

**The Hindrances to the US Pacification Advisory Effort in the Vietnam War from the  
Perspective of the Advisors**

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## **Abstract**

During the Vietnam War, an American advisory effort supported the South Vietnamese as they attempted to pacify the countryside. The subject of this thesis is that advisory effort. The pacification effort used a whole-of-government approach to counterinsurgency that included civilian development, humanitarian assistance, and local security. This inquiry explores the pacification advisory effort's greatest impediments to success, and also seeks to determine pacification's proper place in the story of the war. In general, the historiography is weak on that, and this thesis challenges the historiography by reconstructing the war from the perspective of the advisors rather than the policymakers. To do that it uses mostly untapped sources. The thesis also seeks to determine if there were conceptual problems with the advisory effort.

The inquiry makes several findings. First, despite the prevailing narrative, pacification was always at the center of strategy. Even the large search and destroy operations were explicitly intended to shield the pacification effort. Second, there were four significant hindrances to the advisory effort: (1) the challenge of achieving unity of effort among the various American agencies; (2) confusion over how to earn the allegiance of the people; (3) government corruption; and (4) a dysfunctional Vietnamese command and control system. In the end, the US had overcome the first, muddled through on the second, and completely failed on the third and fourth. However, perhaps the most significant finding of this project is that there was indeed a substantial problem with the way the US conceptualized the advisory effort. They invariably tried to solve problems at the bottom that could only have been solved at the top, and in the process made certain that the Vietnamese chain of command would never be forced to stand on its own.

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I appreciate the encouragement and support of my father, Colonel Nathan M. Pulliam, who has always been an inspiration. It was to follow his example that I went into the Army. His long military career included two tours in Vietnam. He assisted by proofing the dissertation. I am also grateful for the encouragement and support of my late father-in-law, Chaplain (Lieutenant Colonel) Robert M. (Bo) Blasingame, who began his military career during the Korean War as an infantry officer and served in Vietnam as a chaplain, being wounded in both. After my first year in Iraq, which was as an advisor, he gave me a copy of Neil Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie*, and that was the start of a broader intellectual interest in advising and counterinsurgency rather than one that was mostly practical. He and my mother-in-law, Betty, visited me in Oxford, but both died shortly before I completed the thesis.

During the years I have worked on this project, which followed four in Iraq, my family has been nothing but supportive and encouraging, and for that I thank my wife and life partner, Patty, my daughter, Katie, my son, Nathan, and my dear parents, Nathan and Janet. Finally, I would like to acknowledge and remember my son-in-law, Lieutenant Dimitri del Castillo, who was killed in action in Kunar Province, Afghanistan while I was at Oxford, and Katie, his widow, who was his West Point classmate and in the same brigade in Afghanistan. This thesis is dedicated to Dimitri and Katie.

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## Cue Titles and Abbreviations

Cue Title/Abbreviation	Full Title
<i>Abrams Tapes</i>	Sorley, Lewis, ed., <i>Vietnam Chronicles: The Abrams Tapes 1968-1972</i>
ADST	Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
CORDS	Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, or Civil Operations and Rural Development Support
GVN	Government of Republic of Vietnam
DOD	US Department of Defense
DTIC	Defense Technical Information Center
FSO	Foreign Service Officer
HES	Hamlet Evaluation System
HQ DA	Headquarters, Department of the Army
MACV	US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
VC	Viet Cong
VCI	Viet Cong Infrastructure—the Communist shadow government
VCATTU	The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University

## Chapter 1 The American Pacification Advisory Effort

During the Vietnam War, an American advisory effort supported the South Vietnamese in their endeavor to pacify their countryside. This inquiry examines that advisory effort and its greatest hindrances to success. Both in theory and as a technical matter, the Vietnamese pacification effort and the American effort that supported it were distinct undertakings, but in practice the two were all but inseparable. Indeed, at times the US seemed to be directing the Vietnamese rather than advising them, but the Vietnamese were the final decision makers, which is an important point for this thesis, and the US went to great lengths to respect their sovereignty.

What was the pacification effort, and what did the US hope to accomplish by supporting it? The French used the term “pacification” in Indochina, but it did not originate there as a synonym for stability operations. Charles Crosthwaite, who had been the British Chief Commissioner in Burma from 1887–1890, described pacification as the transformation of society from “systematic disorder” and “the misrule of brigands” to “a quiet and prosperous State.”<sup>1</sup> In 1906, US troops occupied Cuba because of instability on the newly independent island, and each received the “Cuban Pacification Medal” when the campaign ended. David Galula entitled his 1963 classic on French counterinsurgency *Pacification in Algeria*.<sup>2</sup> According to Richard Hunt, the author of the most comprehensive of the Vietnam pacification histories, the “basic concepts of pacification emerged from the counterinsurgency doctrine of the late 1950s and early 1960s,” which “melded a wide array of civil and military programs,” including “economic development, land reform, ... broader participation in politics,” and security operations to defeat the insurgents. Although the US military no longer uses the term, a 2006 counterinsurgency manual explained that in Vietnam it had referred to “the process by which the government asserted its influence and control in an area beset by insurgents [and] included local security efforts, programs to distribute food and medical supplies, and lasting reforms (like land redistribution).”<sup>3</sup> Hunt noted that “pacification tended to supplant

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<sup>1</sup> C. Crosthwaite, *The Pacification of Burma* (London, 1912), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> D. Galula, *Pacification in Algeria, 1956-1958* (Santa Monica, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> HQ DA, *FM 3-24: Counterinsurgency* (Washington, 2006), p. 2-12.

counterinsurgency as the operative term in 1964-1965.”<sup>4</sup> This dissertation will treat pacification as synonymous with counterinsurgency, which the US Army defined in 2004 as “those military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency.”<sup>5</sup>

American advisors were an important part of the pacification effort, had been in Vietnam fifteen years when the US committed ground troops in 1965, and remained after those troops withdrew.<sup>6</sup> The use of advisors was not new. The American Continental Army had French and German advisors in the 1770s, Germany provided advisors to its Ottoman allies in World War One, and the British advised the Arab insurgents who opposed them.<sup>7</sup> The US had advisors with the Nationalist Chinese in World War Two, and then in Greece and Korea after that. The advisory effort in Vietnam was different, though, in that it included a large number of civilians.

How did the pacification advisory effort fit into American aims in Vietnam? America’s overall objective was to keep the South non-Communist, but to prevent muddled thinking we need to view that in three parts. The first was to prevent North Vietnam from conquering the South through a conventional invasion. When it became clear that invasion was not imminent, the Americans pivoted to the second, which was countering the Communist insurgency. Preparing the South to stand on its own was the third, and it was implied from the beginning but specifically stated in the latter years in the policy of Vietnamization. Advisors were key to all three.

Did the advisory effort succeed? One might assume, as Army historian Jeffrey Clarke did, that Saigon’s 1975 collapse was prima facie evidence that it did not.<sup>8</sup> We will see, though, that the matter is considerably more complicated than that, and for analytical purposes we will view the effort’s performance in terms of those three distinct yet overlapping goals that made up the overall American objective. The advisory effort faced numerous obstacles, four of which were so substantial that they could have caused failure. Those four were the difficulty of synchronizing the various

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<sup>4</sup> R.A. Hunt, *Pacification* (Boulder, 1995), pp. 2-3.

<sup>5</sup> HQ DA, *FM 1-02: Operational Terms and Graphics* (Washington, 2004), p. 1-47.

<sup>6</sup> The early advisory mission was technically to the French rather than the Vietnamese, and assisted with the use of American-provided equipment.

<sup>7</sup> See T.E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (Ware, Hertfordshire, 1997), for an account of the British advisory effort to the Arab insurgents.

<sup>8</sup> J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years* (Washington, 1992), p. 521.

American agencies, confusion over what it meant to win “hearts and minds,” systemic government corruption, and a highly dysfunctional Vietnamese command and control system.<sup>9</sup>

The author’s interest in this subject began during a yearlong deployment to Baghdad in 2005, where he was the deputy senior advisor to the 6<sup>th</sup> Iraqi Division. After a year at home, he returned for three more years, this time as a civilian at the Multi-National Force—Iraq Counterinsurgency Center in Taji, where he served as the specialist on the coalition’s advisory effort. That gave him the opportunity to observe American, British, and Australian advisors throughout the country as they worked with their counterparts. Based on those observations, he prepared and presented instruction for incoming American units. Reflection on the hindrances to success in Iraq led to an interest in the pacification advisory effort in Vietnam, which led in turn to this project.

### **The Historiography**

Scholars have divided the historiography of the war into “orthodox” and “revisionist” schools. The orthodox historians came first, and were “essentially antiwar,” explained John Dumbrell, having “emerged from the writings of early journalistic, academic and other critics.” As “new evidence” has emerged, though, and “war-related passions have cooled,” orthodox arguments “have gained in subtlety and complexity,” but the themes have remained constant: the US misunderstood the authenticity of Ho Chi Minh’s nationalism, was hubristic, fought an unnecessary war, acted on the basis of the faulty domino theory, conducted “cruel and counter productive” bombing campaigns, and could not have won the war even with better “strategy and tactics,” which in any event were poor. LBJ was “especially blameworthy,” most have asserted, but Nixon “disastrously and mendaciously prolonged the agony.” In contrast, the revisionists have “defend[ed] US motives and conduct” and “argu[ed] for some degree of American success.” Some revisionists have asserted that the insurgents had been defeated, but that Washington, “for political” reasons, had “betray[ed] the victory.”<sup>10</sup> This way of categorizing the historiography is useful, but for purposes of this inquiry, we will also separate the works that have consciously attempted to explain the importance of the pacification effort from

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<sup>9</sup> The US Army defines command and control as “The exercise of authority and direction by a properly designated commander over assigned and attached forces in the accomplishment of the mission.” HQ DA, *FM 1-02*, p. 1-37.

<sup>10</sup> J. Dumbrell, *Rethinking the Vietnam War* (New York, 2012), pp. 13-4, 17-8.

those which to varying degrees have not. Interestingly, historians who have inadequately covered or minimized the significance of the pacification effort are almost always in the orthodox category, while those who have attempted to explain its importance tend to be revisionists.

Many of the early historians started as Vietnam journalists and then went on to make substantial contributions to the historiography. With the possible exception of Robert Shaplen, they fit neatly into the orthodox category. Shaplen, because of the breadth of his knowledge and his ability to see how the various pieces fit together, was probably the best of the lot both on the war in general and pacification in particular.<sup>11</sup> Michael Maclear, a Canadian who had reported from Hanoi during the war, devoted a chapter in *The Ten Thousand Day War* to pacification (“The Village War”) and did reasonably well at explaining it.<sup>12</sup> However, David Halberstam and Frances FitzGerald spoke the language of pacification and saw it in action, but seem to have been unable to explain how its various components fit together and why it was important that they did. Similarly, Neil Sheehan discussed pacification at length in *Bright Shining Lie*, but in a way that was mostly disjointed and ancillary to his story of John Paul Vann.<sup>13</sup> Stanley Karnow, who barely mentioned pacification, was probably the weakest.<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Schell’s vivid accounts of operations that had some connection to pacification were intended to persuade his readers that even when the Americans and Vietnamese had the best of intentions, their attempts at pacification were clumsy and did far more harm than good.<sup>15</sup> One gets the feeling that Schell might have better understood the pacification effort had the practitioners themselves better understood it, and that leads to an important point about this group. That their writings often seem willfully ignorant can be explained in part by the fact that most had become rather fixed in their views by 1967, yet that was a transition year for the pacification effort, and it was not until later that it was truly effective. A second point is that their collective weakness on

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<sup>11</sup> R. Shaplen, *The Road from War* (New York, 1970), pp. 30, 32-3, 36-47, 78-9, 123, 126, 132-6, 146, 152, 155, 163-5, 180-2, 192-3, 214, 234, 260, 279, 336-9. See also Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution* (New York, 1965), and Shaplen, *Time out of Hand* (New York, 1969).

<sup>12</sup> M. Maclear, *The Ten Thousand Day War* (New York, 1981), pp. 157, 255-64.

<sup>13</sup> D. Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York, 1973); F. FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake* (Boston, 1972); N. Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie* (New York, 1989).

<sup>14</sup> S. Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York, 1983).

<sup>15</sup> J. Schell, “The Military Half,” in *The Real War* (New York, 1987), pp. 189-398; Schell, “The Village of Ben Suc,” in *The Real War*, pp. 57-188, originally published in 1967.

pacification tended to create a similar weakness in the American public, who read their articles, and among the academics, who used those articles and the books that followed as sources.

Most of the academic historians who followed had not been in Vietnam during the war but learned from these journalists who had. Like the journalists, most failed to recognize that the pacification effort had been at the center of American strategy. Understandably, two of the prominent historians of post-World War II America, James Patterson and William Chafe, adopted the same view. Patterson wrote that pacification was “a policy, intermittently employed after 1965, that depended...on civil-military programs to promote stability and peace in heavily populated regions of Vietnam,” when in fact it was not intermittent at all, and was most energetic and effective after 1967. Patterson could discuss the US military’s heroin and race problems, “fragging,” the anti-war movement, Kent State, My Lai, the Pentagon Papers, and Watergate, but did not truly understand the pacification effort.<sup>16</sup> Chafe asserted that LBJ’s pacification programs “lacked support from Westmoreland's headquarters,” were inconsistent with “the overwhelming emphasis on destruction,” and “fell apart under the contradictions of American policy.” The inept Americans worked to help villages and then sent “bombers [to] flatten” them. Americans viewed the pacification effort as a benevolent modernization project, but the Vietnamese “worshipped traditionalism,” “the values of the past,” and the “technology [they had been using] for thousands of years.” There was a kernel of truth in all of this, but the way he presented it made it a caricature. After savaging Johnson’s pacification effort, Chafe completely ignored Nixon’s, even though the pacification effort reached its zenith in the Nixon years. He portrayed Nixon as uninterested in non-military matters and consumed by a “private strategy [for] escalating the war.” “Virtually every step [he] took,” said Chafe, “was designed to destroy Vietnamese culture,” and “the result could not help but be a disaster.”<sup>17</sup>

The most influential of the Vietnam specialists have not done much better than Chafe and Patterson on this subject. With a rather parochial focus on the intricacies of domestic decision making without seriously attempting to reconstruct the challenges and opportunities that American advisors faced, they have missed the essence of pacification. Marilyn Young, well to the left of John Prados

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<sup>16</sup> J.T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations* (New York, 1996), pp. 606, 617, 752-3, 755-7.

<sup>17</sup> W.H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey* (New York, 1986), pp. 295-6, 393.

(who thinks of himself as an “engaged leftist intellectual,” and will be discussed below), saw only the negative; she asserted, for example, that advisors “trained and equipped the forces of repression.”<sup>18</sup> Rather than disparaging the pacification effort, though, others to varying degrees have mostly ignored it, apparently ruling out that it could have made any difference.

Early in *Lyndon Johnson’s War*, for example, Larry Berman noted that “pacification had been a central objective of U.S. policy,” but there was little about the subject after that, and he concluded that Westmoreland should have realized that “Vietnam could not be won by attriting the enemy alone.”<sup>19</sup> As we will see, there are good reasons to criticize Westmoreland, but this is not one of them. Over time Berman seems to have developed a greater appreciation for the importance of pacification. During the war, a senior Hanoi intelligence official named Mai Chi Tho controlled a spy in Saigon by the name of Pham Xuan An. An was arguably the most important of Hanoi’s spies, and when Berman asked what An’s “most valuable contribution” had been, Tho’s answer was that he had kept Hanoi informed of the details of Saigon’s “pacification program.” Berman was obviously surprised at this, so Tho explained that the pacification effort had been a “strategic” threat to the Communists, and having Saigon’s plans enabled Hanoi to devise ways to counter them. Although Berman had apparently missed it, Hanoi considered the pacification effort the real threat to their center of gravity, which was their control of the villages.<sup>20</sup>

Fredrik Logevall, George Herring, and John Prados would have been just as surprised at Tho’s answer. In *Choosing War*, Logevall wrote that by March 1965 the US had decided on “a military solution,” which critics had rightly warned “could never succeed.” “The futility that lay ahead for any American military effort” should have been obvious, said Logevall, who maintained that once Johnson had settled on a military solution, Saigon’s ultimate collapse was inevitable. The problem with this characterization is that it both ignores the pacification effort and rules out that it

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<sup>18</sup> M.B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars* (New York, 1991), p. 61. In a 2010 lecture at St. Antony’s College, Young suggested that Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon should have been criminally liable for their actions in Vietnam. Prados’s comment is in J. Prados, *Vietnam* (Lawrence, 2009), p. xxi.

<sup>19</sup> L. Berman, *Lyndon Johnson’s War* (New York, 1989), pp. 14, 181.

<sup>20</sup> L. Berman, *Perfect Spy* (New York, 2007), p. 137. See also Berman’s *Planning a Tragedy* (New York, 1982), which discussed the decisions leading to the introduction of American ground troops without any reference to the ongoing pacification effort, and *No Peace, No Honor* (New York, 2001), which ignored the pacification effort during the period leading up the ceasefire as well as American plans to continue its civilian component after the ceasefire.

could have made any difference.<sup>21</sup> Herring did much the same thing. Although he correctly discussed some of the components of pacification, he does not appear to have understood the significance or centrality of the whole, and he echoed Chafe as he advanced the notion that the US had “assumed that the mere application of its vast military power would be sufficient.”<sup>22</sup>

Prados’s rather limited coverage of the pacification effort gives the impression that it was an interesting sideshow rather than central to the US strategy. He concluded *Vietnam*, which was tellingly subtitled *The History of an Unwinnable War*, with the finding that the US had engaged in an “insan[e]...effort to reverse the tide of history” that had “no possibility of a different outcome.” The various pacification programs, he said, “conflicted with” MACV’s predilection for large, conventional operations. This inappropriately suggests that the village security and development projects on the one hand and the attempts to neutralize the large enemy forces that might disrupt them on the other were a zero-sum game. Prados made a point of thanking Lewis Sorley, a historian who had served in Vietnam, for his recently published transcripts of meetings at General Creighton Abrams’ headquarters from 1968-1972. Prados, though, noted that his and Sorley’s “interpretations of the war differ”—a polite understatement, given that later in the book Prados condemned Sorley for being one of the few writers to go beyond revisionism to “neo-orthodoxy,” which he defined as not just arguing that the war could have been won, as most revisionists do, but that at a certain point it actually had been won. Prados conceded that “considerable progress” had been achieved in the war’s later years, but then dismissed that as mostly an illusion.<sup>23</sup>

Despite Prados’s special category for Sorley, this thesis places him solidly in the revisionist camp, and like most revisionists, he emphasized the importance of the pacification effort.<sup>24</sup> When Sorley published the *Abrams Tapes* in 2004 he had already drawn from his unpublished transcripts in

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<sup>21</sup> F. Logevall, *Choosing War* (Berkeley, 1999), pp. 384, 402-3.

<sup>22</sup> G.C. Herring, *America’s Longest War* (Boston, 2002), p. 144.

<sup>23</sup> J. Prados, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War* (Chicago, 1995), pp. 204-20; J. Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War* (Lawrence, 2009), pp. xviii, 70-1, 328, 544, 550. For Sorley’s comment that, “There came a time when the war was won,” see L. Sorley, *A Better War* (Orlando, 1999), p. 217. For the transcripts, which will hereafter be referred to as the *Abrams Tapes*, see L. Sorley, ed. *Vietnam Chronicles: The Abrams Tapes, 1968-1972*. See also J. Prados, ed., *In Country: Remembering the Vietnam War* (Lanham, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> John Dumbrell’s recent *Rethinking the Vietnam War* is a refreshing exception to the orthodox tendency to inadequately explain the pacification effort. Although Dumbrell places himself in the orthodox camp, he is sympathetic to a variety of the of the revisionists’ tenets. See for example pp. 179-82, 187-9, 201-2, 204, and especially 244-5.

*A Better War*, the 1999 book that examined the Abrams era. Many of his conclusions are valid, but his argument is weakened by his obvious disdain for both General Westmoreland and Ambassador Robert Komer, Westmoreland's pacification director, as well as his attempt to deny those two any credit for the improved pacification effort. Indeed, Sorley's readers could easily but wrongly conclude that after Westmoreland and Komer had paid little attention to the pacification effort, Abrams and Colby had finally gotten it right. After *A Better War*, Sorley was obviously frustrated that "even some of the army's official historians" would continue to believe that "the changes from Westmoreland to Abrams were evolutionary rather than revolutionary," and he predicted that *The Abrams Tapes* would convince even the most skeptical among them that "that such an interpretation is not supported by the battlefield realities."<sup>25</sup> This thesis will examine that claim.

Rufus Phillips, whose substantial role in the early pacification effort will be discussed in the next chapter, was a late contributor to the historiography. An essay in 2001 was followed by the book-length *Why Vietnam Matters* in 2008, and both are highly critical of the US effort. He is clearly in the revisionist school, though, having concluded that the American failure had not been inevitable. Multiple shortcomings had contributed to it, he argued, but two were particularly significant: first, the Americanization of the war had quickly overwhelmed the Vietnamese and eventually depleted American support for the war, and second, the American pacification structure that was implemented in 1967 had also overwhelmed the Vietnamese. He did see the latter, though, as a model worthy of future emulation.<sup>26</sup>

Hunt's *Pacification* is very useful, as are the Army's official chronicles of the war: Ronald Spector's *Advice and Support: The Early Years*, which covered 1941 through 1960; Jeffrey Clarke's *Advice and Support: The Final Years*, which covered 1965 through 1973; and Thomas Scoville's *Reorganizing for Pacification Support*.<sup>27</sup> Like the journalists, their experience in the war provided

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<sup>25</sup> Sorley, *Abrams Tapes*, p. XIX; Sorley, *A Better War*; see also Sorley's *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (Boston, 2011), and *Thunderbolt: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Times* (New York, 1992), which have the same weaknesses.

<sup>26</sup> R. Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters* (Annapolis, 2008), pp. 305-7; see also R. Phillips, "Before We Lost in South Vietnam," in H. Neese and J. O'Donnell, eds., *Prelude to Tragedy* (Annapolis, 2001), pp. 7-57.

<sup>27</sup> Hunt, pp. 121-32; R.H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941-1960* (New York, 1985); T.W. Scoville, *Reorganizing for Pacification Support* (Washington, 1982). See also G. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967* (Washington, 2006); G. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command*

insight, but having been on the inside, they were able to place the various pieces of the pacification effort into context. However, they too looked mainly at the policymaking level rather than the perspective of the advisors.

John Carland and Andrew Birtle were also official Army historians, and though neither had served in Vietnam, their easy access to the official records helped their projects. Carland's history of the first eighteen months of the Americanization of the war reveals that much of MACV's attention was shifted from the pacification effort to the infiltrating North Vietnamese and the American combat units that were arriving to counter them. There is relatively little about pacification, but he did not ignore the subject. He provided a brief description of the effort, which he noted had "never reached the root of South Vietnam's weakness"—"the corruption and incompetence of Saigon's political leaders and their failure to create a broadly based, multiparty system capable of winning the loyalty of the people."<sup>28</sup> Birtle's comprehensive examination of American counterinsurgency theory and practice from early World War II through the Vietnam War is useful. Among other subjects of interest to this inquiry, he touched on the subject of leverage, which he defined as "using threats of unfavorable action, or even the suspension of aid, to prod a reluctant ally into action." "The old dilemma of leverage," he noted, "would continue to bedevil any counterinsurgency action undertaken by the United States," with frequent confusion "over how far [American advisors] should push a sovereign, independent government over matters that pertained to its internal affairs."<sup>29</sup>

Thomas Ahern, an official historian for the CIA, wrote *Vietnam Declassified: The CIA and Counterinsurgency*, which was published in 2010. He supplemented his descriptions of the agency's various pacification experiments and operations in Vietnam with his own experiences there in the mid-1960s. This inquiry concurs with John Carland's review of the book in *The Journal of Military History* that it "will constitute the definitive account...of the CIA's effort, and ultimate failure, in the

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*in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973* (Washington, 2006); C.L. Cooper, J.E. Corson, L.J. Legere, D.E. Lockwood, D.M. Weller, *The American Experience with Pacification in Vietnam: Volume I, An Overview of Pacification, Volume II, Elements of Pacification, and Volume III, History of Pacification* (Arlington, 1972).

<sup>28</sup> J. Carland, *Combat Operations: Stemming the Tide, May 1965 to October 1966* (Washington, 2000), p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> A. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1976* (Washington, 2006), pp. 239, 347. See also his volume on the preceding period, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1860-1941* (Washington, 2009).

counterinsurgency conflict in the countryside.” By providing the CIA’s perspective on the evolving pacification effort, Ahern helps this thesis tell that story and analyze the hindrances to it.<sup>30</sup>

Other military scholars, most of whom were too young for Vietnam, attempted in various unofficial histories to identify the war’s lessons on the assumption that different decisions might have changed the outcome. Harry Summers was a Vietnam veteran, and argued that the US could have won the war had it not been distracted by pacification and stayed true to Clausewitzian principles by sealing the borders, destroying enemy forces inside the country, and “repelling external aggression as we had done in Korea.”<sup>31</sup> H.R. McMaster’s *Dereliction of Duty* was a critique of top civilian and military leaders as the question of Americanization was debated. He generally ignored the pacification effort, but by implication did not think it could have made a difference.<sup>32</sup> Andrew Krepinevich’s *The Army and Vietnam* explored how the Army’s conventional mindset and predilection toward mid-intensity war had poorly equipped it for pacification.<sup>33</sup> John Nagl’s *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, which built on Krepinevich, provides a useful overview of the pacification effort, but wrongly asserted that Westmoreland’s sole “solution to...countering insurgency” was “firepower,” and that he believed that with “enough [of that] and the freedom to apply it indiscriminately,” his troops “could defeat any enemy.” Nagl also claimed that Westmoreland “repeatedly rejected innovative suggestions” for countering the insurgency, but this is half right at best.<sup>34</sup> We will examine the problem with Nagl’s assertions later in the thesis.

Two other prominent revisionists are Mark Moyar and Dale Walton. Moyar initially published *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*, which covers pacification in general rather than just the Phoenix program, in 1997, and then updated the book ten years later. While this thesis finds much in common with Moyar, there are some important points of disagreement, including his rosy assertion that the South had solved most of its leadership problems by the late sixties and his failure to grasp

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<sup>30</sup> T. Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified* (Lexington, 2010); J. Carland, “Scorecard on CIA COIN in Vietnam,” *The Journal of Military History* (July 2011), p. 888. (Carland has also written other essays on Vietnam in *The Journal of Military History*.)

<sup>31</sup> H.C. Summers, *On Strategy* (Novato, 1982), p. 171.

<sup>32</sup> H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty* (New York, 1998).

<sup>33</sup> A.F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, 1988).

<sup>34</sup> J.A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (Chicago, 2005), pp. 200-1, 203.

the severity, complexity, and impact of systemic government corruption.<sup>35</sup> Walton, who made a convincing case that the US “was not predestined to fight and lose in Indochina,” devoted more attention to the lack of effective counters to Hanoi’s actions than to the pacification effort, which he tucked into relatively few pages. He criticized Westmoreland’s large operations for detracting from the pacification effort, but tempered that by noting that he was not arguing “that MACV should have abandoned altogether the ‘American way of war’ and fought the war strictly as a counter-insurgency.” That, he said, “would have been excessive, and communist main force units would have cheerfully taken advantage of such folly.”<sup>36</sup>

To sum up, the orthodox histories tend to be deficient with regard to the pacification effort. Rather than examining the war by recreating it as it had actually been experienced by those there at the time, the members of the orthodox school to varying degrees suffer from a focus on explaining inevitable failure. As a result, they fail to consider any themes lying outside a simplistic narrative of that failure. Even the revisionists, though, tend to miss the most important findings of this dissertation with regard to the pacification effort. They have inadequately examined the advisory effort from the perspective of the advisors, have not attempted to identify its greatest hindrances, and have not questioned whether the advisory effort itself might have been conceptually flawed. This thesis does each of those. It does not regard the war as having been unwinnable, views the pacification effort as having accomplished much, and sees an upward trajectory in the American understanding of what needed to be done to counter the insurgency—a trajectory that started in the Diem years and continued up to the ceasefire. On the other hand, while this thesis is clearly in the revisionist camp, it does not fit perfectly there. Though it agrees that after the ceasefire Washington squandered much that had been achieved, it does not argue that Americans in Vietnam had achieved a victory that Washington then threw away. As impressive as the achievements of the pacification effort were, that effort had major failings that were never overcome, and even if they had been, the intentions of North

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<sup>35</sup> M. Moyer, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey* (Lincoln, 2007).

<sup>36</sup> C. Walton, *The Myth of Inevitable US Defeat in Vietnam* (London, 2002), pp. 53-8, 62-3, 151; see also Moyer’s *Triumph Forsaken* (Cambridge, 2006) and *A Question of Command: Counterinsurgency from the Civil War to Iraq* (New Haven and London, 2009).

Vietnam (rather than the southern Communists) would have remained a factor, and the sustainability of an independent South Vietnam would have remained uncertain.

### **A Note on Methodology and Primary Sources**

American advisors received their orders from their own chain of command but lived and worked with the Vietnamese, thus providing a unique vantage point. This thesis attempts to reconstruct the war in general and the pacification effort in particular from that unique perspective, and has therefore made substantial use of the firsthand accounts of advisors from several different archives. These include not just interviews of military advisors, but also a collection of previously unexplored interviews of State Department diplomats who found themselves in Vietnam as advisors rather than at embassies and consulates elsewhere, along with memoirs and contemporaneous reports and memoranda. To vet these first-hand accounts, as well as to provide context and background, they have been compared with the mostly overlooked in-house histories that a team of historians working in the US headquarters in Saigon produced each year. These internal histories provide the official view of each year's events within months of their occurrence, and include excerpts from the actual orders, memoranda, and communiqués, including those that were highly classified at the time. The later chapters of this thesis also make use of Sorley's transcripts of meetings in General Abrams headquarters from mid-1968 to mid-1972, and they are significant because they reveal the mindset of key decision-makers in casual, unguarded conversations as they dealt with the problems. What they reveal is often at variance with the assertions of the orthodox historiography.<sup>37</sup> This approach fits within a historiographical shift from a parochial obsession with "Why Vietnam?" to one that reconstructs the war from different vantage points, in some cases using documents in Vietnamese, Chinese, and Russian. Although this thesis uses only English sources, where possible it has consulted Vietnamese accounts that were written in or translated to English, and it makes use of sources that the conventional historiography has ignored.

We will now begin our examination of the war and the role of the pacification effort in it. In the process, we will investigate the charge that the Americans sought only a "military solution." If it was in fact something more than that, what was it, and did it achieve any success on the way to the

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<sup>37</sup> Sorley, *Abrams Tapes*.

final disappointment? Furthermore, what factors hindered the advisory effort and were there any conceptual problems with the effort itself?

## **Chapter 2**

### **The Diem Pacification Efforts, 1955 - 1963**

By 1950 the United States viewed Communism as a monolithic threat that was on the advance around the globe, and decided that French colonial control of Indochina, as distasteful as that might be, was better than allowing it to fall to the Communists. Following World War Two, the Soviets had vastly increased the territory under their direct and indirect control, and to keep them out of Western Europe, the US had implemented the Marshall Plan and established NATO. In response, the Soviets had formed the Warsaw Pact. In Greece, Communists fought democratic forces in a bloody civil war. The Chinese Communist defeat of the Nationalists in 1949 put them on Indochina's northern border, and Communist insurgencies threatened the Philippines and Malaya.

In May 1950, President Truman provided the French with \$10 million to help counter the insurgencies in Indochina. North Korea's invasion of South Korea the next month only stiffened American resolve to stop the advance of Communism wherever it appeared to be occurring, and in December of that year the US made a formal agreement with France and the nominally independent Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos to make more substantial logistical contributions to the fight. The Pentagon formed the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), Indochina, to administer the aid. France was more interested in the aid than advice, but in any case neither prevented the French loss to the insurgents.<sup>38</sup>

Following the fall of Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Conference in 1954, the French pivoted to Algeria and took the best American-provided equipment with them. The American advisory group remained, though, and shifted to building a modern South Vietnamese army that could counter a Korea-like conventional invasion from the North, which they considered the most likely threat. The French continued to help with some advisors until April 1956, at which time their interest waned and they removed all but a few navy and air force personnel, who stayed until 1957.<sup>39</sup>

#### **The Early Attempts at Pacification**

A good way to view the war is as a series of efforts at pacification. It is in this period after the Geneva Accords and the resulting partition of Vietnam that our study of the pacification advisory

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<sup>38</sup> J.L. Collins, *Vietnam Studies: The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army*, p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4; Spector, pp. 258-60.

effort begins. This chapter traces the experiments and failures during the nine years that Ngo Dinh Diem led the new state, and will emphasize that he began a trajectory that would influence the rest of the war. The effort in the remaining years, despite much that was new, was a product of that which preceded it, so understanding the attempts during these early years is crucial.

The partition of the North and South and their sudden independence from the French threw both new states into nation-building challenges that involved replacing the vestiges of French colonial sovereignty with political control and a sense of nationhood. The North's preoccupation with its own nation-building project gave the South and its new American benefactor a few years to focus on consolidation without significant interference from the North, but also a false sense of security. The South's immediate problems were resettling nearly a million mostly Catholic North Vietnamese refugees who refused to live under the Communists and headed south, and occupying areas that were being evacuated by the Viet Minh—the nationalist forces that in 1941 had been formed by and were under the control of Ho Chi Minh's Indochinese Communist Party—as they headed north.

A small CIA operation headed by Air Force Colonel Ed Lansdale, secretly seconded to the CIA, assisted the Vietnamese with the resettlement project. Lansdale, who had recently been an advisor to President Ramon Magsaysay in the Philippines' successful struggle with insurgents, had a reputation for understanding the complexities of counterinsurgency, and Diem quickly developed confidence in his counsel. Lansdale assigned Rufus Phillips, an army officer who was on secondment to the CIA, to provide American support to the reoccupation of the former Communist-controlled areas. In early 1955, Phillips assisted as the Vietnamese Army moved into the southern tip of Vietnam, and in April he helped them do the same in northern South Vietnam.<sup>40</sup>

Recognizing Phillips' abilities, Lansdale next assigned him to work on a new "civic action" program. Before the Accords, the Viet Minh had exercised governance in some parts of the South, and in other parts there had been either a weak colonial government or none at all. The departure of the French from some areas and the Communists from others left a vacuum. An obvious answer to the government's urgent need to establish its presence in the provinces, districts, and villages was to send

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<sup>40</sup> R. Phillips, "Before We Lost in South Vietnam," in H. Neese and J. O'Donnell, eds., *Prelude to Tragedy* (Annapolis, 2001), pp. 14-6.

civil servants, but this was impractical for several reasons. Kieu Cong Kung, a former Viet Minh general who had defected to the government, described the existing civil service as “an arrogant, slow-moving, undisciplined lot of paper-pushers, with no political convictions and interested only in their salaries.”<sup>41</sup> Even though they were Vietnamese, their white suits reminded the peasants of their colonial overlords, and Lansdale noted that eighty per cent of them were located in Saigon—“white-collar workers” not at all comfortable with the prospect of moving to the countryside.<sup>42</sup>

Kung knew that the lack of Communist activity was temporary, and suggested there was an urgent need to send specially trained teams into the countryside. Such teams were standard practice with the Communists, and Kung thought they would work for the government as well. Under President Diem’s orders, he developed the program, which deployed small teams in black pajamas like the peasants they aimed to assist.<sup>43</sup> While Phillips worked with Kung to develop procedures and a training program, Lansdale financed the start-up with “seed money from the CIA.” The hope was that hundreds of these small teams would “extend government into the rural areas, ...give medical assistance, ...help rebuild villages that had been destroyed or neglected by war, and...organize support for the new nationalist government.”<sup>44</sup>

By mid-1956 over one hundred teams had been fielded. They encountered numerous needs resulting from the nine years of war and colonial neglect, but were constrained by inadequate tools, building supplies, and medicines. To institutionalize the fledgling initiative into a full-scale program would have required considerably more funds than Lansdale had arranged, and despite an intense effort by Lansdale and Phillips, neither the USAID director nor Ambassador George F. Reinhardt would support the program. USAID, said Phillips, was inclined toward large infrastructure projects, industrial development, and “commodity support” rather than rural development, and the ambassador naively assumed that because Diem had succeeded in stabilizing the country Vietnam was a routine rather than urgent challenge. The program continued even without American support, but dwindled

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<sup>41</sup> E.G. Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars* (New York, 1972), p. 208.

<sup>42</sup> Phillips, “Before We Lost,” p. 22; Lansdale, p. 208.

<sup>43</sup> Lansdale, pp. 207-11.

<sup>44</sup> Phillips, “Before We Lost,” p. 21.

into a propaganda effort rather than muscular government outreach.<sup>45</sup> This unsuccessful pacification attempt shows that while a handful of Americans understood the need for a preemptive approach, the American decision-makers in both Saigon and Washington did not, probably because their lack of experience with Communist insurgencies blinded them to their vulnerabilities. It also reveals that some Vietnamese officials grasped the problem, and over time it would be clear that the quickest to do so often had in common their military service with the Communists before partition.

### **Agglomeration**

Because of American opposition to European colonialism in the years after World War Two and the dominant theme of self-determination, the US mission in Saigon and its Washington masters were especially sensitive to charges of neocolonialism and imperialism. The US wished to avoid the appearance of throwing its weight around, and that led to a reluctance to point out problems to the Vietnamese.<sup>46</sup>

Multiple American agencies were involved in the Vietnam project, but the main ones were Defense, State, USAID (known at the time as the International Cooperation Agency, or ICA), the US Information Service, and the CIA. As the civilian agencies focused on resettlement, governance, and development, the Pentagon fielded advisors with high-level headquarters and training institutions. It is somewhat understandable that they would give little thought to counterinsurgency, because by all appearances one did not yet exist. Instead, they attempted to create an army much like its own that could withstand a Korea-style conventional invasion..

In 1959, though, the Communists decided they could not achieve their goal of reunification under Hanoi's rule by waiting for Diem to fall or through other peaceful means, and added violence to their political activities in the countryside, murdering numerous government officials and supporters.<sup>47</sup> There was method to the brutality; the Viet Cong often left particularly corrupt or

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, pp. 21-3.

<sup>46</sup> Such sensitivity seems to have been common in America's overseas diplomatic and development operations, but was not universal. Ambassador Dennis Kux, for example, recalled during an interview that the American aid director in Pakistan in the late 1950s had been Jim Killen, who would later be the USAID director in Vietnam. Killen, said Kux, "was rough and nasty, and not very sensitive to the feelings of others—including the Pakistanis." See D. Kux, interviewed by T. Stern, ADST (1995), pp. 22, 26.

<sup>47</sup> Spector, p. 330; see also the entire 17<sup>th</sup> chapter, "Things Fall Apart, July 1959–June 1960," pp. 329-48.

incompetent village chiefs in place while murdering the effective ones.<sup>48</sup> Since the struggle was over perceptions of who really cared for the people, the Viet Cong would not tolerate the honest and competent district and village officials who obviously did. While claiming that the Diem government cared nothing for the peasants, they murdered officials who did. It is clear that to some degree the government began to comprehend that when guerrillas had unfettered access to hamlets, even if at night, only a few could wreck weeks of effort at governance and development. In 1959 they concluded that resettlement and concentration might be the answer to preventing access to the Communists.

Diem's first program to gather the peasants into fortified villages, which was known as Agglomeration, took place in February 1959. It classified the peasants in contested areas as either "Viet Cong families," who were suspected of having some connection to the Communists, however tenuous, or families presumed loyal to the government but vulnerable to the Communists because of their rural isolation. Both were moved to settlements near their homes so that they could continue to work their fields, but there were separate hamlets for the two groups, and those for the Viet Cong families were designed to facilitate government surveillance.<sup>49</sup>

Both pro- and anti-government peasants were unhappy with this, and for similar reasons: it took longer to get to their fields; for Buddhists abandoning ancestral tombs was unthinkable, but moving them was difficult; and they disliked being forced to build new villages without compensation. "Viet Cong families" resented that classification and denied the charges. Joseph Zasloff, on a USAID contract with the Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group, studied the short-lived program in 1963, and concluded that it had been "bare, unsophisticated, and essentially

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<sup>48</sup> As the southern Communists became more active, the South Vietnamese and Americans began referring to them as the Viet Cong, which they generally abbreviated as VC. Some argue that the term was a disparagement, but it meant simply "Vietnamese Communists." The Communists, who attempted to portray themselves as a nationalist movement consisting of various parties of different ideological persuasions, referred to their movement as the National Liberation Front, or NLF, and therefore objected to the term Viet Cong as inaccurate, as have those who have been sympathetic to their cause. This dissertation will use the terms Viet Cong and VC both because of their accuracy and because they were the terms used by South Vietnamese and US agencies that were involved in the pacification effort. Furthermore, the term Viet Cong is used to indicate the southern insurgents, while North Vietnamese refers to units and individuals from that country, even if they were operating in the South. Viet Cong and North Vietnamese units were distinct from one another, although in the last years of the war after the Viet Cong had been significantly weakened it was very common for North Vietnamese regulars to augment or even make up most of some Viet Cong formations.

<sup>49</sup> J.J. Zasloff, *Rural Resettlement In Vietnam* (Washington, 1963), VCATTU, p. 12.

military, ignoring the economic and social implications of relocation.”<sup>50</sup> While there is logic to grouping families in fortified settlements if that was the only way to separate them from the Communists, the program did more damage than good, which the government soon recognized. Without announcing the end of Agglomeration but correcting some of its problems, the government launched the next program, which it called Agroville.

The cautious transition from Agglomeration to Agroville shows that to some degree Vietnamese officials could recognize a problem, analyze it, and take steps to adjust. Agroville’s aim was to address the same problems that Agglomeration targeted. President Diem himself presented the plan in a speech to the country in terms of “social and economic development,” and though it was that, the weightier reason remained that the government needed to prevent the people from meeting the logistics, financial, and personnel needs of the Viet Cong and to protect the village officials who were trying to implement the various programs. In that sense, as Zasloff concluded in his report, “the agroville program was primarily a measure of counter-insurgency.” The government built the first settlement in the fall of 1959, and continued the program for two years.<sup>51</sup> It was a major improvement over Agglomeration. The government built roads to connect hamlets to the outside world, groomed local leaders, set aside land for fish ponds and fruit trees, started youth programs, and formed neighborhood militias. The Viet Cong energetically opposed the program, though, claiming in their propaganda that the government was confining the peasants so they could more easily abuse them, which was not true, and that the program was fraught with corruption, which was. The Viet Cong warned an Agroville manager that because he was profiting from bribes from people who did not want to move or perform the mandatory labor, his safety could not be “guarantee[d]” if he continued with the program.<sup>52</sup>

Only twenty-three agrovilles were begun, and it is not clear how many were finished, but they contained just 40,000 peasants. Zasloff noted that, “In many locations, the corruptibility and inefficiency of incumbent officials made it virtually impossible to assure the sympathy of the local

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, pp. 11, 27.

population.”<sup>53</sup> Despite the improvements, Agrovillage was unpopular, and without explanation the government ended it in 1961. Robert Komer, who would be the top American pacification official in 1967, considered the program one of the “high points in the U.S. experience” between 1955 and 1967, apparently because it involved a holistic approach to the problem and provided additional experience, not because he approved of the forced relocation.<sup>54</sup> It is not clear, though, how heavily the US was involved, and any support appears to have been minimal; Rufus Phillips, who would return to Vietnam in 1962, said that prior to mid-1962 the US mission had failed to make “any significant direct contribution to the well-being of the vast majority of the Vietnamese who lived in the countryside.”<sup>55</sup> There were no USAID representatives at the province level to coordinate support or offer advice.

Despite the first two pacification campaigns, the situation in the countryside continued to get worse. According to the Army’s official history of the war, it was in 1960 that the “insurgency that had been simmering unnoticed for several years suddenly began to boil over throughout the length and breadth of the country.” “Assistance from the North” was limited, but the southern rebels “had managed to rebuild their political organization and openly challenged the government of Saigon.” The South “began to totter,” said the history, “and the elaborate military machine constructed by the American advisers seemed incapable of dealing with the new situation.”<sup>56</sup>

Though slow to make the change, in 1961 the US mission shifted from this conventional focus to pacification. However, neither the military, embassy, nor USAID handled the change well. Pacification had two components: civilian development and security. USAID had the lead for development, which tended to be at the national levels, but as the Communists stepped up their subversive activities, the development had to be seen within the context of counterinsurgency, and that shifted the focus from national-level programs in Saigon to the countryside. In 1961, the Pentagon started deploying military advisors to the province capitals.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 10.

<sup>54</sup> R. Komer, *Organization and Management of the “New Model” Pacification Program—1966-1969* (Santa Monica, 7 May 1970), pp. 13-4.

<sup>55</sup> Phillips, “Before We Lost,” p. 23.

<sup>56</sup> Clarke, p. 7.

There is a strong similarity between Diem's first two resettlement campaigns and a French program that had preceded them by a few years. It would therefore seem that the notion of forced resettlement had originated with the French rather than Diem—and that the French had appropriated the idea from the British, who had been successfully using it in nearby Malaya.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the French had called the fortified settlements into which they gathered peasants “agrovilles.” The French program, aimed at village social and economic development along with protection from the Communists, was limited to northern Vietnam. The French agrovilles, the first of which were created in 1952, had “quasi-urban amenities [intended] to attract peasants away from their normal hardships.” Some had called the approach “pacification by prosperity.”<sup>58</sup>

The differences between the British and French programs help explain why the French version failed in Indochina. One was that in Malaya the British had implemented the program throughout the country, but the French implemented it in only in certain areas. A second was that government forces had greatly outnumbered the insurgents in Malaya, but in Indochina the opposite was true. Third, the Viet Minh were better armed than the Malayan insurgents. Fourth, in Malaya the people were kept from the Communists by moving them long distances away, but in Vietnam the Communists “operated at night, anonymously, and held all village authorities in the same state of dread as ever.”<sup>59</sup> Finally—and perhaps most significantly—“the French were reluctant to grant Vietnam its independence, or [to] allow the Vietnamese a voice in government affairs,” while the British did just the opposite.<sup>60</sup> The US provided substantial financial support to the Agroville program but did not take the intellectual lead, and understandably might have developed some skepticism after its failure.

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<sup>57</sup> Bernard Fall thought the French agrovilles “resembled their British prototypes line for line.” See B.B. Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams* (New York, 1963), p. 372.

<sup>58</sup> C. Peoples, “The Use of the British Village Resettlement Model in Malaya and Vietnam,” delivered at 4th Triennial Vietnam Symposium (11-13 April 2002), VCATTU.

<sup>59</sup> D.J. Duncanson, cited in Peoples.

<sup>60</sup> Peoples.

## Strategic Hamlet

In 1961, bemused Americans in Washington and Saigon grappled with what the American role in stopping the developing insurgency should be.<sup>61</sup> The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, for example, attempted to refute accusations that the Pentagon was “overtraining the Vietnamese Army for a Korea-type war,” and doing “little or nothing...to meet the terrorist problem in Vietnam.”<sup>62</sup> What was this “terrorist problem?” Historians tend to gloss over why Diem thought resettlement programs were necessary. Marva Hasselblad, who was in Vietnam in 1962 as a medical missionary with the pacifist Mennonites, described her visit to what she called a “resettlement village.” While the villagers lived in their ancestral village, guerrillas arrived demanding that they prove their loyalty by regularly supplying food and men. When they refused, the Communists “burn[ed] homes and crops and kidnapp[ed] young men and elders.” “With their means of sustenance destroyed and their social units disrupted,” recalled Hasselblad, the remnant fled to the government, which then built the “resettlement village.” She noted that this was “being repeated throughout South Vietnam.” For this particular village, though, the story did not end there. Guerrillas eventually made their way to the new village and again burned their crops, but could not fight their way into the village because the peasants, despite the lack of troops to protect them and no weapons, pummeled the attackers with rocks, a pile of which Hasselblad could see ready for the next onslaught.<sup>63</sup>

We may draw a few conclusions from this vignette: First, the Viet Cong saw control of rural villages as indispensable to their cause, because they had no other source of food and manpower. Second, they preferred willing cooperation but were willing to use coercion; control was more important than “hearts and minds.” Third, even when the government moved villagers behind barricades, it had trouble protecting them. Finally, at this point in the insurgency, some of the Viet Cong were so poorly armed that they could be stopped with rocks.

Saigon began planning the third resettlement campaign while Agroville was still in progress, and attempted to learn not just from the first two but also directly from Britain’s recent success in

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<sup>61</sup> W.C. Trueheart, interviewed by Ted Gittinger, ADST (1982), p. 9.

<sup>62</sup> L.L. Lemnitzer, “Memorandum for General Taylor” (18 October 1961), in DOD, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967: Book 11 of 12* (Washington, 1971), p. 324.

<sup>63</sup> M. Hasselblad and D. Brandon, *Lucky-Lucky* (New York, 1966), pp. 50-3.

Malaya. Diem's principal advisor for the new campaign was Robert Thompson, a colonial official in Malaya whom Diem had invited for consultation in 1960. In September 1961, again at Diem's request, London posted him and a staff of four to Saigon to establish the British Advisory Mission.<sup>64</sup> One of his early recommendations to Diem was to send Colonel Tran Ngoc Chau, a province chief in the Delta who seemed to be having some of the government's only success, to Malaya to study what had happened there. Like Kieu Cong Kung, Chau had started military life as a Viet Minh officer, but deserted after concluding that Ho's organization was in fact Communist rather than nationalist.<sup>65</sup> Chau would play an important role over the next few years.

Thompson had concluded from Malaya that insurgencies were defeated in the countryside, and that hamlets were therefore of strategic importance. Because he, like few others, had been successful against an Asian Communist insurgency, he tended to get the benefit of the doubt. However, General Lyman Lemnitzer, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, noted the differences between Malaya and Vietnam.<sup>66</sup> Thompson advised Diem to designate a priority area for pacification, secure a number of hamlets in the area, and then flood it with resources to raise the standard of living. A collection of secured hamlets would become a "base" that would expand as security and development took hold, connecting with other bases. According to Thompson's theory, the entire country would eventually be cleared, local government would be connected with province and national government, and the peasants, because of the improved standard of living, would be content and therefore loyal to the government.<sup>67</sup> Diem enthusiastically approved Thompson's proposal for a multinational effort. The Vietnamese would be in charge, the British would offer advice, and the Americans would provide the funds.

President John F. Kennedy, keenly interested in counterinsurgency, had resolved "to make South Vietnam a test case for defeating Khrushchev's doctrine of Wars of National Liberation,"

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<sup>64</sup> "Sir Robert Thompson," *The Times of London* (20 May 1992).

<sup>65</sup> T.N. Chau, "My War Story: From Ho Chi Minh to Ngo Dinh Diem," in H. Neese and J. O'Donnell, eds., *Prelude to Tragedy* (Annapolis, 2001), p. 194.

<sup>66</sup> B. Fraleigh, "Counterinsurgency in South Vietnam: The Real Story," in H. Neese and J. O'Donnell, eds., *Prelude to Tragedy* (Annapolis, 2001), pp. 112-3; Lemnitzer, pp. 324-5.

<sup>67</sup> R. Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency* (St. Petersburg, 2005), pp. 121-40.

recalled Rufus Phillips, the former CIA operative.<sup>68</sup> It was now clear that guerrilla activity like that Hasselblad described was increasing by the month, and that insurgency rather than invasion was the near-term threat. When Kennedy concluded that USAID's practice of focusing on the central government was probably inadequate for Vietnam, that brought his views into alignment with those of Thompson.

### **The First Six Months: March - August 1962**

In March 1962, President Diem launched the Strategic Hamlet program with Operation Sunrise. In May, he followed that up with Operation Sea Swallow. Ngo Dinh Nhu, his brother, directed the campaign, and a highly regarded colonel, Hoang Van Lac, oversaw its execution.<sup>69</sup> The Viet Cong's violence was an adjunct to political agitation, and until the Viet Cong started propagating their political narrative, the peasants had been "neither concerned with nor aware of political matters," Lac recalled.<sup>70</sup> Diem and Nhu had correctly concluded that to compete they needed some type of grass-roots political structure in the countryside, but their push for peasants and officials to join their Personalist Labor Revolutionary Party rather than encouraging open competition, while understandable, suggests that they had not really embraced the notion that the people merited a political voice.<sup>71</sup>

Although the Americans were still optimistic three months into the program, they were concerned that much of the money they were providing to the Vietnamese was not making it to the provinces. There was also concern that Nhu's emphasis on speed was at the expense of quality.<sup>72</sup> Meanwhile, the Kennedy White House had concluded that the US should be doing more to counter the insurgency than just providing funds, and directed USAID to develop a more holistic and active

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<sup>68</sup> Phillips, "Before We Lost," p. 25.

<sup>69</sup> H. Lac, "Blind Design," in H. Neese and J. O'Donnell, eds., *Prelude to Tragedy* (Annapolis, 2001), pp. 68-73.

<sup>70</sup> Hasselblad and Brandon, p. 77.

<sup>71</sup> R. Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution* (New York, 1965), pp. 130-1; F. FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake* (Boston, 1972), pp. 124-5; Phillips, "Before We Lost," pp. 18-9.

<sup>72</sup> R. Hilsman, Memorandum to Governor Harriman, "Progress Report on South Vietnam" (18 June 1962), VCATTU, pp. 5-6. See also C.E. McManaway, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (1993), p. 11, who stated that in 1965 there had been a similar problem getting funds from the provinces to the villages; Phillips, "Before We Lost," pp. 34-5; and W.R. Warne, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (1995), pp. 8-9.

plan. With that, USAID assumed the lead for counterinsurgency. Lacking expertise, though, they asked Rufus Phillips to return to Vietnam to study the situation and develop a plan.<sup>73</sup>

Having begun his study in July, Phillips concluded that while there was too much emphasis on resettlement and not enough on political development, the program was conceptually sound. He recommended that USAID deploy a representative to each province to coordinate aid and that the US remove Saigon from the funding process, which seems to be an acknowledgement that the Vietnamese could be trusted to manage neither the money in Saigon nor the projects in the provinces. Diem, whose approval the Americans coveted both because of their respect for the South's sovereignty and their desire to not be seen as neocolonial, agreed to the recommendations on the condition that Phillips, whom he had grown to admire during the 1950s, would manage American support for Strategic Hamlet. Phillips went home for his family, and returned to set up the new system in September 1962.<sup>74</sup>

That same month, Robert Thompson, who felt that after a "haphazard start" the program had "developed well during the summer," gave Diem his assessment of the program's first six months. He noted that the Communist reaction to the program had "been less violent than...expected," and attributed that to the government offensives that were keeping them off balance as well as the dilemma they found themselves in—they wanted to attack the hamlets, but were concerned that doing so would alienate the very "people [whose] support [they needed to] win." Hasselblad's account suggests that they did attack hamlets, though, so Thompson's second point may have been more conjecture than fact.<sup>75</sup>

After mentioning the program's "very great progress," he suggested that the government needed to correct defects in the existing hamlets, continue building new ones at a pace that would keep the VC off balance, and take control of the territory in between hamlets, which they were conceding to the Communists in their haste to build. He gave some specific recommendations: One was to quit basing troops in isolated strongpoints outside hamlets. The VC could mass at night to destroy them piecemeal, he said, so the troops should be moved inside the hamlets to camouflaged

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<sup>73</sup> Phillips, "Before We Lost," pp. 25-7.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, pp. 26-31.

<sup>75</sup> Thompson, p. 130.

fighting positions where they could actually protect the people. (That this was not already standard practice is surprising, but might explain why Hasselblad's villagers protected themselves with rocks). A second was to train and arm more territorial troops, and a third was to do away with the practice of evacuating women and children when hamlets were under attack, which never worked in the chaos of battle.<sup>76</sup> These were very basic suggestions, and that Thompson felt the need to make them reveals some of the limitations both of the Vietnamese government and the Americans who were advising it.

Thompson warned further that any improvement in security would remain insufficient if the government did not prove through its actions that it was just as interested in the peasants' "prosperity" as it was in separating them from the Communists. That American money provided to the central government was not making it to the provinces suggests that officials at the top might have been diverting it to their own use, but Thompson did not speculate on that. He did suggest, though, that hamlets in the poorer areas should be made the "priority [for] subsidized fertilisers, poison for rat control, improved livestock (including pigs, chickens and ducks), better seeds and fruit trees." Within days, Phillips and his young team would be working on these very things. Thompson added that "province and district chiefs must start to think as much of the civilian aspect of their work as of the military," and he suggested they wear civilian clothes to remind them of that.<sup>77</sup>

### **USAID Gets Involved in the Provinces**

The Strategic Hamlet program was six months old when Phillips set up shop, so he had to simultaneously provide support and build his team. His title was Assistant Director for Rural Affairs, and he established his headquarters in Saigon, with regional offices at the four Vietnamese corps headquarters.<sup>78</sup> He needed a capable deputy, and USAID gave him Bert Fraleigh, who was then posted to Nationalist China. To fill some of his key headquarters positions he tapped into Ed Lansdale's contacts from the Philippines. One, retired Colonel Charles Bohannon, had just co-authored a book on the Philippine insurgency, and helped Saigon establish Chieu Hoi, a "surrender

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid, pp. 130-3.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, p. 133.

<sup>78</sup> Fraleigh, p. 101.

program” modeled after one that had worked well in the Philippines. By the end of the war, it could rightly boast thousands of defections.<sup>79</sup>

The lynchpin of the whole operation, though, was the USAID provincial representative—the “prov rep”—who would coordinate and oversee all USAID programs in his province. There were no American government workers with such a job description, so Phillips had to recruit his own, and welcomed anyone with a decent record and desire to make a difference, even if inexperienced. They came from the Foreign Service, USAID, the International Voluntary Services (which was the forerunner of the Peace Corps), and for a while from the Army, as General Harkins gave permission for military advisors to double as prov reps where Phillips did not yet have them.<sup>80</sup> In the early months there were too few to go around, and John O’Donnell, one of the earliest, managed seven provinces in the Delta, handing them off as others arrived.<sup>81</sup> There were other priorities as well. Harvey Neese had been scheduled to take one of O’Donnell’s provinces but was switched at the last minute to work on the Pig Corn Program, a high-priority agricultural project that Phillips’ team had started.<sup>82</sup>

Building from scratch and operating such an organization required a capable leader with an entrepreneurial spirit, and by all accounts Phillips was that. Decades later Vladimir Lehovich, one of the few Foreign Service officers that first year, would describe Phillips as “one of the finest natural leaders” he had encountered in his long career. He possessed “great leadership skills,” “self-confidence,” and “personal courage,” said Lehovich, who described the organization as “a very unusual outfit run by some absolutely unorthodox and gifted people.”<sup>83</sup> These men knew that defeating the Malayan insurgency had taken “more than ten years of quiet, thorough grassroots work,”

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<sup>79</sup> N.D. Valeriano & C.T.R. Bohannon, *Counter-Guerrilla Operations* (Westport, 2006); R.C. Phillips, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (1995), p. 36.

<sup>80</sup> Phillips, “Before We Lost,” pp. 32-3; Fraleigh, p. 109.

<sup>81</sup> J. O’Donnell, “Life and Times of a USOM Prov Rep,” in H. Neese & J. O’Donnell, eds., *Prelude to Tragedy* (Annapolis, 2001), p. 213.

<sup>82</sup> H. Neese, “Destination South Vietnam, 1959,” in H. Neese and J. O’Donnell, eds., *Prelude to Tragedy* (Annapolis, 2001), pp. 256-9.

<sup>83</sup> V. Lehovich, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (1997), p. 27.

Fraleigh later recalled, and he described their endeavor “as a long-term, nation-building effort” manned by “dedicated people...willing to put in the years that might be required for success.”<sup>84</sup>

Although Phillips believed in the Strategic Hamlet program, from the start he had recognized its shortcomings. “The challenge,” he later wrote, “was to convert it into something in which people in the countryside were real participants rather than objects and through which democratic ways and institutions could begin to blossom.”<sup>85</sup> From a more immediate standpoint, though, the effort was focused on the development projects that might originate through Phillips’ and Fraleigh’s brainstorming, travel, and analysis of reports, or from grass-roots input, such as a province chief pointing out his communities with inadequate drinking water or a district chief informing an advisor that some of his villages needed schools.

Phillips addressed the problem of American funds not working efficiently through the Vietnamese system by arranging to have the White House send them straight to his office rather than through USAID to the Vietnamese, and significant aid started reaching the provinces. To influence the way it was used yet still involve the Vietnamese, Phillips established a “provincial rehabilitation committee” in each province to vet projects. Before funding one, he required the unanimous consent of a committee’s members, who were the Vietnamese province chief, his senior military advisor, and the USAID representative. The prov rep could veto a questionable project, the military advisor could examine a project’s likelihood of success from a security standpoint, and the province chief could provide the Vietnamese perspective. The system encroached on Vietnamese sovereignty, which the US was loath to do, but at the time seemed acceptable to the Vietnamese. It is perhaps portentous that even at this early stage, when the problems were comparatively small, the Vietnamese government could play only a limited role in straightforward government functions. It is also worth noting that Phillips’ can-do attitude reflects the broader spirit of national self-confidence and faith in problem-solving that are so characteristic of this period in American history.

While Phillips’ procedures may have removed the possibility for corrupt officials in Saigon and at the four corps headquarters to directly misappropriate funds, at the province level and below

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<sup>84</sup> Fraleigh, p. 112.

<sup>85</sup> Phillips, “Before We Lost,” p. 31.

there was still ample opportunity for corruption. Once a project was approved, for example, the next step was to receive bids from contractors, a point that is vulnerable to graft in any country. And there were yet more opportunities as the project was managed, because the Vietnamese performed that function, with USAID's representative limited to oversight.<sup>86</sup>

Despite the fact that they advised colonels and managed numerous, complex projects, the prov reps were a youthful group. John O'Donnell, who had been working on a Hawaiian sugar plantation before joining Phillips, was twenty-six.<sup>87</sup> Vladimir Lehovich, who was twenty-four, and Richard Holbrooke, who was just twenty-two, were "French-speaking bachelors" in the Foreign Service.<sup>88</sup> Because they were generalists but had to manage projects ranging from agriculture and engineering to governance, microeconomics, and health care, when they could they relied on USAID specialists in Saigon or at the regional level for technical knowledge. By the end of the second six months, Phillips was correct in thinking that his men were making a significant contribution to Strategic Hamlet, but that does not mean that all was well with the program.

As Thompson had done after the first six months, he sent Diem his assessment of the second, and the optimistic tone was gone. Problems he had highlighted in the first assessment remained uncorrected in March 1963, and six months earlier he probably could not have imagined that so much of his advice would have been unheeded. Once built, hamlets were being ignored rather than improved, there were too few territorial forces and they poorly trained, armed, equipped, and led, and everything was being done too quickly, with shoddy results. He was now less concerned about maintaining momentum than he was with slowing construction to focus on eliminating the enemy's "pockets and salients." And rather than decentralizing decisions on where and when hamlets would be formed, corps commanders should do that so the seemingly random decisions would be "linked to the overall strategy."<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, pp. 27-8; O'Donnell, p. 215-8; Phillips (1995), p. 19.

<sup>87</sup> O'Donnell, p. 210.

<sup>88</sup> Lehovich, p. 30; Holbrooke, pp. vii-viii.

<sup>89</sup> Thompson, pp. 133-7.

### **The Program Crumbles: April – November 1963**

In the program's final six months, neither Thompson nor Phillips sounded very hopeful. Phillips thought it was not too late to correct the problems, but Thompson probably suspected it was, noting that the Communists were now aggressively opposing the program: "fences were torn down"; "construction...was destroyed"; "inhabitants [were] forced to return to their previous sites"; "hamlet militia posts were constantly attacked."<sup>90</sup> Lehovich, the Vinh Long representative, watched his work "built up by day and pulled down by night."<sup>91</sup> "The few capable local leaders," said George Tanham, "were singled out for assassination or kidnapping."<sup>92</sup>

On the first of May, Phillips sent his boss a worried report. There were only a few places where the program was "well executed" and the people had "the will and the means to resist," and the problems in the others were legion. Diem and Nhu were punishing province chiefs who were constructing new hamlets at too slow a pace and rewarding those who reported the most constructed. The predictable result was that most province chiefs now focused "on quantity [rather than] quality," and reported as complete hamlets that were either not "viable" or had not even been started. Few understood the program's role in winning the allegiance of the people, said Phillips, and many had been "conditioned by years...with the French" to use methods that were "sure to alienate the population." Phillips had learned that one province chief was using territorials "to keep the people in" rather than the enemy out, and he suspected others were doing the same. The worst problems were in the Delta, he said, "where, except in a few provinces, the apparent progress is largely illusory."<sup>93</sup>

Phillips could not have been more forthright, but not all Americans were. John Bennett, a USAID officer working at the embassy, recalled that the "Saigon types with a stake in reporting good news and the success of their agency's programs" maintained the illusion that things were going well. While Phillips and his subordinates could report what they saw, some civilians did not, and military advisors generally could not. The American military's problem of wishful thinking rather than truthful

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid, pp. 137-8.

<sup>91</sup> Lehovich, p. 29.

<sup>92</sup> G.K. Tanham, "Defeating Insurgency in Vietnam: My Early Efforts" in H. Neese and J. O'Donnell, eds., *Prelude to Tragedy* (Annapolis, 2001), p. 162.

<sup>93</sup> R.C. Phillips, "Memorandum From the Assistant Director for Rural Affairs," (1 May 1963), in Office of the Historian, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume III, Vietnam, January-August 1963*, paras. 3-5, 7-8.

reporting started with General Paul Harkins at the top. One day as Bennett was manning the embassy's phones he overheard a conversation between Harkins and Ambassador Nolting in which Harkins, who had just returned from a visit to the countryside, assured Nolting that "everything was going great" out there. That was "totally at variance" with everything Bennett was hearing, and Harkins acknowledged that the press corps was telling a different story, but assured the ambassador that they were "misrepresenting the situation." In contrast, Bennett and his young colleagues had concluded that the press were "the only ones telling the truth."<sup>94</sup> William Trueheart, Nolting's deputy, was inclined to trust Harkins, but later concluded that the press had indeed had better information and was writing more accurate accounts of the situation than his own people were sending back to Washington.<sup>95</sup>

It is clear now, as it should have been then, that military reports were upbeat because Harkins wished to emphasize the positive and did not brook dissent. Two decades later he would justify this approach by asserting that he had been "born an optimist," and was therefore "a little more optimistic" than others.<sup>96</sup> According to Trueheart, Harkins refused to let advisors "report what they were seeing" if it was not "upbeat." The embassy eventually began to see the weakness of the security situation, though it was within Harkins' purview, because of civilian rather than military reports.<sup>97</sup> It should not be surprising, then that Harkins did not teach Vietnamese generals how to supervise their subordinates, which would have involved inspections to determine the truth, since he did not do that with his own. We may therefore conclude that his rose-colored glasses affected not only the pacification effort, but the advisory effort as well.

Another example of the forthrightness of Phillips and that of his young representatives in the field came in early September, when he received a call from Earl Young, the Long An prov rep. Young reported that "Viet Cong company- and battalion-size main-force units" had recently destroyed fifty hamlets, and asked Phillips to come see for himself. Phillips made a quick visit, but

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<sup>94</sup> J.T. Bennett, 1996, ADST (1996), p. 14.

<sup>95</sup> Trueheart, pp. 24-5.

<sup>96</sup> P.D. Harkins, interviewed by T. Gittinger, ADST (1982), p. 7.

<sup>97</sup> Trueheart, p. 24.

had to leave the next day for the US.<sup>98</sup> President Kennedy became aware of the starkly different views of Phillips and Harkins at a meeting of the National Security Council on 12 September. Kennedy had dispatched General Victor Krulak and the State Department's Joseph Mendenhall to assess the situation, and they were now giving Kennedy their reports. It appears that because Harkins was a fellow general, Krulak had accepted his views without verifying them. He told Kennedy that things were going very well. Mendenhall, in contrast, told Kennedy how badly they were going. Kennedy, incredulous, asked if they had visited the same country, and someone then suggested that Phillips give his thoughts. Phillips told the President of his trip to Long An just a few days earlier, and opined that Strategic Hamlet was going very badly, and especially so in the Delta. Krulak, apparently feeling threatened, attacked Phillips' credibility by pointing out that because he was a civilian he was unqualified to make such judgments. Meanwhile, back in Saigon at an embassy party, Harkins was telling Trueheart that he was "going to get that Rufus Phillips," at which point Trueheart's wife reminded the general that Phillips did not "work for" him.<sup>99</sup>

While rosy reporting was one enormous problem, another was reconciling notions of Vietnamese sovereignty with the never-ending attempts of Vietnamese officials to convert American funds to their own personal use. Phillips learned that Saigon had demanded a return to the old system, with the money for his projects under Vietnamese control and the two Americans in the province capital no longer part of the approval process. He argued vigorously against the change, and a compromise returned funding to the Vietnamese but kept the three-person sign-off.<sup>100</sup> Once again, top officials in Saigon would be able to siphon off the money.

The American side of the pacification effort faced other challenges. One was that USAID "traditionalis[ts]" in Saigon were skeptical of Phillips' approach, and sometimes seemed unsupportive.<sup>101</sup> Another was the competition between different American agencies over control of programs and access to President Diem. USAID staffer John Bennett referred to the "agency

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<sup>98</sup> Phillips, "Before We Lost," pp. 45-6.

<sup>99</sup> J.A. Mendenhall, interviewed by H. Torbert, ADST (1991), pp. 26-8; Phillips, "Before We Lost," pp. 45-51, 54.

<sup>100</sup> Phillips, "Before We Lost," pp. 35-8.

<sup>101</sup> Neese, p. 265.

rivalries.”<sup>102</sup> A third was that some of the prov reps had entered government service inspired by John Kennedy’s appeal to idealism, and grew uncomfortable as they recognized that the government they were propping up hardly shared American values. Lehovich rationalized that his work was “mak[ing] villages attractive and prosperous,” and the American military support—the “fences [and] militia” that Diem controlled—were someone else’s business. While others worried that working with province chiefs would appear an endorsement of their actions, he had concluded that the war not a matter of good versus evil, but as somewhat evil (the government) versus truly evil (the Communists). The government, he said, “was often physical [and] repressive,” but the Communists were even more so.<sup>103</sup>

Richard Holbrooke wrote to a friend in November that there were large Viet Cong units in all eight of his province’s districts, and described part of the province as “almost unmovable hell.” “While we claim that we control 61% of the population through the Strategic Hamlet Program,” he wrote, “we concede to the VC control of over 50% of the land area, with over 135,000 people in it.”<sup>104</sup>

That same month both South Vietnam and the United States lost their presidents. A coup with President Kennedy’s tacit approval overthrew Diem on the first of November, and exactly three weeks later Kennedy was murdered in Dallas. Strategic Hamlet lost its champion, and in a more general sense the coup set a pattern for attempting to solve systemic problems by removing individuals. Phillips, the founder of USAID’s effort in the countryside, left for home shortly after Kennedy’s assassination.<sup>105</sup>

How did the press treat Strategic Hamlet? While some Americans concluded that they were among the few pointing out the program’s problems, not all was going wrong, and reporters at the time and most historians since have failed to see the program’s good, including its positive legacy. They therefore get the story only half right. David Halberstam, for example, wrote that the US pushed its agenda of “nation-building and reform” in the provinces “by by-passing Diem’s government, creating strategic hamlets to protect the people from the Vietcong” and pursuing its development

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<sup>102</sup> Bennett, p. 14.

<sup>103</sup> Lehovich, p. 29.

<sup>104</sup> Holbrooke, p. ix.

<sup>105</sup> Phillips, “Before We Lost,” p. 55.

project “not necessarily with Diem, but in spite of him.”<sup>106</sup> In fact, as we have seen, Strategic Hamlet was Diem’s decision after experimenting with the two earlier programs, and the US rushed to catch up.<sup>107</sup> Halberstam questioned whether the peasants even saw the Viet Cong as enemy. Certainly some did not, but many did. The fact they would wish to leave the new hamlets and return to their homes is easily explained by the practical problems the dislocation created rather than a preference for the Communists. “The problems were political, but the response was military,” Halberstam wrote, overlooking two key points: first, that the only way to stop Communist military assaults was with military force, and second, as the accounts of Phillips and those who worked for him make abundantly clear, that the program had significant political, agricultural, education, health, and public works components.<sup>108</sup>

Stanley Karnow dismissed Strategic Hamlet with the comment that it “often converted peasants into Viet Cong sympathizers,” and wrongly generalized that “the strategic hamlets soon crumbled.” In fact, a top official in the government that replaced Diem’s—rabidly anti-Diem and skeptical of his programs—confided to journalist Robert Shaplen that over 1,700 of the hamlets were in “usable” form. One can see the weakness of Karnow’s narrative by comparing it with Phillips’ account. To make his case, near the end of 1963 Karnow went to one of the worst villages in perhaps the worst province—Long An—and extrapolated from there. He found that most of the new hamlets in that area had been destroyed, and to that point his report corresponds with what Phillips had learned—and then conveyed to the White House—several months earlier.<sup>109</sup>

Karnow, though, highlighted a hamlet where “a handful of Vietcong agents had entered the hamlet one night and told the peasants to tear it down and return to their native villages.”<sup>110</sup> While this may have been true in that instance, to generalize as Karnow did is to mischaracterize. Phillips, as the reader will recall, understood from his Long An representative that “Viet Cong company- and battalion-size main-force units” had destroyed fifty hamlets, and “were invading in force, killing any

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<sup>106</sup> D. Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York, 1973), p. 218.

<sup>107</sup> R. Phillips, interviewed by T. Gittinger, ADST (1982), pp. 29, 32; Phillips, “Before We Lost,” pp. 26-7.

<sup>108</sup> Halberstam, pp. 218, 225; Phillips, “Before We Lost,” p. 32.

<sup>109</sup> Karnow, pp. 257-8; Shaplen, *Lost Revolution*, p. 220; Halberstam, pp. 340-2; Phillips, “Before We Lost,” pp. 50-1.

<sup>110</sup> Karnow, p. 323.

hamlet defenders who opposed them, rousting the inhabitants from their homes, and making them take down and cut up the barbed-wire defenses and, in many cases, remove the corrugated metal roofs off their houses.”<sup>111</sup> By treating the evidence as he did, Karnow was suggesting to his readers that the peasants of Long An—like those across the country—were so opposed to the government that only four or five guerrillas could destroy a hamlet, whereas in many cases, if Phillips was right, it took companies if not battalions of VC regulars to do that. Indeed, the attacks were so large that Phillips had wondered why Vietnamese regulars had not responded, and learned that when pleas for help went out, the regulars had been confined to their barracks because of Diem’s fear of a coup. Frances FitzGerald, too, got it half right. She correctly described Strategic Hamlet as the “centerpiece of American strategy in Vietnam,” but dismissed it as accomplishing nothing positive.<sup>112</sup> Neil Sheehan correctly saw the program’s negatives but failed to see its positives.<sup>113</sup> If there were positives, what were they?

In short, while the program was probably wrong on its emphasis on involuntary relocation, it was conceptually right on the necessity of somehow denying Communist access to the peasantry and the importance of improving the peasant’s lot in life. Indeed, in the days after the coup, Rufus Phillips told the country’s new leaders that regardless of what they might wish to call it, Strategic Hamlet had to go on in some form “because the basic program and approach is right.”<sup>114</sup> An important point for this inquiry is that most of the problem with Strategic Hamlet was not the theory, but the government’s departure from the theory and extremely poor management. They departed from the theory by haphazardly building strategic hamlets everywhere rather than bringing security and development to small areas and expanding them as the situation permitted, as Thompson had recommended. They departed from sound management practice by relying on unverified reports, rewarding hasty but shoddy work, and penalizing those who were trying to do things right. Another problem was that the entire territorial army system was broken.

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<sup>111</sup> Phillips, “Before We Lost,” p. 45.

<sup>112</sup> FitzGerald, pp. 123-4.

<sup>113</sup> Sheehan, pp. 309-12.

<sup>114</sup> Phillips (1995), pp. 33-4.

The Americans, though, had problems of their own. Their projects were out in the villages, yet neither the military nor USAID had advisors below the province level. General Harkins profoundly harmed the American effort by not letting his advisors report problems and disparaging civilians who saw things differently, and the Pentagon compounded the problem by trusting Harkins' judgment. General Krulak, President Kennedy's counterinsurgency expert, neither understood counterinsurgency nor let facts interfere with his analysis, and like Harkins, had a distrust of civilians, one of whom described as predisposed to an "assumption of civilian incompetence."<sup>115</sup> Those at the embassy could have been a counterweight to Harkins, but were slow to comprehend that he was in the wrong, and had relied on him in the first place because they were out of their element in dealing with an insurgency they neither wanted nor understood.

Phillips was convinced that his financing mechanism for getting funds to the provinces and then on to vetted projects was a critical component of his entire program, yet within months it was being challenged. The Vietnamese considered it an affront to their sovereignty that the Americans did not trust them enough to let them manage it in Saigon, and the Embassy and USAID conceded to their demands. It was perhaps more about the threat to their patronage power than sovereignty, but that went unsaid. Phillips lost that battle but managed to keep the joint sign-off at the province level. The related problem was the failure to use leverage. There was a national reluctance to leverage the significant American aid out of fear that the Americans, like the French before them, would be seen as exhibiting an essentially colonial attitude. The US, while providing all the resources, therefore let countless Vietnamese mistakes and corrupt practices continue unabated.

### **Conclusion**

What may we conclude about the pacification effort in these early years? Diem's first true attempt at something that looked like pacification was the Civic Action program. This Vietnamese initiative to engage at the village level was commendable, but America's failure to support it on an adequate scale suggests that the US comprehended neither the imminence of the threat, how to get ahead of it, nor what Maoist theory, which the Viet Cong were following, predicted would come next. Indeed, the emerging challenge was so far outside American experience that no agency had the lead

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<sup>115</sup> G.W. Allen, *None So Blind* (Chicago, 2001), p. 164.

on counterinsurgency, and the Agency for International Development ended up with it because development—even local development in the context of counterinsurgency—did not seem within the Pentagon’s purview. Even then, USAID remained enamored with big, national projects, and as the US failed to comprehend the government’s vulnerability in the countryside, the American military was fixated on creating an army that could defeat a conventional invasion from the North.

As the insurgency grew, Diem saw a protected hamlet program as at least part of the answer, but implemented it in a way that seemed more anti-Communist than pro-peasant. With its forced relocation, division into friendly and enemy settlements, and lack of attention to social, political, and economic development, Agglomeration was a failure, but one from which the Vietnamese learned. Agroville, which replaced it, did away with the division into friendly and VC families, attempted to address economic needs, and paid more attention to social and political development, but continued to rely on involuntary relocation. To many it seemed more about barbed wire and punji sticks than development, and as the government created grievances through both policy and wrong behavior, the Communists exploited them.

Agroville evolved into Strategic Hamlet, and while this third attempt was indeed an overall disappointment, its positive aspects would significantly shape subsequent approaches. For the first time, USAID put civilian representatives at the regional and provincial levels, and took on intensive development projects at the local level in the countryside. Strategic Hamlet, though, is best viewed through the prism of the four hindrances to the pacification advisory effort that were introduced in the first chapter. Though they were not as clear in the nine years of the Diem era as they would become later, each was present to some degree, and during Strategic Hamlet became more visible.

The first was the abject failure of Vietnamese officials to supervise their people and programs. In military parlance, this would be described as a dysfunctional system of command and control. By demanding quick work without verifying quality, Diem and his brother doomed Strategic Hamlet to failure. Certainly that was not their intention, and one must assume that they would have changed course had they realized that those they were rewarding for speedy results were not actually achieving them. Effective supervision in any endeavor requires verification that work is being completed to standard, and they did not do this. There was no system for ensuring that reports from

the province chiefs were accurate, and by rewarding those who submitted false reports they created a house of cards.

The American response, though, is even more baffling, because from the start of their careers American officers were indoctrinated with the notion that a leader was responsible for everything his subordinates did or failed to do, that ignorance was no excuse, and that inspections were therefore essential. Indeed, failing to inspect was proof of negligence. Inexplicably, though, as American generals found themselves in top advisory positions in Vietnam, they appear to have decided that those principles did not apply to their Vietnamese counterparts, and not only failed to coach them on how to supervise, but ignored the evidence that the reports they were making were false.

What might the fledgling advisory effort have done differently? It is intuitively obvious that advisors at any level should focus on improving the competencies expected of officers at that level. While an American lieutenant advising a platoon of territorials might counsel his counterpart on how to emplace an ambush because doing so is one of a platoon leader's core competencies, an American general advising a three-star corps commander should not only help him prepare orders, but then advise on how to ensure his orders were being followed. It is clear, then, that in 1962 and 1963, the advisors at the top of the advisory system failed to advise on the things that mattered most.

A second hindrance was that the Vietnamese officer corps, which held the reins of power at every level of government above village, tolerated corruption. The advisory effort was still small and disjointed, and few Americans understood Vietnam, so the problem was not as obvious as it would become later, but that it was significant is clear from the fact that when funds for the rural development effort were provided to Saigon, they did not make it to the provinces, and when Phillips bypassed Saigon they did. That his change in the procedures was effective in eliminating the corruption at the top is suggested by Diem's demand that things return to the way they had been. Even if he couched that in terms of sovereignty, it is likely that he was most interested in restoring opportunities for graft.

Especially important for this inquiry, though, is how Phillips chose to solve the problem in the first place. By finding a way to circumvent the corrupt practices of Diem's government rather than insisting he end them, the early advisory effort adopted a *de facto* policy that would survive the rest of

the American intervention of looking for ways to work around problems of corruption and incompetence instead of getting at their root. Though this practice would often achieve some positive results in the near term, it fixed nothing permanently, and could never be a complete solution.

The third hindrance to the pacification advisory effort—a failure to appreciate that winning the people’s allegiance required that they be wooed—overlapped with the second. It is clear that Saigon understood that in the midst of insurgency, loyalty to the government was something to be valued, but Diem seems to have assumed that such allegiance could be forced by removing all contact with the Communists rather than truly earning the peasant’s loyalty. It was probably not until Strategic Hamlet that Americans began to suspect that government officials were often more interested in controlling the peasants and benefitting from their exploitation than caring for their welfare and empowering them politically. If the British thought the hamlets needed social, political, and economic development, and the Americans were willing to pay for it, all the better, because it created opportunities for various patronage streams.

The slipshod approach to constructing the new hamlets, though, must have made the government look incompetent, even to the peasants, and moving them from their ancestors’ graves and farther away from their fields would not have earned any loyalty. Nor is the fact that advisors would consider Saigon the lesser of two evils a ringing endorsement. By all appearances, Saigon was attempting to apply Robert Thompson’s theory without understanding what it ultimately aimed to achieve.

The fourth hindrance was the emerging lack of unity among the various agencies making up the American mission. It would be unreasonable to expect the US to have achieved interagency unity of effort this early in the intervention because they had no experience doing so—certainly nothing on this scale—and had not yet comprehended that such unity was necessary. Furthermore, achieving unity would have been virtually impossible given that neither USAID nor the American military truly understood counterinsurgency. It is now clear, though, that a lack of unity was already a problem in 1962 and 1963. John Bennett’s comments about “agency rivalries” and Vladimir Lehovich’s statement that he saw his work as benevolent and therefore distinct from that of the American military

reveal a bifurcated effort.<sup>116</sup> The divisions within the American effort could also be seen in the way the different organizations handled information. The reporting problems revealed deep divisions between Harkins and his advisors in the field, but also between Harkins and Rufus Phillips' organization.<sup>117</sup>

The tendency to view work in a stovepiped rather than holistic fashion was not just a theoretical problem. The Communists were waging a form of revolutionary war that attacked the status quo politically, socially, and economically as well militarily, and countering that required a whole-of-government approach. Rufus Phillips was probably one of the few to recognize at the time that advisors who viewed their work in isolation were completely missing the point. His joint sign-off necessitated cooperation not only between Americans and Vietnamese, but between civilian and military advisors as well, as both were growing aware that civilian development could not take place without security.

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<sup>116</sup> Bennett, p. 14; Lehovich, p. 29.

<sup>117</sup> Though John Vann was a division senior advisor in 1962-63 rather than directly involved in the Strategic Hamlet Program, he faced the same challenge as the pacification advisors, and turned to Halberstam and Sheehan to get the truth to the American public and Washington decision-makers. This advisor-journalist partnership is one of the early themes of Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie*, pp. 328-33, 384-5, and Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest*, pp. 222-3, 331, 343.

### Chapter 3 Pacification Attempts, 1964-1965

Nineteen-sixty four began with President Lyndon Johnson trying to get his bearings on Southeast Asia. In Vietnam, his ambassador was Henry Cabot Lodge, USAID's director was Joe Brent, and Bert Fraleigh had replaced Rufus Phillips as director of USAID's provincial operations. The "ineffectual and perennially optimistic" General Paul Harkins, as George Herring accurately described him, continued to command US forces.<sup>118</sup> On the Vietnamese side, the coup leaders who overthrew Diem had formed a twelve-man Military Revolutionary Council to direct the government.

The Council's "first action," according to Colonel Hoang Lac, who had managed Strategic Hamlet, was "to reward, monetarily and through promotions, the high-ranking officers" who had supported the coup. Those who had not "were fired regardless of their accomplishments and skills."<sup>119</sup> This was not a good omen for a professional officer corps. Robert Thompson recalled that the Council replaced every province chief in the country, and that throughout 1964 the Viet Cong took advantage of the resulting turmoil to increase their control by killing or shaming local officials. "Others could hardly be expected to take their place," said Thompson.<sup>120</sup>

It was a tumultuous period. The US had hoped for a new era, but the post-coup government failed to govern, the Council failed to manage, and on 30 January, General Nguyen Khan, who had not been involved in the coup, conducted his own. Washington soon decided that some "housecleaning" was in order on the US side, and in June replaced Harkins with William Westmoreland.<sup>121</sup> Also that summer, President Johnson replaced Lodge with Maxwell Taylor so that Lodge could return to the US to pursue the Republican nomination for the Presidency. In the second half of 1964, the North, having decided that the guerrillas needed help, began infiltrating their own regular units into the South. Johnson responded with air strikes on North Vietnam in August and then on their infiltration routes through Laos in December. Those failed to stop the flow. Back in Washington, "the mood [grew progressively] gloomy throughout 1964," wrote Jeffrey Clarke, and

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<sup>118</sup> Herring, *Longest War*, p. 116.

<sup>119</sup> Lac, p. 82.

<sup>120</sup> Thompson, pp. 139-40.

<sup>121</sup> B. Zorthian, interviewed by Cliff Groce, ADST (1988), p. 30.

Thomas Ahern, who was in Vietnam with the CIA at the time, later recalled the “generally pessimistic atmosphere...in mid-1964,” and “the sense of desperation that pervaded all of our efforts.”<sup>122</sup>

Despite the turmoil and gloom, the US actually increased its pacification support in these two years, but one would not know that from the historiography. Indeed, one might conclude that development work in the provinces had died with Strategic Hamlet. George Herring, for example, in *America's Longest War*, devotes but one paragraph of his thirty-two pages on 1964-65 to pacification. Likewise, Fredrick Logevall says little about the subject. His chapter covering August 1964, which was the month that one of the major pacification offensives of the war began, makes no mention of that or the pacification effort in general. It is as if they did not exist.<sup>123</sup> Historians typically miss the point that the entire American effort in 1964 and 1965, including the ground troops, was seen in the context of pacification rather than a simplistic attempt to impose a military solution. This chapter aims to fill the resulting gap in the historiography.

### **Chien Thang, New Life, and Hop Tac**

One of the new government's first tasks was to decide what to do with Strategic Hamlet. Shortly before leaving, Rufus Phillips tried to salvage what he could from his work, but discovered that the regime's inclination “was to demolish anything that Diem might have been associated with.” He told them that whatever they might call it, the next effort in the countryside would have to rely on the same principles, because they were the very essence of counterinsurgency. He also warned that the Diem government had utterly failed to protect the hamlets, and that everything hinged on getting that right. He discerned, though, that the new leaders were preoccupied with “establishing their control” and not very interested in the countryside.<sup>124</sup> That is no doubt correct, but it is clear from journalist Robert Shaplen that they knew they could not simply ignore the strategic hamlets. The prime minister told Shaplen that “only twenty per cent of the 8,600 [that Diem] claimed to have built [were actually] usable,” and that his government would halt new construction, “abandon those that could not be safeguarded,” and “consolidate” the rest.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Clarke, p. 16; Ahern, pp. 131, 136. See also F. Logevall, *Choosing War* (Berkeley, 1999), pp. 75-221.

<sup>123</sup> Herring, *Longest War*, pp. 117-8; Logevall, pp. 222-51.

<sup>124</sup> Phillips (1995), pp. 33-4.

<sup>125</sup> Shaplen, *Lost Revolution*, p. 220.

After General Khanh seized power, he replaced Strategic Hamlet with Chien Thang, which meant “Struggle for Victory.” It was based on the French counterinsurgency theory known as the “spreading oil spot,” whereby government control would gradually expand from a secure base. It was not really much different from what Thompson had envisioned for Strategic Hamlet. Indeed, Khanh embraced one of Thompson’s key points that Diem had ignored: rather than a willy-nilly approach, he would establish and gradually expand these bases according to carefully picked priorities. It was understood that some areas would have to remain under Communist control until the oil spot reached them, which might take years. The oil spot was designed to expand over time until the whole country was pacified, but until that time there would always be a periphery around the pacified area that needed to be cleared, and areas outside the periphery in which enemy forces that might threaten the pacification effort had to be neutralized. The combat operations in this outer area were just as essential to the pacification strategy as were the territorial troops guarding the hamlets.<sup>126</sup>

The new moniker was “new life hamlet,” and before a hamlet could get that designation, the government had to clear out the enemy, form and train territorial forces to keep them from coming back, construct defenses, classify the villagers according to loyalty, organize them, dismantle any Communist shadow government that might exist (the Viet Cong infrastructure, or VCI), and carry out an intensive development program. No doubt good in theory, in practice it was a tall order, and it could take months, if not years, just to root out the shadow governments. The Chien Thang teams were not supposed to leave one hamlet to go to another until these conditions had been achieved, but in practice they often did.<sup>127</sup>

The government made the area around Saigon the top priority, but work was complicated by the fact that two different Vietnamese commanders shared responsibility, and nobody seemed in charge. There was no “clear-cut direction and management,” said Colonel Jasper Wilson, one of the corps senior advisors. Westmoreland prepared a plan to address that issue, and the Vietnamese approved it and named it Hop Tac, which meant “Many Working Together.” The words were

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<sup>126</sup> Cooper *et al.*, *Vol. II*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>127</sup> Cooper *et al.*, *Vol. III*, pp. 204-5, 216. The term “new life” would last the remainder of the war, and some advisors became “new life development officers.” See also J. Sylvester, interviewed by L.M. Calkins, VCATTU (2004), p. 70; J. Sylvester, interviewed by J. Broadwater, ADST (1993), p. 14.

obviously intended to reflect the new appreciation for the necessity of various entities working toward a common purpose. To coordinate the disparate activities, the government set up the Hop Tac Secretariat, which consisted of top military and civilian officials and their American counterparts. The campaign began in September 1964.<sup>128</sup>

### **The USAID in Turmoil**

Meanwhile, the USAID operation in Vietnam was experiencing turbulence. Two months before Hop Tac, USAID reassigned James Killen from Korea to Vietnam to replace Joe Brandt. In Korea, Killen had been known for cutting programs and staff, and before he left Seoul a subordinate who had preceded him to Saigon wrote back that USAID's "preoccupation [with] counterinsurgency ... was eating up the rest of the Mission [and interfering with] other priorities." Whether or not getting USAID back to its traditional mission was the reason Killen was being posted to Saigon, he seems to have made that his priority. Once he got there, his preference for large capital projects over community development would put him at odds with Chien Thang.<sup>129</sup>

He arrived in Saigon with an established reputation for being "very tough," "autocratic," and "a bull in the china shop," and immediately started cleaning house.<sup>130</sup> His principal target was the men whom Phillips had hastily hired under his mandate from President Kennedy. They had been sent into dangerous conditions to start operations from scratch, and many had an entrepreneurial rather than bureaucratic mentality. Fraleigh rightly described them as "the catalysts who quick-started the counterinsurgency effort." Few looked or acted like the civil servants Killen was used to.<sup>131</sup> After a hasty investigation, he announced that Fraleigh's team was "corrupt, unprofessional, not worthy of being in AID, and full of homosexuals." There was little if any evidence to back up those charges, but Killen ran off some of Fraleigh's men, and others, unhappy with the environment, left on their own.<sup>132</sup> Unfortunately for the American mission, said Fraleigh, many who left the program had "Vietnamese

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<sup>128</sup> Komer, *New Model*, pp. 17-8; Military History Branch, MACV, *Command History, 1966* (MACV, 1967), DTIC, pp. 736-8; see also JUSPAO Planning Staff, "JUSPAO Guidances, Psychological Requirements of Hop Tac" (13 July 1965), VCATTU, p. 1.

<sup>129</sup> F.D. Correl, interviewed by W.H. North, ADST (1998), p. 19; see also D. Lazar, interviewed by W.H. North, ADST (1997), p. 19 and T. Szulc, "Aid Rise to Saigon May Be Withheld," *New York Times* (28 December 1964), p. 2.

<sup>130</sup> R.M. Poats, interviewed by W.H. North, ADST (1999), p. 6; Kux, p. 22; Fraleigh, p. 116.

<sup>131</sup> Fraleigh, p. 121.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 117-9. See also Tanham, p. 170; Neese, p. 268; Lehovich, pp. 30-1.

language capabilities and long years of experience in Asia.” He thought most were dedicated in a way that career bureaucrats usually were not.<sup>133</sup>

Killen directed his people to take a hands-off approach to advising. Robert Komer, who was not there at the time but would later direct the American pacification effort, concluded that one of Killen’s greatest errors had been directing provincial representatives to “sit back and help only when asked.” The problem with that, said Komer, was that “when it was needed most, he withdrew U.S. advice, support, and most of all, push.” From this, we may conclude that Komer thought an advisor’s most important function was to “push” his Vietnamese counterpart to take a particular action, and this raises a philosophical question about the nature of advising. Whether soldiers or civilians, advisors helped coordinate American resources—“support,” Komer called that here—and they often provided their “advice” as well. Pushing one’s counterpart, though, connotes prodding him to do something that his own boss was not holding him responsible for doing, which would be a de facto insertion into the Vietnamese supervisory chain. If a supervisor were doing his job, there would be no need for advisors to “push” his subordinate. The advisor could then focus on rendering advice and coordinating the distribution of resources. We will explore this more deeply in later chapters.<sup>134</sup>

Although Bert Fraleigh had replaced Rufus Phillips on a temporary basis, in mid-1964, USAID sent George Tanham to head up the provincial operations. Tanham was an academic who specialized in counterinsurgency, and for a while, the two seem to have co-led the organization.

In December 1964, Killen announced that he intended to abolish the “the troika provincial sign-off agreement” that Phillips had established two years earlier to control the disbursement of US funds in the provinces. Killen’s rationale was that including Americans in the process was both “an affront to Vietnamese sovereignty, and against standard procedures.”<sup>135</sup> Certainly it was both, but bureaucratic rules had not been written with counterinsurgency in mind, and as for the sovereignty issue, it was, after all, American money. Some Vietnamese were hiding theft behind the cloak of sovereignty, and Americans seem to have been overly respectful of their sensitivities. Killen had consulted Westmoreland since his advisors were involved, and though Westmoreland thought

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<sup>133</sup> Fraleigh, p. 121.

<sup>134</sup> Komer, *New Model*, p. 17.

<sup>135</sup> Fraleigh, p. 117.

canceling the sign-off was a mistake, he viewed it as “USAID business” and did not make it an issue.<sup>136</sup> Fraleigh, though, perhaps with an idealized view, considered the procedure “the keystone of our provincial operations,” because it ensured “constant consultation and cooperation” between the Vietnamese and Americans. He complained, but to no avail.<sup>137</sup>

Killen’s negative impact on the pacification effort continued. Within days of the argument over the sign-off, Killen fired Fraleigh. Tanham, meanwhile, had decided that “Killen knew nothing about South Vietnam” or “the insurgency raging” in the countryside, and had no interest in learning. “Disillusioned” and seeing “no future for [rural] development...as long as Killen remained,” Tanham resigned in December.<sup>138</sup> Although Rufus Phillips had returned to private life, he had been keeping Hubert Humphrey, who would soon become Vice President, informed of the damage Killen was causing. Humphrey thought things were off track in Vietnam, and Phillips persuaded him that to get back to the more “unconventional approach,” Killen should be replaced and Edward Lansdale should return in some capacity.<sup>139</sup> A March 1965 *New York Times* article alluded to the Killen controversy.<sup>140</sup> Probably under pressure from Humphrey, USAID suddenly pulled him out in July. Killen had not ended the provincial work, but had set it back. Meanwhile, Lodge did not win the Republican Presidential nomination, and that summer Johnson reappointed him as ambassador. Lansdale returned to Saigon to serve as Lodge’s advisor on pacification, and he would liaise with General Nguyen Duc Thang at the Ministry of Rural Development.<sup>141</sup> Even though Phillips had left government service, he briefly returned to Saigon help Lansdale get established, and would make a few more short visits as a consultant.<sup>142</sup>

### **The Effort in the Provinces**

Like Vice President Humphrey, President Johnson had come around to the view that Kennedy’s emphasis on the provinces had been appropriate and should be strengthened. That Killen

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<sup>136</sup> Komer, *New Model*, p. 145.

<sup>137</sup> Fraleigh, pp. 117-8.

<sup>138</sup> Tanham, pp. 169-71; see also; C. Mohr, “U.S. Due to Revise Its Vietnam Setup for Combat Role,” *New York Times* (1 August 1965), p. 2.

<sup>139</sup> Phillips (1995), p. 35; Fraleigh, pp. 123-4; Phillips (1982), p. 49.

<sup>140</sup> “U.S. Aide in Saigon Applauds Regime,” *New York Times* (21 March 1965), p. 25.

<sup>141</sup> W. Colby and J. McCargar, *Lost Victory* (Chicago, 1989), p. 191.

<sup>142</sup> Phillips (1995), p. 35.

would be going in one direction while the President was headed in another illustrates how confusing Vietnam was for the US Government. In 1964, Johnson increased the number of USAID representatives in each province from one to two or more. To fill those positions, he directed the State Department to start diverting FSOs to Vietnam from traditional diplomatic posts, and to prepare them for such a non-traditional assignment, he approved the establishment of the Vietnam Training Center in Arlington, Virginia. Stephen Ledogar, Frank Wisner, and Clay Nettles were among the first students. After language and cultural studies and some basic combat training, they deployed on eighteen-month assignments.<sup>143</sup> USAID recruited from other sources as well. In 1965, two years after leaving the infantry division that he advised in the Delta, John Vann returned as a civilian.<sup>144</sup> USAID's province representatives were separate from the military teams, and lived on the economy. Guerrillas attacked Nettles' house soon after he arrived, and the frequent trips to the countryside could be dangerous.<sup>145</sup>

The US continued to operate on the assumption that the Communist narrative would not appeal to a villager who was satisfied with his life, and therefore worked to improve the rural standard of living. From Clay McManaway's USAID office in Washington, the mission seemed mostly about "moving things out to Vietnam," and was "growing by leaps and bounds."<sup>146</sup> Once those commodities arrived in Vietnam, they went to warehouses in each province, and Ledogar summarized his job in Quang Tri as keeping his warehouse "fully stocked, and then working with the province chief to help empty it out."<sup>147</sup> Nettles, in Lam Dong province, later described his work as ensuring that "programs were effective and...material...used properly."<sup>148</sup> Cement, roofing, powdered milk, cooking oil, and bulgur wheat were typical handouts, and agricultural development included the "pigs and corn" program that had begun during the Strategic Hamlet days. Ledogar had two specialists who visited farmers to consult on animal diseases. American specialists operated on children with cleft palates,

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<sup>143</sup> S.J. Ledogar, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (2000), pp. 22-3; F.G. Wisner, interviewed by R.L. Jackson, ADST (1998), pp. 10-1; G.C. Nettles, interviewed by R. Ewing, ADST (1997), pp. 16-9; R.W. Teare, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (1998), p. 29.

<sup>144</sup> Sheehan, pp. 501-3.

<sup>145</sup> Nettles, p. 23; Ledogar, p. 26.

<sup>146</sup> McManaway, p. 10.

<sup>147</sup> Ledogar, p. 26.

<sup>148</sup> Nettles, p. 21.

and Frank Wisner recalled that his job in Dinh Tuong included refugee support, agriculture, education, and village development.<sup>149</sup> The prov reps accompanied their counterparts on visits to the districts, and because USAID had no advisors there, Ledogar relied on the army's new district advisory teams to identify needs and manage projects.<sup>150</sup> Captain Robert Evans, one of the first district advisors, estimated that his workload was "seventy-five per cent political."<sup>151</sup>

In March, USAID assigned Vann to Hau Nghia, "the most insecure" of the Hop Tac provinces, and he discovered that the VC controlled much of the province, and routinely set up checkpoints to collect taxes and abduct soldiers.<sup>152</sup> Unlike his peers, Vann saw his job as much more than distributing commodities and overseeing projects. He set out to break the back of the Communists. Within months, though, he was discouraged, writing a friend that unless the US took drastic action the Communists were going to win the war because of their "excellent discipline" and the government's "moral degeneration." He faulted the corrupt and incompetent Vietnamese, but even more he blamed top advisors for "refusing to admit [that the only solution was for the US] to take over...lock, stock, and barrel." He was convinced that doing that while giving the appearance that the Vietnamese were still in charge was the only thing that could prevent collapse.<sup>153</sup>

While Vann had been aware of Vietnamese incompetence on his earlier assignment, he had not noticed the extent and impact of the corruption, which he now concluded was the root of the military's problems. According to Neil Sheehan, Vann had decided that "corruption infected the whole Saigon society, from Ky and almost all of the other Young Turk generals consolidating their power at the center, to the corps and division commanders, through the province and district chiefs...

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<sup>149</sup> Ledogar, p. 26; Reports Officer, MRCC (Provincial Operations) USOM, "Monthly Report on Status of Rural Construction Program for the Month Ending November 30, 1965," VCATTU, Quang Tri section; Reports Officer, MRCC (Provincial Operations) USOM, "Monthly Reports of USOM Provincial Representatives for the Month Ending 31 December 1965," VCATTU, Long Khanh, Hau Nghia, Chau Doc sections; Wisner, p. 12.

<sup>150</sup> Ledogar, pp. 28-9; see also E. Jones, interviewed by S. Maxner, VCATTU (2003), pp. 21-2, for the perspective of a district advisor.

<sup>151</sup> J.H. Pickerell, "Subsector Advisor in Cai Lay District," *Army* (July 1966), p. 52; see also J.F. Ray, "The District Advisor," *Military Review* (May 1965), p. 26.

<sup>152</sup> Sheehan, pp. 503, 506-7.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid*, p. 512.

to the village policeman blackmailing a farmer...not to report [him] as a Viet Cong suspect.”<sup>154</sup> Vann was correct, but few Americans seem to have recognized it.

Vann had not broken the back of Hau Nghia’s Communists by September, when he was made USAID’s field operations coordinator in Saigon. Reports from the province in the final months of the year reveal some of Hop Tac’s challenges. Communist troops had made three major attacks on a particular village, which had apparently received such attention because the government had encouraged the villagers to move there from VC-controlled areas. Although the Viet Cong had suffered major casualties in the second attack, a detachment had returned the next day and torched twenty houses—the third time in a month they had done that. The peasants were rattled, and many, assuming that the Communists would not harm homes in areas they controlled, moved back to their own village. Only forty of the province’s 201 hamlets had hamlet chiefs, said another American report, and just fifteen of those were “function[ing] effectively.” The province government was also dysfunctional, which a December report attributed to poor security, a “lack of support from higher headquarters,” bureaucratic in-fighting, and “rampant corruption.”<sup>155</sup>

Could peasants receive American-donated goods and services, yet at the same time feel alienated from their government? Rufus Phillips had been concerned about that during Strategic Hamlet, and Vann now wrestled with the same question. In a widely distributed memo entitled “Harnessing the Revolution in South Vietnam,” Vann argued in September 1965 that pouring money into projects to benefit the people was not winning their allegiance. Over the years, he said, the US had propped up various Saigon governments with “material and financial support and...tactical and technical advice,” but had “refused to become overtly involved in the internal affairs of governing [to ensure that they were] responsive to a majority of its people.” The money and advice were not getting to the crux of the matter, which was that the country’s ruling elite served themselves rather than the people.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid, pp. 512-3.

<sup>155</sup> Reports Officer, MRCC (Provincial Operations) USOM, “Monthly Report on Status of Rural Construction Program for the month ending 31 October 1965,” VCATTU, Hau Nghia section; Reports Officer, USOM, “Month Ending November 30, 1965,” Hau Nghia section; Reports Officer, USOM, “Month Ending 31 December 1965,” Hau Nghia section.

<sup>156</sup> J.P. Vann, “Harnessing the Revolution in South Vietnam” (10 September 1965), *Small Wars Journal*, p. 3.

Vann went on to assert that Vietnam was experiencing a “social revolution” that the people associated with the Communists rather than Saigon. Since America’s top priority was to keep the South out of Communist hands, it therefore tended to support the most ardent anti-Communist Vietnamese, but they were “the affluent members of the urban areas who [would] lose the most if the communists take over.” They were conservative by nature and “politically articulate and influential,” and the government that derived from them was “oriented toward the exploitation of the rural and lower class urban populations [and in effect] a continuation of the French colonial system.” Vann thought it ironic that “the wealth of the country lies in its agricultural production,” yet farmers were “realizing the least out of...the massive assistance provided by the US.” The rural “dissatisfaction” that had started under the French and festered under Diem was now being “fanned [into flame] by communism.” It was “understandable” that Americans would worry that the Communists were co-opting the revolution, said Vann, but the values of Saigon’s elite were not American values. He suggested that perhaps a socialist government would be better at keeping the country out of Communist hands than the reactionaries the US was supporting.<sup>157</sup>

Robert Shaplen wrote in 1964 that, “good leadership among the Vietnamese remained scarce.”<sup>158</sup> Americans recognized the leadership problem, but were slow to comprehend corruption’s central role in it. In November 1965, the prov rep for Vinh Binh reported that corruption was hurting his self-help projects, but admitted that he had failed to recognize this sooner because the lack of security had kept him out of many areas where his projects were being conducted. The purpose of “self-help” was to involve villagers in their own development by providing American funds if they contributed labor. Some of Vinh Binh’s district chiefs were thwarting this by contracting projects out instead of allowing the villagers to do the work. The practice of requiring contract kickbacks, which was just one aspect of the corruption, he said, had resulted in shoddy construction, and instead of empowering the people, the American projects had generated “dependency, insecurity and frustration.” In the six months he had been there, US attempts at developing the province socially and

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid, pp. 3-4.

<sup>158</sup> Shaplen, *Lost Revolution*, p. 258.

economically had failed because of “widely spread” corruption and the peasants’ frustration that their situation was not improving despite the activity and promises.<sup>159</sup>

The corruption was not so obvious in every province. While Stephen Ledogar considered his province chief “conscientious,” “moderately competent,” and “courageous,” he knew he “was probably skimming off a little bit at the edges.” Ledogar “would not call him corrupt,” though, given the standards in “the rest of the country.” The American belief that corruption was normal and culturally acceptable in Asia as long as it did not exceed a certain level tended to cloud their view.<sup>160</sup> Clay Nettles, for example, had been impressed with his counterparts and seen no corruption, but when a new province chief arrived and told the Americans that they need not “worry” about his being corrupt because he had already been a province chief twice and therefore “made [all the] money” he needed, Nettles realized the problem must have been more common than he had recognized.<sup>161</sup> Indeed, inexperienced American advisors might go an entire tour without comprehending what was happening around them, but those with a trained eye could see clearly.

Despite the propensity for Americans to excuse corruption as culturally acceptable, that much of it was not is clear from the fact that various political movements used it in their anti-government narratives, knowing that it angered the common man. The Buddhist political movement complained of “corruption and mismanagement,” said Ledogar, and in Binh Dinh province the USAID representative reported that the “Catholic hierarchy” distributed flyers “denouncing the provincial government for corruption and mismanagement.”<sup>162</sup> The Communists, of course, used it in their narrative. An advisor reported that in his province they had “spread rumors that the local government is totally corrupt and does nothing for the people.” He noted that “in this case” their accusations were “untrue,” but had observed that the Communists directed such propaganda against the “honest and effective officials,” ignoring the truly corrupt ones because the people would easily recognize them.<sup>163</sup> The important point for this inquiry, though, is that Buddhists, Catholics, and Communists had in common that their charges of corruption would resonate with the people, so we may conclude that

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<sup>159</sup> Reports Officer, USOM, “Month Ending November 30, 1965,” Vinh Binh section.

<sup>160</sup> Ledogar, p. 27.

<sup>161</sup> Nettles, p. 22.

<sup>162</sup> Ledogar, p. 28; Reports Officer, USOM, “Month Ending November 30, 1965,” Binh Binh section.

<sup>163</sup> J.F. Freund, “JUSPAO Reports of Field Representatives, 30 November 1965,” VCATTU, p. 37.

even if a little corruption was acceptable, most of it was not. At this point in the war, though, most Americans do not seem to have considered that corruption might alienate the people.

Other factors added to the difficulty of winning the people's allegiance. According to Ledogar, many local officials were Catholics who had fled the North and tended to get the good jobs because they were educated. A southern peasant, though, did not see a northerner as one of his own, regardless of which side he was on. Their accent was "harsh" to the southern ear, said Ledogar, and they had an air of "arrogance and...superiority" and "tended to treat farmers like imbeciles." It was easy for VC agitators with southern accents to take advantage of that by entering villages at night to thwart the government's attempt to win "hearts and minds."<sup>164</sup>

Misunderstandings and mistrust could also hinder the effort. American law prohibited the funding of religious projects, but allowed aid to religious institutions for social purposes. Ledogar recalled that the Catholics, savvy at working the distinction, would get financing for Catholic health clinics. Buddhists would see that and ask for a pagoda, but when Ledogar explained that he could build a clinic but not a pagoda, they took that as proof that Americans favored the Christians.<sup>165</sup>

American air strikes, too, could counter the effectiveness of government overtures. Unintended "property destruction and loss of life" were common, though the resulting ill will was often more than offset by the Viet Cong's taxation, conscription, movement restriction, "murders, road minings and destruction of installations."<sup>166</sup> Because there were so many Communist units in Captain Robert Evans' district, there was a lot of "bombing" both in support of operations and in zones assumed to contain only enemy bases. The district chief went around the district to explain that bombs were dropped to counter the aggressive acts of the Communists, and Evans accompanied him, carrying cash to compensate those with "a legitimate gripe," which might be due to "a rice paddy destroyed by armored personnel carriers, or a pagoda damaged by bombing."<sup>167</sup>

Many villagers saw no reason to feel particularly loyal to either side. An Information Services advisor said that the typical villager in his province was "apathetic" toward Saigon and only "vaguely

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<sup>164</sup> Ledogar, p. 27.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid, p. 28.

<sup>166</sup> Freund, JUSPAO, 30 November 1965, pp. 35, 37.

<sup>167</sup> Pickerell, p. 56.

aware” of the province government. In contrast, village and hamlet officials affected his daily life and there was almost universal disdain for them. This was apparently not because they were worse than those at the higher echelons, but because the peasants could see their incompetence and malfeasance on a regular basis. On the other hand, said the same advisor, the typical villager was “fully conscious of [the VC’s] ability to do him harm,” so the net result was that the conflict between the two sides “washes back and forth over him, and he feels little freedom to choose sides nor does he feel that his choice could have any influence.” Another advisor sensed that in his two provinces the people’s dislike of the Communists did not translate into support for the government because the government did little for them. “Until recently,” he added, “province officials were rarely, if ever, seen in the hamlets except to participate in ceremonies.”<sup>168</sup> These comments seem typical, and suggest both that the government did not truly care and was unmindful of the impact of its actions on perceptions of government legitimacy.

Even with that weakness, over the years there had been various experiments with Vietnamese “cadre” programs to bring government to ungoverned hamlets. In 1965, the US settled on a fifty-nine-man model and informed Saigon that they would fund the program if the Vietnamese would take it national.<sup>169</sup> Saigon formed the Ministry of Revolutionary Development to manage the program, and appointed General Nguyen Duc Thang, whom the Americans greatly admired, to be its director, and Colonel Tran Ngoc Chau, the former Viet Minh officer, to head the program and run its school. As a province chief, Chau had used his experience with the Communists to develop one of the prototypes, and the CIA had taken notice and supported it.<sup>170</sup> The teams dressed like the peasants they were trying to reach and were armed so they would not be totally dependent on security forces. Their projects ranged from forming territorial forces and establishing local government to digging wells and helping with farm work. The program will be explored more fully in later chapters as their story unfolds.

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<sup>168</sup> Freund, JUSPAO, 30 November 1965, pp. 30, 37.

<sup>169</sup> For a discussion on these experiments, see S.E. Methven, *Parapolitics and Pacification Vietnam* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 45-54; Ahern, pp. 111-25.

<sup>170</sup> Chau, pp. 195-6, 201; Ahern, pp. 116-20, 127-48, 182-3.

## The Security Component of Pacification

Chien Thang focused on civilian development and security in the districts, villages, and hamlets, but there were neither military nor civilian advisors at those levels. The US had placed military advisors in the province capitals in 1961, and started placing USAID civilians there in 1962. In late 1963, MACV began to study the feasibility of putting a few soldiers in each of the country's 242 districts. No two districts were alike, but an advisor described one as having thirty-four hamlets, 55,000 people, and 100 square kilometers.<sup>171</sup> The Viet Cong had long focused on this level, but the advisory effort, despite sponsoring projects there, had ignored it.<sup>172</sup> The study considered several potential problems with district teams: the district chief might "be overwhelmed with advice and advisors"; uniformed Americans in the districts could strengthen the Communist narrative that Americans were taking over; with no civilians, the advisory effort would be out of balance; there would be an increase in American casualties. In the end, though, it concluded that potential advantages outweighed the disadvantages, and that the scattered teams that were beyond the reach of the American logistics system could rely on the Vietnamese for support.<sup>173</sup> In the spring of 1964, MACV tested the concept by deploying thirteen two-man teams to districts around Saigon. Deeming the experiment a success, they increased the team size to five, and fielded one hundred more by the end of the year.<sup>174</sup> The number of teams continued to grow throughout 1965, and by early 1966 they were operating in over two-thirds of the country's districts.<sup>175</sup>

What were these advisors to do? The term military advisor connotes a soldier with specialized knowledge from one country rendering advice to a counterpart from another. The early district advisors were not sure the district chiefs needed their advice. "I probably learned more from him than he learned from me," recalled Captain Eddie Jones, who arrived in 1964.<sup>176</sup> The district chiefs varied

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<sup>171</sup> J. Ray, p. 4.

<sup>172</sup> R.M. Montague, "Advising in Government," US Army War College (Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, 18 February 1966), DTIC, pp. ii, 8.

<sup>173</sup> Military History Branch, MACV, *Command History, 1964* (15 October 1965), DTIC, p. 59; Komer, *New Model*, p. 216.

<sup>174</sup> Military History Branch, *Command History, 1964*, pp. 59-61.

<sup>175</sup> Montague, "Advising," p. ii.

<sup>176</sup> Jones, p. 22.

in experience and competence, and by 1964 some had been on the job five or ten years.<sup>177</sup> At this point in the war, few American captains had combat experience, and they were understandably reluctant to present themselves as possessing superior knowledge, especially when the Vietnamese they advised were often a decade older and higher in rank. Jones noted that his counterpart had been fighting guerrillas “most of his life,” and Captain John Waghelstein thought that the notion that they “were there to advise the Vietnamese district chiefs was a silly idea anyway.”<sup>178</sup>

District chiefs did need help, though. Colonel Bryce Denno, who had been a corps senior advisor from 1962-63, wrote two years later that young advisors more than made up for their lack of experience with their knowledge of “planning, training, and administration.” “Even high-ranking military officers [were] notoriously weak” in those areas, he said.<sup>179</sup> Indeed, even with their combat experience, district chiefs tended to follow unsound tactical practices and exhibit poor leadership. Four of the early district advisors have left accounts that support this interpretation.

Captains Eddie Jones, James Ray and Robert Evans, were rushed to Vietnam in 1964, and Captain John Waghelstein arrived the next year. Despite two months of pre-deployment training, they faced significant challenges as they arrived in remote areas that had never before had an American presence. These early teams often had only two or three members as they began their assignment.<sup>180</sup> For a month, Jones and his team had no American contact, and the Vietnamese phrases they had learned proved inadequate. Eventually they got an interpreter, but communicating important matters through an intermediary was fraught with difficulty.<sup>181</sup> Advisors often lived with chronic jungle rot and diarrhea, and their diet was anything but American: dinner might include roasted dog, fermented eggs with partially formed ducks, or stir-fried rat, all seasoned with a foul-smelling sauce made from decayed fish. There were also different concepts of time and work. Americans like “to fix everything right now,” said Jones, and their counterparts did not share that sense of urgency.<sup>182</sup> In addition to

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<sup>177</sup> See for e.g. J. Wright, interviewed by R.B. Verrone [part 1], VCATTU (2002), p. 19; Pickerell, p. 54.

<sup>178</sup> Jones, p. 21; see also Pickerell, p. 58; J.D. Waghelstein, “What’s Wrong in Iraq?” *Military Review* (January-February 2006), p. 114.

<sup>179</sup> B.F. Denno, “Advisor and Counterpart,” *Army* (July 1965), p. 26.

<sup>180</sup> Jones, pp. 15-7, 20; Pickerell, p. 52; Waghelstein, p. 114; Ray, p. 3.

<sup>181</sup> Jones, pp. 17-8.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 25, 28, 40-2.

their security responsibilities, the district chiefs had substantial administrative and governance duties, and Ray's counterpart used his paperwork as an excuse not to go on combat operations.<sup>183</sup>

The early teams had little guidance about what they were to accomplish, but it did not take them long to identify areas that needed their attention.<sup>184</sup> As soldiers, their inclination was to focus exclusively on security matters, and that alone could have been a full-time job, but they found themselves spending a great deal of time on civilian development as well.<sup>185</sup> Ray worked with district officials and a territorial company commander to develop procedures for their organizations. The district had no training management system, and the soldiers protecting the headquarters had "deplorable" marksmanship and were tactically weak, so Ray's team worked to remedy those deficiencies. Ray also worked with the police chief to improve his organization.<sup>186</sup> Many advisors felt that their most significant contribution was the US close air support that was permitted only when Americans were on the ground to coordinate it. That support could make a difference in how the Vietnamese commander reacted to enemy contact when on combat operations. Jones' counterpart grew more aggressive as he learned to depend on the American firepower.<sup>187</sup> Such territorial operations within a district could have a profound impact on pacification when they were conducted frequently and professionally. Ray attributed the lack of any "permanent Viet Cong bases" in his district to the nightly ambushes and daily offensives that his district chief insisted on, but his does not seem to have been a typical district.

As MACV had anticipated, the duty was dangerous and casualties increased. Ray was killed midway through his tour while on a night patrol.<sup>188</sup> Mortar attacks were common, and the VC began targeting advisors.<sup>189</sup> Because Vietnamese families were often split with some on each side, collusion

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<sup>183</sup> J. Ray, p. 5.

<sup>184</sup> Pickerell, pp. 52-3; Jones, p. 21.

<sup>185</sup> Pickerell, pp. 52-7; Ray, p. 5; Jones, p. 22; Military History Branch, MACV, *Command History, 1965* (20 April 1966), DTIC, p. 235. Interestingly, Waghelstein's recollection is entirely different on this matter: "The focus of the U.S. advisory effort at this critical political/military level remained locked on the purely military until 1967, when Ambassador Robert W. Komer established the CORDS program," p. 114.

<sup>186</sup> Ray, pp. 5, 6.

<sup>187</sup> Jones, p. 28.

<sup>188</sup> Ray, 4.

<sup>189</sup> Pickerell, p. 54.

with the enemy was common, and advisors suspected that some in government uniforms would turn on them if circumstances permitted.<sup>190</sup>

As American advisors were for the first time in a position to observe how territorial troops operated, they could see the challenges that were hindering Chien Thang and Hop Tac. These are best viewed in the context of a strategic framework that historians generally miss. The government's aim was to keep the Communists out of the villages and districts—indeed, out of the entire country—so that the development project could thrive. This involved the entire security apparatus: police and territorial troops were to protect the villages and the roads and canals that connected them from guerrillas, while the regulars took on the large Communist units. Those large units were a threat to the villages undergoing pacification even if they were hiding in jungle bases many miles away. In Evans' district, for example, there were at least three VC battalions, each of which could easily overwhelm any hamlet or outpost. The Communists therefore had some degree of control over eleven of the district's twenty villages.<sup>191</sup> Even the best territorial units were likely to be overwhelmed when attempting to repel the attacks of such large units. The large combat operations were therefore intended to be an adjunct to the pacification effort rather than the other way around.

What were the problems with the Chien Thang and Hop Tac pacification efforts in 1964-65? One was that Saigon was not eliminating the Communist shadow governments that used guerrillas to enforce decrees, collect taxes, organize labor, and draft recruits. If even a few guerrillas could get into a village at night, the Communists had it under their control. However, at this point in the war both Saigon and the Americans wrongly assumed that keeping them out was within the capabilities of the territorials.<sup>192</sup> A second problem was the way in which the Vietnamese conducted offensive operations. Advisors, noticing that the offensives were often aimless meanders, began calling them "walks in the sun." In Evans' district the territorials had much ground to cover, and peasants could go months without seeing them. One wonders whether they really wanted to locate those three battalions, and on the rare occasions when government troops did make contact, they usually broke it off in time to be home by dark, thereby enabling the enemy to get away. While this probably reflects some

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<sup>190</sup> Jones, pp. 29-30.

<sup>191</sup> Pickerell, pp. 52, 56.

<sup>192</sup> See e.g. Jones, p. 35.

cynicism born of pessimism, other factors were an unwillingness to break with tradition and the failure of senior officers to hold their subordinates accountable.

This aversion to operating at night was also reflected in the outpost system, which was a third problem. Following French practice, the Vietnamese dispersed their territorial troops into vulnerable fort-like outposts.<sup>193</sup> There had been 16,000 of these when General Harkins arrived in 1962, and he pressed Saigon to do away with them. Even if soldiers patrolled during daylight hours, they would retreat into the outposts before dark, thus ceding the night to the guerrillas. The Communists had no similar reluctance to use the cover of darkness. Captain Eddie Jones recalled that they “operated mainly at night” to attack villages and outposts or sneak into villages to intimidate the peasants. Harkins correctly observed that Communist troops could simply bypass an outpost or at the time of their choosing mass to destroy it, killing not just the troops, but also the families who lived with them. “I finally got them to get rid of most of these,” said Harkins, who recalled just 6,000 when he left in 1964, but to the consternation of advisors the practice would continue to some degree throughout the war.<sup>194</sup>

A fourth problem was that Vietnamese commanders often seemed to grasp what needed to be done, but did not follow through to make sure it was. Top generals, for example, acknowledged the need for nightly ambushes, but their orders were often ignored, and those that did take place were often sloppily conducted. This allowed guerrillas to sneak into the hamlets, where they could destroy government projects and warn the peasants against cooperating with Saigon’s representatives, and it is understandable that the villagers would comprehend their vulnerability and be reluctant to show any future affinity for the government.<sup>195</sup>

A fifth problem was that the territorials were simply not up to the task. At this time they were still a low priority for both Saigon and Washington, and as a result were poorly led, paid, trained, armed, and equipped, and there were far too few to go around.<sup>196</sup> They also lacked American advisors.

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<sup>193</sup> See e.g. Pickerell, p. 56; Jones, p. 24; J. Vincent, “Jim Vincent,” in H. Maurer, ed., *Strange Ground* (New York, 1989), p. 125.

<sup>194</sup> Harkins, pp. 7-8; Jones, p. 24; see also W.A. Hoch, *Dai Uy Hoch* (Breiningsville, 2009), p. 258.

<sup>195</sup> R.M. Pearce, *Evolution of a Vietnamese Village—Part III* (Santa Monica, February 1967), DTIC, pp. 11-2.

<sup>196</sup> Pickerell, pp. 53, 56-7.

Territorial units were scattered around the district and therefore could not benefit directly from the district advisors, since they worked in the district headquarters.

However, the district advisors' biggest limitation was that their counterparts often ignored their advice on these matters and others. Understanding that this was a problem at all levels, John Vann recommended that the US insist "that 'advice' be accepted and acted on." Under Vann's proposal, if a Vietnamese officer thought he was getting bad advice, rather than simply ignoring it he would have to elevate it to his boss, who in conjunction with his own advisor would adjudicate the dispute. For example, if the district chief ignored his advisor's advice on nightly ambushes, the issue would go higher. If the review at the next level deemed the advisor had given "bad advice" or the Vietnamese officer had rejected "good advice," the offender would be disciplined. The intent was obviously to get the matter resolved at the lower level.<sup>197</sup>

There is no indication that Vann's proposal was adopted, and it is impossible to know whether it would have worked, but it overlooked an important problem. Because advisors at higher levels often succeeded in coaxing their counterparts into issuing orders of various types, a low-level advisor's advice was often on a matter that his counterpart had been ordered to do anyway. The problem was that the Vietnamese chain of command rarely followed up to ensure subordinates were complying with those orders. Vann's proposal might have given the Vietnamese general even more of an excuse to ignore his supervisory responsibilities, because the advisors at the lowest levels could become enforcers by threatening adjudication.

Where the strong-armed advice was really needed, then, was at or near the top, and only the American generals who advised at that level could have made the lack of supervision an issue. However, there is no indication that they did, and it does not appear that they fully comprehended the problem or their unique role in fixing it. As a result, the advisory effort became a crutch for the Vietnamese generals and a work-around for top Americans. District advisors could see the problems in their areas, but not their root cause, which was ultimately the failure of the Vietnamese generals to do their jobs.

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<sup>197</sup> Vann, p. 6.

The story of Niven Baird illustrates the point. He arrived in 1964 to advise an armored cavalry squadron, and at his first meeting with his boss, the corps senior advisor, Baird learned that his “main mission [was] to get [that unit] out of [their barracks] and into the field to fight Viet Cong” in an area that the Communists were dominating. When Baird approached his counterpart on this, the Vietnamese officer explained that he lacked authority to “unilaterally move the squadron.” Baird, aware that his boss would not let him accept that as the final answer, began to pressure the Vietnamese commander. After a month of cajoling him, recalled Baird, “I can only presume he convinced Armor Command that I was a royal pain and he needed to save face by getting the squadron out of [Saigon].” They moved to an area that a Vietnamese division “refused to enter,” and had some success there, “making life miserable for the Viet Cong who previously had been able to move about...without interference.”<sup>198</sup>

This sounds like a positive outcome, but it raises some important points. Pressure from junior advisors could indeed have a positive effect at the lower levels. However, the fact that the pressure in this case was from an American captain rather than the Vietnamese corps commander suggests that Vietnamese general was unconcerned that the Viet Cong had freedom of movement in his area. The corps senior advisor, Colonel Jasper Wilson, recognized the problem, but apparently could not get his counterpart to take it seriously. Wilson’s solution to the problem was a pragmatic one for the near term, however to compensate for both his own counterpart’s shortcomings and his inability to influence him, he directed a low-level advisor to apply pressure to his low-level counterpart. In effect, Wilson was delegating the heavy lifting of advisory duty.

### **Results of Chien Thang and Hop Tac**

The Hop Tac campaign to implement the Chien Thang strategy in the Saigon area had begun in September 1964, but by the next month Westmoreland already recognized that he had greatly underestimated how difficult the management of so large and complex a program would be for the Vietnamese. MACV acknowledged in its internal history of 1964 that in most of the country pacification was not advancing, and that even in the Saigon area, which had been the priority for resources, progress in the campaign’s first few months had been minimal. Indeed, said the history,

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<sup>198</sup> N.J. Baird, “Colonel Niven J. Baird, U.S. Army, Retired,” Veterans National Education Program (undated).

“pacification programs...such as Hop Tac” crumbled of their own weight “when it became clear that the already overloaded Vietnamese system was not responsive or competent enough to execute them,” and in many cases the province chiefs seemed incapable of understanding the “sophisticated [and centralized] methodology” the Americans had developed to manage the campaign, or even how their provinces fit into the scheme. MACV also noted that as the government put more effort into pacification, the Communists put more effort into countering it; success was going to require a “long, tough, slow” slog.<sup>199</sup>

The campaign fared no better in 1965. In July, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, noting that Hop Tac had failed, asked Ambassador Taylor to “review the program in detail to throw light on the causes of its failure.”<sup>200</sup> The USAID reported in October that only sixty-seven of the 256 hamlets that had been “targeted” for 1965 were under solid government control at that time. “Security [was] the essential prerequisite” for all else, it said, and because that was “lacking” local officials spent “little time in their assigned hamlets, especially at night.” The situation was so bleak that it was “most difficult to find something positive,” said the report.<sup>201</sup> It was a frank and accurate assessment.

According to MACV’s own statistics, Hop Tac did not meet its objectives by the end of the year. From its start in 1964 to the end of 1965, the government had extended its control of land in the Hop Tac area from thirty-eight to forty-three percent, but the Communists had increased theirs from thirty-seven to forty-four percent. On the other hand, there is an important difference between controlling land and population, the latter being the true goal in an insurgency. The same document reported that during 1965 the government had increased its “control” of the population from seventy-five percent to eighty-five percent, and that which the Communists controlled had dropped from twenty-five percent “to less than” fifteen.<sup>202</sup> Whether accurate or not, those numbers portray limited success at best. A few years later, Colonel Robert Montague, who had been General Westmoreland’s

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<sup>199</sup> Military History Branch, *Command History, 1964*, pp. 68, 125.

<sup>200</sup> R.S. McNamara, “Exclusive for Ambassador Taylor from SECDEF Signed McNamara,” SECDEF (Washington, 7 July 1965), VCATTU, p. 5.

<sup>201</sup> Reports Officer, “Monthly Report on Status of Rural Construction Program for the month ending 31 October 1965,” p. 3.

<sup>202</sup> Military History Branch, *Command History, 1965*, p. 232.

special assistant for pacification at the time, described Hop Tac as a failure, adding that while the situation had not regressed, “things didn't improve nearly at the rate which we had anticipated.”<sup>203</sup>

Why did Hop Tac achieve so little? While MACV correctly concluded that the inability of the Vietnamese government to manage so complex an endeavor was much of the problem, it is not clear that the Americans fully comprehended that other important factors were the weaknesses of the territorials, the failure of the regulars to shield the hamlets from the larger enemy units, and the tendency of Vietnamese officers to ignore the recommendations of their advisors even when they were fundamentally sound. On top of those, the thousands of trained and equipped North Vietnamese and Viet Cong regulars that were infiltrating into the country offset much of the effort. The goal to rid the zone around Saigon of significant enemy forces by the end of 1964 was met in neither 1964 nor 1965.<sup>204</sup>

An important point for this thesis, though, is that despite the failure of Hop Tac to accomplish its purpose, MACV considered it conceptually sound, as it was, and one can see attempts to incorporate the lessons learned into future endeavors. Over time the term “Hop Tac” evolved to connote a concept rather than a specific campaign. The area around Saigon became known as “the original Hop Tac area,” and there were the Hop Tac “Council,” “Secretariat,” “base,” “organization,” “organizational framework,” “program,” “experience,” and “principles,” as well as “Hop Tac-like plans.”<sup>205</sup> In 1965, Hop Tac morphed into an aspirational model describing a well-coordinated campaign aimed at clearing the enemy from an area, developing it socially, politically, and economically, and keeping the enemy from coming back.

Hop Tac demonstrated the difficulty of pacification, and drove home the critical point that neither Americans nor Vietnamese had fully grasped: protecting the people from the Communists, whether the shadow governments, local guerrillas, or North Vietnamese or Viet Cong regulars, was the foundation on which pacification stood, and it was easy to discuss but immensely difficult to

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<sup>203</sup> Komer, *New Model*, p. 18.

<sup>204</sup> Military History Branch, *Command History, 1965*, pp. 231-2.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 147, 231-4.

achieve. By July 1965, Americans hoped that Hop Tac, even though it was not succeeding, might “serve as a pattern for the pacification of the entire country.”<sup>206</sup>

Given the difficulty that Vietnamese and American officials had grasping the nuances of pacification, it is understandable that journalists at the time and historians since have had difficulty with the concept. Journalists paid little attention to pacification, and when they did they failed to understand it or cherry-picked their evidence. Frances FitzGerald, for example, devoted but a paragraph of *Fire in the Lake* to Hop Tac, asserting that it had “worked no better than its predecessors” and likened it to “trying to stop a brush fire with rotten sticks.” Her suggestion that Hop Tac actually made things worse is dubious.<sup>207</sup> She was under the impression that Westmoreland viewed it as she did, when in fact he saw it as a model to be followed throughout Vietnam, remarking in May 1965 “that the Hop Tac organization had been unique in providing a forum for the military and civilian officials to address common problems.”<sup>208</sup> As ineffective as the campaign may have been, the centralized management and high-level coordination had never before been attempted, and they may have been Hop Tac’s greatest legacy. Indeed, it is unlikely that later pacification campaigns would have been what they were without Hop Tac’s attempts at interagency unity of effort and centralized management serving as a baseline from which to adjust. It is clear that the American emphasis on pacification that had started in 1962 with its support of the misguided Strategic Hamlet program had continued from 1964-66 with Chien Thang and Hop Tac. Where, though, did American ground troops fit into the mix, and how did Westmoreland view his role in the pacification effort?

### **The Introduction of American Ground Troops**

Because his generals could see no other way to prevent the South’s collapse in 1965, President Johnson started deploying American ground units to Vietnam. Although the orthodox historians have been highly critical of this decision, most revisionists have tended to be sympathetic to the need for American troops but critical of how they were used. Both Krepinevich and Nagl have argued that instead of sending them after the large enemy forces hiding in remote areas, he should have broken them into small elements for village security. When Westmoreland claimed that the

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<sup>206</sup> JUSPAO Planning Staff, p. 1.

<sup>207</sup> FitzGerald, p. 271.

<sup>208</sup> Military History Branch, *Command History, 1965*, p. 234.

towns and villages were unsafe as long as large enemy units could raid them from their jungle bases, they viewed that as Westmoreland's feeble attempt to justify what he was determined to do anyway. They were convinced that he neither understood pacification nor had any interest in it.<sup>209</sup> We will therefore review some of the considerable evidence that he did understand pacification and was a strong proponent of it, but we will follow that with a review of his weaknesses.

First, it was Westmoreland who had seen the need for district advisory teams to assist with security at the local level, and it was he who then authorized them to play a substantial role in civilian development since there were no American civilians at that level. Second, Westmoreland had conceived of Hop Tac and then pressed the Vietnamese to implement it. Before they named the campaign, he had called it "Pacification Intensification in Critical Areas."<sup>210</sup> Even though Hop Tac failed to meet his expectations, Westmoreland saw it as a holistic pacification model that could be used throughout the country, and urged the Vietnamese to expand it.<sup>211</sup> Third, it was under Westmoreland's coaching in 1964 that the Vietnamese war plan for 1965 placed the Vietnamese regular army "in direct support of the Chien Thang ('Victory') Pacification Program." Westmoreland thought it "essential" that the regulars conduct "continuous harassment of VC bases and lines of communications...to keep the enemy on the defensive and impede his movements." In other words, if government troops did not keep enemy units on the run, they would be able to interfere with the pacification effort.<sup>212</sup>

Fourth, when American troops arrived, Westmoreland's vision for them was that they would join the Vietnamese regulars in protecting the pacification effort. His campaign plan for the American and "free-world" troops that began arriving in 1965 called for the destruction of enemy forces in "priority" areas for the purpose of facilitating "the reinstatement of rural construction activities." Rural construction was another term for pacification, so Westmoreland's plan was to destroy enemy units that could threaten the pacification effort.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> See for example Nagl, pp. 199-203 and Krepinevich, pp. 171-77.

<sup>210</sup> R. Montague, interviewed by T. Gittinger, LBJ Library (1984), p. 18; *MACV Command History, 1964*, p. 68.

<sup>211</sup> *MACV Command History, 1965*, p. 232.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 137-8.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 141-2.

Finally, there is the testimony of two of Westmoreland's key subordinates from this period. Colonel Robert Montague was Westmoreland's special assistant for pacification 1964-65. As one of the advisors to a Vietnamese division during the Strategic Hamlet program, he had experimented with synchronizing the various Vietnamese agencies that were involved in pacification at the district level. Westmoreland had been so impressed with the experiment that he asked Montague to stay a second year to help "expand what we had done successfully in this one division area to other parts of the country."<sup>214</sup> Montague recalled that as early as 1964, Westmoreland had observed that the various American agencies involved in pacification were operating in a disjointed manner, and concluded that a single "executive agent" should be placed in charge of all. As the commander of MACV, he thought he was the logical person to assume that responsibility, but he detected resistance from USAID and decided not to press the issue.<sup>215</sup>

Colonel Gerald Bartlett also worked for Westmoreland in this period, and became so engaged with the pacification effort that he volunteered to return as a province advisor in 1971. In his first assignment he had been required to give Westmoreland a weekly briefing "on the status of pacification and development" in the Hop Tac area, and to prepare for Westmoreland's questions he visited units directly involved in the pacification effort. He was subsequently transferred to Westmoreland's Rural Development Support Directorate where he continued to focus on pacification. He later reported that these jobs in Westmoreland's headquarters had provided "experience in all facets of pacification and development," thoroughly preparing him for the 1971 job. He knew "how to advise," "what needed to be done," and "exactly what [he] was getting into."<sup>216</sup> Montague and Bartlett, both of whom later became generals, hardly paint the picture of a commander who thought that the use of indiscriminate firepower was the sole answer to the Communists.

On the other hand, Westmoreland did have some significant weaknesses in the area of pacification. One was that he poorly communicated its importance to his subordinates. According to Montague, few people in Westmoreland's headquarters could explain "what pacification was all

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<sup>214</sup> R.M. Montague, interviewed by T. Gittinger, LBJ Library (1984), pp. 7-8.

<sup>215</sup> Komer, *New Model*, p. 16.

<sup>216</sup> G.T. Bartlett, "Senior Officer Debriefing Report," Hau Nghia Province (29 November 1972), DTIC, p. 2.

about,” and the same was probably true of his commanders in the field.<sup>217</sup> Colonel Kenneth Mertel, who commanded a battalion in the 1st Cavalry Division from before its arrival in Vietnam in the fall of 1965 to the spring of 1966, published a book about the battalion’s experiences two years later and never once discussed the pacification effort or anything related to it. It is not clear that he was even aware of it.<sup>218</sup>

A second weakness was that Westmoreland seems to have assumed that the village fight was considerably easier than it was. At this point in the war, the struggle in the villages had been left to the poorly trained and equipped territorial army, and Westmoreland wrongly supposed that they were up to the task. The key to success in the village fight was alert guards, aggressive patrolling, and nightly ambushes, all of which were conceptually simple, and eliminating the enemy’s shadow governments, which was complex. With proper supervision, the Vietnamese chain of command could have solved the simple problems, but Westmoreland does not seem to have noticed that commanders were not fulfilling that most basic responsibility. Nor did he see the need for better weapons and equipment, which only he could have provided, and intelligence support for dismantling the shadow governments. A third criticism is that though he was interested in pacification, the increasing number of Americans that he had to employ distracted him. It is easy to see how this would happen, though. Determining what US troops should do to counter the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong main force units, which he and most others viewed as an existential threat, was his most urgent task.

What about the charge that his search and destroy operations accomplished little? When American units could find the large enemy formations, their superior mobility and firepower generally enabled them to prevail. However, many of the Communist troops often seemed to escape into the jungle, Hanoi was able to replace those that did not, and Westmoreland’s attrition strategy certainly did not convince Hanoi to give up the fight as he had hoped. However, even if one concedes that these operations were inefficient, the arguments of most orthodox and some revisionist historians that they were a misguided waste of lives and resources are unconvincing. John Prados, one of the most vigorous of the orthodox, revealed his thoughts on this matter in a chapter entitled “The Failure of the

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<sup>217</sup> Komer, *New Model*, p. 16.

<sup>218</sup> K. Mertel, *Year of the Horse—Vietnam* (New York, 1968).

Large-unit War,” and Krepinevich, a revisionist, argued that Westmoreland should have forgone the large operations and broken the American brigades into platoons to guard the villages.<sup>219</sup> If the Americans had ignored the Communist jungle bases in South Vietnam, though, those would have become sanctuaries, and sanctuaries in Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam were already trouble enough. Colonel Harold Moore, whose book about his battalion’s 1965 battle in the Ia Drang valley was made into a movie, wrote of that fight that, “We knew...that the three North Vietnamese regiments...had withdrawn into Cambodia [and] wanted to follow them in hot pursuit...but could not do so under the rules of engagement.” The division commander, General Harry Kinnard, later recalled that not pursuing Hanoi’s troops, who were on the run, “violated every principle of warfare,” but President Johnson had decided that the Americans could not cross into Cambodia. As a result, he said, “It became perfectly clear to the North Vietnamese that they then had sanctuary [and] could come when they were ready to fight and leave when they were ready to quit.”<sup>220</sup> In effect, the American decision to allow sanctuary had enabled large Communist formations to operate as guerrilla forces, attacking when they had superiority and slipping away when they did not.<sup>221</sup> It is understandable that Westmoreland did not intend for that to happen within the South.

Even when search and destroy operations appeared ineffective, they kept the large Communist units off balance and disrupted their operations. Despite Prados’s charge that the Bong Son operations, which began in 1966, exemplified the failure of Westmoreland’s approach, certainly this was the case there.<sup>222</sup> However, Moore, by then a brigade commander, pointed out that the problem in Bong Son had not been clearing the enemy out of the area, which American and Vietnamese regulars had done, but keeping them from coming back, which in the division of labor was considered a Vietnamese responsibility. Though he did not mention it, that job depended on a combination of Vietnamese regulars and territorials who were to “hold” the area, thereby facilitating

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<sup>219</sup> Prados, *Hidden History*, p. 111; Krepinevich, pp. 176-7.

<sup>220</sup> H. Moore, *We Were Soldiers Once...and Young* (New York, 1992), p. 438. See also C. Oualline, *Flying Alligators and Silver Spurs* (Collierville, 2004), p. 90.

<sup>221</sup> Large conventional forces functioning as guerrillas was not a new concept. During World War II in the China Burma India Theater, certain large British and American forces operated as guerrillas. See Field-Marshal Viscount William Slim’s account of Brigadier Orde Wingate’s “Chindits” and General Frank Merrill’s “Marauders” in *Defeat into Victory* (New York, 2000).

<sup>222</sup> Prados, *Hidden History*, pp. 111-20.

the work of Vietnamese and American civilian agencies that were to “build.” According to Moore, the Americans in Saigon had inadequately coordinated these “follow-on Vietnamese government programs to reestablish control in the newly cleared areas.” If MACV and the Embassy could not get this right with “the most powerful American division available,” he asked, “how could they possibly hope to reestablish South Vietnamese control in other contested regions?”<sup>223</sup>

Finally, Krepinevich and Nagl criticized Westmoreland for not adopting throughout his command the US Marine practice of integrating Americans into “combined” Vietnamese-American platoons, which tended to stiffen Vietnamese leadership, make American resources available, and improve village security.<sup>224</sup> While the technique might have achieved much in the short run, putting Americans in charge of Vietnamese troops would not have strengthened the ability of the Vietnamese chain of command to manage its own affairs, and would have been yet another way of working around a Vietnamese problem. Eventually, though, Westmoreland would direct the deployment of numerous mobile advisory teams that would go from unit to unit in the territorial army. Though different from the Marine program, they would attempt to solve the same problems.

### **Chasing the Elusive Interagency Unity of Effort**

What about the elusive interagency unity of effort that Westmoreland had been concerned about in mid-1964? In an attempt to harmonize the efforts of the disparate agencies operating in Vietnam, in late 1964 the embassy had formed a “Mission Council” that was chaired by the deputy ambassador, Alexis Johnson.<sup>225</sup> However, it was concerned with the whole American mission rather than just pacification, and its loose coordination did not solve several significant problems. One was that every agency continued to have its own chain of command extending back to Washington. A second was that the use of military resources for the civilian side of pacification required bureaucratic clearance.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Moore, pp. 440-1.

<sup>224</sup> Krepinevich, pp. 175-7; Nagl, pp. 156-8.

<sup>225</sup> U.A. Johnson, interviewed by P.E. Mulhollan, ADST (1969), p. 12.

<sup>226</sup> Cooper *et al.*, *Vol. III*, p. 217, said that the Mission Council consisted of “senior representatives of the embassy, MACV, USOM, USIS and the CIA.” It continued: “in addition, COMUSMACV functioned as the executive agent for pacification and headed the Executive Committee which served the Mission Council and also included representatives of USOM, USIS, and the other US agencies.”

A third was the lack of American unity at the province level. Every province chief had multiple advisors, each with his own ideas and priorities. District advisors—all soldiers—found themselves juggling both military and civilian development tasks because it was difficult to separate the two, and because there were no USAID representatives below the province level. In every province capital, though, the USAID, US Information Service, CIA, and Defense Department “competed for the ear of the province chief.”<sup>227</sup> Clay Nettles liked the autonomy he had as a USAID province representative, but recognized its impracticality.<sup>228</sup> General John Freund wrote that “The biggest problem in I Corps [was] coordinating the activities of the various American elements—civilian and military—with each other and with [the] Vietnamese.”<sup>229</sup>

Westmoreland proposed an experiment combining all agencies at the province level. Before departing in the summer of 1965, Ambassador Taylor approved a three-province test, the first of two experiments dealing with what came to be known as the “single manager” concept. In one province, a lieutenant colonel was put in charge, in a second the State Department had the senior position, and in a third it fell to a USAID prov rep.<sup>230</sup> A problem at the very beginning hinted just how hard such a radical change might be. The USAID representative for one of the provinces—an agronomy professor from Texas—refused to take orders from the lieutenant colonel, and was moved into another job. Frank Wisner, the FSO who had been his deputy, took his place.<sup>231</sup>

At the conclusion, two issues may have masked positive results. There was a temporary unity at the province level, but none above it, so the senior person in each of the three provinces received instructions from multiple supervisors. Also, the various stakeholders thought their work was shortchanged when the person in charge was not from their agency: USAID complained that hamlet schools showed no improvement, the CIA said the RD Cadre had been misused, and the Army complained that security forces had been “fritter[ed] away.” Westmoreland decided the results were “inconclusive,” and again backed off from the issue.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Wisner, pp. 11-2.

<sup>228</sup> Nettles, p. 29.

<sup>229</sup> Freund, JUSPAO, 30 November 1965, p. 2.

<sup>230</sup> Komer, *New Model*, p. 23.

<sup>231</sup> Wisner, p. 12; Komer, *New Model*, p. 23.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid*, p. 23.

Having failed to gain the Republican nomination for President, Henry Cabot Lodge returned as Johnson's ambassador that summer, and according to William Colby, was even more interested in pacification than he was before. He noticed that each American agency "tended to do its own thing and to run its own projects with minimal coordination," and as a result he pushed "a series of studies and conferences."<sup>233</sup> Meanwhile, the White House concluded that the embassy was ill equipped to coordinate the increasingly important pacification effort, and dispatched William Porter to replace Alexis Johnson as deputy ambassador. Porter would have a special staff for orchestrating the various civilian activities, and Frank Wisner was ordered to Saigon to serve on it. The idea, as Wisner recalled, was that Lodge would "focus on Washington, the politics, the diplomacy with the top rungs of the new Vietnamese government of Nguyen Cao Ky," and Porter would run the mission, including the civilian side of the pacification effort.<sup>234</sup>

### **Conclusion**

There are several key points to take away from our analysis of this period. First, America's development work in the provinces did not end with Strategic Hamlet in 1963. Indeed, just the opposite was true. President Johnson placed additional civilians in the province capitals, and deployed military advisors to the district capitals. Second, the North Vietnamese had concluded that the southern insurgency was incapable of toppling the South in a timely manner, and began infiltrating tens of thousands of its own troops into the South. The South seemed incapable of dealing with that, so President Johnson introduced American ground troops. Whether this was wise or not, as Fredrik Logevall and others have questioned, is outside the scope of this project, but what is germane is that the North's troops threatened not just the pacification effort, but the country's very existence. Something had to be done.

Third, Chien Thang, which became the South's overarching strategy, had pacification at its core, and even the large operations should be seen in that context. The strategy was conceptually sound, but Hop Tac and the other campaigns that implemented it were poorly executed. There were various reasons for the poor execution. Westmoreland was no doubt correct in concluding that a major

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<sup>233</sup> Colby, p. 191.

<sup>234</sup> Wisner, p. 12.

cause of Hop Tac's failure was the complex task of managing the various programs, and he apparently hoped that as his staff worked with their Vietnamese counterparts, the Vietnamese would develop the necessary sophistication to manage Hop Tac-like programs. What he overlooked, though, was that the Vietnamese chain of command was failing to manage even the conceptually simple tasks. Indeed, Vietnamese officers at every level were inattentive to their duties, and arguably their most important duty—the one that was so often shortchanged—was holding their subordinates at every level accountable for carrying out their orders. Ultimately, it was the unit commander in the vicinity of a village who was responsible for protecting the people of that village, but more often than not he carried out that responsibility in an ineffectual way, and his superiors did not make him do otherwise. Americans could see the manifestations of the problem, but did not grasp its magnitude or that the only effective way they could have addressed it would have been at the top rather than with advisors at the bottom. This substantial hindrance to the pacification advisory effort overlapped with another. Americans were beginning to see the magnitude of the problem posed by corruption, but not how it was structured. As a result, the US Mission did not come up with a coherent policy to address it, and it would only grow worse.

Yet another major hindrance to the pacification advisory effort was the confusion over how to support the government in its attempts to win hearts and minds. The assumption all along had been that the best way to do that was to mollify the peasants through quality of life improvement programs. Over time, though, the advisors had developed some understanding of the fact that the development programs were meaningless if the people who were to benefit from them, and whose loyalties were being sought, could not be protected from the insurgents. The James Killen episode reveals some of the confusion. Although USAID was the American agency charged with supporting village development—the effort that was considered the very foundation of the government effort to win over the peasants—they were not comfortable with that responsibility, and under Killen there was an institutional drift away from the countryside and back to the large, national projects. The combination of Killen's disdain of community development and his proclivity for things being neat, tidy, and by the book, caused many of USAID's best pacification workers to leave. Another part of the challenge, though, was that you could not get a villager to show support for the government if he thought he

might be tortured and killed for showing that support. Ultimately, then, it all came back to security, and that was much easier to talk about than achieve.

Saigon tried to apply the mechanics of British and French counterinsurgency theory without fully embracing the British notion of political empowerment. That President Johnson understood something of the problem is clear. In May 1965, he had said that “people must fight for something” rather than “against something.”<sup>235</sup> The American goods and services may have brought some over to the government’s side, but there were also forces working against that effort, including the incompetence and corruption that were visible to the villagers and the American failure to truly understand those problems. Despite the vast resources the US was now applying at the local level, the advisors at the top were not addressing the problems that only they were in a position to address. In effect, they were delegating the heavy lifting to their subordinates at the low levels.

Finally, the lack of unity among the various agencies making up the pacification advisory effort was hindering it. There was still a tendency for soldiers to think that USAID had the lead on pacification and that they were in support, yet all parties now recognized that pacification required a whole-of-government approach. Increasing numbers of advisors sensed that with no single manager in charge at any level, they were conducting the effort in a dysfunctional way.

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<sup>235</sup> L.B. Johnson, “Address to Members of the Association of American Editorial Cartoonists: The Challenge of Human Need in Vietnam” (13 May 13 1965), *The American Presidency Project*; see also Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Military Operations, *A Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam (PROVN)*, Vol. I (March 1966), DTIC, p. 101.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Exasperation: 1966 through April 1967**

In 1966 as American troops continued to flow into the country, South Vietnam remained under the rule of a military junta. Nguyen Cao Ky was the premier, and Nguyen Van Thieu the president.<sup>236</sup> Despite the fact that American troops generally defeated any Communist units they could find and then engage, the Viet Cong continued to make inroads in the countryside, and the American attempt to win over undecided villagers by improving their lives did not seem to be working. The Pentagon and White House were perplexed at so little to show for the huge American investment. As this chapter follows the pacification effort in 1966 and early 1967, it will continue to examine the most significant hindrances to that effort—uncertainty over what the government needed to do to win the loyalty of the people, the lack of unity within the American mission, the corruption of the Vietnamese government, and the dysfunctional Vietnamese command and control system.

#### **Revolutionary Development and “Hearts and Minds”**

In late 1965 when Saigon formed the Ministry of Revolutionary Development to coordinate its pacification activities, the ministry’s principal program, the Revolutionary Development Cadre, got off to a rocky start. Captain Bing West, who worked with some of the 59-man RD Cadre teams in 1966, explained that their purpose was “to show the villagers that [Saigon] cared [and that] the Viet Cong” did not. They were to do this by assisting with development and helping in ways that demonstrated the government’s good will, but this was easier said than done. West recalled that the teams consisted mostly of urban Vietnamese teenagers who were out of their element in the countryside, often distracted by girls and beer, and prone to “cluster together, light a lantern and play cards” when they were supposed to be on ambush.<sup>237</sup>

In effect, the teams were to spearhead the government’s effort to win hearts and minds, but as the program was getting off the ground there were a number of actors within the pacification community who were questioning the whole hearts and minds concept and the role of the RD teams in it. Even though the teams would be central to the pacification effort for the next seven years and some of those who had initiated the debate would eventually be in positions to implement their ideas, there

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<sup>236</sup> For a description of how this came to be, see Shaplen, *Lost Revolution*, pp. 344-6.

<sup>237</sup> B. West, *The Village* (New York, 2003), p. 46.

has been a tendency for historians to inadequately explain the program and completely ignore the debate. Michael Maclear, for example, covered the Cadre in just six sentences, George Herring failed to discuss the debate over the concept, and Stanley Karnow mentioned neither the Cadre, the Ministry of Revolutionary Development, nor General Nguyen Duc Thang, the ministry's director.<sup>238</sup> The program does not fit the prevailing narrative that the US sought to solve Vietnam's problems with brute force.

Even though there was nothing clandestine about the program, the US had made the CIA responsible for supporting it, and one of its early obstacles was the opposition of some military advisors to such civilian involvement in the provinces. Colonel Jasper Wilson, the senior advisor in III Corps, opposed the CIA's involvement with the Cadre, and in 1965 had sacked a province senior advisor for cooperating with them. Thomas Ahern, a CIA official working with the Cadre, recalled visiting a province's military advisors when Wilson unexpectedly arrived. The "terrified" senior advisor insisted that Ahern hide until Wilson left. The CIA complained to Westmoreland about Wilson's approach, but Ahern recalled that "collaboration in the Delta remained uneasy for the rest of Wilson's tour." Ahern thought that some senior soldiers continued to see the war "as an entirely military enterprise... whose conduct the intervention of ignorant if well-intentioned civilians could only impede."<sup>239</sup> Such views help explain why the US Government could not achieve unity of effort, and also underline Colonel Montague's criticism that while Westmoreland embraced the pacification effort, he was weak in articulating its importance to his subordinates.

During this period, the terms "revolutionary development" and "pacification" were essentially interchangeable. The Americans defined revolutionary development as "the integrated military and civil process to restore, consolidate and expand government control so that nation building can progress," and pacification as "the military, political, economic and social process of establishing or

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<sup>238</sup> M. Maclear, *The Ten Thousand Day War* (New York, 1981), pp. 256-7; Herring, *Longest War*, pp. 158-9; see also Karnow, pp. 687-92, where General Thang did not even make Herring's "Cast of Principal Characters."

<sup>239</sup> Ahern, p. 178.

re-establishing local government,” with the qualifier that local government had to be “responsive to and involving the participation of the people.”<sup>240</sup>

In 1965, the government had ordered Colonel Tran Ngoc Chau, who as a province chief had developed one of the prototypes of the Cadre, to take his program national. By early 1966, though, Chau had concluded that despite “superficial” similarities, the national program was not really like his, which he had built “on a foundation of political and moral principles [that] the people at the top did not truly share.” “It was all well and good to be anticommunist,” said Chau, but without real democracy the government was offering the villagers little of substance.<sup>241</sup> He would have agreed with his friend John Vann that because the top American priority was keeping South Vietnam out of Communist hands, the US had fallen in with those who were instinctively conservative rather than revolutionary, willing to exploit the masses, and in effect “a continuation of the French colonial system.”<sup>242</sup>

According to Ahern, who had been his advisor, Chau thought General Thang “naively equated the volume of benefits bestowed...with progress in winning peasant loyalty,” and was “entirely uncomprehending of the political and psychological aspects of pacification.”<sup>243</sup> Indeed, the US seemed to assume the same thing. Chau’s aim in Kien Hoa had been to use “political and social action” to get the people off the fence, with force “a last result.” He felt so strongly that the government was misguided and intransigent that in 1966 he resigned from the army under protest. He would later feel that even the US-touted 1967 national elections had changed little because “a small minority of opportunistic Vietnamese [continued to profit] from the war at the expense of thousands of sincere Vietnamese patriots serving in the civil service and...military.”<sup>244</sup> In other words, the problem was at the top.

Others arrived at similar conclusions. In October 1966, CIA official William Colby argued that the US had an “impatient desire...to impose ‘pacification’ and security on the population rather

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<sup>240</sup> E.R. Brigham, *Pacification Measurement in Vietnam: The Hamlet Evaluation System* (HQ, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, 1968), US Army CGSC Combined Arms Research Library, p. 27.

<sup>241</sup> Chau, p. 201.

<sup>242</sup> Vann, p. 4.

<sup>243</sup> Ahern, p. 183.

<sup>244</sup> Chau, pp. 201-2.

than engaging it in a common effort.” There was little hope of pacifying an area, he said, if villagers did not demonstrate “a willingness to contribute to intelligence, local security and community development.”<sup>245</sup> Similarly, Clay McManaway, a USAID economist who arrived in 1965, eventually decided that it was “terribly naive” to think that the US could buy the villagers’ allegiance with “better seeds,” “schools,” and “medical services.” The people, he said, must have “a stake in the society and economy and local community that they wanted to protect.”<sup>246</sup>

In 1967, the Revolutionary Development officer for II Corps, Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Ba Lien, concluded that the program “would never work and should be discontinued.” There were far too many hamlets to protect, he thought, and at any rate villagers were “indifferent” to who was in charge, going along with the government “only for the cement, roofing, wheat flour, rice, and other gifts.”<sup>247</sup> His concerns overlapped with those of Chau, Colby, Vann, and McManaway, and though this combination of Vietnamese and Americans were a minority, they were worried that Saigon and its American advisors were not getting it right. They did not dispute that winning the peasants’ allegiance was of paramount importance, but questioned how to go about that.

### **Conceptual Problems with the Advisory Effort**

Rather than the top American advisors, who were generals, it was usually their subordinates who came closest to identifying problems with the advisory effort. Major Edward Metzner had assumed that generals would want to identify problems and force change, but soon realized that was not necessarily the case. He noticed that when he reported problems to General Richard Lee, the corps deputy senior advisor, Lee modified the reports to such an extent that they “bore little resemblance to my original thoughts.” Top advisors in Saigon were therefore unaware of the deficiencies Metzner had identified. Another problem was that Lee accepted Vietnamese reports at face value, dismissing Metzner’s recommendation that advisors personally “verify the facts and figures fed to us by the Vietnamese.” Metzner concluded that Lee did not understand “how an advisor was supposed to function.” In Metzner’s view, a good advisor knew the importance of “apply[ing] leverage,” and the best way to do that was “to gather the facts...and then forward the truth to higher authority for

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<sup>245</sup> Ahern, pp. 211-2.

<sup>246</sup> McManaway, p. 10.

<sup>247</sup> E.P. Metzner, *More Than a Soldier’s War* (College Station, 1995), pp. 17-21.

resolution of the discrepancies.” He concluded that those at the top of the advisory effort might not really be interested in confronting their counterparts with their shortcomings and then insisting on change.<sup>248</sup>

Metzner was not alone in his frustration. The senior military advisor in Lam Dong province, who also worked for General Lee, told Clay Nettles, USAID’s representative, that he was forbidden to report his concerns about the security situation because his supervisor had instructed him to “write [nothing] negative.” A report that his counterparts had problems was “an admission that [he was] not doing [his] job,” he had been told. In effect, Lee was saying, “Don’t air dirty laundry. If your unit has problems, fix them.” The colonel, determined that the truth make its way to the top, fed the information he could not include in his own reports to Nettles, who put them in his.<sup>249</sup>

Since Nettles’ and Metzner’s accounts are consistent, we may assume that General Lee suppressed accurate reporting throughout his command. Whether the practice extended to other corps is unclear, but we may draw several conclusions. First, junior advisors were in a position to see the failings of their counterparts, and if they felt compelled to report them, they thought they were incapable of addressing them at their level and needed help. Second, they assumed that at some level there would be an American with the wherewithal to solve the reported problem. Third, Metzner’s view that leverage was necessary suggests he recognized that the senior Vietnamese would not implement change unless forced to do so, and that advisors at the top had such power if only they would use it. Finally, although General Lee had no interest in pressuring his counterparts to properly supervise their subordinates, he thought his own subordinates were not doing their job if they did not pressure theirs. Lee’s approach ensured that the Vietnamese would not be forced to develop their command and control system.

Was this practice widespread? There are indications that it was. Samuel Thomsen, the consul in Hué, observed that the American military was prone to expressing an “upbeat” attitude in reports, always portraying the “glass [as] half full.”<sup>250</sup> Of greater weight is the conclusion of Jeffrey Clarke, who authored the Army’s official history of this period. After examining the considerable

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid, pp. 14-7.

<sup>249</sup> Nettles, p. 27.

<sup>250</sup> S.B. Thomsen, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (1996), p. 39.

documentary evidence made available by the Army, he concluded that there had been a “cult of optimism” in the highest ranks, and that “in many cases reports emphasized only data that reflected favorably on the state of the South Vietnamese armed forces and played down or ignored negative information.”<sup>251</sup> This suggests that there was something in the genetic code of the American general that privileged naïve optimism over reality or perhaps a cynical preference for form over substance.

Why would General Lee give the impression of suppressing the truth? Few of the advisors at the top had been advisors at more junior ranks, and they seem to have been uncomfortable in their role as advisors. Enthusiasm, optimism, and stoicism were valued traits in American officers, who were taught from the beginning that problems could be solved through diligence and hard work. A captain ordered to take a hill would not say to his troops, “I doubt we can do it,” but developing an indigenous army into a professional one while attempting to earn the allegiance of the people is no time to sugarcoat problems. Unreported faults were likely to go uncorrected, and even when senior advisors did become aware of them they might remain unresolved if the American generals were uncomfortable pressuring their own counterparts like they expected their subordinates to pressure theirs. Lee seems to have thought that he was there to coordinate programs and direct subordinates rather than to push change on his counterparts. It was a problem of mindset, then, but the end result was that no matter how good the generals might have been at commanding American troops, most were ineffective at advising, and as a result the advisory effort as an institution missed the mark.

By the end of his tour, though, Lee had acquired some understanding of the problems with the Vietnamese command and control system. Seemingly bewildered at his discovery, he wrote in his end-of-tour report that “surprisingly large numbers [of Vietnamese officers] seemed to lack aggressiveness, leadership ability, and a...commitment to their profession.” Part of the problem, he thought, was that officers tended to be from the country’s elite and valued their own position over the good of the country. He suspected that some took jobs as province and district chiefs “so that they could avoid the rigors, boredom, and dangers of training and combat,” and that “a few [sought] to use their positions for personal or even financial advantage.”<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> Clarke, pp. 512-3, 521-2.

<sup>252</sup> Collins, p. 76.

Lee was right on all that, but even at the end of his tour he apparently did not recognize his own role in perpetuating the problem. Had he allowed his majors and colonels to report what they were seeing, and then taken those problems to his boss—the three-star general who commanded American troops but was technically the senior advisor as well—that man could have gone to the Vietnamese corps commander and demanded change. It is quite possible that the corps commander would have feigned indignation at learning of the problems, as often happened, and gone through the motions of instituting change. He would have known, though, that his counterpart might take it to General Westmoreland if he did not deal with it. The evidence suggests that most American generals were unwilling to take such an approach, perhaps because it would have seemed ungentlemanly, condescending, and an affront to Vietnamese sovereignty.

#### **Conferences, Studies, Experiments, Directives and Frustration**

As a few argued that the existing approach to winning over the people was dysfunctional and others grew frustrated with the counterproductive practices of senior advisors, Washington was looking at the big picture. Why was the substantial American effort proving inadequate? Despite the failures of Strategic Hamlet and Hop Tac, the US had attempted to absorb their lessons. From Strategic Hamlet they had concluded that the government could not simultaneously pacify all areas; that the advantages of forcibly resettling peasants were outweighed by disadvantages; that pacifying even small areas was difficult. Ambassador Lodge had decided that reports from the Vietnamese could not be taken at face value and that even those from MACV were suspect. From Hop Tac they then learned that complex pacification campaigns could be difficult for the Vietnamese to manage; that securing a village at night was crucial but difficult; that pacification required large numbers of troops; and that interagency unity of effort was essential but elusive. However, simply recognizing the problems had not solved them: In 1966, the VC still owned the night; reports were still inaccurate; interagency coordination remained problematic; and the territorial army was far too small and still poorly led, trained, and armed.

In January 1966, a conference in Virginia examined how the pacification effort was organized, and “suggested centralizing Washington responsibility for all...nonmilitary matters,” but did little else. It was at the Honolulu Conference a month later that President Johnson first referred to

pacification as “the other war,” and emphasized that he saw the creation of a more just and prosperous Vietnamese society as essential to defeating the Communists.<sup>253</sup> On the way back from Honolulu, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy wrote Johnson that he was pleased with the decision to make Deputy Ambassador Porter the “chief of staff” for pacification. Porter would have a separate staff and no longer be distracted by the embassy’s day-to-day affairs. Bundy thought the “remaining weakness” was USAID’s Saigon chief, Charles Mann, who had replaced James Killen seven months earlier.<sup>254</sup> Clay McManaway recalled that Lodge “couldn’t stand” Mann, and avoided him when he could.<sup>255</sup> USAID continued to believe in him, though, and in June would send the highly regarded Ward Lathram to be his deputy. Because of USAID’s work in every province, many saw Mann as “heading the pacification program,” and even after Porter took over Mann would get much of the blame for the lack of progress.<sup>256</sup>

Westmoreland, continued Bundy, was enthusiastic about pacification and ensured his command was “responsive” to the civilian agencies, which would have been “gravely hampered” otherwise. The administration had not yet lost confidence in Ambassador Lodge, but was heading in that direction. Colby later recalled his enthusiasm for pacification, but noted that he could not manage all the pieces. Bundy acknowledged his strengths, but pulled no punches in describing his weaknesses: He “has little taste for the hard work that lies between a general assertion of purpose and a concrete administrative achievement”; “the only things in Saigon that he really administers are the arrangements for comfort and security at his own house”; “his energy level is not high,” and “he can spend two days on a single cable, with time out for social activity and a daily swim and a couple of diplomatic visits”; he “frets over trivia [and though] many great men have this weakness [he] is not a great man.”<sup>257</sup> Some who worked for Lodge in Saigon, including Clay McManaway, viewed him as

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<sup>253</sup> Komer, *New Model*, p. 24.

<sup>254</sup> McG. Bundy, “Memorandum From the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Johnson” (16 February 1966), para. 1.

<sup>255</sup> McManaway, p. 12.

<sup>256</sup> L.W. Lathram, interviewed by W.E. Knight, ADST (1993), p. 5.

<sup>257</sup> Colby, p. 191; Bundy, para. 1.

“lazy” and lacking initiative, and years later Wade Latham could recall Lodge reprimanding him with the words, “You know I don't like to make decisions.”<sup>258</sup>

They hoped Porter would be able to make up for Lodge's shortcomings. Under the new arrangement, he would “have local authority over agency heads,” but Bundy thought more was needed, and suggested Johnson appoint someone to provide “prompt executive support” back in Washington—a “Director of Non-Military Operations in Vietnam”—so “that no needed action is delayed, for any reason, without a prompt report to the President.” This person must prefer “action to excuses and management to contemplation,” said Bundy.<sup>259</sup> The White House thought getting strong leaders in place and giving them sufficient authority and support was key to getting the war on track, but they, like the US Mission in Vietnam, were overlooking the systemic problems in the Vietnamese chain of command and the conceptual problems within the advisory effort that were preventing them from being addressed.

In late March, the President signed *National Security Action Memorandum 343*, emphasizing that “the war on human misery and want” was as important to the war's outcome as military operations, and tasking Robert Komer, a CIA officer known for getting difficult things done, to oversee “the direction, coordination and supervision in Washington of U.S. non-military programs for peaceful construction relating to Vietnam.” He added that Komer's charter also included “the mobilization of U.S. military resources in support of such programs,” and that Komer would “have direct access to me at all times.”<sup>260</sup>

Also in March, the Army published the 1,000-page “PROVN” study, which stood for “A Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam.” One of its conclusions was that even though Vietnam's stability and development were in America's national interest, the US lacked experience, and therefore competence, in such matters. There was neither an “over-all, integrated plan” nor even a “pattern” for developing one, said the authors, so they presented PROVN

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<sup>258</sup> McManaway, p. 12; Latham, p. 7.

<sup>259</sup> Bundy, para. 2.

<sup>260</sup> L.B. Johnson, “National Security Action Memorandum No. 343,” The White House (28 March 1966), LBJ Library.

as a “blueprint” for creating a “viable [and] independent” state, and warned that the project might take decades.<sup>261</sup>

Three of its arguments are particularly relevant to this thesis. First, winning the people was the “central battle” and everything else was “secondary.” Though everyone spoke of “winning the hearts and minds,” it said, few really understood what that meant, and until the government started truly protecting villagers nothing else mattered.<sup>262</sup> Second, the lack of interagency unity of effort was having an adverse impact on pacification. All American agencies, including the military, should therefore be placed under the direction of a “single manager,” and the ambassador was the most logical person for that.<sup>263</sup> Third, there was a need to influence Vietnamese behavior through the use of “leverage,” which the study defined as “the use of resources in such a manner that action is initiated or that a greater result is achieved with minimum input of effort.”<sup>264</sup> According to Colonel Volney Warner, one of the study’s authors, it was not well received in the Pentagon.<sup>265</sup>

In June the US began another study, this one at its embassy in Saigon. Informally named “the Jacobson Study” after the retired army colonel who led it, it examined the roles of the various American agencies operating in Vietnam. The most significant ones had a representative on the team. Daniel Ellsberg, whose name would later be associated with the *Pentagon Papers*, represented Edward Lansdale, and Stephen Ledogar, a former province representative, was there for USAID.<sup>266</sup> Ledogar recalled the significant “overlap among...agencies, and friction between programs,” and the group attempted to rationalize the whole civilian effort, making recommendations on “which agency would perform which mission.”<sup>267</sup> That the work had developed so disjointedly lends weight to

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<sup>261</sup> Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Military Operations, *PROVN, Vol. I* (March 1966), DTIC, pp. v-vi, 99.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid*, p. 100.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid*, p. 6.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 14, 54; 2-41; Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Military Operations, *A Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam (PROVN), Vol. II* (March 1966), DTIC, p. xxvii and Annex K.

<sup>265</sup> V.F. Warner, interviewed by D.M. Owen, U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center, Military History Institute (1983), pp. 69-71.

<sup>266</sup> G.D. Jacobson, “Report of Inter-Agency ‘Roles and Missions’ Study Group, US Mission, Vietnam” (24 August 1966), VCATTU.

<sup>267</sup> Ledogar, pp. 24-5.

PROVN's conclusion that because of its inexperience the US Government lacked competence at counterinsurgency. Both PROVN and the Jacobson Study informed Komer's thinking.<sup>268</sup>

Komer opened his small but powerful White House office in May.<sup>269</sup> His deputy was William Leonhart, who had just been the ambassador to Tanzania, and his staff included Colonel Robert Montague and FSO Richard Holbrooke, both of whom already had extensive Vietnam experience. Several times a week John Sylvester, another FSO, attended meetings at USAID, where he detected a "basic tension" between Komer and the various agencies because they "knew Komer had the president's ear." With the combination of Komer's abrasive personality and this access to the president, it was "for good reason" that Komer made them "bureaucratically nervous," recalled Sylvester.<sup>270</sup>

After a trip to Vietnam in June 1966, Komer recommended that the US increase pacification support to the Vietnamese and that the US push the Vietnamese to a "greater" and "better" effort of their own. Like Bundy in February, he thought Westmoreland was supportive of pacification but understandably preoccupied with combat operations. He also reported that Deputy Ambassador Porter was growing into an effective manager, and that Henry Koren, "a top notch FSO," would arrive in July to be his deputy for pacification. He highlighted the fact that while there were 2,500 advisors, only 300 of those were civilians, subtly making the point that if pacification was as important as Johnson claimed he needed to allocate more civilians to the mission and require "better... coordination" between soldiers and civilians.<sup>271</sup> With no civilians at the district level, soldiers were trying to carry out the civilian mission as well as their own. Better coordination between all the American agencies was certainly needed, and Komer may have been laying the groundwork for a single person in charge.

That same month, Porter formed a "joint US agency planning group" to synchronize the efforts of the various American agencies with each other and General Thang's Ministry of Revolutionary Development. Having seen Frank Wisner's talents, Porter brought him in as the

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<sup>268</sup> Komer, *New Model*, p. 32.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>270</sup> Sylvester (2004), pp. 52-7.

<sup>271</sup> R. W. Komer, "Memorandum for the President: Second Komer Trip to Vietnam, 23-29 June 1966" (1 July 1966), VCATTU, p. 2.

group's secretary. Working together, the Vietnamese and American pacification planners identified "National Priority Areas." Once those had been approved, two different planning processes began: The first was that military planners from both countries used the pacification priorities as a start point for the 1967 combined campaign plan. A second was that General Thang's staff prepared "guidelines" for the country's province chiefs, who would then "prepare [and] and execute" the actual pacification plans. As PROVN had noted, there was still no national-level plan, and Wisner recalled that "the aggregate of the 43 provincial plans would constitute the [government's pacification] program" for 1967.<sup>272</sup> One important point to note is that even though this was a new attempt to harmonize the efforts of the various agencies, each still operated independently under its own supervisory chain. A second was that pacification planning drove military planning, which is another indicator that combat operations were an adjunct to pacification rather than the other way around.<sup>273</sup>

Indeed, though General Westmoreland consistently described the role of the American troops in terms of their place within the overall pacification effort, in August he more sharply defined the purpose of their operations. They were to "provide the shield" behind which Vietnamese troops could concentrate on pacification, and to do that they would "take the fight to the enemy by attacking his main forces and invading his base areas." When on hiatus from that, they were to conduct "saturation patrolling," "civic action," and partnership activities with Vietnamese regulars and territorials "to bolster their combat effectiveness."<sup>274</sup> The emphasis on pacification is clear, but there was a tendency for Westmoreland and his staff to think that they were enabling pacification rather than conducting it.

Although no one described it in these terms, the American government had begun to view pacification in three parts. The two that were directly related to pacification were the civilian development effort in the villages and the close-in security that protected both that effort and its village beneficiaries. A third—Westmoreland's "shield"—was an indirect but indispensable part of the pacification effort. It was intended to protect the projects, people, and territorial troops from the larger Communist units that could easily destroy them if they could get close enough. As a result of this intellectual construct, MACV and the Pentagon viewed village development operations as

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<sup>272</sup> Wisner, p. 13.

<sup>273</sup> Military History Branch, *Command History, 1967, Vol. I*, p. 317.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 323-4.

USAID's bailiwick and the military operations to secure them as the territorial army's. The American military, therefore, could feel that they were doing their part for pacification if they defeated or disrupted the large Communist units that might threaten the villages, even as those villages might be falling to guerrillas or under the control of shadow governments.

There was obviously something wrong with this picture, and senior civilians in Saigon were frustrated at their predicament. They had no control over security, yet when it was deficient, as it was in most cases, they were blamed for the inevitable failure of their projects. There was also exasperation that those projects were intended to generate an affinity for the government but did not appear to be doing so. In the summer and fall of 1966, Deputy Ambassador Porter often lamented that "the night belongs to the VC."<sup>275</sup> Apparently assuming that an experienced diplomat could learn such things on the job, the State Department sent career diplomat Henry Koren to be Porter's deputy for pacification without any preparation for the job. Robert McNamara visited Vietnam in October, and when an ill informed Koren briefed him, McNamara was convinced that Koren had no idea what he was talking about, and advised the Mission to remove him from so critical a position.<sup>276</sup>

#### **Secretary McNamara's Trip to Saigon and the Subsequent Manila Conference**

After that trip to Vietnam, McNamara sent the President a pessimistic report of his findings. He now believed that it was the pacification effort in the villages that would ultimately decide the war. The "big military operations" against the "main force" units had been necessary, he said, because they had "blunted the communist military initiative" and "thwarted" his plans for a military victory. Furthermore, they would continue to be necessary, but they alone could not win the war because the enemy could "more than replace his losses by infiltration from North Vietnam and recruitment in South Vietnam." The pacification effort, he said, was "the key to success," and "the large-unit operations war, which we know best how to fight and where we have had our successes, is largely irrelevant to pacification as long as we do not lose it." He predicted that the trajectory that the pacification effort would take in 1967 would "be the main talisman of ultimate US success or failure

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<sup>275</sup> H.L.T. Koren, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (1989), p. 28.

<sup>276</sup> Komer, *New Model*, p. 41; Koren, p. 27.

in Vietnam.”<sup>277</sup> When McNamara spoke of “success in pacification,” he meant that villagers were secure in their homes, they were not being controlled by shadow governments, they saw cooperating with the government in their self-interest, and had responsive district, village, and hamlet governments. McNamara now understood that for these conditions to exist, the government had to protect the villagers by night as well as by day, and with a permanent presence rather than occasional visits.

McNamara had decided that despite its importance and all that the US had put into it, the pacification effort had been an abysmal failure. It was “thoroughly stalled,” he said, but more than that, it had actually “gone backward,” and all of the American efforts “since 1961 [had failed] to make a dent in the problem.” McNamara ticked off the evidence for his assessment:

Enemy full-time regional forces and part-time guerrilla forces are larger; attacks, terrorism and sabotage have increased in scope and intensity; more railroads are closed and highways cut; the rice crop expected to come to market is smaller; we control little, if any, more of the population; the VC political infrastructure thrives in most of the country, continuing to give the enemy his enormous intelligence advantage; full security exists nowhere (not even behind the US Marines’ lines and in Saigon); in the countryside, the enemy almost completely controls the night.<sup>278</sup>

McNamara blamed both the Vietnamese and Americans for this sad state of affairs, but mostly the Vietnamese. His extensive critique of the Vietnamese government and military cataloged the shortcomings that if not corrected would unavoidably lead to failure. One was that government officials often seemed apathetic and corrupt. “Often appointments, promotions, and draft deferments must be bought,” he said, “and kickbacks on salaries are common.” Recognizing that many were caught in a system not of their own choosing, he correctly observed that those “at the bottom can be no better than the system above them.” The Vietnamese military had the same problems and others. The troops “understand [neither] the importance...of pacification nor the importance to pacification of proper, disciplined conduct.” They are “weak,” he said, “in dedication, direction and discipline.” He pointed out that the villagers were very much aware of these deficiencies because they could observe them firsthand: Government troops would enter their villages but not stay, and as soon as they left the VC would return and punish anyone who had cooperated with them. Government officials were

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<sup>277</sup> R. McNamara, “Memorandum From Secretary of Defense McNamara to President Johnson: Actions Recommended for Vietnam” (14 October 1966), *US Department of State Archive*, pp. 727-9, 731, 735.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 728.

“indifferent to [their] welfare.” “Low-level” officials were “tools of the local rich.” Corruption was pervasive.

It is clear that McNamara had reflected on what the advisory effort might be doing wrong, and it is probable that he had already discussed much of this with both Lyndon Johnson and Robert Komer. He told the President that one reason for the pacification effort’s lack of success was “bad management” on the American side, which had resulted in “too little hard pressure on the [Vietnamese government] to do its job and no really solid or realistic planning.” He thought radical structural change was imperative, and provided two possible solutions. His words suggest that the first one would be preferable but would not work, and that they would eventually settle on the second.

The first would place all of the American civilian agencies that were involved in pacification under a single civilian, and all the American military activities that supported village security under a single general. These two men would need to “be among the highest rank and most competent administrators in the US Government.” However, even then, “success will depend...on complete cooperation among the US elements, and on the extent to which the South Vietnamese can be shocked out of their present pattern of behavior.” “The discouraging truth,” he said, “is that...we have not found the formula, the catalyst, for training and inspiring them into effective action.” “We cannot tolerate continued failure,” he added. If the first solution is given a “fair trial” and fails, “the only alternative” is to switch to the second solution, which was to “place the entire pacification program—civilian and military—under General Westmoreland.”<sup>279</sup>

McNamara’s trip report also laid out his plan for shifting the bulk of the Vietnamese regular army to the pacification effort, where they would augment the territorial army. Too few regular battalions had been allocated to this “area and population security” mission, he said, and those that had tended to quit before the job was done, did “not make good use of intelligence,” and had bad “leadership and discipline.” On top of those problems, said McNamara, “their tactics are bad,” by which he meant that there were “no aggressive small-unit saturation patrol[s], hamlet searches,...or offensive night ambushes.” These deficiencies in the regular army were “despite [the considerable] US prodding,” and because of them, Communist companies and battalions were able to “remain in

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid, pp. 732-3.

operation” even when government troops were not far away, “and [were] more than large enough to overrun anything the local security forces can put up.”

McNamara wanted “at least half of the ARVN and perhaps a portion of the US forces [allocated] to the task of providing an active and permanent security screen behind which the Revolutionary Development teams and police can operate and behind which the political struggle with the VC infrastructure can take place.” While the close-in pacification mission needed more and better military force allocated to it, McNamara was adamant that at most the Americans should augment that mission rather than take it over. “The US,” he said, “cannot do this pacification security job for the Vietnamese.” Even if the US were able to do it successfully, he said, doing so would have been unwise. “We do not intend to stay,” he explained, and the South would therefore have to stand on its own against the Communists.

Implicit in McNamara’s comment are two important assumptions. One was that if Americans did for the Vietnamese what the Vietnamese should have been doing for themselves, that created a dependency and stunted the growth of the Vietnamese. A second assumption was that if the Vietnamese did conduct that mission for themselves, with just advice and support from the Americans, they would indeed develop the capacity to stand on their own. The first assumption seems reasonable, but McNamara did not lay out a roadmap for the second. As we have seen, McNamara had lamented that the US had tried in vain to find the elusive “formula” or “catalyst” that would get the Vietnamese to take their responsibilities seriously, and he had identified a myriad of Vietnamese problems that could derail the pacification effort. How did he intend for the advisory effort to address those? Whether he thought the structural change to the advisory effort and strong leadership at its helm were sufficient to achieve those “essential” changes in Vietnamese attitudes, doctrine, and practice is unclear. Although McNamara did not say so, there is no question that a lack of supervision from the highest ranks had contributed to those problems and that correcting them would require effective supervision from the top. We do not know whether McNamara recognized that, but in a memorandum that is replete with detailed analysis, it is telling that he neither used the word “supervise” nor pointed at the concept as an overarching one.

It was at a conference in Manila ten days later that the Vietnamese formally agreed to allocate sixty percent of their infantry battalions to the pacification mission. According to George Herring, the Americans had “shunted [the Vietnamese] aside, relegate[ing them] to lesser operations and population control”—“chores [that] its officers considered demeaning and took on with considerable reluctance.” Indeed, some senior Vietnamese officers were unhappy to find themselves on pacification duty while Americans took the lead on the large combat operations.<sup>280</sup> Some divisions considered the duty so onerous that they rotated battalions through it rather than leaving them in place long enough to truly get to know a community and its problems.<sup>281</sup> The Americans, though, now realized that these so-called “lesser operations and population control” were the bread and butter of counterinsurgency, and had concluded that the territorial troops that should have been taking care of them apparently needed help. Actually, Westmoreland would have disagreed with Herring that those tasks were “lesser” at all.

As for the division of labor, the logic was understandable. Americans were equipped with state-of-the-art helicopters, naval gunfire, close air support, artillery, and intelligence and communications technology, all of which made it easier to find and attack large enemy formations, and Vietnamese troops certainly had much more in common with the villagers that they would be interacting with on a daily basis. Herring was probably right that a “sense of inferiority” had resulted, and that it “did nothing to resolve the problems of morale and leadership which had always been the ARVN’s curse,” but that is mostly irrelevant since those problems existed both before and after the change. Certainly the “problems of morale and leadership” would have to be addressed in as yet an undiscovered way.<sup>282</sup> It is significant, though, that some Vietnamese commanders would consider pacification the less important mission, especially since the campaign plans stated otherwise.

Around this time, Westmoreland expressed the view that if all American units would establish partnerships with nearby Vietnamese units and then work side-by-side to plan and conduct both military and pacification operations, the American proficiency would somehow rub off on the Vietnamese. He wanted American commanders to pay “constant attention” to this, and hoped it would

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<sup>280</sup> Herring, *Longest War*, p. 155; see also Krepinevich, p. 216.

<sup>281</sup> R.M. Montague, “Memorandum for Mr. Komer,” The White House (22 December 1966), VCATTU.

<sup>282</sup> Herring, *Longest War*, p. 155.

“result in increased [Vietnamese] effectiveness not only in defeating the enemy, but more importantly, in continuing to gain support from the Vietnamese people.”<sup>283</sup>

The fact that Westmoreland considered gaining the support of the people “more important” than “defeating the enemy” reinforces our observation that pacification was indeed important to him, but also significant is that he hoped to address Vietnamese problems in this way. Vietnamese officers undoubtedly could improve their abilities by rubbing elbows with the Americans, but their problem was not so much planning operations but executing them, because most commanders did not hold their subordinates accountable for complying with their orders. Did Westmoreland make that an issue with his counterparts? It does not seem so.

When American generals interacted with the Vietnamese they advised, they did so as diplomats and gentlemen, with handshakes and polite conversation rather than heavy-handed attempts at influencing behavior. Westmoreland, for example, could get his counterparts to issue orders on such things as “saturation patrolling, ambushes, and increased night operations,” but could not get them to then ensure their troops were obeying those orders.<sup>284</sup> There was a similar problem with the civilian side of government. Economist Clay McManaway worked on financing for rural development. American money was earmarked for development in the villages and hamlets, but much of it was not making it to the villages. No doubt corruption was a major part of the problem, as it was in all areas of governance, but bureaucratic lethargy also played a key role. His counterpart, demonstrating a common attitude, wanted no change to the status quo even though it was not working. McManaway had concluded that without American control measures to keep the hands of province and district chiefs off the money, it “would never get” to the villages.<sup>285</sup> It would seem, though, that a more appropriate solution would have been proper supervision by the Vietnamese rather than American attempts at mitigation.

In November, the Americans and Vietnamese issued their combined campaign plan for 1967. It specified that the operations of both armies would be “conducted in consonance with political, economic, and sociological programs,” and that while Vietnamese troops would have “the ultimate

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<sup>283</sup> MACV 1967, Vol I, p. 319.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

<sup>285</sup> McManaway, p. 13.

responsibility” for pacification, American troops “would provide a shield” behind which it could occur. As Westmoreland had said the year before, the purpose of American units was to enable the village pacification activities by keeping large Communist units at bay.<sup>286</sup>

Westmoreland anticipated that the Vietnamese infantry battalions that would now be dedicated to pacification would be working for province chiefs rather than their own division commanders, and he was concerned that the division commanders would therefore lose interest in their troops. “It is essential,” he said, “that the division commander enthusiastically support Revolutionary Development,” by which he meant pacification. Apparently suspecting that the Vietnamese corps commanders would not address the matter on their own, he directed American division commanders “to influence the [Vietnamese commanders] to do what is required.”<sup>287</sup>

This expectation that Westmoreland’s generals would “influence” Vietnamese generals “to do what is required” is revealing. Even though American division commanders were not advisors, Westmoreland was treating them as such, which is a good thing. Not so good, though, is the underlying assumption that without being prodded the Vietnamese commanders would lack interest in pacification, which helps explain why the pacification effort was doing so poorly. A second problem was that if there was a need for an American two-star general to make sure a Vietnamese two-star was doing “what is required,” the Vietnamese three- and four-star generals were not doing that. Westmoreland had conceived of a way to work around the failure of the Vietnamese to supervise, and though that may seem admirable, it was negative in the sense that it did not force the Vietnamese command and control system to develop, which was what Secretary McNamara was aiming for when he discussed the importance of forcing the Vietnamese to stand on their own.

It was also in 1966 that the Americans decided to put more emphasis on countering the serious threat posed by the Communist shadow governments that stretched from Hanoi down to the villages and hamlets. The 1967 combined campaign plan attempted to address the problem of villages that appeared to be under government control but were actually controlled at night by the Viet Cong infrastructure “through intimidation and terrorist campaigns.” The plan called for an “increased

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<sup>286</sup> Military History Branch, *Command History, 1967, Vol. I*, pp. 317, 319.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid*, p. 324.

emphasis [on] identifying and eliminating the VC infrastructure and to small unit operations designed specifically to destroy the enemy guerrilla force.” The plan addressed the shadow governments and guerrillas in the same sentence because the former issued the orders and the latter carried them out, generally at night when they had greater freedom of movement, which explains the next point. “These operations were to be characterized by saturation patrolling, ambushes, and increased night operations by both [Vietnamese and other members of the coalition].”<sup>288</sup> The ambushes were intended to interdict guerrillas before they made their way into the villages, and there was no other reliable way to keep them out. The question, though, was whether the Vietnamese chain of command would not only put those instructions in the campaign plan, but then follow up to ensure that their troops were obeying them.

### **Moving Ever Closer to Interagency Unity of Effort**

As Washington pressed the US mission to “unify management,” a second experiment with the “single-manager” concept began in November, this time in Long An province. In 1964, Robert Shaplen had described Long An as one of the country’s “most insecure provinces,” and the situation was hardly changed two years later when Lodge placed Colonel Sam Wilson in charge for the experiment. After just a few months, Wilson declared success and rotated home. Robert Komer, who monitored the experiment from Washington, thought the results were inconclusive. Wilson had created a functioning and unified advisory effort, said Komer, but he was a Special Forces colonel who had run USAID’s field operations for the whole country, and was therefore uniquely qualified. Komer considered the results more a demonstration of Wilson’s abilities than a proof of concept, and thought that the province’s instability precluded the quick results that Wilson had boasted. However, he did consider the “lessons learned” useful.<sup>289</sup>

In December, the radical restructuring that Robert McNamara had recommended in his October trip report began to be implemented. In Saigon, Deputy Ambassador Porter directed a major reorganization of the civilian effort, merging “all activities of a civilian nature outside of Saigon” into a single organization, with four regional headquarters to supervise work in the provinces. The Office

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid, pp. 317-9.

<sup>289</sup> Komer, *New Model*, p. 42; Shaplen, *Lost Revolution*, pp. 258-9.

of Civil Operations (OCO) was a radical restructuring that transformed how work was done in Saigon, at the four corps headquarters, and in the provinces. The chiefs of the affected agencies complained that the new headquarters was “taking their people [and] money” but removing their control—a charge that was accurate and understandable, but also parochial and nearsighted.<sup>290</sup> The complaint was further evidence that the US bureaucracy was out of its element when it came to counterinsurgency, and helps explain why the status quo had to be changed.

Henry Koren, who had flubbed the briefing to McNamara, became the first and only Office of Civil Operations director in I Corps. General Lou Walt was the American commander in that corps, as well as the senior advisor to General Lam, a very corrupt corps commander who will be discussed in the next chapter. Because the OCO merger had not included the military, Koren was Walt’s equal at this point, but would be his deputy later. Koren found Walt supportive, but soon concluded that his new subordinates—the regional heads of the USAID, CIA, and the US Information Service—“weren’t any good,” and replaced them. He wanted to replace his deputy as well, and asked for Charles Cross, an old colleague. The State Department responded that Cross was “one of our best” and that they could not spare him. Koren eventually got Cross, but concluded that the State Department viewed Vietnam as a sideshow. “If we needed our best” anywhere, he said, “we needed them out there.”<sup>291</sup> Koren’s approach to weak subordinates and a recalcitrant State Department exemplifies the energy that the new headquarters had infused into the pacification effort, and it would only grow under Robert Komer’s leadership of CORDS, the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, which would come into existence in May 1967.

Over time Koren did learn about counterinsurgency. The fact that the VC controlled the night remained “a terrible irritant” his entire tour. He had spent World War Two in the airborne infantry, and decided that part of America’s Vietnam problem was that it was fighting a “low-intensity conflict” yet had only “high-intensity” experience.<sup>292</sup> While that did play a role, the Marines in I Corps may have grasped the importance of securing villages at night sooner than other Americans. Their Combined Action Platoons paired US troops with Vietnamese territorials and police to use

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<sup>290</sup> Latham, p. 10; see also Wisner, p. 13.

<sup>291</sup> Koren, pp. 30-1; see also C.T. Cross, *Born a Foreigner* (Boulder, 1999), p. 159.

<sup>292</sup> Koren, pp. 28-9.

those indispensable ambushes to protect the villages. The program was a success, but there were insufficient American infantrymen to use it throughout I Corps area, much less as a countrywide model.<sup>293</sup>

The OCO lasted only a few months. Was it successful? Komer said in 1970 that those “who set [it] up weren't really sold on it [and saw it as a] counterploy to our proposal for unification under the military.” An observer might rightly marvel that such decisions were shaped by bureaucratic politics and power plays rather than unified strategy. From the White House, Komer dealt regularly with OCO during its short existence. “Since it never really got much of a try,” he said, “it's hard to judge its accomplishments,” but he thought those in charge “managed with a fairly loose rein.” Given his own management style, this was a significant criticism. The military was not involved, so OCO had only partially addressed the matter of unity of effort.<sup>294</sup> Lathram, who ran OCO and would later work for Komer, recalled that they had been “rather proud of our structure.” Given the difficulty of integrating disparate organizations and that such had never before been attempted, they had reason to be proud.<sup>295</sup>

As McNamara had explained in his memorandum to the President in October, the military advisory effort also needed to change. In early November, Westmoreland formed the Revolutionary Development Support Directorate under Brigadier General William Knowlton. Province and district advisory teams were shifted from the corps senior advisors' control to the new directorate, thereby creating a single pacification chain of command within MACV.<sup>296</sup>

Even before the creation of OCO and the Rural Development Support Directorate, Komer had already come to three conclusions that would shape the rest of the war: first, interagency unity of effort could be attained only with unity of command; second, although civilian agencies ran most of the pacification programs, the military had the resources; third, his office at the White House was limited in what it could do because of distance. His solution, which was consistent with McNamara's October recommendation, was to merge OCO with Knowlton's organization and put the new structure

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<sup>293</sup> For first-hand accounts of the Combine Action program, see B. West and B.L. Goodson, *CAP Môt: The Story of a Marine Special Forces Unit in Vietnam, 1968-1969* (Denton, 1997).

<sup>294</sup> Komer, *New Model*, p. 46.

<sup>295</sup> Lathram, p. 10.

<sup>296</sup> Military History Branch, MACV, *Command History, 1967, Vol. II* (16 September 1968), DTIC, pp. 566.

under Westmoreland with a civilian in charge. The civilian would be subordinate to Westmoreland but possess a great deal of autonomy.<sup>297</sup> In March 1967, Komer traveled to Guam with President Johnson to discuss the matter with Lodge and Westmoreland. In May, Johnson signed CORDS into existence with National Security Action Memorandum 362, and replaced Lodge with Ellsworth Bunker.<sup>298</sup> The war had entered a new phase.

### **Conclusion**

Nineteen sixty-six ended as it began, with great frustration in Washington and Saigon that the pacification effort was floundering. However, the various studies, experiments, debates, and analysis had culminated in a decision to make a radical change in the US Mission's structure, leadership, and emphasis, and there was a modicum of hope that the change might turn the tide. The unorthodox arguments of individuals like Vann, Colby, and Chau had now been heard by Americans who were in positions of influence, and were making a difference.

That McNamara finally comprehended much of the problem is clear from his October report to the President. Either directly or indirectly, he touched on each of the four hindrances to the pacification advisory effort that this thesis has identified. By proposing the creation of what would become known as CORDS, he targeted the US Government's dysfunctional approach to counterinsurgency at the organizational level. He also highlighted the problem of corruption and referred to it as a system, but what he intended to do about it was unclear. Although he touched on the matter of political agency, his real contribution to the discourse on hearts and minds was his unequivocal assertion both that security at the village level was the foundation for everything else and that the Vietnamese were badly failing at it. He talked around the South's dysfunctional command and control system, but did not directly discuss it. In other words, he did not link Vietnamese performance to supervision.

There has been a great deal of criticism of General Westmoreland for his alleged lack of commitment to the pacification effort, and it has been based primarily on his penchant for large combat operations. While much of that criticism is based on misunderstandings, some is valid. What

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<sup>297</sup> Komer, *New Model*, pp. 33, 35, 37-8, 48, 53, 62-3.

<sup>298</sup> L.B. Johnson, "National Security Action Memorandum No. 362," The White House (9 May 1967).

did he get right in 1966 and early 1967, and where did he fall short? To answer that, it is helpful to think in terms of those three aspects of pacification that were introduced above. As we have seen, even though the US Mission never put it in such terms, it is clear that they viewed the pacification effort as if a stool with three legs: the first leg was village development, the second was village security, and the third was the effort to neutralize the main force units ranging in size from companies to divisions that could easily overrun the villages.

To his credit, General Westmoreland saw the pacification effort as the overall priority that provided the context for the entire American intervention. He emphasized pacification in his orders, advised his Vietnamese counterparts to emphasize it in theirs, and encouraged American units to support civilian development any way they could. He placed advisors at the district level, where they worked on both village development and village security, and he supported the joint planning group that established pacification priorities so that military operations could then be planned to support them. He did what he could for civilian development given that USAID had the lead for that, and his operations certainly disrupted the large enemy units that threatened the pacification effort. In other words, he was strong on the first and third legs of the stool.

In contrast, he was quite weak on the second. He probably did place too much emphasis on the large operations, but he did understand the importance of village security. The problem was that he grossly underestimated how difficult this was for the unprofessional territorials who had been charged with the task. As it became apparent that they needed help, it was logical to re-mission the regulars, but that did not solve the problem of countless Vietnamese units that simply went through the motions of protecting the villages in their care. At the root was the failure of the Vietnamese chain of command to supervise, and though Westmoreland probably had some understanding of this, he does not seem to have done anything to fix it. We may, of course, criticize him for other reasons. Even though he understood the centrality of the pacification effort, he was poor at ensuring that his subordinates did as well, and he allowed some practices that worked against winning over the people such as free-fire zones and forced relocation.

General Westmoreland was the senior advisor in Vietnam, and it is during this period that we start to notice that the traits that made good generals did not necessarily make them good advisors. It

is intuitively obvious that at each level of command advisors should focus on helping their counterparts perform the core competencies of that level. For Vietnamese lieutenants and captains, those competencies included the planning and execution of guard operations, night ambushes, and patrols. For Vietnamese colonels and generals, though, the competencies included making high-level estimates of the situation, developing plans that might involve thousands or tens of thousands of soldiers, issuing orders to those in charge of thousands of troops, and most importantly, ensuring that those orders were followed. How was this theory working in practice? In Vietnam, the advisory effort required its junior advisors to improve the performance of their counterparts in their core competencies, but did not hold the American generals to the same standard with their counterparts. It would seem that Westmoreland would have used leverage to force improvement, but he and the other generals who were also advisors appear to have overlooked the problem or addressed it only feebly. When Westmoreland and his immediate subordinates could see that the Vietnamese command and control system was not working, instead of taking action to reform it, they developed workarounds by pressuring the junior advisors to ensure their counterparts were carrying out the Vietnamese orders. This was certainly not making them stand on their own, and given that American advisors would eventually leave, as Robert McNamara had pointed out, the wisdom of such an approach is questionable.

McNamara's October report suggests four questions that we will examine in the next few chapters. First, would CORDS solve the interagency unity of effort problem? Second, how would CORDS address the matter of winning hearts and minds? Third, would CORDS address the problem of corruption, and if so, as a system? Finally, most if not all of the Vietnamese problems that McNamara had highlighted could have been solved only if a functioning command and control system were in place. Would the new American structure and its strong executive somehow solve those Vietnamese problems?

## Chapter 5 CORDS and the Pacification Effort, May-December 1967

In October 1966, Robert McNamara had laid out for President Johnson his vision for a unified pacification structure under the leadership of a single, exceptionally strong executive. He hoped that this combination of extraordinary structure and leadership would finally synchronize the efforts of the various American agencies that were involved in pacification. That, however, was just the first step. To win the war, the pacification effort had to succeed, and that in turn meant that the US Mission in general and CORDS in particular would have to find the elusive “formula...for training and inspiring [the Vietnamese] into effective action.”<sup>299</sup> As a result of no single person being in charge—“split responsibility,” he said, was tantamount to “no responsibility”—there had been “too little hard pressure on the [Vietnamese government] to do its job.”<sup>300</sup> “Success,” he said, would be conditioned on not only the strong leader at the top and his ability to harmonize and coordinate the American agencies, but also “the extent to which the South Vietnamese can be shocked out of their present pattern of behavior.”<sup>301</sup> The organization that he had envisioned came into existence on 28 May 1967, and the strong leader he had wanted turned out to be Robert Komer. Time would tell whether Westmoreland and his new deputy for pacification could accomplish all that President Johnson and Secretary McNamara expected them to.

Westmoreland charged his new deputy with “the formulation and execution of all plans, policies and programs, military and civilian, [supporting] Revolutionary Development.”<sup>302</sup> According to Komer, Westmoreland was enthusiastic about the new structure and gave him the “high degree of autonomy” that he needed. Although McNamara had presented the idea to President Johnson, Komer had conceived the idea in August, and for the next six months worked out the details with the help of John Vann in Vietnam and Robert Montague on his staff at the White House. He would later refer to himself as the “‘father’ of CORDS.”<sup>303</sup> The President appointed him to ambassadorial rank equivalent to a four-star general, and as MACV’s Deputy for CORDS, or DepCORDS, he could issue

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<sup>299</sup> McNamara, “Actions Recommended,” p. 728.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid, p. 732.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid, pp. 732-3.

<sup>302</sup> HQ, MACV, “Organizations and Functions” (28 May 1967), VCATTU, p. 1.

<sup>303</sup> R.W. Komer, letter to Colonel R.I. Channon (20 June 1974), VCATTU, pp. 2-3.

orders to generals and civilians alike. Soldiers and civilians working on pacification were now integrated from Saigon down to the district capitals. Some civilians refused to join the new organization, and Komer fired a general who would not accept his plan for civilians in supervisory positions to rate military subordinates, and vice versa.<sup>304</sup>

Komer's personal staff was small, but the new CORDS staff section, which Wade Lathram headed, was enormous. Knowlton, whom Komer described as "one of [Westmoreland's] brightest young generals," was Lathram's deputy.<sup>305</sup> Lathram was troubled by Komer's "blowtorch" style of "scream[ing]...at the nearest subordinate" and tried to "buffer" the impact.<sup>306</sup> The workload was heavy, with half of MACV's paperwork coming through the new office because it dealt with pacification; the staff routinely worked fourteen to sixteen hours a day.<sup>307</sup> There were sections corresponding to each of the Vietnamese pacification programs, and CORDS interacted with the Vietnamese ministries who managed them, but mostly with the Ministry of Revolutionary Development. General Thang, whom Komer described as "energetic, able, [and] dynamic," was responsible for coordinating rural pacification activities, and he faced the same kind of opposition from the other ministries that the embassy had faced from American agencies before CORDS. They were less than enthusiastic about his attempts to orchestrate their work, said Komer, and "just sat back" if they did not get their way.<sup>308</sup>

Komer had been working on pacification at the White House for over a year by the time CORDS was created, and had an agenda from day one. He set up a school in Vietnam to supplement the pre-deployment training advisors were getting, and brought in additional civilians to flesh out province teams and join the district teams.<sup>309</sup> In one sense, he said, CORDS was "the sum of the programs we took over." Those included New Life Development, the RD Cadre, Chieu Hoi, psychological operations, public safety, and refugee support, but he wanted field advisors to look at

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<sup>304</sup> McManaway, p. 14; Komer, *New Model*, p. 61.

<sup>305</sup> Komer, *New Model*, pp. 44, 63, 190-1.

<sup>306</sup> Lathram, p. 15.

<sup>307</sup> Lathram, pp. 11, 14.

<sup>308</sup> Komer, *New Model*, pp. 137-8.

<sup>309</sup> Komer to Channon, p. 2.

their duties holistically—not just running the program they were directly responsible for, but advising on how all the pieces fit together.<sup>310</sup>

This holistic approach tied in with the question of how to measure pacification. Before 1967 the US had relied on Vietnamese assessments, with military advisors in each province “cross-check[ing] the information whenever possible.” In 1966, Komer and McNamara had concluded that this was “unsatisfactory” because it measured only security and government “presence,” looked at provinces in the aggregate, and was “out of step” with General Thang’s “new...system for classifying hamlets.” That it took this long for the US to come up with its own system is surprising, given its distrust of Vietnamese reports and awareness that security and development were interdependent. The delay is probably explained by the fact that before CORDS different agencies would have been responsible for the various measurements that went into holistic assessments. To get better fidelity at the lowest levels and make a more holistic assessment, the US implemented its Hamlet Evaluation System (HES) in 1967.<sup>311</sup>

Komer used the HES to assess whether the sum of the various components were actually advancing pacification in each district. Without such a tool, he said, CORDS could not have managed “the incredibly fragmented set of local efforts down at the rural cutting edge,” and because President Thieu viewed them as an American “report card” on Vietnamese performance they “had bite.” As a campaign started in late 1968, Thieu informed his subordinates that it “would be ‘scored’ by the American[s] to ensure that it really took place.”<sup>312</sup> That, of course, is a telling comment.

With the exception of those clearly under Communist control, the HES used six broad categories to examine the state of pacification in every hamlet: guerrilla activity, the shadow government, territorial security, economic development, local governance, and public services.<sup>313</sup> The scores enabled Komer to engage in centralized planning, such as assessing when villages were ready for elections and when districts needed more attention from the advisory effort. Some had argued for decentralization, since every province was different. Komer’s logical counter was that because the

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<sup>310</sup> Komer, *New Model*, pp. 63, 135.

<sup>311</sup> Brigham, pp. 1-2.

<sup>312</sup> Komer to Channon, p. 2.

<sup>313</sup> Brigham, pp. 4-5.

Communists used a centralized approach, moving resources to take advantage of government weaknesses, the pacification effort had to do the same or risk piecemeal defeat.<sup>314</sup>

Komer viewed the war as a struggle between freedom and totalitarianism, but also between different economic systems, and therefore emphasized “rural economic revival, opening and repairing roads and waterways, land reform, and the like.”<sup>315</sup> Land reform, for example, was about social justice but also economic in nature: Farmers who owned their land were more likely to squeeze as much as possible from it so they could sell their surplus to the cities, and roads and waterways were necessary for moving that surplus to market. As USAID had done, CORDS emphasized crop and livestock productivity, importing high-yield rice from the Philippines and more productive vegetables from Taiwan, introducing better pig stock, and providing the latest techniques on feed production.<sup>316</sup> In a sense, CORDS was a continuation of earlier programs, but Komer liked to emphasize that it was a “new model” that had replaced the “earlier abortive efforts.”<sup>317</sup> The structural change was most noticeable, but in what other ways was it new? There were various differences, but some of the most significant were the “centralized systematic planning and follow-through”; the “scale [that was] commensurate with the need”; the emphasis on protecting the villages; the focus on taking security to the villagers rather than villagers to security; the substantial allocation of resources to pacification; and the attempt to measure effectiveness rather than activity.<sup>318</sup>

Before CORDS, American corps commanders had supported pacification but not been responsible for it. Under the new organization, those three-star generals not only oversaw American combat operations in their areas, but were responsible for all pacification activities as well. Each now had a CORDS civilian deputy with rank equivalent to a two-star general who ran the day-to-day operations. The regional CORDS deputies could be retired soldiers like John Vann in III Corps, or career USAID staffers, but most, like Bernie Koren in I Corps and Sterling Cottrell in IV Corps, were senior diplomats. They worked for the general, but took most of their instructions from Komer. Komer considered Vann “far ahead of the rest on the basis of experience, leadership [and] drive,” and

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<sup>314</sup> Colby, p. 264; Komer, *New Model*, p. 19.

<sup>315</sup> Komer to Channon, p. 1.

<sup>316</sup> V.C. Johnson, interviewed by W.H. North, ADST (1994), pp. 17-8.

<sup>317</sup> Komer to Channon, p. 1.

<sup>318</sup> Komer, pp. 236, 247.

Vann was highly regarded by peers and subordinates as well. Charles Whitehouse, who would arrive in 1968, considered him “the best” of the lot, and John Dean, another DepCORDS who would serve with him later, recalled his “strong convictions about our role in Vietnam,” possibly referring to the ideas Vann had expressed in his 1965 “Harnessing the Revolution” memorandum.<sup>319</sup>

These regional DepCORDS managed very large organizations with multiple programs and advisors at the province, district, and unit levels, and were advisors in their own right. Whitehouse, who would serve in III Corps, managed nine provinces and 1,800 people, and years later still recalled the challenge and excitement.<sup>320</sup> Cottrell supervised over 1,900, including 978 Vietnamese and 178 nationals from other countries. He grew enthusiastic about his work, writing a friend at the State Department that CORDS was “the finest crucible I know for training FSOs,” and that it was unfortunate that only two of his sixteen provinces had them in the top position. Young diplomats should be “begging for these jobs,” he said.<sup>321</sup> Whitehouse, too, thought FSOs gained much from the experience, because CORDS “was so much more challenging than working in an embassy.”<sup>322</sup> Cottrell told his friend that all but the most callous Americans soon found themselves emotionally committed to their work regardless of how they had viewed the war before arriving. He recounted the story of a fifteen-year-old girl who had fled her village after guerrillas forced her to watch them disembowel her parents as a lesson to others.<sup>323</sup> The depravity stirred Cottrell’s commitment to the cause, but the story also illustrates the importance of security.

### **Securing the Villages**

How did the advent of CORDS affect village security? In 1966, Westmoreland had stressed that American troops were in Vietnam to shield the pacification effort, and that everything was secondary to winning the people over to the government. There were multiple factors that went into winning hearts and minds, but the Americans now understood that development was impossible without security. With CORDS, Westmoreland’s strategic perspective broadened to incorporate the

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<sup>319</sup> Koren, pp. 27-39; S. Cottrell, letter to John Steeves (17 July 1967), VCATTU; Komer to Channon, p. 2; Komer, *New Model*, pp. 211-2; C.S. Whitehouse, interviewed by R. Ernst, ADST (1989), p. 1; J.G. Dean, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (2000), p. 87; Vann.

<sup>320</sup> Whitehouse, p. 1.

<sup>321</sup> Cottrell, p. 2.

<sup>322</sup> Whitehouse, p. 2.

<sup>323</sup> Cottrell, p. 3.

non-military elements of power, but the basic strategy remained the same. In his October guidance for the six months that would start in November 1967, he emphasized that the pacification effort was still the context for everything else, and that “the key to [his] concept [was] security for the pacification program.” He said that MACV would “expand and accelerate” that, with “containment forces” keeping the enemy from entering the South and “offensive” forces neutralizing those already there. Together those would provide pacification’s “protective shield.”<sup>324</sup>

Given such words, it is fascinating that the historiography is as weak on this period as it is on the rest of the pacification story. Though the creation of CORDS was one of the defining moments of the war, Stanley Karnow made no mention of it and barely mentioned pacification in 1967. Although Karnow had at least one conversation with Komer, it is not clear that he understood Komer’s role or aim.<sup>325</sup> George Herring addressed pacification but not CORDS, and seems to have missed the big picture. He began his coverage of this period by advancing the commonly held notion that the US had “assumed that the mere application of its vast military power would be sufficient,” which is simply not the case.<sup>326</sup> That Westmoreland saw the “vast” American military machine and its operations within the context of pacification has been lost on most historians.

When CORDS was less than six months old, Westmoreland announced that the situation was right for “an all-out offensive on all fronts”—“political, military, economic, and psychological.” Pacified areas were expanding, he said, because of the increasing effectiveness of the territorials and RD Cadre, the interdiction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and the resistance the Viet Cong were encountering as they attempted to use villages for manpower and supplies. Having studied the problem at the White House, Komer made the territorial army a top priority as soon as CORDS was activated, and immediately began increasing its size, arming it with the best American weapons, and improving training and leadership. He saw advisors as the lynchpin of his program, and started

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<sup>324</sup> Military History Branch, *Command History, 1967, Vol. I*, pp. 343-4.

<sup>325</sup> See Karnow, p. 442, on the conversation he had with Komer, and pp. 439, 502, 507 for Karnow’s ever so brief discussion of pacification and Komer’s role in it.

<sup>326</sup> Herring, *Longest War*, p. 144. Herring muddles his own argument a few pages later, referring to Westmoreland’s view that “once the enemy’s regulars had been destroyed...the South Vietnamese government would be able to stabilize its position and pacify the countryside” (p. 150).

deploying them to the territorial units that were tasked with protecting the villages. Some improvements came quickly, but most would take time.

Before CORDS the Vietnamese regular army had been the US priority. The logic was that the regulars were to take on the larger enemy formations, and that even poorly trained and equipped territorials could handle ragtag guerrillas. Properly executed defenses, patrols, and night ambushes were the key to local security, but the territorials executed them poorly, if at all.<sup>327</sup> As Captain Bing West had observed in 1966, they tended to lock themselves in their outposts at night, leaving nearby villages to fend for themselves.<sup>328</sup>

There were too few advisors to cover the countless territorial units, so they rotated from unit to unit, and were called mobile advisory teams, or just MATs. They would train their units by day and accompany them on ambushes at night.<sup>329</sup> However, being “mobile” meant that at any given point in time only one or two units in an area were being helped; it could take several years to cover all of the territorial forces this way. Depending on how receptive unit commanders were, the MATs could have a positive influence. Sterling Cottrell visited a MAT where a newly trained unit had just ambushed an eight-man VC squad, killing all.<sup>330</sup> Despite such anecdotal evidence, though, this was not the norm even under CORDS. Colonel Edward Metzner, who started working for Cottrell in mid-1967, criticized his territorials for collusion, false reporting, mistreatment of civilians, and overall ineffectiveness. Though he saw improvement over time, he did not think it would stick, which suggests that it was dependent on the presence of the advisors.<sup>331</sup>

Why was it so hard for territorials to keep small bands of guerrillas out of villages at night? It would not seem to be a difficult task, but when the government abandoned the policy of corralling villagers into “strategic hamlets” and left them dispersed, the only way to stop the guerrillas was through nighttime ambush patrols. The VC never hesitated to conduct their own night ambushes; a favorite tactic was to attack a hamlet and ambush the unit that came to the rescue. Government troops,

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<sup>327</sup> See for example, C. Lloyd, interviewed by R.B. Verrone, VCATTU (2003), pp. 42-3.

<sup>328</sup> See for example West, pp. 14-5.

<sup>329</sup> See for example D. Donovan, *Once a Warrior King* (New York, 1985), pp. 6, 128, 189.

<sup>330</sup> Cottrell, p. 6.

<sup>331</sup> Metzner, *More Than a Soldier's War*, pp. 33-4, 36-7.

in contrast, avoided operating at night when they could or conducted too few or ineffective ambushes, and as a result they ceded the night to the Communists.

Like American units, the purpose of the Vietnamese regulars was to shield the pacification effort. In IV Corps there were few Americans, but Cottrell thought the Vietnamese divisions were “gradually but surely wearing down the Viet Cong battalions,” several of whom had “been mauled so badly they have been disbanded, with the survivors joining other...units.” Government forces were capturing guerrillas as young as thirteen, which reflected the recruiting difficulties. “This is not the old Viet Cong,” said Cottrell. These boys “frequently break ranks, run, and drop their weapons.”<sup>332</sup>

Metzner, with a more experienced eye, had a different perspective on this as well. He thought the Vietnamese regulars in his province were not doing enough to disrupt the large units that threatened his villages. To encourage them to come into areas where the Communists were hiding, he proposed having the territorials help them; regulars would sweep through suspected enemy areas as territorials lay in wait hoping to ambush them as they fled. As a further enticement, Metzner promised to have advisors along, which would make combat aviation assets available, and the division commander and province chief agreed to the proposal. Even if the attacking units did not make enemy contact on the ensuing operations, they kept the Communist forces on the move, and they were therefore less able to interfere with the villages.<sup>333</sup>

Although Metzner rightly considered this a success, his account reveals problems with both the Vietnamese chain of command and the advisory effort that was supposed to be improving it. One was that it was normal for the province chief to receive fictitious reports from his subordinates. He was therefore delighted that Metzner would now deploy advisors with his units, because his own men, knowing that their reports would be compared with those of the Americans, would be less inclined to “disregard or violate orders [or] lie about their locations or actions.” From the standpoint of the advisory effort, though, it is troubling that the province chief would fatalistically view a disciplined reporting system as unattainable without American help, and it is also troubling that Metzner was willing to allow his men to become an adjunct to his command and control system

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<sup>332</sup> Cottrell, p. 5.

<sup>333</sup> Metzner, *More Than a Soldier's War*, pp. 33-5.

without getting at the root of the problem. Indeed, Metzner, writing in his memoirs almost three decades later, did not raise an issue with any of this. A second problem, though, is even more troubling: The province chief also sent false reports higher. Metzner rightly faulted the corps commander for accepting them at face value, but not his counterpart for submitting them in the first place. It seems that advisors were less comfortable confronting their own counterparts, with whom they had to work on a daily basis, than noticing the faults of officials who were higher in the system. It is noteworthy that after the war Metzner would consider this particular officer one of the two most professional he had worked with during his seven years there.<sup>334</sup>

A third was Metzner's observation that when his advisors were on the operations the mistreatment of civilians, which was a chronic problem throughout the war, decreased. That the mere presence of Americans could shame Vietnamese soldiers into behaving differently than they did when only their own officers were present is another indicator of problems with supervision. Finally, Metzner was convinced that even when his territorials were in the field, they tried to avoid enemy contact.<sup>335</sup> Ultimately, only the Vietnamese corps commander could have corrected such problems. In Metzner's case, either Sterling Cottrell or the general that he worked for would have been the ones to bring these issues to the attention of their counterparts in the corps headquarters. However, the evidence suggests that those at the top were not addressing such matters, except in the general sense of noting that the Vietnamese had leadership problems up and down the ranks. The most senior advisors were not emphasizing the things that might have made the greatest impact.

The essence of advising was seeking to change the counterproductive behavior of one's counterpart. The challenge was persuading the counterpart to make the appropriate change. The advisory effort was constrained by several factors. One was that the lower a Vietnamese official was in the chain of command, the less impact his advisor could have on the overall system. He could generally affect only his counterpart and those working for him. A second was that an advisor's suggestion might be at variance with the desires of the counterpart or his supervisors. Third, there was a general resistance to change, regardless of the cost of continuing the status quo. Metzner eventually

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<sup>334</sup> Ibid, pp. 35, 192.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid, pp. 33, 40.

concluded “that the Vietnamese really didn’t want to change much of anything, because most practices were connected in some manner to their traditions.” A Vietnamese officer did not normally reject his advisor’s recommendation. He usually smiled and concurred with its merit, but then did little to carry it out. Metzner concluded that “beneath [this] show of agreeing and understanding, the Vietnamese resented our mission to bring about change,” and that “if all the advisors suddenly disappeared, most of the changes we had brought certainly would disappear with us.”<sup>336</sup> Given that one of America’s objectives was to prepare the Vietnamese to stand on their own, this was profound.

This suggests that the most important advisors were not those down in the provinces, districts, and villages, but rather at the top, but those at the top seem to have entirely overlooked this point. They were the most important because they advised the officials whose actions could affect the entire army. The fastest way for a person in any culture to embrace change is when his boss holds him accountable for doing so. In Vietnam, the low-level insistence on change from American advisors rather than Vietnamese supervisors could not possibly have created the near-term yet sustainable change that the US hoped for. However, this is not to say that the Vietnamese as a people were against change; indeed, the Communist agenda was all about change, and at one time or another it resonated with many.

In addition to the question of where the most important change should originate, a related one was what tools the advisors had to bring it about. Komer defined “leverage” as “the power our indispensable contributions gave us” to “press the Vietnamese hard enough and effectively enough to do what needed to be done.”<sup>337</sup> The advisors at the bottom felt the pressure to advance pacification in their areas, and would therefore search for ways to get their counterparts to do their jobs. The needed change was often a simple but recurring task such as the conduct of the night ambushes. One of the first things an American lieutenant learns is “I am responsible for everything that my unit does or fails to do,” and that applies throughout his career. The concept is universal, yet in most Vietnamese units, whether regular or territorial, it was never applied.

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid, pp. 36-7.

<sup>337</sup> Komer, *New Model*, p. 144.

One of the dilemmas of the most senior advisors was that they had both managerial and advisory duties. Most seem to have focused on the management, delegating the burden of influencing the Vietnamese to their subordinates. When one comprehends that an advisor makes suggestions to his counterpart, but that only that his supervisor can direct his actions, the way an advisory program should work becomes clear: An advisor who sees a problem needing attention should discuss it with his counterpart. If that resolves the matter, no further action is necessary. If not, then the unit advisor should report it up through the advisory chain of command. This routinely happened in Vietnam, but rarely accomplished anything. When a high-level advisor took a low-level problem to his counterpart, the Vietnamese general would typically issue an order to address it and then consider himself absolved from further responsibility. By implication, the order was mostly a gesture to please the Americans and not to be taken seriously. Recognizing this, the Americans looked for a workaround.

That workaround generally consisted of circumventing the Vietnamese chain of command by directing low-level advisors to “go get your counterparts to do such and such.” Larry Colbert, an FSO who arrived in Vietnam in late 1967 to work on “social welfare issues,” explained it this way: He would receive instructions from CORDS to go tell his counterpart “to do ‘X’.” As politely as he could, he would pass that on to his counterpart, who would respond with “Well Larry you know...I would agree with you ‘X’ would be a really good thing to do but my government [is] telling me to do ‘Y’.” “If you can get your people in Saigon to convince my people to tell me to do ‘X’,” he continued, “I will do ‘X’ but as long as my people are telling me to do ‘Y’ I will do ‘Y’.” When Colbert would then suggest to the people above him that they work with their own counterparts to resolve the dilemma at the higher level, as the Vietnamese officer had suggested, they would indignantly respond, “Don’t tell us how to do our job.” They sent him to try again, but still to no avail. “They couldn’t get the [Vietnamese] in Saigon to do something,” said Colbert, so “they are telling me to get the people who work for Saigon to do it.”<sup>338</sup> The practice was understandably frustrating for the advisors at the bottom, but seems to have been common.

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<sup>338</sup> L. Colbert, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (2006), pp. 32, 37-8.

## Civil Operations Under CORDS

The civilian development programs under CORDS were essentially the same as before, and several resembled those USAID and even the Peace Corps ran in developing countries around the world. In Vietnam, though, they were conducted at the lowest level of government under wartime conditions as a form of non-lethal targeting in the struggle against the insurgents.<sup>339</sup> Cottrell wrote that the sole purpose of the American development system that started in Washington was to support the development effort down in the villages and hamlets. It was there “in the mud” that the war would be “won or lost,” he said, and it consisted of “small foot bridges across the canals so that villagers can get their pigs to market,” “schoolhouses [made with American] cement and rebar,” “a tin roof over a 3-room shack, with a Medical Advisor, dispensary and a few cots,” and “a pair of pigs in a cement sty designed by the Agriculture Advisor to keep them alive until they have piglets, which are [then] distributed to other villagers.”<sup>340</sup>

In addition to the FSOs and retired army officers, the civilians working for CORDS included former members of the Peace Corps, professors, doctors, and local government officials. They had gone to Vietnam “eager to accomplish something,” said Dr. Beale Rogers, a New York surgeon who had volunteered for a short, unpaid assignment in Vietnam in 1967. He was incredulous at what he found. The American civilians he met were giving it their all, yet were frustrated, angry, and felt “thwarted by the system.” An education advisor said that the textbooks he had given to a school remained in storage because the principal was afraid that if students lost them he would be liable. An energy advisor explained that a new power plant was placed into operation only if a dignitary visited, because it had come without repair parts or trained operators.<sup>341</sup>

Rogers himself was soon in awe at how bad the medical system was. His hospital needed morphine but received aspirin, needed intravenous solutions but received “vascular sutures that were difficult to come by” at home, and randomly received a shipment of mattresses that could not be used. Peacetime efficiency is impossible under wartime conditions, but corruption played a role in some of

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<sup>339</sup> See e.g. F. Pavich, interviewed by W.H. North, ADST (1998) , pp. 6-8; D. Rybak, interviewed by F. Pavich, ADST (1998), p. 9.

<sup>340</sup> Cottrell, p. 3.

<sup>341</sup> B. Rogers, “Beale Rogers,” in Harry Maurer, ed., *Strange Ground: Americans in Vietnam* (New York, 1989), p. 322.

the chaos. “If I didn't have any antibiotics in the hospital,” he said, “I could often give a patient a prescription and he could go down to the pharmacy in town and get it filled.” He felt sure that the hospital’s chief was stealing the drugs and giving them to the pharmacy, which was owned by his brother-in-law. Rogers knew “there were great mounds of medical supplies” in Saigon, but “something happened between there and the provinces.” He left Vietnam disgusted by the “despicable” methods of the Communists, but also by the “absolutely corrupt” practices of the government, which the Americans were “patsies” for tolerating.<sup>342</sup>

Although aid to refugees was not really development work, it too was in Komer’s portfolio. The peasants often had no warning when forced to flee their homes, which some did to escape the Communists and others to avoid American bombs and artillery. Colonel Metzner was chagrined to discover that the US “had caused a disproportionate share of the...recently dislocated people” in his province.<sup>343</sup> Regardless of how they came to be refugees, they needed food, water, and shelter, and most were traumatized and in despair. After a stint in the Peace Corps, David Rybak had joined USAID in 1966, and would spend the next six years in Vietnam with the humanitarian assistance mission. In 1967, he worked with refugees who “were living on the streets” of Saigon, coordinating water, shelter, and sanitation, but also trying to help them regain a sense of hope.<sup>344</sup>

Refugee work was psychologically oppressive and often dangerous. Alan Lavelle, a retired aviator who was John Vann’s refugee director on two different occasions, recalled that “Vann wanted a guy who’d immediately go where you might get your ass shot off and come back and tell me what the problem is and then solve it.” Vann wanted a man of action, not someone who would sit in an office and study problems. Lavelle soon discovered what that meant. He found himself in places where roads were mined, snipers were looking for targets, and ground attacks were common, and he sometimes suspected that he was coordinating matters with Viet Cong officials. After a week on the job, he decided that Vann’s expectations were “insane,” and wondered if he had made terrible mistake. He stuck with it, and though he eventually got used to the danger he also became aware of things that bothered him. He marveled that the US “spent on refugees in one year...what they spent

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<sup>342</sup> Ibid, pp. 324, 329.

<sup>343</sup> Metzner, *More Than a Soldier's War*, p. 47; see also Rybak, p. 10.

<sup>344</sup> Rybak, p. 10.

on the shooting war for half a day,” and seeing “the rich Vietnamese getting richer and the poor getting poorer” troubled him. After the war, he would lament that the US had “spent a lot of money and fifty-thousand Americans got killed and God knows how many North Vietnamese and VC,” and “their whole society was torn asunder,” yet there was nothing to show for it.<sup>345</sup>

In 1967, Congress began to take a keen interest in the plight of the refugees, and Lavelle recalled visits from Senator Kennedy and his assistants to investigate alleged mismanagement.<sup>346</sup> As with other programs, though, Americans provided resources and advice, but the Vietnamese actually ran it, and it was therefore plagued by the two factors that seemed to plague everything else—corruption and a lack of supervision. In other words, it was the Vietnamese who were mismanaging the program, rather than the Americans, but instead of demanding that the Vietnamese run the program professionally, the Americans looked for ways to work around the Vietnamese failings. As with other problems, they sensed that the solution involved putting more Americans into the system, so several of the FSOs who were finishing their pre-deployment training in Washington were denied normal leave and rushed to Vietnam for refugee work.<sup>347</sup>

Metzner saw that “the squalid living conditions prevalent in the [refugee] camps” were caused in part by the “misappropriation of funds and supplies.” The US prodded the refugees to return to their homes at the earliest opportunity, and to facilitate that helped with the reconstruction of houses, schools, and government offices. Corruption was present there, too. Rybak recalled that once an advisor had coordinated “cement or whatever else might be needed,” it was inevitable that some would “disappear into the hands of the officials,” though there was normally “enough...left to do the project.”<sup>348</sup> The historians have not overlooked the fact that practically every government endeavor was infected with this deep-seated corruption. Karnow and Sheehan correctly described it as a “system,” and Herring referred to its “incredible scale,” and correctly asserted that it “undermined the U.S. aid program and severely handicapped American efforts to stabilize the economy of South

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<sup>345</sup> A. Lavelle, interviewed by L. Calkins, VCATTU (2004), pp. 73, 162-4.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid, pp. 91, 101-3. See also B. McKerrow, “Al Lavelle, John Vann and Lamar McFadden ‘Mac’ Prosser, South Vietnam Icons/Iconoclasts,” in *Bob McKerrow—Wayfarer: Mountains, Travel, Humanitarian Work and Opinion* (15 February 2010).

<sup>347</sup> Colbert, p. 31; Rybak, p. 10.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

Vietnam.”<sup>349</sup> Michael Maclear and Mark Lawrence referenced it, though neither described it as systemic.<sup>350</sup> The historiography does not explain how the system worked, though, or what CORDS did to address it and how that worked.

Samuel Thomsen, the American consul in Hué, said that “from the time you get any position of authority at all, you have to look for...other sources of income,” and there were “plenty of examples...as to how you do it.” “At some point,” he said, “you...have a bigger house [and] start using [stolen] cement to add on a bedroom, and...soon you're gone.”<sup>351</sup> While advisors generally recognized the existence of corruption, only those at higher levels were in a position to see its extent and impact, and they failed on both counts. Frank Pavich, a low-level advisor, later concluded that “corruption [was in Asia’s] socio-economic fabric,” and he was no doubt right. After the war his Vietnamese wife often returned home, where she observed that the Communists were at least as corrupt as the government they replaced.<sup>352</sup> Certainly, then, some of the practices that Americans viewed as corruption had their roots in cultural norms, but as we will see, most went far beyond what was culturally acceptable.

Vladimir Lehovich served as one of USAID’s first provincial representatives from 1963 through 1965, and then worked at the embassy’s Provincial Reporting Unit until 1966. Like Thomsen, he recalled that corruption was “just about everywhere,” but because he saw nuance, he divided what Americans typically called corruption into two categories: the culturally acceptable, which was understandable, and the culturally unacceptable, which was generally detrimental to the mission. The low-paid Vietnamese army officer with a large family who was “trying to augment his income by alternative means” was in the first category, Lehovich thought, and because what might be questionable acts to Americans were “actually necessary to survive,” society viewed an official not availing himself of such opportunities as failing his family. Such opportunism was “expected,” “low-

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<sup>349</sup> Karnow, pp. 440-3; 660-1; Sheehan, pp. 514-7, 549-52; Herring, *Longest War*, p. 162.

<sup>350</sup> Maclear, pp. 142-50; M.A. Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 60-1, 134, 149, 165.

<sup>351</sup> Thomsen, p. 49.

<sup>352</sup> Pavich, p. 10; on the rampant corruption following the Communist victory, see also Karnow, pp. 31, 37.

level,” “moderate,” and “built in,” by which Lehovich probably meant the district chief taking a commission on American aid projects that Americans often did factor in.<sup>353</sup>

On the other hand, Lehovich considered the theft of cement and other construction materials unacceptable. When he discovered that a school had been so “shoddily built” that a concrete floor “broke through” when he tapped on it with a hammer, he insisted that it be rebuilt, and when he learned that a USAID truck was being used by two of his Vietnamese workers to steal aid supplies, he reported them and “they were...arrested.” The Vietnamese authorities then followed up in a perfunctory manner, sending one who was a soldier to a combat assignment rather than prosecuting him.<sup>354</sup> Getting caught by the Americans seems to have been more of a sin than the crime itself, because some type of face-saving action was then required.

It should have been obvious to the advisors at the top that what looked like the discrete actions of individuals was actually part of a system that started at their level, the unwritten rules of which were set in Saigon and by the corps commanders but understood throughout the country. If a province or district chief would not participate in the system, he could be replaced by someone who would, so officers often had little option.<sup>355</sup> Lehovich thought the most serious corruption was well above the province level, and from his time on the Provincial Reporting Unit he knew of illegal taxation schemes “on livestock and rice” that stretched across entire corps areas.<sup>356</sup> Thomas Dunlop, an FSO who worked for the embassy as a “reporting officer,” recalled that his reporting included material on “some of President Thieu’s principal supporters,” and in particular the IV Corps commander, Dang Van Quang, whom Dunlop described as “the ‘overlord’ of the Mekong River Delta area” and “corrupt down to his toenails.”<sup>357</sup>

The story of Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, the commander of I Corps, shows how the system worked. “When Thieu became president,” said Charles Cross, the CORDS director in I Corps, “Lam rose from a lieutenant colonel to a lieutenant general almost overnight.” Still in his thirties in the summer of 1966, he was advanced from division to corps commander, while General Nguyen Van

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<sup>353</sup> Lehovich, p. 31.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid, pp. 31-2.

<sup>355</sup> See e.g. Sheehan, p. 549.

<sup>356</sup> Lehovich, p. 31.

<sup>357</sup> T.P.H. Dunlop, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (1996), p. 108.

Toan took his place commanding 2nd Division.<sup>358</sup> Lam's interest lay in the financial opportunities that his office provided rather than his duties.

That Lam was corrupt was apparent to senior Americans, but there was disagreement over the extent of the corruption and what to do about it. According to James Gormley, an advisor in Da Nang from 1968-70, Lam had an "unsavory reputation," and was "a political general" and "a businessman more than anything else." "No one took him seriously as a military man," said Gormley, except General Herman Nickerson, the corps senior advisor who also commanded American troops in I Corps.<sup>359</sup> Terry McNamara, the consul in Da Nang from 1969 to 1971, regarded Lam as a "scoundrel" and "truly dreadful man."<sup>360</sup> Thomsen considered Lam "absolutely without any restraint" in using his office for personal gain. Lam would remain in command of I Corps until 1972, and when Thomsen was reassigned to Laos from 1969-70, he continued to hear about Lam's corruption "all that distance away."<sup>361</sup>

How were advisors to deal with such corruption? Gormley could remember no instructions. "Obviously we were to report anything that we saw that was untoward." He came up with his own approach: "working with the...officials who you thought were honest until proven otherwise and cutting off those you didn't." Most advisors—especially those at the top—seem to have been less confrontational. Gormley recalled that Nickerson would not permit his subordinates to criticize Lam.<sup>362</sup>

Americans had trouble assessing their counterparts' effectiveness. In 1968, advisors had advocated General Toan's removal because of "incompetence and his involvement in smuggling activities," but in 1969, his division "had the highest ratings in leadership and performance." In 1971, Toan was still in command of the division, and his counterpart regarded him as "a good combat leader [despite the fact that he] continued to get himself into personal difficulties."<sup>363</sup> If he were, in fact, a "good combat leader," it was only when compared to other generals who were worse. As Stanley

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<sup>358</sup> C.T. Cross, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (1997), p. 66; see also Thomsen, pp. 49, 86-7.

<sup>359</sup> J.J. Gormley, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (1992), p. 13.

<sup>360</sup> F.T. McNamara, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (1993), p. 89.

<sup>361</sup> Thomsen, p. 49.

<sup>362</sup> Gormley, pp. 13-4.

<sup>363</sup> Clarke, pp. 365, 476.

Karnow noted, Toan's division "devoted more of its time and energy to harvesting [cinnamon] than to fighting the enemy." Indeed, said Karnow, Toan "had spent most of the war reaping fat profits from the cinnamon trade."<sup>364</sup> Terry McNamara recalled that General Toan had been implicated in the "illegal exporting of cinnamon," and had also been "accused of raping a 12-year-old."<sup>365</sup>

McNamara had an argument with General Nickerson about Lam and Toan. Visiting Nickerson in his office, McNamara told him that Toan's conduct had become so egregious that even the Vietnamese "were trying to remove him," and that this was "a very good thing" since it "was the first time [the] government had moved against a general for corruption." Nickerson, visibly angry, said, "I'll bet you'd like to get rid of General Lam, too." "You're right," said McNamara. "He's a crook, ...he and his wife are at the center of the drug trafficking in I Corps, and [are] selling drugs to your men." At that, "Nickerson [got so mad that he] almost came across the desk after me," recalled McNamara.<sup>366</sup>

Was Nickerson protecting Toan and Lam? MACV emphasized the importance of getting along with one's counterpart, and McNamara thought that Nickerson, like "most American officers," wanted to be recognized as doing that. He thought it went even deeper than that, though, and speculated that Nickerson had "a tacit agreement with Lam [to shield him] in return for the latter's acquiescence to any kind of military operation that Nickerson proposed." That "was worth a great deal to him in career terms, because it made him look as though he...could deal with an ally and get him to do the things that he wanted him to do," when other American generals had counterparts who "who weren't quite as cooperative." McNamara, then, thought, Nickerson's light touch was motivated by ambition, and that Lam, for his part, was motivated by the assumption that if he let Nickerson do as he pleased, Nickerson would leave "his and his wife's business interests alone".<sup>367</sup> Actually, Nickerson retired when his tour ended, so it is unlikely that he had career goals in mind. More likely, Nickerson viewed Lam's corruption as much less important than his own freedom of action, and McNamara's interference as meddling by a well-intended but naïve diplomat who could not possibly

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<sup>364</sup> Karnow, pp. 442, 641.

<sup>365</sup> F.T. McNamara, p. 92.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid, p. 92.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid, pp. 92-3.

understand what was truly important. If so, Nickerson's approach would be another example of senior American advisors choosing short-term expediency over the long-term development of a professional Vietnamese army.

Charles Cross, the I Corps pacification director from 1968-69, left just before General Nickerson arrived, but in a 1997 interview downplayed Lam's culpability with the puzzling comment that Lam was better than one of his subordinates (General Toan) and not as good as the other (General Truong). Indeed, by all accounts, Truong was both brilliant and scrupulously honest, and even the Vietnamese held his abilities in such high esteem that he may have been the exception to the rule that officers could not opt out of the system. Cross, who viewed Lam as not that bad since Toan was worse, saw the situation in relative terms. "There was no indication that Lam was stealing warehouses full of stuff," he said; "his misdemeanors were pettier than that." Actually, the evidence suggests that they were not all "misdemeanors." Cross's biggest problem with Lam was that "he was [slow] to remove commanders and province chiefs who were known to be on the take," but it is almost certain that Lam was slow to relieve them because he was at the apex of the scheme that profited from their patronage. That Cross, after nearly thirty years to reflect, still did not recognize the gravity of the situation, probably reflects the tendency of American civilian and military officials to recognize to some degree the power of cultural norms and to realize that there was a certain amount of mutual incomprehension on many issues, and especially this one.<sup>368</sup> As we will see below, though, there is ample evidence to suggest that some Vietnamese elites saw their system as violating universal standards of proper conduct.

When Cross completed his two-year tour, he did feel that despite Lam's resistance there had been great progress in cleaning house. "We had a lot of information about some of the province chiefs," he said, and "all had been replaced by the time I left Vietnam."<sup>369</sup> Since Lam would not take action, the advisors went around him. Clay McManaway, who was working for Komer in Saigon, recalled that Komer had implemented a program of "special [American] reporting on province chiefs." Once the evidence had been collected, Komer would have McManaway "tell the prime

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<sup>368</sup> Cross, ADST, p. 67.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

minister who he wanted fired. We would go over with lists of province chiefs that we wanted changed and they would be changed.”<sup>370</sup>

McManaway’s account, though, sheds light on a major problem. While Komer was apparently quite successful in having corrupt province chiefs removed, he had concluded that Lam was “too high to deal with.” This suggests that Komer, with McNamara’s blessing, went after the low-level corruption—the low-hanging fruit, some might say—and that if he recognized it was a system, he certainly did not treat it as such. As a result, the system’s infrastructure remained intact even when low-level operatives were removed, and sooner or later the new man had little choice but to take his place in it.<sup>371</sup> The longer the problem existed, the harder it was to fix. “The United States found to its chagrin,” said George Herring, “that as its commitment increased, its leverage diminished.” How so? Herring’s answer was that American “concern with corruption and inefficiency was always balanced by fear that tough action might alienate the government or bring about its collapse.” “Lodge and Westmoreland,” he wrote, were therefore “inclined to accept the situation and deal with other problems.”<sup>372</sup>

Eventually, Lam was replaced, but it would not be until the Easter Offensive in the spring of 1972. Urgently needed at the front to manage the defense of his Corps, he chose to remain in the safety of his Da Nang headquarters.<sup>373</sup> Despite all that was known about him, he stayed in command over five years, and this final bad choice hints at how his attitude may have affected the war during each of those years. Interestingly, it would be the scrupulously honest and effective General Truong who would replace him.

### **General Thang’s Thoughts on Corruption**

General Truong was not the only honest officer now in a senior position. General Thang, the Minister of Revolutionary Development, understood the scale, structure, and impact of the corruption and was “thoroughly discouraged” over it. In 1967, he lectured Edward Lansdale on the problem. The corruption, he told Lansdale, was far more pervasive than Americans recognized, and had to be

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<sup>370</sup> McManaway, p. 20.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid.

<sup>372</sup> Herring, *Longest War*, p. 163.

<sup>373</sup> Clarke, p. 483-4.

addressed because it was sabotaging the war effort. The Vietnamese, though, were incapable of handling it on their own.

Thang explained that a young officer's descent into a corrupt lifestyle took a standard path. The man married and acquired mistresses, but then discovered that supporting them and his extended family and friends, as was expected, required a great deal of cash. He used his office to generate that cash, and any endeavor, whether or not it was legal or interfered with military duties, was fair game. Realizing that his peers, superiors, and subordinates were doing the same thing, he overlooked their transgressions as they overlooked his. Managing his affairs consumed increasing time, which allowed even less for his official duties. "A thorough house-cleaning of the upper echelons" was essential, he told Lansdale, and he thought the majors and lieutenant colonels in the field would be glad to see that happen. Though reform would have to be led by the Vietnamese, he thought General Vien, the chief of the Joint General Staff, and General Vy, the minister of defense, would be up to the challenge if they received "considerably more American support in this area than they had...in the past."<sup>374</sup>

Lansdale reported the conversation to Ambassador Bunker, and would have made Westmoreland and Komer aware of it, but there is no evidence that anyone acted on it. What did Westmoreland think about the problem? According to the official history, he was "completely frustrated over the corruption issue," and while acknowledging that it was ubiquitous, was "hesitant to intervene directly in South Vietnamese internal affairs," especially given his belief that the problem was rooted in the Vietnamese tradition of placing loyalty "to family and friends" above "duty to the nation." "Until the Saigon government could command more loyalty from its own officials," he saw little he could do. "Because the essentially political nature of the problem obviated any solution that MACV could recommend or impose, Americans would just have to live with the situation and hope for more success on the battlefield."<sup>375</sup>

Westmoreland was right, of course, that the problem had cultural and political roots. The corrupt officials at the top were part of the political power structure, and the fear of coups was always a consideration in personnel decisions. But his conclusion from those facts is troubling. As Thang had

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<sup>374</sup> Ibid, pp. 230-1.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid, pp. 231.

postulated, nothing could be done without the US making the solution a priority, but Westmoreland presumably ignored Thang's plea for help. As a gesture, he provided General Vien with a copy of the American army's code of ethics, certainly not expecting that to make a difference. By all appearances, the US Mission thought the war could be won despite the corruption. Ironically, Minister of Defense Vy, one of the two generals Thang thought could have lead the reform, was eventually sacked by President Thieu because he and seven other high-ranking officers had been caught stealing from the soldiers' pension fund. That was so egregious that it could not be ignored.<sup>376</sup>

According to Komer, the subject of corruption and its impact on the war effort were "hotly debated" in the first year of CORDS. In 1967, Colonel Volney Warner, working in Komer's old office at the White House, solicited feedback on a memorandum on "leverage" he had prepared for the President's signature. It got nowhere. The State Department, too, was concerned about corruption, and "always writing silly papers on leverage," said Komer, who downplayed the problem. Komer thought that "given persistence plus access, you can get the Vietnamese to do things by the proper combination of cajolery and persuasion without resort to threat or sanction."<sup>377</sup> He obviously did not mean to include solving the systemic nature of corruption in that boast.

Premier Ky talked about corruption and his plans to root it out. Michael Maclear described Ky as "the exception in a generally corrupt regime." When Ky took office he threatened to have corrupt officials and businessmen shot, and with great fanfare one hapless Chinese businessman was shot. No government officials were held to the same standard, though.<sup>378</sup> Komer bragged of his "first great case" of getting rid of a particularly corrupt province chief in 1967. Over dinner with Ky, Komer complained of corruption, and Ky, not knowing Komer had done his homework, said that if Komer could come up with a single case, he would have the man removed immediately. Komer responded with the man's name and summarized the evidence. His honor at stake, Ky launched an investigation and removed the province chief.<sup>379</sup> Komer's account, though, raises as many questions as it answers: Why had the Vietnamese corps commander not already take action against the corrupt

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<sup>376</sup> Ibid, pp. 231, 487.

<sup>377</sup> Komer, *New Model*, pp. 144, 153.

<sup>378</sup> Maclear, p. 145.

<sup>379</sup> Komer, *New Model*, p. 156.

province chief? Certainly if Americans with their limited access to information were aware of the misconduct, the corps commander would have known about it, or should have. In this case, the province chief was the corps commander's brother-in-law. And if a government investigation could so quickly determine the facts, why had the Ky government not already identified the culprit? Either the government knew and turned a blind eye or simply did not care. However, relieving the subordinate of a powerful political ally—as all of the corps commanders could be described—came with risk, and since the corps commanders were members of the Directorate that gave guidance to Ky, getting rid of one bad corps commander probably required some form of concurrence from the others. Finally, why was Komer not pushing to have the corps commander removed as well for tolerating the corrupt subordinate? The answer, to which McManaway alluded, is that MACV knew they would rock the boat if they went after the highest targets. Even when corrupt individuals were relieved, they were not typically disciplined. Army historian Thomas Scoville observed that “you'd get a corrupt guy out of one place and he'd be reassigned to another corps.”<sup>380</sup>

A year after Komer left Vietnam, an interviewer asked him about the problem. There was a great deal of corruption in Vietnam as there was “in most Asian countries,” he replied, and much of what looked like corruption to Americans was simply Asia's “way of doing business.” But another factor was that the long war had created an attitude of every man for himself because of the “breakdown of [government] administration”; this was not unlike American “war profiteering” during the two world wars, he added. On top of all that, the combination of low government pay and high inflation made it difficult to support a family. This last point especially elicits sympathy, but Komer's remarks on the whole convey the notion that because corruption was more or less normal for the circumstances, the US should not have overly worried about it.<sup>381</sup> What he failed to take into account was that the Communists were out to demolish “normal,” and used the all too obvious government corruption as one of the key grievances in their resonating anti-government narrative.

Norman Olsen provides a fascinating story of how corruption could become a weapon in the anti-government narrative. During this period, he was an advisor with the Chieu Hoi program, which

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<sup>380</sup> Ibid. See also Herring, *Longest War*, pp. 162-3.

<sup>381</sup> Komer, *New Model*, pp. 153-4.

solicited Communist defections. A VC colonel named Pham was so frustrated with Hanoi's growing heavy-handedness with the Viet Cong that he approached Olsen about defecting. Olsen invited Pham to live with him for three months as he made up his mind, and they had discussions stretching late into the night. On the one hand, Pham liked Americans and thought they were well intended, but on the other, he "really hated the [government] corruption." Eventually deciding to stay with the Viet Cong, one night he slipped away, and Olsen felt sure that the corruption had been the tipping point.<sup>382</sup>

Komer's pacification achievements were substantial, but he seems to have entirely missed the importance of getting at the root of this problem rather than its symptoms. Because Komer was so quick to explain away most of the corruption yet anxious to have particularly corrupt province chiefs removed from office, he was left with the dilemma of where to draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. In 1970, CORDS instructed advisors that it was "of prime importance that...village leaders be, by village standards, honest," but added that advisors should recognize "that from time to time an official may divert a tithe into his own pocket [to] support his family." Corruption was "obnoxious," said a CORDS handbook, only when it was "conspicuous" and consisted of "favoritism, cronyism, demanding bribes from those who cannot afford them, or excessive bribes in general, other injustices, and particularly, accepting favors and then failing to deliver a quid pro quo." One must admire the attempt to factor cultural norms into what was unquestionably a complicated subject, but the clear implication is that bribes were acceptable if they were not "excessive," if the person being bribed could afford them, or if the quid pro quo was in fact delivered. It is no wonder that advisors had trouble understanding what to do when they encountered Vietnamese behavior that would land Americans in jail. More problematic, the instructions failed to address the systemic nature of the problem. It was one thing for a village chief to collect a little off the top to support his family, but quite another to maintain "ghost soldiers," illegally tax peasants, and force subordinates to pay for office.<sup>383</sup>

It is significant, too, that the instructions were directed at the village level, providing yet another example of the tendency of advisors at the top to delegate problems they could not solve to

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<sup>382</sup> Olsen, p. 3.

<sup>383</sup> CORDS, *Vietnamese Village 1970: Handbook for Advisors* (1970), pp. 29-30.

the lowest levels. Ultimately, it was not the hamlet, village, and district chiefs who were the problem, but the corps commanders who ran their rackets with the approval of the Ky and Thieu governments. Where were the written instructions for advisors at the top instructing them how to handle corruption at their level? Because the American mission could neither frame the problem nor comprehend the damage it was causing, they could not design a solution. The Army's official history of the period concluded that "given the cultural heritage of Vietnam, and the confused social and political milieu of the times, recurrent instances of corruption were not necessarily signs of poor military or administrative ability." How nearsighted this now seems.

### **Conclusion**

During this period, General Westmoreland made clear that the combat operations that American and Vietnamese forces were conducting were to be seen in the context of pacification, and that their purpose was to shield village and hamlet pacification operations from the larger enemy units. Despite his clarity, some commanders did not embrace this notion, journalists all but missed it, and historians have generally overlooked it. As important as this articulation of the US strategy was, it was the creation of CORDS with the appointment of Robert Komer to run it that was the year's most significant event. We will now return to the four questions from the end of the last chapter to examine whether Komer had been able to address Robert McNamara's concerns from October 1966.

Did CORDS solve the problem of interagency unity of effort? It was still too early to tell at the end of 1967, but it appeared to be on track to do so. The birth of CORDS in May integrated the various agencies involved in pacification in a single organization with Komer at the helm. Officially one of Westmoreland's deputies with the rank of ambassador, he now was in a position to have influence on every American command and activity that had anything to do with pacification. His vision, drive, energy, and tenacity transformed how Americans viewed pacification and how they pursued it. He was brilliant at cutting through organizational obstruction and inertia. He had been the impetus behind the Hamlet Evaluation System and used it effectively to manage the disparate pieces and measure their contribution to the whole.

Did CORDS identify an effective methodology for stimulating a peasant's loyalty to the government? Under Komer, the US increased the number of civilians on province teams, and for the

first time placed them on district teams. He also pressed the Vietnamese to be even more aggressive in using the RD Cadre to blaze trails into contested hamlets. More importantly, Komer knew that village security was the foundation for all else. Until now there had been much talk about that, but too little real action, and making genuine improvement in the territorial army therefore became his top priority. He also stressed the importance of creating a sense of political and economic agency within the rural population. Time would tell whether these changes would serve their intended purpose.

As the government was going to great lengths to provide security and a better quality of life, there were self-inflicted forces working against that effort. Vietnamese bureaucrats and officers often seemed not to care for the people, and American artillery and bombs frequently drove them from their homes. The very visible corruption was also a problem. Did CORDS address that, and if so, as a system? Americans could see that the corruption was pervasive and culturally embedded, but it is not clear that they fully comprehended its systemic nature. At best, they only half-heartedly heeded General Thang's warning about its magnitude and impact, and appear to have ignored his plea for help. Although top CORDS officials thought they were aggressively tackling the problem, Komer seems to have been unsure of himself. He targeted corrupt province chiefs, but acknowledged that corruption was understandable under the circumstances. By going after the province chiefs instead of their bosses, he continued the tendency of the top Americans to try to solve at lower levels the problems that originated at the top. As a result, the corruption continued to harm the pacification effort by diverting attention from supervisory responsibilities, confirming suspicions that officials were interested only in their own welfare, substantiating the Communist narrative that the government was corrupt and undeserving of loyalty, and removing financial and material resources that had been intended for the people's benefit.

Did CORDS begin to solve the other problems with the Vietnamese military that McNamara had identified? He had warned that even with a new structure and dynamic leadership at its helm, "success [would] depend...on the extent to which the South Vietnamese [could] be shocked out of their present pattern of behavior." Before CORDS, government forces had not been taking "effective action" on their own, and the US had "not found the formula [or] catalyst" that would get them to do so. Did Komer find the formula for unleashing that potential? He certainly had an ambitious agenda

for improving the territorial army down at the unit level where the fighting was done, but was he doing anything that might affect the “attitude and conduct” of the military on the whole? In his 1966 report, McNamara had lamented the Vietnamese military’s practice of making “promotions, assignments, and awards” on the basis of nepotism, cronyism, and payoffs rather than performance, and that it was “weak in dedication, direction and discipline.”<sup>384</sup> Although he had not said so directly, he must have known that these problems originated at the top and could not have been fixed elsewhere. As laudable as it was, Komer’s attention to the territorial army at the unit level was incapable of addressing the problems that McNamara was rightly concerned with at the top.

As the year ended, combat forces from the United States and its allies were doing well against the larger Viet Cong and North Vietnamese units, but those continued to infiltrate into the South from Cambodia and Laos, and even the DMZ, offsetting the victories. Many American officers still had a conventional mindset, and there was a certain amount of institutional resistance to the new CORDS structure. Despite this friction and the aforementioned problems, though, Komer now had a direct role in shaping MACV’s agenda, and it could no longer be said that the pacification effort was regressing. Indeed, there was some cautious optimism. The next chapter will examine the pacification effort in 1968, which was the first full year of CORDS.

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<sup>384</sup> McNamara, “Actions Recommended,” p. 732.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Pacification in 1968: Before, During, and After Tet**

As 1968 began, CORDS had been in existence seven months, and American officials were pleased with its start. President Johnson viewed it as a Vietnamese version of his Great Society. Although he had suffered a drop in popularity over the previous eighteen months, he was far from a lame duck, and it was plausible to think that he might win another term. Despite a growing antiwar movement, there was still strong support for the war at home. Nevertheless, in late 1967, Robert McNamara had announced that he would be leaving the Pentagon in March, and Clark Clifford would take his place. In Saigon, Ellsworth Bunker had been the ambassador since April, William Westmoreland commanded the US troops that now numbered over half a million, and his two principal deputies were Creighton Abrams for military affairs and Robert Komer for CORDS. Vietnam had conducted its first national elections, and though Thieu and Ky had won, their roles were reversed. Thieu won the presidency, and Ky became his vice president.

#### **The Tet Offensive: 30 January-3 March 1968**

In January, when FSO Terry McNamara was in Saigon going through his new-arrivals orientation, his briefers “exuded optimism” and said that “a corner had been turned.” The Vietnamese he encountered were also optimistic, and the eve of Tet was like “the before-Christmas atmosphere” at home.<sup>385</sup> A long weekend preceded the holiday, and Larry Colbert, an FSO who had arrived in November to work with refugees, flew to Da Nang to dine with friends. At the end of the weekend, they congratulated their host for having been posted to a “polished cultural city,” and returned to their own provinces. On Tuesday, 30 January, the Viet Cong launched their surprise offensive with hundreds of guerrilla attacks in thirty-eight of the country’s forty-four provinces.<sup>386</sup> Within days Communist troops captured the man whose posh assignment Colbert and his friends had envied, shot him, and dumped his body in a ditch.<sup>387</sup>

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<sup>385</sup> F.T. McNamara, p. 70.

<sup>386</sup> Lathram, p. 17.

<sup>387</sup> Colbert, pp. 35-6.

Saigon could not imagine either side violating a Tet truce, and “Tet” caught them by surprise. Troops were on leave or relaxing in their barracks.<sup>388</sup> In II Corps, the Communists had not previously entered cities, so guerrillas simply “walked in” to the relaxed capital of Phu Yen at dusk. Major Robert Barron, a district senior advisor, recalled that the ensuing firefight had destroyed many of the capital’s buildings, along with the morale of both Vietnamese and Americans.<sup>389</sup> In I Corps, guerrillas were killed as they entered the Quang Tin province chief’s office, and in the IV Corps province of Vinh Long, guerrillas had been entering the city for weeks disguised as mourners, their coffins full of weapons.<sup>390</sup> Back in Quang Ngai, Colbert himself had a close call when guerrillas overran the capital, as did George Jacobson in Saigon, who shot a guerrilla entering his room in the embassy compound.<sup>391</sup>

Tet had a profound impact on CORDS and the newly energized pacification effort. Awaiting an assignment when the offensive started, McNamara was dispatched to Vinh Long to replace a civilian who had just been killed. That man himself had replaced one who had been killed a few days earlier. McNamara encountered “mass destruction” and “piles of bricks and mortar” when he arrived. Five CORDS civilians had died in the fighting. He realized that pacification would have to wait. The Vietnamese who guarded the CORDS compound had left to protect their families, so any advisor “who could pull a trigger” was put on security. He learned that he would have responsibility for civilian development and the RD Cadre, but his immediate task was to assist refugees. After persuading his Vietnamese employees to return to work, they began to assist the refugees, but two weeks later the Communists attacked again.<sup>392</sup> Carl Dillery arrived just after Tet and encountered “total chaos” at the CORDS headquarters in Saigon. They did not know where to send him, and when a province senior advisor invited him to join his team, Dillery accepted. Like McNamara, he became the development officer, but the 600,000 people who were now refugees became his first priority.<sup>393</sup>

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<sup>388</sup> F.T. McNamara, p. 74.

<sup>389</sup> J. Wright, interviewed by S. Maxner, VCATTU (2001), pp. 23, 28-9.

<sup>390</sup> A. Hemingway, “CORDS: Winning Hearts and Minds in Vietnam,” *Historynet.com* (18 September 2006); F.T. McNamara, p. 74. See also Lavelle, p. 77.

<sup>391</sup> Colbert, p. 36; Ledogar, p. 40; Lathram, pp. 16-7; F.T. McNamara, p. 75.

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 71-5.

<sup>393</sup> C.E. Dillery, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (1994), pp. 25, 26.

In the end, Tet resulted in a million new refugees, widespread destruction, numerous deaths, and a delay in pacification. In Hué alone, Communist troops massacred three thousand government workers and supporters, and those living in the South's northern provinces would never get over the trauma. Though it was a tactical defeat for the Communists, who were disappointed that the people did not rise up with them, over time it would become apparent that they had achieved a strategic victory because of the way it turned Americans against the war.<sup>394</sup> For those in Vietnam or soon to head over, Tet became a point of reference. One was either there at Tet, left just before it, or got there after it was over.<sup>395</sup> Robert Barron recalled that when he arrived "six months after Tet," the colonel he worked for was still "shell shocked," and unable to "utter five coherent sentences." However, it would become clear over time that the Viet Cong would never fully recover from their huge losses, and that Hanoi's ultimate victory would require increasing numbers of North Vietnamese troops.<sup>396</sup> In the short term, the offensive set pacification back in several ways. Saigon pulled territorials to province and district capitals where the fight was, and pulled the RD Cadre out of the hamlets because of their vulnerability. American advisors were preoccupied with their own defense and refugee work. And the country now needed to be rebuilt. Komer had no choice but to put pacification on the back burner.

#### **Recovery and Then a Return to Pacification: March—October 1968**

Putting Komer in charge of recovery was logical, because CORDS now controlled all USAID workers outside Saigon. Across the board, advisors shifted to refugee support and the reconstruction of homes, schools, and government buildings. In the end, Komer estimated that CORDS had lost six months to the recovery.<sup>397</sup> Meanwhile, Komer arranged for the CIA's William Colby to return to Vietnam to replace Wade Latham at the helm of the CORDS office in Saigon. Colby arrived on 2 March just as the Tet Offensive was ending, and found the headquarters reeling and overwhelmed.<sup>398</sup>

Terry McNamara's Vietnamese staff remained in a perpetual state of worry about what might come next, but he finally got them back on the road to manage their projects. To set the example, he

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<sup>394</sup> For an example of this line of thought, see F.T. McNamara, p. 75.

<sup>395</sup> See for example R. Boettcher, "Robert Boettcher," in H. Maurer, ed., *Strange Ground* (New York, 1989), p. 293; G. Anderson, interviewed by D. Kienzle, ADST (1996), p. 30.

<sup>396</sup> Barron, pp. 23, 29, 34.

<sup>397</sup> Komer, *New Model*, p. 77.

<sup>398</sup> Colby, pp. 221-3, 234; Komer, *New Model*, p. 92.

began regular visits to the districts, using a helicopter because of the uncertainty on the ground; it would be about six months before they routinely used roads again. His next challenge was “cajoling, challenging, [and] shaming” his counterparts back “into the countryside,” knowing that was “where the war would be won or lost”; once again, an advisor was performing a supervisory function.<sup>399</sup>

As the crisis subsided, McNamara turned more attention to development, and by May, the government began to return the RD Cadre to the field. Each year, these fifty-nine-man teams of armed development workers had become more important to the pacification effort. Komer’s prodding had led to an increase in their number. In IV Corps, for example, which was now the government’s main effort, the number of teams grew from 176 to 300 in 1968.<sup>400</sup> According to Dennis Harter, who was the district senior advisor in Kien Hoa Province in 1968 and 1969, most were young and urban, but “dressed like the peasants in black pajamas.” Despite this attempt to look like those they were attempting to help, adapting to country life was not easy, and some “tended to look down on” the villagers. They were to demonstrate Saigon’s concern for the villagers’ well-being by promoting “small scale self-help projects,” introducing improved farming techniques and new rice strains, teaching hygiene, providing basic health care, explaining “the rudiments of self defense,” and encouraging the villagers to start schools. Because it was difficult to get teachers into outlying areas, the Cadre often took on the teaching role. Norm Olsen, now a province senior advisor, observed that even though “the quality of leadership varied,” because of their interaction with the villagers they were particularly effective at identifying members of the Viet Cong shadow government. Harter recalled that as the Communists came to realize that the Cadre “were keeping the[m] from getting at the local population,” they began aggressively targeting them.<sup>401</sup>

As part of the push back into the countryside, McNamara and his Cadre moved by canal to a district capital that had been cut off since Tet. The senior advisor, who was an army colonel, expected the convoy to be ambushed, and did not want McNamara going. Capturing the ethos of CORDS, he

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<sup>399</sup> F.T. McNamara, p. 75.

<sup>400</sup> G.S. Eckhardt, “Senior Officer Debriefing Program,” HQ Delta Military Assistance Command (29 May 1969), DTIC, p. 39.

<sup>401</sup> D.G. Harter, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (2004), pp. 49-50; N.L. Olsen, “Vietnam and Iraq: A Strategic and Tactical Analysis,” *Center for the Study of the Presidency* (13 September 2005), p. 12.

replied that this was not “a question of being civilian or military,” and that because the young Cadre members were “my responsibility,” it was only right that he “go with them.”<sup>402</sup>

### **Civilian Development**

The creation of CORDS in the spring of 1967 had produced a huge requirement for the State Department to identify FSOs for new CORDS province and district advisory teams, and Terry McNamara had been one of the first. Before CORDS, the State Department had placed little pressure on its young FSOs to go to Vietnam. In 1966, Harter, who had just completed his Foreign Service training, was permitted to work in Washington for a year as he finished his PhD. The next year, though, CORDS had become a vortex, and he soon found himself at the Vietnam Training Center.<sup>403</sup> Stan Ifshin had been told in mid-1967 that as a bachelor he had no choice in the matter.<sup>404</sup> Bob Boettcher was an FSO in Japan, when a friend who had just left Vietnam described CORDS duty as “fascinating, important, challenging,” “stimulating,” and “constructive,” and Boettcher volunteered.<sup>405</sup> The course lasted eight weeks, and some had an additional week at Fort Bragg to learn basic combat survival skills. Many then started a forty-two-week language program, but some went straight to Vietnam.<sup>406</sup> James Landberg had been posted in India when he volunteered for Vietnam, and anxious to get there, he declined the language training.<sup>407</sup> Similarly, after Charles Lahiguera listened to General Westmoreland’s upbeat report at the end 1967, he worried that he would miss the war if he stayed for another forty-two weeks, and his request to drop out of the language course and deploy immediately was approved.<sup>408</sup> Although the historiography tends to portray this period as a time when everything was going wrong and the war was reaching a tragic and inevitable denouement, the accounts of those who were in Vietnam or going there are generally upbeat and hopeful.

When the FSOs got to Vietnam, they could be assigned at the district or province level. McNamara and Dillery had gone to province teams to work on development, and Dillery to work with refugees. The district teams typically had five to ten men. Ifshin, the only civilian on his team,

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<sup>402</sup> F.T. McNamara, p. 76.

<sup>403</sup> Harter, pp. 31, 34.

<sup>404</sup> S. Ifshin, interviewed by D. Reuther, ADST (2001), p. 14.

<sup>405</sup> Boettcher, p. 292-3.

<sup>406</sup> Harter, pp. 34-5.

<sup>407</sup> J. Landberg, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (2001), pp. 22, 25-6.

<sup>408</sup> C. Lahiguera, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (2000), p. 20.

became the team deputy. His boss was a major, and there were two lieutenants and several enlisted personnel.<sup>409</sup> Landberg, also the only civilian on his team, became the district senior advisor, as did Harter. Under CORDS, the senior advisor in a district could be civilian or military, but civilians generally took the senior position only in relatively stable districts.<sup>410</sup>

CORDS's development projects were largely the same as in earlier years. Long after the war, Colonel Phil Bolté, who had been a province senior advisor, would summarize his work as "feeding refugees, building schools [and] improving roads."<sup>411</sup> Carl Dillery's province team had thirty civilian advisors and another 150 Vietnamese employees, and they augmented the staff of the province hospital, advised officials on education, built schools and trained teachers, worked with the police, built roads, and assisted farmers with their "irrigation problems." Two Americans on his team worked full-time on the massive post-Tet refugee problem. The team contracted with builders and monitored their work. As with all USAID projects, there was "paper work and physical inspections of projects," and they had to approve a contractor's work before it was deemed complete.<sup>412</sup>

Did Dillery think all of that was accomplishing its purpose? He recalled that after Tet many villagers no longer viewed the VC in a positive light, having observed that they had become "mostly punitive," executing those "who didn't support them" and taxing the peasants but giving them nothing in return. Dillery thought that ultimately the people simply "wanted...to be let alone [and] didn't particularly like either side."<sup>413</sup> Perhaps the government could prevail against the Communists even without winning the people's affection as long as it could prevent the Communists from getting to them and not alienate them in the process. Time would tell.

To some, working for CORDS seemed like the Peace Corps. Dennis Harter estimated that twenty-five percent of his Vietnam Training Center class had Peace Corps backgrounds and viewed CORDS as paralleling "what they had been doing...in Africa and Latin America, albeit with higher pay and greater danger." Generally not debating the war, they simply saw another opportunity "to

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<sup>409</sup> Ifshin, p. 21.

<sup>410</sup> Harter, p. 43.

<sup>411</sup> Hemingway.

<sup>412</sup> Dillery, pp. 27-8.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid, p. 30.

help people who were less fortunate.”<sup>414</sup> The point that is overlooked by most historians is that even in 1968, the JFK-inspired idealism was still reflected in the civilian development work in Vietnam.

In the early days of the civilian advisory effort, Rufus Phillips had instructed his new province representatives to go out and look for needs the US might be able to address. Things had grown more structured over time, and even more so since the advent of CORDS. Each hamlet had to have a development plan addressing its “political, economic and social” needs, but that plan had to fit within the district, province, and national plans. Harter often worked fifteen hours a day to reach that level of detail. Although the American-provided supplies came down through the Vietnamese system, he had a \$2,000 monthly discretionary budget to meet local needs, and spent that on such things as “supplies for a new maternity clinic [or] school,” or to loan a farmer money so he could “put concrete floors in a pig sty.” He once obtained special funds to construct a small dam to keep salt water out of agricultural land.<sup>415</sup>

One of Harter’s experiences shows the interplay between development and security. He had organized a sewing class for refugees, bought a sewing machine, and arranged instructors through a school he supported. Hearing of his plans, guerrillas entered the village one night and warned the peasants that Harter “could not be trusted,” that they were to have nothing to do with him, and that they would kill him if he returned. The threat was idle—nothing happened—but the story suggests some problems: First, because the guerrillas came at night, territorials probably followed the standard but tactically unsound practice of having a visible presence during the day but retreating to their outpost at night, leaving the villagers vulnerable. Second, it is likely that the province and district chiefs were not verifying that their units were conducting the nightly ambushes that were essential for keeping the guerrillas out.<sup>416</sup>

When district chiefs made their rounds, advisors often went with them. Harter’s counterpart was a politically savvy officer who engaged all strata of society to identify problems, inquire how programs were working, and ask about VC activity. Frequently, the two would be invited to lunch, and then take the customary siesta there or back in their offices, using the rest of the day to follow

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<sup>414</sup> Harter, pp. 35-6.

<sup>415</sup> Ibid, p. 49.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid, pp. 58-9.

up.<sup>417</sup> When Stan Ifshin visited a hamlet, he looked for indicators that the government was not functioning properly, and considered much of his job “prodding” and “poking.” If he identified a problem that could be solved at the district level, where he advised, he took it directly to the appropriate official. If that bureaucrat blamed a province official, Ifshin then went to that person’s advisor on the province team, who could pressure his counterpart. Ifshin’s counterparts at the district level told him that province officials were more responsive if Americans were involved. That seems to have been the case across the country, and Ifshin concluded that since the advisors had become an indispensable link in the Vietnamese system, they “weren’t really building government.”<sup>418</sup> His observations are consistent with others, and we may therefore conclude that the advisors had become a shadow chain of command, and that while it could often cut through a bureaucratic impasse, it created a form of dependency. Advisors may have thought of this as a transitional dependency, but it is clear that they were the glue holding the system together. If province officials were unresponsive to villagers’ needs unless Americans intervened, that suggests that they viewed them as something other than constituents. One also wonders why Ifshin’s district chief, rather than Ifshin, was not identifying the problems and requiring his staff to solve them.

### **Corruption in Humanitarian Assistance and Civilian Development**

Carl Dillery and Larry Colbert, both FSOs, worked on refugee support on the same province team. The Vietnamese major in charge of refugee operations routinely stole from the warehouse where American-provided supplies were stored, but Americans could not catch him, and the practice continued. They knew at least some of the district chiefs were corrupt as well. When the province senior advisor had proof that one had stolen refugee funds, he presented it to the province chief, who made the district chief return the money. There was no indication, though, that the restitution was accompanied by disciplinary action, and Dillery knew the practice would continue. From the perspective of the Vietnamese, it seems that the sin was getting caught by Americans rather than the act itself. That Americans viewed such misappropriation as common is clear from the team’s American colonel, who quipped as he watched construction material fall from a helicopter sling

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid, p. 46.

<sup>418</sup> Ifshin, pp. 23, 25.

where it was free for the taking that this was the first honestly distributed aid he had seen while there. Despite all that, years later Dillery would still think of the province chief and his deputy as “terrific guys” and “quite honest.” It would be a stretch to think that a province chief could be honest yet not discipline his subordinates when they stole supplies and funds—he was aware of the malfeasance if not a participant in it—but perhaps Dillery could excuse this because he suspected that province-level officials had little ability to opt out of the system. Colbert suspected that “the big money was being made in Saigon.”<sup>419</sup>

Sometimes there was the appearance of disciplinary action, but not the reality. Charles Lahiguera worked with refugees in a remote province along the Cambodian border, and he too had a counterpart who “siphoned off [American] supplies.” He reported the man, the Vietnamese investigated, and the offender was sacked, but Lahiguera later learned he had been reassigned to a cushy job in the “resort area” of Dalat. He was told this was the “Vietnamese way of handling things.”<sup>420</sup> If an advisor tried too hard there could be repercussions. Ifshin worked with a “terribly corrupt” district chief who routinely diverted “government materials” to his “private projects.” Ifshin tried to have him removed, failed, and then heard rumors he was on an assassination list because of his attempt. Though nothing came of it, the corrupt district chief was left in place.<sup>421</sup> Not all officials were so obviously bad. James Landberg worked with three district chiefs over the course of his tour. Two favorably impressed him, but the third was so corrupt and ineffective that Landberg succeeded in having him removed.<sup>422</sup>

Bob Boettcher, another FSO, found corruption wherever he looked. When he was on a district team, the district chief took equipment the Americans had provided, sold it, and “pocketed the money.” Perhaps following his example, the district health officer sold the American-provided “medicines, bandages, and medical equipment.” Boettcher became aware of a local newspaper publisher who was also a prominent “member of the national legislature.” His corruption was so “notorious” that he thought the embassy should know, even though that meant going outside the

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<sup>419</sup> Dillery, pp. 28-9; Colbert, pp. 40-1.

<sup>420</sup> Lahiguera, p. 24.

<sup>421</sup> Ifshin, p. 24.

<sup>422</sup> Landberg, pp. 31-2.

CORDS chain of command. His contact at the embassy told him to back off because the man was “one of the great liberal leaders of this country,” and the US “need[ed] more men like him.”<sup>423</sup>

The Minister of Political Affairs at the time was Josiah Bennett. Thomas Dunlop worked for Bennett as a provincial reporting officer covering several IV Corps provinces. Dunlop wanted to forward reports of corruption to the State Department, but Bennett was “uneasy at this kind of reporting” and did not want the “warts... focused on.” “I had a lot of fights with him about this,” Dunlop recalled, and he suspected the problem was not confined to IV Corps. “The Thieu Government was corrupt...but the degree to which that had an impact on events is another matter, because a certain level of corruption was very common in South Vietnam.” Everyone at the Embassy seemed to agree that corruption was an appropriate matter to report when it had reached “a politically damaging level,” but the point of contention was over where that level was. Dunlop thought it had already become “politically damaging” in IV Corps, but recognized that Americans could be a bit “hypocritical” or “sanctimonious” in dealing with corruption since it was so ingrained in Asian political systems.<sup>424</sup>

Dunlop finally decided there was an unwritten rule in the Foreign Service that if forced to deal with a corrupt official it was best to never report him in those terms so that both individual and collective consciences could be protected. Charles Kennedy, a retired FSO who was interviewing Dunlop and who had been at the embassy at the time, said that in addition to that psychological aspect, there was also a practical one: If FSOs were tempted to report a problem to Washington, they knew they could provide the context, but that from there anything “juicy” would make it to Congress or the press without context and be used “to titillate an audience,” which could have “profound effects” back in Vietnam. “To give the Josiah Bennett's of this world full credit,” replied Dunlop, “they are well aware of this,” and on top of that, “there was a whole constituency in the United States [who] felt that the Vietnam War was the ‘wrong war, in the wrong place, at the wrong time,’” and who would latch onto any negative reports from the field. As we will observe in a later chapter, the

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<sup>423</sup> Boettcher, pp. 299-300.

<sup>424</sup> Dunlop, p. 108.

cumulative effect over the years of those at home hearing mostly the bad news would indeed have a “profound effect.”<sup>425</sup>

The endemic corruption was bad for the people and complicated the advisory effort. As General Thang had explained to Ed Lansdale in 1967, there was a correlation between corruption and duty performance. Corrupt officers spent so much time pursuing their financial interests that they had no time for their duties. Advisors were in a dilemma; they could work to thwart the corruption or they could go with the flow, rationalizing that the real problem lay above their level. It is hard to blame those who chose to do the latter.

### **Miracle Rice, Land Reform, and Rural Banks**

It is remarkable that so much pacification progress was made despite the corruption and dysfunctional chain of command. Over the summer it was clear that the work of Terry McNamara’s team and their counterparts was paying off, and he attributed that success to a “confluence” of three factors: the impact of the “IR-8 miracle rice”; the establishment of “rural banks” so farmers could finance their crops at low rates rather than through loan sharks; and land reform, whereby the government transferred the title from the absentee landholders who had acquired it during the colonial era to the peasants who farmed it. The banks and land reform would take time, but before McNamara left the province in September 1968, he got to see the initial results of the rice project.<sup>426</sup>

Of all the rural programs during the war, the rice initiative may have had the greatest impact. For some time, the US had been introducing the high-yield rice strain that enabled three or four crops a year rather than the standard two. Maximizing the yield required fertilizer and irrigation pumps, so CORDS offered those with the seed. Because the farmers were skeptical at first, McNamara and his men established “experimental plots” in each district, provided the owners with seed, fertilizer, and a pump, and promised to underwrite any losses. His team had “two agricultural advisors,” one of whom had been a county agent advising farmers in upstate New York, and they “rolled up their sleeves and helped the farmers, showing them the techniques of applying the fertilizer.”<sup>427</sup>

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<sup>425</sup> Ibid, p. 109.

<sup>426</sup> F.T. McNamara, pp. 77-8, 80.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid, p. 77.

The experiment convinced the skeptics that the yields were as claimed, and “the farmers were lining up in front of my door, trying to get seeds for the next planting,” said McNamara. Looking back years later, he thought this had been the start of the “green revolution in the Mekong Delta.” By the time McNamara left for another province in September, the trauma of Tet had “dissipated, ...confidence [had been] restored,” and things “were going very well.” He saw a convoy “traveling at night to arrive at the market [in Saigon] the next morning,” with a cargo of “the marvelous fruits, vegetables, fish, pork and rice [that were] produced in the Mekong delta in such profusion.” Before the war, the Delta had been the country’s breadbasket, and to McNamara the convoy was proof that “the economy had been restored.”<sup>428</sup> Actually, there was still a long way to go. MACV estimated that for the entire corps, “the amount of commercial highway traffic [in July was] about 80 percent of the pre-Tet level,” but “enemy activity [had] dropped significantly” that month.<sup>429</sup> Clearly things were progressing.

The impact of the so-called miracle rice in the Delta—the birthplace of the Viet Cong and a hotbed of insurgency during most of the sixties—was indeed profound. Six years after leaving, McNamara would return to serve as the consul general, and was delighted to see that those early efforts had been just the beginning.<sup>430</sup> His account of 1968 is corroborated by Dick Burnham, the senior advisor in Kien Hoa, the next province over. When Burnham arrived in 1967, his team could get to only “one district without any difficulty,” two others required an armed convoy, and five were accessible only by helicopter. Because of the poor security throughout most of the province, the US decided to focus on a single district and leave the rest for later.<sup>431</sup> Burnham worked on economic development, and the government kept enough troops in that district to secure the villages. The “new rice strains [that] could increase the yield on a field of rice by three or four times,” along with other crops the advisors helped with, “transformed” the district’s economy, said Burnham. The peasants bought outboard motors and would “reverse the prop, put a tin shaft around it, and make a pump that could raise water out of the canals.” Pig production increased, in one case “from 300 to 650 over six

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<sup>428</sup> Ibid, pp. 77, 80.

<sup>429</sup> Military History Branch, MACV, *Command History, 1968, Vol. I*, DTIC, p. 529.

<sup>430</sup> F. T. McNamara, pp. 77-8.

<sup>431</sup> D. Burnham, “Dick Burnham,” in H. Maurer, ed., *Strange Ground* (New York, 1989), pp. 308-9. For how Burnham became the senior advisor in Kien Hoa province, see Komer, *New Model*, p. 213.

months.” With their greater discretionary income, peasants were for the first time buying sewing machines and bicycles, and replacing their “rags [with] new clothes.” With more cash working through the system, businesses were started, and some entrepreneurs bought taxis. Burnham attributed this transformation to the “better security” and American help, and he too saw a political impact. With the new prosperity, the people viewed the Communists as unwanted troublemakers. This was just in that one district, though. When Burnham left for good in 1968, most of the province was still quite insecure, but he “could travel without a convoy to the two [districts] where you needed a convoy before.” “It still wasn't safe to go to the other five,” he said, “but within a couple of years, that [too] was all resolved.” Later, he said, “you could travel everywhere in the province,” and to Burnham that meant “it was pacified.”<sup>432</sup>

### **Security in 1968**

As the last chapter explained, General Westmoreland’s “basic strategic concept” for late 1967 and early 1968 had two components: On the one hand, US forces were to “invade enemy base areas, destroy or capture enemy materials and facilities, and defeat enemy organized units,” and on the other, they were to “expand and accelerate the pacification program.” He stressed, though, that the purpose of the former was to provide a “protective shield” for the latter. Likewise, the combined US-Vietnamese campaign plan for 1968 directed the Vietnamese corps commanders to “protect the population, resources and...pacification activities” by saturating their areas with “day and night patrolling, ambushes, and other anti-guerrilla tactics.” Westmoreland reexamined the strategy after Tet, and on 12 March informed his counterparts that the “mission, objectives, and goals remained valid.” Even when the Communists launched another offensive in early May, Westmoreland continued to emphasize pacification, telling the senior American general in the I Corps area that “pacification operations [were] inseparable from the [military] offensive,” were to be taken just as seriously, and that military operations were intended to provide “breathing room [for] pacification.” Despite the fact that the historiography entirely overlooks this, it should be clear that Westmoreland’s

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<sup>432</sup> Burnham, pp. 306-9. For another description of how the agricultural development in Kien Hoa moved peasant farmers from “subsistence farm[ing]” to relative affluence see Harter, pp. 56-7.

strategic framework was constructed entirely around pacification, and that even the attrition strategy was intended to enable it.<sup>433</sup>

Even apart from Tet, there were places where combat made development difficult. James Landberg was on an advisory team near the DMZ where the problem was attacks from North Vietnamese regulars. He recalled “big battles” throughout 1968, and each night tanks protected his compound, which had a large “barbed wire fence and minefields all around for hundreds of yards.”<sup>434</sup> Dennis Harter worked at the other end of the country in Kien Hoa, which he believed to be “one of the most insecure provinces in the...country.” This was the province where Dick Burnham was the senior advisor, and except for that one district, it probably was less secure than most. A large number of “main force VC units” were still active after Tet, and as Burnham explained, there were many areas government troops avoided. There was also an American unit, but Harter thought it hurt rather than helped the pacification effort; it “produced lots of ‘death and destruction’” on its operations, and its commander “didn’t seem to care about civilian casualties and chalked up everyone in black pajamas as VC.” Such comments were not unusual, which suggests that even as Westmoreland preached pacification, some of his commanders had retained a World War Two mindset and had difficulty seeing what they did in the context of winning “hearts and minds.”

General Abrams took Westmoreland’s place in July 1968. On 18 August, he emphasized to his subordinates that Vietnamese territorials should be dominating the countryside through “aggressive patrolling and night ambushes.” He apparently knew by this point that his own counterparts at the top of the Vietnamese chain of command could not be counted on to ensure that happened, so he ordered advisors “to exercise all their skills and energies” to goad the Vietnamese into performing.<sup>435</sup> Despite the improvements in the territorial army, too few of its units were conducting the patrols and ambushes that the campaign plan specified, and that was because Vietnamese officers were not supervising. Abrams thought he could mitigate that by having the advisors who were down at the unit level pressure the most junior commanders to perform a task that they were disinclined to do, and that their own supervisors were not making them do. Nine days later,

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<sup>433</sup> Military History Branch, MACV, *Command History, 1968, Vol. I*, pp. 15, 19-22, 30.

<sup>434</sup> Landberg, pp. 26-7.

<sup>435</sup> Military History Branch, MACV, *Command History, 1968, Vol. I*, pp. 30-1.

Abrams reminded his immediate subordinates that the Vietnamese decision to withdraw troops from rural areas during Tet “to protect towns and cities” had caused “a considerable setback to the pacification effort,” and he directed “advisors at all levels” to “impress on their counterparts” that this must not happen again.<sup>436</sup> It is clear that Abrams and his staff could get Saigon to issue orders, but could not get them to enforce them. Given the weakness of the Vietnamese chain of command his focus on the near term is understandable, but it was at the expense of preparing the Vietnamese to stand on their own.

Komer continued to press his territorial army improvement program, which Westmoreland had made one of MACV’s priorities for the year.<sup>437</sup> The force continued to grow, and each month more units had gone through training programs and been issued American rifles.<sup>438</sup> Even though the advisors who were now with the territorial army rotated from one unit to the next, they were having a profound impact as they taught tactics, accompanied their counterparts on operations, and called in combat aviation support that was otherwise unavailable. They were limited in what they could accomplish, though, because of the dysfunction of the Vietnamese chain of command. They had no authority over their counterparts, but if the chain of command had been functioning properly, they could have served solely as technical advisors and needed none.

Even with their weaknesses, as the territorials got better, the poor performance of the regulars was more noticeable. Major Barron thought the territorials in his district were much more productive than the regulars, and he found it “just astonishing” that the regiment in his area “literally never did anything,” and that not one of its officers had been killed or wounded.<sup>439</sup> This was now common sentiment among advisors who saw both types of units. If a regiment of regulars was not contributing to the pacification effort, the Vietnamese division and corps commanders (as well as their advisors) would have known that, and it is therefore quite clear that the Vietnamese generals were not supervising their subordinates. It is just as clear, though, that the American generals who advised them were failing to get them to do so. Meanwhile, CORDS was holding relatively junior advisors

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<sup>436</sup> Ibid, p. 32.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid, p. 21.

<sup>438</sup> See e.g. Barron, p. 38.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid, p. 32.

like Barron responsible for prodding their counterparts into action, and for making progress even though they had no relationship with the regulars and only the power of their relationship, whatever that might be, to influence their own counterparts.

Another development was the advent of a nationwide village militia program. The territorial army would never be large enough to counter a surge like the Tet Offensive, and on top of that, many territorials had been distracted by the presence of their families during the attacks. Komer concluded that villagers needed to be able to protect themselves. Diem had rejected the concept in the early 1960s, concerned that armed villagers might threaten his rule, but on Komer's recommendation Thieu embraced it. Tens of thousands of peasants joined the new Peoples Self Defense Forces (PSDF). Some Americans saw them as unpaid territorials.<sup>440</sup> They could not have substituted for trained soldiers, but they could stand guard and report what they saw. Colby and Vann preferred to emphasize their political significance, arguing that they were armed not so much to fight, but because standing guard for the government with a rifle in hand announced to the village that they were on the government's side. Vann had observed that in areas that were truly pacified the people had rejected the Communists and openly aligned themselves with the government, the proof of that being that they reported the Communists to authorities when they had information on their whereabouts. He saw the PSDF in the same light. Indeed, that a farmer would give up one night a week to stand guard does suggest that he had rejected Communist rule.<sup>441</sup>

The Phoenix program officially started in 1968. The Americans had tried to neutralize the shadow governments for some time, but, according to MACV, their efforts had been "hampered by a lack of understanding and direction of the program by the Vietnamese." On 1 July, President Thieu signed a decree formalizing the government's approach, and called it *Phuong Hoang*, which meant "All Seeing Bird." Not having an exact English match, the Americans called it Phoenix.<sup>442</sup> There will be more on this in subsequent chapters.

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<sup>440</sup> See e.g. J.B. Engle, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (1988), p. 21.

<sup>441</sup> *Abrams Tapes*, pp. 50-1.

<sup>442</sup> Military History Branch, MACV, *Command History, 1968, Vol. I*, p. 520; Dillery, p. 27, referred to the Phoenix portion of his district advisory team as "the intelligence presence."

The implementation of Komer's many initiatives was contingent on Vietnamese officials approving them. When he made a proposal, they might respond in one of three ways: they could embrace the proposal and implement it; they could appear to embrace it and issue orders to implement it, but never follow up to ensure they were obeyed; or they could reject it outright. In the latter case, it appears that Komer sometimes tried to have his way anyway. Though Colonel Bolté admired Komer, he complained of his tendency to think that if he could not get his counterparts "to issue some order to the province chief, he would try to get it done through the advisory chain." This would not work, said Bolté, because "there wasn't anything that province chief was going to do, no matter what I told him, if he didn't get the word from Saigon."<sup>443</sup>

Bolté's words suggest that a province chief who received an order from Saigon would have taken it seriously, but we know it was not as simple as that. In fact, it appears that if province chiefs knew they would be held accountable for obeying orders, they did take them seriously, but that if nobody checked to verify that they were being obeyed, they did not take them seriously. Indeed, the lack of follow-up seems to have been the signal that the orders were not really important. This behavior is probably universal rather than unique to Vietnam. There is an American army saying that, "An organization does well only those things the boss checks."<sup>444</sup>

The matter of night ambushes is the best example. As we saw above, the combined campaign plan clearly specified that these were to be a priority for all units. It is likely that the Americans drafted that campaign plan and the Vietnamese then signed it. Even though it was prescriptive for Vietnamese commanders, most did not follow up to ensure their subordinates were actually doing the one thing that could have kept guerrillas out at night. While Americans viewed night ambushes as of overriding importance in both doctrine and practice, in effect the Vietnamese acknowledged them in doctrine but ignored them in practice.<sup>445</sup> Apparently because the Vietnamese generals were not making their commanders conduct the ambushes, Abrams and Komer directed the advisors to those units to do so. However, because the advisors did not have the authority to make the Vietnamese do anything, it is intuitively obvious that it was at the top that American pressure should have been

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<sup>443</sup> Hemingway.

<sup>444</sup> Clarke, p. 1.

<sup>445</sup> On the American emphasis, see e.g. Olsen, p. 10.

applied. Though government troops were loath to operate in the dark, the Communists embraced doing so, because that was when they were most effective. That the proven effectiveness of a tactic was not sufficient to persuade the South's army to adopt it is another indictment of the Vietnamese chain of command.

Unit advisors resorted to various means to goad their counterparts into action. This often worked to some degree, but two negative consequences should have been obvious. First, the Vietnamese sensed that their own supervisors did not really care, and therefore accommodated their advisors in a pro forma way rather than with genuine enthusiasm. Second, the Vietnamese chain of command never fully developed, because both Americans and Vietnamese relied on unit advisors as an adjunct to the Vietnamese chain of command.

The corruption that advisors encountered while working on civilian development was just as prevalent on the security side of pacification. As General Thang had confided to Edward Lansdale in 1967, making money was the first priority of most Vietnamese commanders, and if that interfered with the war, so be it; the Americans would take care of the war anyway. That this attitude helps explain why entire regiments of regulars could opt out of the war and why the pacification effort moved so slowly is generally overlooked in the literature.

Major Barron said that because Vietnamese officers with their immaculate uniforms and air of confidence looked professional, Americans assumed they were, but it did not take long to realize that things were not as they seemed. In Barron's province, the deputy chief ran a black market operation from his office, and certainly the province chief knew that. Barron's deputy, a Vietnamese-speaking FSO named Ellis Wisner, could understand the office chatter, and assured Barron that corruption touched everything. A villager could pay an official "to live in a certain place" or to have his son not be drafted, and the district chief would pad his roster because the government gave him a cash payroll based on the number of troops he reported. The "ghost soldiers" became more than a theoretical problem, said Barron, when a one-hundred-man company was assigned a tough mission and had only sixty real soldiers.<sup>446</sup>

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<sup>446</sup> Barron, pp. 31-2, 43-4.

Those at the top set the tone, but the corruption extended to the lowest levels. The Vietnamese soldiers who drove Barron's jeep filled their tanks at an American pump, sold the fuel, and returned for more.<sup>447</sup> Bolté discovered that his Vietnamese military driver was using his jeep as a taxi when he was not around. Bolté understood that a province chief had to pay the corps commander \$16,000 to keep his job, and that the practice affected everyone since the province chief then needed to earn "a return on his investment." Whenever money changed hands it was common for the higher official to skim ten percent, which Bolté had heard was culturally acceptable.<sup>448</sup>

Advisors found themselves in a moral dilemma. Americans would go to jail for such conduct, said Barron, but "you cooperate in the petty graft" to build the relationships that enable you "to do some good later on." In other words, you "do a small evil [to] further a greater good."<sup>449</sup> It was Komer who had put Barron in this position by demanding that he motivate his counterpart to take particular actions when he had no authority over the counterpart. To get his counterpart to do something that he was not disposed to do, Barron, like other advisors, had to rely on any power his "relationship" might bestow. It often came down to friendship, and under such circumstances it is understandable that he would not want to rock the boat.

### **Measuring Progress and Effectiveness**

The last chapter explained how the Hamlet Evaluation System was used to monitor whether CORDS was succeeding in a particular hamlet. Both sides had the same objectives: hold what they had, take control of contested areas, and as resources became available, tackle the tougher areas that were in the other side's grip. The system divided the entire country into government-held, contested, and Communist-held areas.<sup>450</sup> Those under government control were classified as A, B, or C, with C considered minimally acceptable. Contested hamlets were either D or E, and hamlets under Communist control—those that friendly troops could not enter without risking a firefight—were not graded. District advisors did not assign these grades. They were to visit each of their hamlets on a monthly basis to answer a series of questions, and a computer then determined the grade.

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<sup>447</sup> Ibid, p. 43.

<sup>448</sup> Hemingway.

<sup>449</sup> Barron, p. 43.

<sup>450</sup> J. Wright, pt. 1, p. 28.

Such a system would have been difficult if not impossible before the advent of CORDS, which for the first time gave a single manager the potential to orchestrate the various American agencies operating within his district. Even though everything eventually depended on his counterpart, the district senior advisor was expected to use that power to advance pacification, with the understanding that improvement, stagnation, or regression would be reflected in the scores. The HES was never intended to grade the advisor's performance, but understandably and perhaps inevitably many felt that it did. This inquiry has come across no evidence of attempts by CORDS, MACV, or the embassy to push higher grades than were justified, though some mid-level supervisors may have done so.

Numerous critics have pointed out the problems with this system, but none has offered an alternative. The HES may be seen within the context of the Pentagon's overall approach to management during the McNamara era using such analytical tools as the "planning, programming, and budgeting system" (PPBS), Rand studies, and systems analysis, and it is tempting for some to throw out the baby with the bathwater based on that association. However, some method of evaluating the progress of the various programs was necessary. The ultimate measure of whether they were achieving their desired effect was that the people rejected the insurgents and sided with—or at least tolerated—the government, and could not be coerced into supporting the other side. That was what the HES attempted to measure.

What did advisors think? Stan Ifshin visited as many of his thirty hamlets as he could each month to answer such questions as, "Were there VC in the town during the day? Were there VC in the town during the night? Were there tax collectors with VC infrastructure, when is the last time they were there?... What's the last time there was a military incident?" "I was going to call them as I saw them and be just absolutely accurate," he said, though he acknowledged "a certain amount of grade creep." He said that after being there a while and reflecting on "all the hard work" he had done, it was easy to rationalize that certainly "things must have gotten better...so where this used to be a C, maybe

it's become a B."<sup>451</sup> Though an objective computer program calculated the final grade, the subjectivity entered the system in the way that advisors answered the set of standard questions.

Norm Olsen, the province senior advisor, thought that even with its problems, the system was "useful in showing trends and identifying problems and successes." If the number of incidents "were declining," for example, "one was doing well; if the number of incidents was going up, it was an ominous warning" that adjustments needed to be made.<sup>452</sup> Carl Dillery also provides a province perspective. He described the system as an aid that determined "which hamlets were safe and which weren't." From the computer-generated scores, "beautiful maps" were produced, "with 'our villages' in blue and theirs in red." However, since "almost no place" was really "safe at night," he suspected that the system "probably wasn't a very good tool and overestimated [government] control."<sup>453</sup> Robert Komer had an answer for that, though. He knew there was inflation, but used the system primarily to show trends. He could then make inquiries and re-allocate resources as necessary.

### **Conclusion**

Nineteen sixty-eight had started with an air of optimism and confidence that with its new structure and leadership, America's support to pacification was finally on track. Then Tet hit, and the country reeled for months, with little work in the countryside until late summer. However, Tet set the Communists back even more. When the Viet Cong came out of hiding to conduct the attacks, they did not get the popular uprising they had expected and therefore suffered devastating casualties. Furthermore, their violence alienated many whom might otherwise have been sympathetic. Both of those helped the pacification effort. Even though Tet has dominated the narrative, other developments in 1968 included the continued improvement of the territorial army, fielding of mobile advisory teams, and growth of the RD Cadre. We will now turn again to our four questions to examine whether Komer's eighteen months in Vietnam had been able to address Secretary McNamara's concerns from two years earlier.

Had CORDS solved the problem of interagency unity of effort? This was the new organization's first full year, and by every indication it had achieved the elusive interagency unity of

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<sup>451</sup> Ifshin, p. 22.

<sup>452</sup> Olsen, p. 11.

<sup>453</sup> Dillery, p. 28.

effort. For the first time there was an advocate for pacification in the inner sanctum of MACV, and a single person in every province and district capital who was responsible for taking a holistic approach to pacification at that level. The person at the top of each integrated team now had responsibility for the consolidated pacification effort of all US agencies operating within that geographic entity, and his principal tool for carrying out that responsibility was the Hamlet Evaluation System.

Had CORDS discovered the formula for winning the people to the government's side in the midst of internal conflict? American advisors now acknowledged that earning that allegiance was of paramount importance, but actually doing so continued to prove difficult. Most peasants had no practical relationship with the central government, and therefore no emotional connection. Komer continued to act on the premise that development efforts were vacuous without the foundation of effective security at the village level. That was perhaps one of Robert McNamara's top concerns, and providing that security remained Komer's top priority. The quantitative and qualitative improvements in the territorial army were making a difference, but even the mobile advisory teams, better weapons, and increased training could not make up for the lack of supervision that allowed units to conduct the indispensable night ambushes poorly if at all.

The question of whether security and development alone were sufficient to generate loyalty remained to be answered. Did the peasants perceive that giving them "things" was just an attempt to bribe them? Did they not need to see themselves as empowered politically and economically? These questions continued to be asked, and CORDS worked to address the concern through local elections and self-help projects. As an institution, though, the advisory effort does not seem to have been asking how detrimental the government corruption was to winning hearts and minds.

The practice of using one's office for gain continued to be as egregious and ubiquitous in 1968 as it had been before, with the same results. Victims included the peasants who were intended to benefit from the American development effort, and the effectiveness of the government itself as its executives were distracted by their attempts at personal enrichment. As we saw in the last chapter, within its first months CORDS tackled the problem of corruption, but did so without treating it as a system. If Komer now recognized something of the systemic nature of the corruption, he continued to act as if he did not. He approached the problem in piecemeal fashion, feebly pushing to have

exceptionally corrupt, incompetent, or unproductive individuals removed rather than aggressively pushing for reform of the entire officer corps, and his attempts were inevitably inadequate.

Corrupt officers tended to be ineffective officers. In late 1966, Robert McNamara had warned that the US must “shock [the Vietnamese] out of their present pattern of behavior.” Under Komer’s leadership of CORDS, had the US “found the...catalyst” for getting them to approach pacification in a disciplined way? Were Komer’s methods improving their “attitude and conduct” and correcting their “weak[ness] in dedication, direction and discipline?”<sup>454</sup> Although the cumulative effect of Komer’s initiatives was substantial improvement, neither he nor the MACV commander had found the catalyst that would result in a top-down change “in dedication, direction, and discipline” that would affect the entire force. Indeed, it does not appear that the US even attempted such change in 1968. The failure of supervisors to perform their supervisory duties continued to be a profound problem. District and province chiefs either failed to see problems that were clear to their advisors or pretended not to, and when their advisors tried to goad them into action, they went through the motions, but their orders implementing the needed action often seemed superficial gestures.

It is in this chapter that we start to suspect that the biggest hindrance the advisory effort faced was not the Vietnamese practices themselves, but how CORDS tried to deal with them. Even though the problem of corruption originated at the top, the advisors there targeted it in the middle. Those same advisors tried to address the dysfunctional Vietnamese chain of command, which by definition starts at the top, by mitigating its dysfunction at the bottom. Any improvement was always limited and temporary because it came despite the Vietnamese chain of command rather than because of it. This raises conceptual questions about the proper role of an advisory effort. Is an advisor to teach, coach, counsel, and mentor, or is he also to motivate, inspire, and enforce? We will consider this question in upcoming chapters.

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<sup>454</sup> McNamara, “Actions Recommended,” p. 732.

## **Chapter 7**

### **The Accelerated Pacification Campaign**

This chapter discusses the Accelerated Pacification Campaign, a mammoth endeavor that students of Vietnam have generally misunderstood. Although it lasted just three months, it is important to this thesis for several reasons: it was the first truly coherent nationwide pacification campaign; it served as a model for subsequent campaigns; and it is a story that historians omit, or tell without context. Karnow, for example, makes no mention of the campaign, and his readers would be unaware that there were attempts to pacify the countryside after 1968. Herring does better, but misses pacification's strategic importance and central place. As this chapter will explain, his assertion that the campaign was "a crash program to secure as much of the countryside as possible in the event serious negotiations should begin" is a mischaracterization.<sup>455</sup>

From March through August 1968, CORDS worked on recovering from Tet by assisting refugees and managing the reconstruction effort. Some pacification workers were again pursuing civilian development by August, but in many areas both Vietnamese and Americans were reluctant to resume work, imagining that the VC who had been pushed out of the urban areas were now lurking in the countryside. Territorial troops who should have been protecting hamlets were "in and around province and district capitals in static roles," reported an American colonel, and General Abrams exclaimed that getting them out where they belonged seemed "next to impossible."<sup>456</sup> Komer, though, sensed that the VC were so weakened from Tet that they were licking their wounds in the jungle rather than occupying hamlets.

### **Planning**

By September, Komer thought the country had recovered sufficiently that CORDS could shift back to pacification, and, based on his conclusion that "the Viet Cong [simply were] not out there," directed Clay McManaway and Robert Montague to plan a "pacification offensive" to exploit Communist losses. The notion of pacification seemed defensive to McManaway, and they wrestled over what form an offensive might take, but in a few days presented Komer a draft plan that sent

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<sup>455</sup> Herring, *Longest War*, p. 231.

<sup>456</sup> Jordan, C.E., "Debriefing Report," OACofS, CORDS, HQ MACV (10 November 1968), DTIC, p. 8; *Abrams Tapes*, p. 825.

forces into specific hamlets in every province. Not everyone was immediately on board. John Vann argued that they would be “overextending ourselves,” and wanted something slower and more methodical.<sup>457</sup>

In September, six weeks before the campaign was to start, Abrams gathered his lieutenants to hear their views, and some expressed concerns. General George Eckhardt, senior advisor to IV Corps, was skeptical of the ambitious timeline given the slowness with which the Vietnamese typically moved. He also noted that since there had to be “somebody with a gun on the ground” to protect development, the Delta would need an additional 24,000 territorial troops. Furthermore, the campaign could not succeed unless the US could “get the [Vietnamese] to do their part,” which suggested that he did not think this routinely happened. Abrams responded that Thieu would be on board, but that the real challenge would be getting Thieu’s commanders to embrace the campaign and understand the problem was only partially military. That, said Abrams, would require advisors “preaching,” “pressing,” and “articulating” that point to their counterparts.<sup>458</sup> Though subtle, Abrams’ comment is important for this dissertation, because it is an acknowledgement that the senior American advisor had concluded (a) that the top Vietnamese generals in the field—the corps and division commanders—would not be motivated by duty; (b) that Thieu and the senior generals in Saigon would be unable to motivate them; and (c) that American advisors, if they were properly advising, could mitigate those shortcomings of the Vietnamese chain of command. That Abrams saw advisors having a responsibility to motivate their Vietnamese counterparts is a key point.

General William Peers, the senior advisor to II Corps, reminded the group that increasing the number of territorial troops would be difficult. While he did not explain his comment, probably assuming that the others would understand, three factors made growing the territorial army difficult, especially in less than two months: first, they would be competing with both the regular army and Communist conscription for manpower; second, territorial units came from their own communities, so new units were not normally formed until the government had seized an area using other forces; and even then, training the new soldiers took time. An alternative, Peers said, might be to “push a little

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<sup>457</sup> McManaway, p. 17.

<sup>458</sup> *Abrams Tapes*, p. 49.

harder on [the] People's Self-Defense Force," the militia units that had been created in the aftermath of Tet. If they could "take over their own villages," the territorials could "expand further into the countryside." In other words, move territorials from their home territory into new areas. General Robert Cushman, who advised the I Corps commander, thought the proposal properly emphasized "the political side of [the] war." Everyone but Vann seemed to some degree on board.<sup>459</sup>

Vann, now the pacification director in II Corps, explained that he wholeheartedly endorsed the plan's "direction," because it addressed "the basic problems," but that he had "serious reservations as to the capability of the Vietnamese to be brought aboard and move out this rapidly." One of the few senior Americans who had been there during Strategic Hamlet, he feared another rush to failure. "As you know," he said, "we have always vacillated between whether we do the job well, and not have to do it again, or whether we go for a quick fix." The "quick fix" would be appropriate if a "cessation of hostilities" were imminent, but since nobody was suggesting that, he thought "something like this" should stretch out over several years rather than three months.<sup>460</sup> Given that LBJ had recently refused Westmorland's request for more troops, it is worth noting that the US military was still in the conflict to win and most probably expected that to take considerably more time.

Abrams, who once told a visitor that it was a "cardinal rule" that "no program [was] going to fly unless the president puts his personal stamp on it," approved Komer's plan, knowing that they still had to sell it to the Vietnamese. Both Abrams and Bunker were convinced that Thieu was in firm control of the government, personally involved in its management, and enthusiastic about pacification. Indeed, Abrams thought that Thieu's understanding of pacification exceeded that of "any other Vietnamese."<sup>461</sup> William Colby recalled that Thieu, having observed the "unified management structure the Americans had finally produced," now grasped that he needed something similar. As he approved the campaign, he directed the formation of a Central Pacification and Development Council to manage it in parallel with CORDS, and appointed a major general to direct the council, provided him with his "own integrated staff," and authorized him to "speak with the...authority of the Prime Minister." Colby later described the combined work of the Central Council and CORDS as an

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<sup>459</sup> Ibid, p. 50.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid, pp. 50-1.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid, p. 106.

integrated “piece of complicated and sensitive machinery” that planned, supervised, and evaluated the campaign. They used automated systems to “identify weak spots and direct attention and resources to them,” said Colby.<sup>462</sup> With American and Vietnamese unified structures working in tandem, it was now up to effective management to achieve results.

Colby said the campaign was conceptually simple—“spread out...into the countryside.”<sup>463</sup> From the perspective of Robert Boettcher, a young FSO on a province team, government forces would “regain control over large areas that had come under the sway of the VC,” and American and Vietnamese civilians would then come “with self-help programs.”<sup>464</sup> There were precise, quantifiable goals in categories ranging from village and hamlet elections and governance to militia recruiting, defections, VC infrastructure neutralizations, and refugee resettlement.<sup>465</sup> The one tool the government did not have in targeted hamlets that were VC-controlled or heavily contested was its own infrastructure, and that was where the RD Cadre came in. These armed teams could function as government until the actual governments could be established.

There had been other nationwide pacification campaigns—Civic Action, Agglomeration, Agrovillage, Strategic Hamlet, and Chien Thang—but this was the first one planned and directed by a unified Vietnamese interagency effort synchronized with and supported by an American organization with its own unified structure. Management of so complex an endeavor would be a challenge. The Hamlet Evaluation System served as a management tool on the front end to identify hamlets to target; during the campaign to assess progress and make adjustments; and at the conclusion to evaluate results and determine the way ahead. Without the HES and the similar Territorial Forces Evaluation System (TFES) that graded territorial units, said Komer, “we could never have managed effectively the incredibly fragmented set of local efforts down at the rural cutting edge.”<sup>466</sup>

Another function of the two American-run evaluation systems was to “wr[i]te the report cards on the Vietnamese,” Komer explained. He provided each new report to Thieu, the prime minister, and

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<sup>462</sup> Colby, pp. 260, 268-9. See also West (p. 182), who wrote of Cadre sent back into a village after a Communist attack resulted in an HES downgrade.

<sup>463</sup> *Abrams Tapes*, p. 105.

<sup>464</sup> Boettcher, p. 293.

<sup>465</sup> *Abrams Tapes*, pp. 105-6.

<sup>466</sup> Komer, letter to Channon, p. 2.

other high-level decision-makers, and was convinced they valued them. Indeed, the month before the campaign, Thieu informed his top assistants that it “would be ‘scored’ by the American system to ensure that it really took place.”<sup>467</sup> Clearly Thieu did not want a repeat of Strategic Hamlet whereby province chiefs lied about progress and both Diem and top Americans accepted their reports at face value. Thieu’s comment, though, reveals two important points: first, that he did not fully trust his subordinates, and second, that he felt an important American role was helping him compensate for that.

### **Execution**

The campaign began on 1 November, and Komer’s suspicions about the dearth of VC were soon validated. Abrams observed that in some villages that were identified as VC-controlled in the HES “there weren’t any [VC] at all.”<sup>468</sup> In such cases it was the opposite of grade inflation. On 6 November, Komer left to take the post of ambassador to Turkey, and Colby would run CORDS until June 1971.<sup>469</sup>

How did the campaign appear to advisors in the field? Both province chiefs and their advisors felt pressure to achieve results, but advisors generally performed the same tasks they had all along. The campaign drew on lessons from Strategic Hamlet, Chien Thang, and Hop Tac, and relied on the clear-hold-build paradigm that had been around for years, though the concepts were more fully developed and the tools more plentiful. James Landberg, an FSO serving as a district senior advisor, described what happened at his level: After troops cleared an area presumed to be hostile, civilian advisors and their Vietnamese counterparts stepped in to “reestablish some kind of government control, rebuild a school, bring in some schoolteachers.” Where security was adequate, authorities encouraged the Tet refugees to return to their homes, and Landberg’s team provided construction materials and helped rebuild the “small bridges and culverts” leading into the villages.<sup>470</sup>

James Engle became the Phu Yen province senior advisor in the midst of the campaign. The province team, six district teams, and various MATs were manned by 250 soldiers and ten of the

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<sup>467</sup> Komer to Channon, p. 2.

<sup>468</sup> *Abrams Tapes*, p. 825; see also McManaway, p. 17.

<sup>469</sup> Colby, pp. 257-8; 329-30.

<sup>470</sup> Landberg, p. 28.

twenty-three civilians he was authorized. As in other provinces, when his territorials moved into the targeted hamlets they discovered that “the Viet Cong [had been] almost wiped out,” and “very rapidly got hamlets back.” By the time he left Vietnam eighteen months later, just “three or four” of the province’s 100 hamlets remained outside government control—“at least in the daytime,” he said—and the progress was despite “the ineptness” of the province chief” and in large part because of “the initiative of our advisory teams.”<sup>471</sup> The advisors were apparently doing more than advising; indeed, Engle’s advisors rather than the Vietnamese corps command and control system were apparently the glue holding things together and advancing Komer’s agenda.

Engle’s words suggest that the province chief lost control of his hamlets at night. As we have seen, this was a common problem. According to Engle, “every hamlet was supposed to be defended at night” to prevent guerrillas from sneaking in under cover of darkness to enforce the shadow government’s decrees.<sup>472</sup> To be properly defended meant that a hamlet had alert troops in ambush positions to interdict guerrillas on the way in. If guerrillas could make it into Engle’s hamlets because the ambush patrols were not in place or because they were asleep on the job, that was *prima facie* evidence of poor leadership, and that suggests a problem at the top of the advisory effort rather than the bottom. How so? Engle’s assessment of his counterpart helps answer the question.

According to Engle, the province chief was the principal determinant of whether his troops were good or bad. A good province chief would aggressively seek out enemy units hiding in his province, and a bad one would not. A good one would issue “proper orders” to his subordinates and then “kick them in the behind if they didn’t do their duty,” and a bad one did not. Unfortunately, said Engle, his counterpart was a bad one, and in that sense he was typical; only the exceptional Vietnamese commander actually supervised his subordinates.<sup>473</sup> Fundamentally, the problem was one of supervision by the corps commander. If a province chief was not doing his job, as in Engle’s case, the corps commander could have him sacked, demoted, or court martialed, and if he did none of those, he was condoning his “inept” behavior. The young Americans who were advising the units that the province chief was failing to supervise—the units that were to actually carry out the ambushes—

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<sup>471</sup> Engle, pp. 21-2.

<sup>472</sup> Ibid, p. 21.

<sup>473</sup> Ibid, p. 21.

were greatly limited in what they could do to correct a problem that the province chief and corps commander seemed to have little interest in correcting.

At its core, the Accelerated Pacification Campaign was about good governance at the local level, and there were soon indicators that the campaign was going well in the aggregate, but not addressing the impact of corruption on governance. A young FSO named Lawrence Hydle had concluded during his first tour in 1966–1967, that government “corruption and inefficiency” were among the big problems.<sup>474</sup> He was back in 1968 to work for John Vann as a political advisor, and part of his job was talking to Vietnamese in various walks of life to form an opinion of the political situation. He concluded from his conversations that the problems of corruption and incompetence remained large.

Many advisors would have agreed with Hydle’s Vietnamese contacts, but the debate within the US mission was over what, if anything, to do about it. Hydle thought the problem was so serious that the US “should [at least] try to fight” it by forcing the Vietnamese to make structural changes that would impede the behavior. He eventually concluded, though, that top American officials in Saigon were so committed to defeating the Communists that they preferred “to downplay the talk about corruption [rather than] doing something about it.” In other words, senior Americans thought corruption had a small enough impact on the war that it should not be permitted to destabilize that effort.<sup>475</sup> As this dissertation argues, though, the failure to adequately address the problem was one of the major failings of the advisory effort, and probably played a major role in the ultimate outcome of the war, as will be discussed more fully in the last two chapters.

The fifty-nine-man RD Cadre teams played a central role in the campaign. At the start of the year, these teams had been deployed throughout the country, but in response to Tet the government had pulled them into the province and district capitals. In May they “were sent back into the field to resume their work,” reported General Eckhardt. The number of teams grew throughout 1968, and they performed government functions until elections could be held and governments established in the newly occupied hamlets. In the Delta—the region that was the campaign’s priority—the number of

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<sup>474</sup> L.H. Hydle, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (1994), p. 8.

<sup>475</sup> Ibid, p. 18.

teams grew from 176 at the start of the year to 300 by the end. In January and February 1969, as the government transitioned from Accelerated Pacification to the 1969 pacification campaign, each fifty-nine-man team would be split into two thirty-man teams, the security platoon eliminated on the assumption that the territorial forces were now plentiful enough to protect the Cadre.<sup>476</sup>

Most of the teams deployed to hamlets that had never been under government control, worked for one month, and moved on. Eckhardt reported that in IV Corps, they “successfully reclaimed hamlets [that had been lost] during the Communist Tet and post-Tet offensives [and] also raised the HES rating of many other hamlets to a solid ‘C’”—an achievement made possible by the failure of the VC to oppose them.<sup>477</sup> The Viet Cong were still licking their wounds from Tet when the suddenness of the RD Cadre deployments across the country caught them by surprise and overwhelmed their ability to respond.

Attempting to capture the imagination of the people, CORDS had declared August 1968 “Self-Defense Month,” and used the announcement as “the kickoff” for the People's Self-Defense Forces.<sup>478</sup> There had been various experiments with such civilian militias over the years, but the government had aggressively taken the program national after Tet demonstrated that villagers needed to assume some responsibility for protecting themselves. As Engle said, the territorials in his province were spread so thin that just a handful defended some villages. “That wasn't enough,” he said, and the new militias were there to “back [them] up.”<sup>479</sup> Some Americans wrongly assumed that these unpaid civilians could perform the same tasks as the territorials, but the idea was that if they encountered guerrillas they were to call the nearest territorials rather than fight, and they were more an armed neighborhood watch than soldiers. Vann and Colby saw them as a manifestation of political commitment.<sup>480</sup> There were firefights between militia patrols and guerrillas. As the campaign was starting, *Time* ran a story about an American-trained seven-man patrol in Phu Binh province that

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<sup>476</sup> Eckhardt, p. 39.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid, p. 39.

<sup>478</sup> Komer, *New Model*, pp. 184-5.

<sup>479</sup> Engle, p. 21.

<sup>480</sup> *Abrams Tapes*, pp. 50-1.

ambushed twenty guerrillas. The article described them as poorly armed “ragtag villagers” who had set an ambush in the mud, rain, and darkness, but that was often all it took to stop infiltrators.<sup>481</sup>

Most of the PSDF militias were probably not as effective as the one in the magazine article, but even the best were of limited use at the beginning of the campaign. Once organized, they protected their own homes and families, and they generally had jobs, so they could not be brought in from elsewhere. A village had to be under some semblance of government control before the Cadre could form a new militia unit, but once formed, they could function as part of the holding force.

Although the campaign caught the Communists flat-footed, they attempted to react, and three weeks into the campaign they launched a propaganda offensive to mitigate the damage. Their first radio broadcast was called “The True Nature of the So-called Urgent Pacification Plan of the U.S. Aggressor and the Treacherous Thieu-Ky-Huong Clique.” In January, a MACV briefer informed Abrams that the propaganda had “reached a volume and pitch of hysteria unusual even for Communists”; each day they broadcast “the number of people [the government had allegedly] burned, raped, or buried alive as part of the...campaign.”<sup>482</sup> Although Accelerated Pacification would conclude at the end of January 1969, it was immediately replaced by a similar-looking campaign, and an intelligence officer would brief Abrams in August 1969 that a captured Communist order directed all subordinates “to increase attacks in order to disrupt the Accelerated Pacification plan, and to counter the [psychological warfare] effort and Chieu Hoi program.”<sup>483</sup>

On 11 January, three weeks before the campaign was to end, General Abrams again gathered his top lieutenants. A briefer gave the latest HES scores—many showing improvement—and stated that the campaign had “provided the essential umbrella under which pacification forces can function, and...maintained constant pressure on the enemy’s entire military and political structure.” The December HES report indicated that 726 of the hamlets targeted by the campaign had “now been upgraded to the relatively secure category.” There were other positive indicators as well, but the briefer’s assertion that “1,204, of 1,216 target hamlets have been entered by [government] security forces,” raises questions: Did the troops simply “enter,” or did they remain there, and if the

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<sup>481</sup> “Phu Vinh’s Irregulars,” *Time*, vol. 92, no. 19 (1968), p. 47.

<sup>482</sup> *Abrams Tapes*, p. 108.

<sup>483</sup> *Ibid*, p. 238.

government troops had forced guerrillas underground, did they still have freedom of movement at night, as was so common in Engle's province? Territorials provided most of the security in the targeted hamlets, the briefer added. How effective were these territorials, who for the most part must have been new?<sup>484</sup> Knowing what we do about the failure to keep guerrillas out of many hamlets at night, these statistics seem inflated but still reflect significant progress; before the campaign many of the referenced hamlets had been under solid VC control, and in others neither side had been in control. Undoubtedly, much of this progress had been made possible by the weakened state of the Viet Cong after Tet, but it would not have occurred without the aggressive campaign and the improved security forces.

Even if the Cadre could operate openly in a newly occupied hamlet, the planned social, economic, and political development was difficult without local government. According to Ambassador Bunker, in January 1969, the campaign had "brought government physically into most of [the] target hamlets." While some had not yet elected local leaders, he said, all were supposed to "by the end of March."<sup>485</sup> However, conducting those elections was easier said than done. Someone considering the village or hamlet chief position in an area recently under the control of the Communists would wonder if government forces were prepared to stay as long as necessary. He knew that entering the political process came with the risk that he and his family would be brutally murdered—beheadings and disembowelments were common—as his neighbors were forced to watch.

Bob Boettcher, an FSO on the Vinh Binh CORDS team, saw such hesitation firsthand. Part of his job was accompanying the province chief to the villages to encourage the political participation Thieu had directed. Boettcher joined the province chief in trying to "explain what elections were [and] who they were going to elect," assuring the villagers "that elections [which they had never before experienced] were really a good thing." The chief, whom Boettcher considered a "buffoon," encouraged peasants to stand for office. Boettcher recalled a village where the province chief asked who was "going to run for village chief," and when no hands went up, he repeated the question. When

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<sup>484</sup> Ibid, pp. 96-7.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid, p. 97.

there were still no volunteers, he insisted that “Somebody's got to run...!” and pointing at several people, said “All right, you, you, and you run for village chief.”<sup>486</sup> This was probably common.

At the 11 January conference, the briefer predicted that by the end of the month “90 percent of the target hamlet population [would be] relatively secure,” and the Chieu Hoi goal of getting 5,000 VC to rally to the government had “already been exceeded,” with 3,146 defecting in December alone, making it the second best month since the program’s inception in 1962. Despite the upbeat tone, not all of the rather arbitrary goals were being met: Phoenix had made “steady progress,” but was not on track to neutralize 12,000 members of the shadow government, and the Peoples Self Defense Force was not going to add 200,000 members to its ranks.<sup>487</sup> Although some thought such goals were capricious, one of their benefits from a managerial standpoint was that missing the mark resulted in analysis of what might need to be changed.

Both Bunker and Abrams considered Thieu’s interest in the campaign the most important factor in its success, and Abrams contrasted it with other American initiatives that lacked such commitment at the top. From the beginning of the campaign, he said, “the president was at the helm,” “up there briefing,” and “knew this whole thing by heart.” “He’d brief the cabinet,” “the Americans,” and anybody else who would listen, and was unbothered that Americans had come up with the idea. He knew it was what Vietnam needed, said Abrams, and poured himself into it. His “personal involvement” included “critiquing [his] province chiefs and corps commanders,” and he “went from one end of the country to the other...encouraging here and cracking the whip there.” Had Thieu not taken this approach the campaign “would have folded a good many times,” said Abrams, and “it would be difficult to overstate [his] role.”<sup>488</sup> All of that is no doubt true, but Abrams seems to have overlooked the fact that true supervision and accountability required more than pep rallies, and that some of Thieu’s “cracking [of] the whip” may have been for show.

In mid-January, Abrams discussed the Viet Cong Infrastructure. He told subordinates that “the real root of [the Communists’] strength” was their shadow government rather than their combat troops, and because the campaign had been successfully targeting them, they would have no choice

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<sup>486</sup> Boettcher, p. 299.

<sup>487</sup> *Abrams Tapes*, p. 97.

<sup>488</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 373, 376.

but “to do something about it.”<sup>489</sup> The Communists had not yet been able to counter Phoenix, and like the campaign in general, seemed perplexed about how to do so.

On 8 February, Colby informed Abrams that President Thieu had just traveled the country to review how the 1968 pacification effort had gone and discuss the 1969 campaign that was just starting. “We were awash in charts, as you can imagine, a lot of statistics,” said Colby, who had accompanied Thieu. One statistic was that the 1968 Rural Development program, which had overlapped with the Accelerated Pacification Campaign, had “met [only] 60-70 percent of its original goals,” but that was attributed to the six-month delay caused by Tet. Accelerated Pacification, he added, “obviously came out to be a considerable success.”<sup>490</sup>

Both sides viewed the 1969 campaign as an extension of Accelerated Pacification and continued to use the term. On 21 February, three weeks after the campaign’s end, Abrams still spoke of it in the present tense, acknowledging that at the grass-roots level there were problems—“a lot [was] slipping by,” “a lot of [the Viet Cong infrastructure] we’re not getting, a lot of things getting screwed up down there [and] they’ve got agents in some parts of the system”—but in the aggregate, he said, the Communists had been unable to halt pacification in its new form.<sup>491</sup>

James Landberg, a district advisor, participated in the entire three-month campaign and most of the one that followed. As he saw it, both were intended “to protect the relatively government-controlled villages” while “expand[ing] the area of government control.” He used the qualifier “relatively,” he said, because the areas the government controlled by day “were not necessarily controlled at night.” Looking at his district in terms of the clear-hold-build paradigm, the clearing went well, but government troops had trouble holding—keeping guerrillas out—at night. Once some form of governance was in place, though, whether permanent or with the RD Cadre temporarily performing that function, the building—the various development projects—could begin.<sup>492</sup> Even if guerrillas could get in only at night, though, they could disrupt the development, and therein lay the

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<sup>489</sup> Ibid, p. 106.

<sup>490</sup> Ibid, p. 122.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid, p. 128.

<sup>492</sup> Landberg, p. 28.

problem with control that was by day only. It was shallow, and officials, schoolteachers, development workers, self-defense forces, and territorials never knew whether they would survive the night.

Not all Americans, therefore, were impressed with the campaign. David Hackworth, a cynical army officer who got in considerable trouble at the end of his career, considered the campaign “the latest hype,” and pointed out that “the pacification ‘hold’ was really only as secure and long as the light of the day.” “Generally speaking,” he added, “the VC still owned 100 percent of the night, at least in the Delta.” As we have seen, this points to a very real problem, even if Hackworth exaggerated. “At this point in the war,” he said, “most of the VC activity had gone back to hit-and-run, small-unit stuff. Although the real reason for this was to evade our firepower, it allowed the American command to form the mistaken impression that the enemy was down and on his way out.”<sup>493</sup> On this point, his comments must be taken with a grain of salt. The Viet Cong were indeed greatly weakened, and his bleak assessment runs counter to other evidence. Furthermore, Hackworth was not focused on pacification.

On 16 January, Colby gave a campaign update at a MACV staff meeting. Though measured as usual, one can sense his elation. While the original goal had been to improve the security status of 1,000 hamlets, the campaign had gone so well they had raised that to 1,330, and with two weeks to go had sent government forces “into 1,320 of them.” Before Tet, sixty-eight percent of the country’s hamlets had been secure, then the number dropped precipitously as a result of the Communist offensive, but now, as a result of Accelerated Pacification, Saigon’s goal of seventy percent had already been raised to seventy-six. Meanwhile, although Komer had left, his initiatives to improve the territorial army had continued to bear fruit: There were “91,000 more of them” than at the start of 1968, “100,000 [had] M16s,” which gave them firepower parity with the enemy, and 350 mobile advisory teams (MATs) were living with and advising them.<sup>494</sup>

Colby also discussed the 1969 pacification plan that would begin in two weeks: the prime minister and “every one of the ministers” had signed off on the plan, which had as its goal taking the portion of the population living securely up to 90%; doubling the civilians in the self-defense force to

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<sup>493</sup> D.H. Hackworth and J. Sherman, *About Face* (New York, 1989), p. 700. On the aversion of government troops to fighting at night, see Jordan, pp. 8-9

<sup>494</sup> *Abrams Tapes*, p. 105.

two million; getting 30,000 refugees back into some form of permanent home; and completing village elections and having functioning village governments.<sup>495</sup>

### **The Campaign's Results**

Even before the campaign had ended, both Saigon and the US Mission were so convinced of its success—and rightfully so—that they had decided to use it as a model for the next campaign.<sup>496</sup> In earlier years MACV had had a credibility problem when reporting the results of operations, but Abrams was in command now, and did not have a reputation for embellishing the truth or for permitting his subordinates to do so. No single indicator is convincing, but when all are taken together it is clear that the campaign had achieved results that the earlier ones had not.

Three years after the Strategic Hamlet program, nobody described it as a success, and the same was true of Chien Thang and Hop Tac, though they yielded valuable lessons and procedures. However, three years after Accelerated Pacification, Abrams, who was still in Vietnam, stated that it had been a turning point in the war. For the first time, he said, Thieu's government had begun to truly “involve itself with its people,” and he ticked off other factors that contributed to the turn: the larger and greatly improved territorial army, the formation of the civilian militias, the deployment of police into the countryside, local elections and the training of local administrators, successful self-help programs, and the very popular land reform program. He acknowledged that “an awful lot of ineptness” remained even three years later, but asserted that it was during Accelerated Pacification that the government had undeniably set out to compete for the loyalty of the people, and that, he said, had made all the difference. He was convinced that Thieu had taken to heart that in counterinsurgency it was the loyalty of the people the two sides were fighting over.<sup>497</sup>

What were the metrics used to judge success? MACV managed pacification with the Hamlet Evaluation System, and used it to grade the campaign. The final numbers were in by April, and at a presentation that month, a briefing officer reported to Abrams that the number of hamlets ranked A and B (“secure”) had increased by over 1,100; the number at C (“relative secure”) increased by “about the same”; the number ranked D and E (“contested”) declined by 687; and the number of “VC-

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<sup>495</sup> Ibid, pp. 105-6.

<sup>496</sup> McManaway, p. 17.

<sup>497</sup> *Abrams Tapes*, p. 825.

controlled,” which did not receive letter grades because nobody could get to them to gather the data, had been reduced by over 800.

Perhaps anticipating a skeptical reaction to such claims, MACV offered corroborating evidence: There was “the enemy’s growing propaganda virulence directed against our pacification efforts” as well as “a growing file of intelligence reports [indicating the enemy’s] concern with the [campaign].”<sup>498</sup> There were also intangible and impressionistic indicators like optimism within the government; MACV thought the campaign’s success had caused a “psychological breakthrough” that was reflected in the government’s “improved pacification organization and aggressive planning for 1969,” and that they were enthusiastic about continuing the momentum.<sup>499</sup>

However, General Abrams understood that big problems remained. In the campaign’s final month, he explained to his team that Thieu’s “biggest [military] problem” was that he knew that he needed to sack two utterly incompetent division commanders, but “just [could not] bring himself to do it.” Their divisions were accomplishing nothing, and Abrams had told Thieu that these constituted his “principal strategic deficiency.” Abrams was frustrated with his own impotence on the matter, and confessed to his staff that he had discussed the problem so many times that he was now “almost embarrassed” to do so again, concerned that it would hurt the relationship. He feared that by haranguing his counterparts he would be perceived as “a nuisance,” and once you do that, he said, “you’ve just failed” and will never “be effective again.”<sup>500</sup> Abrams did not seem to recognize the inconsistency of that sentiment with the pressure that junior advisors felt from his headquarters to do whatever it took to influence their counterparts on matters that MACV and CORDS considered important.

### **Conclusion**

CORDS “came of age” with the Accelerated Pacification Campaign.<sup>501</sup> Tet, because it had so badly weakened the Viet Cong, created an unprecedented opportunity for a counteroffensive, and several other factors contributed to the campaign’s success. It avoided many of the previous mistakes,

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<sup>498</sup> Ibid, p. 177.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid, pp. 97-8.

<sup>500</sup> *Abrams Tapes*, pp. 106-7.

<sup>501</sup> Komer to Channon, p. 2.

and with Thieu, Abrams, Komer, and Colby, the right people were in place. The timing was also right. With eighteen months under its belt, CORDS was now able to focus on expanding pacified areas rather than starting and overhauling programs. Komer's efforts to improve the territorial army and RD Cadre were bearing fruit, the targeting of the shadow government was making a noticeable dent in the Communists' ability to govern, and the Hamlet Evaluation System, even with its flaws, provided an indispensable management tool for planning and sustaining the campaign.

Despite its success, the campaign was limited by both the corruption that was counterproductive in so many ways and the failure of officials at every level to adequately supervise their subordinates. For all Thieu's authentic enthusiasm, it is clear that he did not really hold his subordinates fully accountable, especially when it came to showing initiative and enforcing the most basic military fundamentals. Certainly Thieu wanted pacification to succeed, but it seems that he wanted success without disrupting the patronage system—a clear case of the proverbial wish to have one's cake and eat it too. It is not clear that senior advisors recognized that or its impact. Though he cracked the whip at province chiefs, corps commanders typically did not, and the practice of inadequate supervision extended all the way to the lowest levels of command—a fact that should not be surprising, since seniors typically model the behavior they want their juniors to follow. Americans tended to hear the right words in briefings and assume they would translate into action, but when they did not, it seems that they would have gone back to Thieu to ask, “Why are you not holding this province chief accountable, and more importantly, why is his corps commander not doing so?”

General Abrams' lament over the two Vietnamese divisions that were for all practical purposes sitting out the war gets to the crux of one of the most significant though unrecognized problems of the war. Americans failed to understand that the discrete acts of corruption they observed were actually the workings of a system; that this system was having a huge impact on the war in general and pacification in particular by distracting officers from their duties and alienating the population that they were ostensibly trying to win over; and that the failure of Vietnamese commanders at every level to not just issue orders, but to enforce them as well, was even more devastating than the corruption itself. Top advisors could see a problem, but were uncomfortable using the leverage that their money, materiel, and manpower gave them to solve it. When two

divisions—perhaps twenty or thirty thousand soldiers—were contributing nothing to the fight, it was indeed a “strategic” problem and worthy of Abrams’ attention, but so too were the thousands of cases of commanders who were not supervising their troops, since that lack of supervision contributed directly to the problem of villages that were secure by day but not at night when it really mattered. The US paid too much deference to the notion of Vietnamese sovereignty, and the advisors at the top who got so many things right got this horribly wrong.

That said, the campaign was a success, and in addition to taking control of so many hamlets across the country, its most significant contribution to the war may have been that it provided the model for all subsequent pacification campaigns. Indeed, the campaign was so successful that everything that preceded it paled in comparison, and Colby would refer to the pre-CORDS era as “the lost years of the middle sixties.”<sup>502</sup>

Most historians have missed the significance of Accelerated Pacification, but George Herring’s account, though brief, was generally correct. He wrote that the campaign involved “a major proportion” of both American and Vietnamese troops; that the territorial army was “enlarged” and modernized; that the “weakened” state of the Viet Cong permitted Chieu Hoi’s and Phoenix’s successes; that there were “strenuous efforts...to clear roads, repair bridges, establish schools and hospitals, and expand agricultural production.” It was, he said, “the first time” the two countries “had committed a major portion of their resources and manpower to the task of controlling the countryside.” He noted, though, that pacification was a “long-range undertaking” and that these “frenzied efforts...could not make up for years of neglect.”<sup>503</sup>

Herring, though, did not put all that into its proper context. There had indeed been “years of neglect”—the “lost years” Colby spoke of— but the campaign was not intended to “make up for” those at one fell swoop.<sup>504</sup> The next three years, though, would make up for much of that lost time, and Herring seems to have missed that. In effect, he characterized Accelerated Pacification as a land grab, which suggests some type of fleeting moment, and in so doing ignores that the same approach was taken for the next few years, and achieved great success. Herring also failed to note that the

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<sup>502</sup> Colby, pp. 260, 269.

<sup>503</sup> Herring, *Longest War*, pp. 212-3, 231.

<sup>504</sup> *Ibid*, p. 213; Colby, p. 269.

campaign would not have happened without CORDS. Indeed, it is unlikely that such a campaign would even have been conceived had Komer not been in so pivotal a position. Furthermore, it is important to understand that the campaign was more than the sum of its programs. Historians tend to equate Accelerated Pacification with Phoenix, which began around the same time. Phoenix was a key part, but the essence of the campaign was going into ungoverned or Communist controlled areas and establishing not just control, but functioning government. Chieu Hoi, Phoenix, territorial army improvements, economic and agricultural development, and public works were essential to the success of the campaign, but had been important CORDS programs from the beginning.

A final observation is that while Thieu was interested in the HES scores, there was a counterproductive aspect to how he showed that interest, and this has gone unnoticed by the historians. Because of the pressure from Thieu, district and province chiefs wanted good scores, and were often angry when their advisors submitted data that caused them to be lower than they deemed acceptable. It is astonishing, though, that when advisors felt pressure from their counterparts, the pressure was to raise the low scores rather than to fix the problems that caused them in the first place. Their counterparts rarely wanted to do anything that might actually merit the rise. Some advisors went along simply to maintain the relationship, just as Abrams did over the two absent divisions. As useful as the HES was as a management tool, as a report card that could be used to improve Vietnamese performance it seems to have been a sham.

## Chapter 8 Pacification in 1969-1970

The years 1969 and 1970 were perhaps the most productive of the pacification effort. American policymakers and military leaders had learned from experience and gradually developed a stronger approach to pacification as they adapted to the barriers posed by the South Vietnamese government and society. At the same time, the South Vietnamese were incorporating lessons that they had learned from the increasingly robust American pacification effort. Through the innovation of CORDS, the US had succeeded in unifying the efforts of the various American agencies. Advisors now spoke with one voice, development was synchronized with security, and the unity extended from Saigon to the lowest levels in the field. There was energy and determination. With the Accelerated Pacification Campaign, CORDS had demonstrated that it could both plan and manage, and virtually everyone was on board with the holistic approach. “To me this is all one war,” said Ambassador Bunker in March 1969. “Military victory would be meaningless”—if even possible—without “political, economic, and social” progress.<sup>505</sup>

As with previous years, though, the historiography gives short shrift to pacification, continuing to miss its central role in the overall strategy, and focusing on such matters as how the new President approached the war; the vast tonnage of bombs and napalm he dropped; American war crimes; the worsening performance and poor discipline of American troops as they withdrew; the anti-war movement; and the peace talks. George Herring, for example, barely mentioned the subject in these years, and though Neil Sheehan did because of John Vann’s role in it, he devoted just four pages to 1969 and fourteen to 1970, overlooking the effort when it was most effective.<sup>506</sup> Though much of the historiography presumes that the US had given up by this point, by examining the transcripts of General Abrams’ private meetings, MACV’s classified but internally produced histories, and contemporaneous reports and oral histories, this chapter will show that that was not the case, and that despite the increasing skepticism of American voters at home, Abrams and his team were optimistic.

To provide some context, Richard Nixon took office in January 1969 as the Accelerated Pacification Campaign was ending, and accelerated Vietnamization. In October his Defense

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<sup>505</sup> *Abrams Tapes*, p. 143.

<sup>506</sup> Sheehan, pp. 732-50.

Secretary, Melvin Laird, ended American offensive operations. As American units redeployed, the Vietnamese divisions assumed their duties, and this shifted the village security mission almost entirely back to the territorials.<sup>507</sup> The pacification effort continued full throttle, though, with campaigns in 1969 and 1970 that were essentially continuations of the “Accelerated” campaign that had just ended. Robert Komer had left in November 1968, so William Colby was running CORDS. The State Department sent able diplomats to run the CORDS’s regional pacification efforts. Charles Whitehouse, for example, who would go on to head embassies in Laos and Thailand, arrived to be the CORDS deputy in III Corps, and when he left, he was replaced by Richard Funkhouser, who had just been the ambassador to Biafra. Funkhouser volunteered for Vietnam. Both found CORDS a heady experience.<sup>508</sup>

It was impossible to manage the holistic approach to pacification without in some way measuring the combined effect of the effort’s various components on the hamlets. That was where the Hamlet Evaluation System came in. During this period the HES maintained its prominent role as the principal tool for tying everything together. The tendency toward inflation was factored into the output based on the understanding that a series of such measurements over time, even if inflated, would indicate an improving, static, or deteriorating situation, and the hope was that analysis of the trends would suggest adjustments that needed to be made in the allocation of the various inputs.

Advisors tended to resent the time-consuming requirement of monthly data collection on every hamlet. “I was always behind on...reports,” said David Donovan, who had arrived in the spring of 1969. Though Donovan had an air of cynicism, he understood the utility of the system and faulted his fellow district senior advisors who delegated the task to a subordinate with instructions to “fill in the blanks with anything that seemed reasonable.”<sup>509</sup> Colby, though, probably would have appreciated that the best guess of district advisors was better than any other method or nothing at all.

The system was easily misunderstood. Even Donovan griped that the reports enabled Saigon to create “a great multicolored map...which could be shown to the visiting generals, celebrities, and politicians” to prove that “there was ‘light at the end of the tunnel.’” However, such use “did not fit

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<sup>507</sup> B. Palmer, *The 25 Year War* (Lexington, 1984), p. 100; *Abrams Tapes*, p. 283.

<sup>508</sup> Whitehouse, p. 1; R. Funkhouser, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (1988), pp. 20-1.

<sup>509</sup> Donovan, pp. 149, 239.

the subtleties of the situation.”<sup>510</sup> With such views among those who produced the data, that journalists might be skeptical is understandable. Michael Cotter, a district advisor, disagreed with the claims that the system bore “no relation to reality,” and said that “it was quite good if used properly.” He thought that MACV briefing officers, instead of announcing that “eighty percent [of the country] was under government control,” needed to explain the statistics and their meaning.<sup>511</sup>

If a district chief wanted higher scores, how did he go about getting them? It is puzzling that he might want them yet be unwilling to make the changes that would merit them, but that seems to have been common. “The Vietnamese authorities wanted all...reports to be glowing and upbeat,” said Donovan.<sup>512</sup> One of Michael Cotter’s duties on a district team was to gather the data for the HES—a process made “difficult” each month by the fact that “it always put you in conflict with the...district chief,” who worried about the impact of the scores on “his reputation and promotion possibilities.” “The worse he showed up on the HES,” recalled Cotter, “the unhappier he was.”<sup>513</sup> Perhaps Thieu did take the reports seriously, then, as Komer claimed.

The evidence suggests, though, that district chiefs were held accountable for the scores themselves rather than for remedying the situation that had caused them in this first place. One of Cotter’s stories illustrates the point. There was a road that one of the district chief’s units was responsible for guarding. Civilians traveling the road were routinely killed by mines that had been emplaced by guerrillas, because the guards who were supposed to prevent that by patrolling and setting ambushes “much preferred staying in their compound at night.” In an attempt to shame the unit into doing its job, Cotter’s boss informed its commander, who worked directly for the district chief, that his team would regularly travel the road, the logic being that even if the man did not care about the death of peasants, certainly he would not let Americans get killed on a road he was responsible for guarding. That appeared to work for a while, but one morning an advisor was killed when a mine went off.<sup>514</sup>

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<sup>510</sup> Ibid, pp. 149-50.

<sup>511</sup> M.W. Cotter, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (1998), p. 28.

<sup>512</sup> Donovan, p. 149.

<sup>513</sup> Cotter, p. 28.

<sup>514</sup> Ibid, pp. 28-9.

Setting aside the questionable judgment of the senior advisor, the conduct of the Vietnamese chain of command—and its advisors—deserves scrutiny. It was the responsibility of the district chief—the same one who pressed Cotter for higher scores but would do nothing to merit them—to make the soldiers patrol the road every night, and he failed to do that. He was not holding the unit commander accountable, and the province chief was not holding him accountable. One might argue that the corps commander shared some of the blame as well, because it was his responsibility to ensure that standards were adhered to throughout the corps. As Colonel Metzner pointed out, corps commanders tended to take their subordinates' reports at face value rather than having a system to verify their veracity.

But what about the advisory effort? Advisors were supposed to work to improve things that were broken. In this case, there were two things broken: the unit not securing the road and the district chief not supervising the unit. Certainly the district senior advisor would have discussed the situation with the district chief, who was, after all, his principal counterpart. He had no authority over the district chief, though, so he resorted to more creative ways to solve the problem, going straight to the unit commander. As we have seen, though, the entire Vietnamese chain of command was to some degree culpable in situations like this—none of them were exercising proper supervision—and for that reason we must conclude that the advisory effort was failing at every level to prompt the official at that level to carry out his most important task, which was holding his subordinates accountable for their work. This is not complicated, and it is not unique to military organizations; it is basic management.

Some advisors went ahead and fudged scores, either to stay on good terms with their counterparts or to make themselves look better, or both, but most seem to have looked for that silver bullet that would influence the Vietnamese officer to do the right thing. Lieutenant Pete Mahoney, who will be discussed later, resorted to liquor, card games, and shaming to get his counterpart's troops into the field, when all it would have taken was an engaged boss.<sup>515</sup> Captain David Donovan got his counterpart to stay out of his way and did things in the name of the district chief. One of the

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<sup>515</sup> P. Mahoney, "Pete Mahoney," in Harry Maurer, ed., *Strange Ground: Americans in Vietnam* (New York, 1989), pp. 29-30.

first dictums an American lieutenant learns is “I am responsible for everything that my unit does or fails to do,” and that applies to him and to the generals, and everywhere in between. The concept is universal rather than an American idiosyncrasy, yet in most Vietnamese units, apparently because of societal norms, it was never applied.

Despite being told that the HES was not their report card, advisors often viewed it as such. Major John Peterkin assumed his duties as district senior advisor and quickly made the rounds to see his hamlets so he could answer the HES questions accurately. Some scores made precipitous drops from what his predecessor had reported. “It takes years to upgrade,” he said with some exaggeration, but “in one stroke of the pen I [had] downgraded.” Peterkin was a reservist who did not worry about the career implications of his decisions, so he stood his ground when his boss, an army colonel, challenged him on the change. “The only way you can get into this village is with a reinforced rifle platoon,” he told the colonel, and when he suggested the two go together to see first hand, his boss dropped the matter.<sup>516</sup>

Colby relied heavily on the HES as a management tool, but the pacification effort was achieving such success by 1970 that scores began “to cluster at the tops of the scales.” Though creeping inflation could have been part of that, this made the scores less useful as a management tool. Wanting more of a spread, he jiggered the system to put more emphasis on the civilian categories, and announced that henceforth only the two top grades would be considered pacified.<sup>517</sup>

### **Security**

From the beginning of CORDS, the US had operated on the premise that protecting villagers from the Communists was the prerequisite for winning their hearts and minds, and that if that failed, attempts at economic and social development were in vain. Komer viewed the territorial army as the key to that, and the success of the initiatives he had begun in 1967 was becoming ever clearer. In July 1968, General Fred Weyand noted the aggressive spirit of the territorials in III Corps, and attributed their newfound confidence to the fact that they were now armed with the M16 rifle. He predicted the

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<sup>516</sup> J. Peterkin, “John Peterkin,” in Harry Maurer, ed., *Strange Ground: Americans in Vietnam* (New York, 1989), p. 314.

<sup>517</sup> Colby, p. 289.

improvement would continue “by leaps and bound.”<sup>518</sup> In May 1969, Abrams said that one reason the situation looked better than it had since 1964 was the improved performance of the territorials.<sup>519</sup>

Three months later, General Julian Ewell, who had replaced Weyand as the III Corps senior advisor, reported that the territorials were now “getting a high[er] percentage of the [Vietnamese] kills” in his area than the regulars, and in response, General Andrew Goodpaster, who was Abrams’ deputy, said that this was the case across the country. The territorials were the ones “fighting the war.” Abrams remarked that as good as things were, they would get “dramatically” better if they could get the regulars to perform as effectively as the territorials, and he wished that with a wave of the hand he could convert an exceptionally unproductive Vietnamese division to numerous smaller territorial units.<sup>520</sup>

This was a profound change in how the Americans viewed the territorials. The regulars had the same American rifle. Why were territorials now more effective than the regulars in many areas? One probable reason is that division commanders could keep their units in the vicinity of cities and larger towns under the guise of protecting them, and not send them into the jungles looking for the enemy. In contrast, the territorials were spread out among countless villages and hamlets, and the enemy, wanting control of those, came to them. That had always been the case, but now with American weapons, equipment, training, and combat support, they more effectively put up a fight. Komer’s mobile advisory teams were now deployed throughout the country and were having a profound impact. Komer saw them as one of his chief accomplishments, Abrams declared that they had “been eminently successful,” and Army historian Charles MacDonald thought the program “one of the most successful” he had seen.<sup>521</sup> Leadership remained a problem, but an advisor’s simple presence could instill confidence because of the artillery, helicopter gunships, jets, and medevac capabilities that he brought to the fight. CORDS expected the advisors to goad the territorials into action when necessary, and they achieved some success with that, but proper supervision and accountability remained rare.

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<sup>518</sup> *Abrams Tapes*, pp. 20-1.

<sup>519</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192. On the territorial army improvement, see pp. 282-3, 345-6, 368.

<sup>520</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181; see also p. 115.

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115; Komer, *New Model*, p. 103.

It should be noted that when Americans remarked that the territorials were doing well, they were speaking in relative terms—they were better than before and often better than the regulars, but were far from good. Though local security had improved substantially, it often remained weak at night because of bad tactical practices. Advisors suggested change, but commanders decided which suggestions to accept. An example of the questionable tactics was the government's reliance on the system of isolated outposts. Americans disliked them for several reasons: First, the soldiers' families lived with them, so the men were distracted when under attack, and the families died with the men. Second, though appearing to project power, the outposts did nothing to actually protect nearby villages at night unless they were used as patrol bases for ambushes, which rarely happened. Essentially, they protected only themselves. Third, because of their isolation, guerrillas could bypass an outpost or mass on it to destroy it. Fourth, district chiefs tended not to check on them. Peterkin's counterpart, for example, showed no interest in his outposts, so an advisor visited a different one each night to identify problems. It is obvious that the province chief was not holding the district chief accountable. This provides yet another example of advisors trying to make up for the Vietnamese failure to supervise.<sup>522</sup>

General Abrams thought the outposts gave villagers the impression that the government could handle security without their involvement, but like Colby and Vann, he believed that if citizens were really on board, they would report guerrillas and warn of attacks. Too often they did neither. Colby saw the Self-Defense militias as the answer.<sup>523</sup> Though they were unpaid and minimally trained, they had become an important part of the fight. Two thousand died in the first nine months of 1969. Colby reported that in August, the government had started recruiting "women, children, and old men" to work in a supporting role; the entire village was now involved in its own protection.<sup>524</sup>

The fact that the Communists were having their own problems somewhat mitigated those of the government. The Viet Cong had suffered heavy losses during Tet, and were having trouble recruiting replacements. The villagers increasingly saw them as a destructive force, and the government now controlled hundreds of new hamlets as a result of the Accelerated Pacification

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<sup>522</sup> See Peterkin, pp. 311-2, for a discussion on the weakness of the outpost system.

<sup>523</sup> *Abrams Tapes*, p. 126.

<sup>524</sup> *Ibid*, p. 273.

Campaign, thus depriving them of their manpower pool. The North was having to fill out some VC units with Northern regulars.<sup>525</sup>

The RD Cadre had been another of Komer's priorities. Their aggressive deployment during Accelerated Pacification had caught the VC off guard, but as they recognized that the Cadre were spearheading an invigorated pacification effort that threatened their mission, they formed special units to attack them. The assumption behind the reduction of team size from fifty-nine to thirty had been that a security platoon was now unnecessary because territorials could protect them, but many of the teams had been sent into "contested and VC-controlled areas" that had no territorial troops, and some were mauled by the Communists. In May, General Eckhardt reported that in IV Corps morale had plummeted and desertions surged, but the Communists could not keep up with the new insertions and continued to lose ground.<sup>526</sup>

### **The Phoenix Program**

When a Communist government controlled a hamlet from the shadows, the hamlet served as a logistics base for nearby forces, development was impossible, and the peasants were subject to intimidation.<sup>527</sup> Phoenix dismantled those governments one person at a time by pooling the resources of multiple intelligence agencies to identify then assigning a unit to apprehend them. Conceptually, it was a police program that looked military because subversives often resisted. The US established intelligence coordination centers at province and district headquarters, where advisors taught the Vietnamese and integrated US intelligence.<sup>528</sup>

The apprehending force could be made up of territorials, police, or special troops known as provincial reconnaissance units (PRUs). The PRUs had grown out of a CIA program known as "Counter-Terror."<sup>529</sup> They specialized in "long range patrols, raids, ambushes, and specialized 'snatch' operations." The CIA hired, trained, and paid them, butCORDS controlled Phoenix, which often employed them. The members of these highly capable yet controversial units seem to have been carefully vetted, and tended to be North Vietnamese or Viet Cong deserters and convicted felons.

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<sup>525</sup> Ibid, p. 134.

<sup>526</sup> Eckhardt, pp. 39-41; *Abrams Tapes*, p. 458.

<sup>527</sup> *Abrams Tapes*, p. 202; see also pp. 46, 63-4, 106, 354, 381, 478-9 and Colby, p. 245.

<sup>528</sup> J.L. Cook, *The Advisor* (Atglen, 1997), pp. 30-31, 49; Peterkin, pp. 310-1.

<sup>529</sup> Ahern, p. 218.

They were generally “social outcast[s]” who for one reason or another had “an uncompromising hatred for the enemy.”<sup>530</sup> Americans often worked with the PRUs and territorials during apprehensions, and Donovan personally led one raid, kicking in the door to catch a Communist assistant district chief who had sneaked home for a conjugal visit.<sup>531</sup>

The Communist butchery could make advisors like Donovan zealously anti-Communist. In 1968, Lieutenant John Cook, who had just arrived to work with Phoenix, was on his first night ambush when several guerrillas walked into the kill zone as they left a village. When Cook’s party entered the village a few hours later, they learned that the men they had just killed had been in the village to torture and had murdered two villagers suspected of police affiliation. After watching the grief-stricken widow of one of the victims beside her husband’s mutilated body, Cook began to view each day as an opportunity to defeat evil, and eventually volunteered to extend his tour.<sup>532</sup> In Donovan’s district, guerrillas deliberately killed and maimed children by blowing up their school, and he, too, developed a hatred for the Communists and would extend his tour.<sup>533</sup> John Peterkin visited a hamlet where the VC murdered everyone, including children he had played with hours earlier. He found bodies and body parts scattered around, and even though he was a reservist, he volunteered for a second tour.<sup>534</sup>

Though Phoenix like other CORDS programs was technically Vietnamese, the Americans established goals, analyzed reports, and worked to solve the seemingly insurmountable problems. As Colby planned the 1970 campaign, critics at home accused him of running an execution program, and critics in Vietnam—his own province senior advisors—complained that Phoenix “was working poorly, if at all,” and that the VC were bribing government officials to get their people released, “low-level” guerrillas were being counted against quotas, and some officials were turning a blind eye toward known bases where their targets were hiding.<sup>535</sup>

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<sup>530</sup> J. Cook, pp. 52-3; see also Donovan, pp. 132-3.

<sup>531</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

<sup>532</sup> J. Cook, pp. 63, 184-5.

<sup>533</sup> Donovan, pp. 168-70.

<sup>534</sup> Peterkin, pp. 310-1.

<sup>535</sup> Colby, p. 280.

Though Colby acknowledged some brutality, he considered it minor in both scale and when compared to the other problems. He explained that deliberately killing a suspect was against policy and that the perpetrators were usually Vietnamese. Advisors were under orders to stop it if they could and report it in any event.<sup>536</sup> Though Colby appears to have been sincere, some advisors worried that Phoenix did look like an assassination program. Major Barron, a district senior advisor from 1968 to 1969, described the program as “very” effective but considered the PRUs “hoodlums” who preferred to kill rather than capture suspects. He thought that if the program were not illegal, it came very close, and he wanted no formal connection that might haunt him later.<sup>537</sup> Peterkin, who began his tour in 1969, had similar feelings, so this perception lasted at least two years. He had been a policeman in civilian life, and he, too, refused to formally involve himself with Phoenix because “what's interpreted as being legal one day can be illegal the next, depending on who's doing the interpreting.”<sup>538</sup> Significantly, neither questioned the premise that an area was not pacified if the Communists exercised some form of control. Colby attempted to correct the problem through policy and training, but accusations continued to dog him.

His goal for 1969 was to remove 33,000 members of the infrastructure.<sup>539</sup> The ambitious number sheds light on the challenge Saigon faced since it must have been a fraction of the total. Lieutenant Cook and the Vietnamese he advised were having great success, but it was clear to Colby that not all districts were pulling their weight. Frustrated, he told Abrams at a July meeting that the program was “going nowhere,” partly because province and district chiefs were “lying to us” about their accomplishments. There was the problem again. When province and district chiefs were misbehaving, they were being allowed to do so by their corps commanders, but Colby did not mention that, and his solution ignored it. He now wanted to assign quotas to each district chief “so that they really have to pick up some of these guys.”<sup>540</sup>

Cook was furious at the idea of district quotas. At an American conference, aCORDS staffer explained that the district quotas were intended to “pressure...the Vietnamese” rather than advisors,

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<sup>536</sup> Ibid.

<sup>537</sup> Barron, p. 22.

<sup>538</sup> Peterkin, p. 311.

<sup>539</sup> Colby, p. 266.

<sup>540</sup> J. Cook, pp. 184-5; *Abrams Tapes*, p. 236.

and that CORDS recognized that quotas were vulnerable to manipulation. To minimize the possibility of counting criminals, guerrillas, or innocent civilians, the coordination centers would now have to present their evidence. Cook predicted that because the quotas made no distinction between senior and junior officials, districts would meet them “by eliminating the...relatively unimportant” ones rather than those at the top who were harder to get and more likely to be protected by someone in the government.<sup>541</sup>

In his memoirs, Cook maintained that other districts failed where his succeeded because the Americans were not working hard enough. “I had seen advisors spend their whole year in Vietnam [complaining] that their...counterpart...would not follow [their] advice,” he said.<sup>542</sup> No doubt true, he missed the point that where there was a good district chief, a good advisor could make a profound difference, but where one was not so good, it was much more difficult no matter how hard the advisor worked. Cook had an exceptionally good counterpart—the best in the country, he boasted—but he still succumbed to the notion that good advisors could make up for bad Vietnamese. That could be true if the bad district chief got out of the way, as Donovan’s did, but it was clearly not the norm. The success of a program at district level should not have been perceived as dependent upon the work of American advisors, but rather on the Vietnamese chain of command ensuring that their subordinates performed, with advisors offering technical advice and coordinating American resources.

Another problem was that Phoenix presented yet another way for corrupt officers to line their pockets, and in this case it was clearly at the expense of the war effort. Donovan recalled an operation in a neighboring district that resulted in the capture of the province’s shadow treasurer, a district chief, a village chief, and “guns, documents, and a considerable stash of money.” After accepting a \$5,000 bribe, though, the province chief promptly released the men. The district advisor had risked his own life and that of the Vietnamese who conducted the operation, and was understandably “disgusted” with the turn of events. The province senior advisor complained bitterly to Colby, but to no avail.<sup>543</sup> That this was not an isolated incident is clear from Colby’s memoirs, in which he acknowledged the common complaint that those detained could often “bribe their way out of incarceration.” It is

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<sup>541</sup> J. Cook, p. 213-5.

<sup>542</sup> Ibid, p. 214.

<sup>543</sup> Donovan, pp. 237-8.

therefore puzzling that Colby never aimed at the true root of the problem. He did work to solve other problems, putting more Americans in the coordination centers, conducting additional training, and using more automation in the hope that computers would “impose better discipline.” Advisors continued to complain, but Colby never wavered in his belief that eliminating the infrastructure was essential. Though he missed some things, he was right on that.<sup>544</sup>

Phoenix was necessary, and despite the frustrations, mismanagement, and corruption, it hurt the Communists badly. It would have been much more effective, though, had province and district chiefs worked as hard as their advisors, rendered honest reports, and avoided the temptation to use the program for personal enrichment. Colby tried to compensate for all that with mechanical fixes instead of acknowledging that the blame lay squarely on the shoulders of the Vietnamese generals who had the power to correct the problem but took no interest in doing so. The US considered the program so important that instead of shutting it down in 1972, it would transfer it to the Vietnamese.

### **The Large Operations Continue**

Revisionist historians have correctly portrayed this as a time when General Abrams paid substantial attention to pacification—far more than Westmoreland ever did—and when CORDS, under William Colby, achieved much. However some have overstated the difference between Abrams and Westmoreland. As we saw in Chapter 1, for example, Lewis Sorley insisted that Abrams had brought “revolutionary” rather than “evolutionary” change to the war.<sup>545</sup> Though we would not wish to deny Abrams the considerable credit that he is due, the evidence suggests that the change was indeed evolutionary, and a good place to see that is the final report of General Elvy Roberts, who commanded the 1st Cavalry Division from mid-1969 to mid-1970.<sup>546</sup>

In that report, Roberts makes two points of interest. First, it is clear that large operations, for which Westmoreland has been criticized, continued during the Abrams era, but there were some key differences. Under Abrams there was indeed less wondering around in the jungle looking for the enemy, but Roberts makes clear that much of that change may be explained by an evolution in technology which in turn led to an evolution in tactics, rather than a revolution in approach. Even with

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<sup>544</sup> Colby, pp. 280-1.

<sup>545</sup> *Abrams Tapes*, p. XIX.

<sup>546</sup> E. Roberts, “Senior Officer Debriefing Report,” 1st Cavalry Division (18 April 1970), VCATTU.

their superior mobility due to the helicopter, in the Westmoreland era the Americans found three tasks particularly difficult: finding the enemy, tracking them if they attempted to escape, and getting to them in the inaccessible jungles. Roberts explained what was new. Rather than sending large American units hacking through the jungle in search of the enemy, as was often fruitlessly done in the Westmoreland years, the Americans now used Sniffer, which detected urine and sweat; Red Haze, which detected campfires; and the helicopter mounted Night Hawk and INFANT night vision systems. And when they had found the enemy, they could now use new technology to get to him, even in the jungles. The Daisy Cutter was a bomb that destroyed trees so that heliborne infantry and artillery could land in even the thickest jungle, and the Rome Plow (named after Rome, Georgia, where it was built) allowed the Americans to cut new roads through the jungle, “opening up many heavily timbered areas,” said Roberts, “that had served to conceal enemy base camps and inhibit our movement through the area.” In the process of making the roads, the division had destroyed 1,658 fighting positions. Eliminating these bases, even if the enemy was no longer in them, had removed something that was “absolutely vital to the enemy to sustain his efforts toward the populated areas.”

The second notable point from General Roberts’ report is that despite Abrams’ reputation for privileging the pacification effort, at least in comparison to Westmoreland, Roberts did not mention pacification or CORDS by name. Either his division was not involved in the village pacification operations or Roberts viewed them as insignificant compared with his primary mission, which was closing with and destroying the large enemy units. On the other hand, he did discuss several matters that contributed to the pacification effort—countering the VCI, disrupting enemy attempts to get from the jungle havens to the populated areas and back again, and the territorial troops in his area. The key point from this, though, is that even with the pacification effort paramount, every type of operation that had taken place in the Westmoreland years was continuing in some fashion under Abrams, and they were all viewed in the context of pacification. The changes were indeed evolutionary.<sup>547</sup>

### **The Civil Aspect of “Hearts and Minds”**

The work CORDS did on education, healthcare, agriculture, economic development, public works, and law enforcement continued much as it had for nearly a decade. “We provided the

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<sup>547</sup> Roberts, pp. 1-10, 12-3.

encouragement, advice, and...know-how to get the projects started,” recalled Donovan, but the challenge was sustaining them because of the shortage of “interest, funds, or personnel.” “The combined effects of war and poverty” had taken their toll, he said, and because schools and clinics were an adjunct of the government, the Communists targeted nurses and teachers along with local officials.<sup>548</sup>

Michael Cotter had been skeptical of the war when he arrived in late 1969, but changed his mind as he saw how CORDS was transforming his district. Pork was a staple, so USAID had introduced the “much meatier pig” in 1962 to replace the indigenous ones that had “more fat than meat.” However, the new breed did not reach Cotter’s district until 1970, and he was there to see its enthusiastic reception. Another project simultaneously attacked the problem of human waste and food by constructing toilets over ponds and providing fish that ate the waste yet were safe for consumption.<sup>549</sup> So much of the country was now stable that some who arrived in 1970 felt like they had joined the Peace Corps. “What I was doing there was basically...Peace Corps-type work,” said Ints Sillins.<sup>550</sup> CORDS used the HES to determine when advisory teams could be reduced in size, and shifted Cotter to an area so stable that the team had only three people and focused exclusively on development work.<sup>551</sup>

The US had concluded, though, that more than that was needed to truly win peasants over to the government. In October 1966, while still with the CIA, Colby had suggested that to earn a peasant’s allegiance, the government needed to endow him with a sense of political agency rather than “impos[ing] ‘pacification’” on him. Then the government and the people could “engag[e] in a common effort.” He thought that if the people were unwilling to involve themselves in their own future, then the government should not even try to pacify their area.<sup>552</sup> He did think that such an attitude could be stimulated, though, and now that he was in charge at CORDS, he could put his ideas to work. With Thieu’s support, he implemented a comprehensive political program that included

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<sup>548</sup> Donovan, p. 269; see also Donovan, pp. 239, 270-80; D.R. Keene, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (2007), p. 13; I.M. Silins, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (1998, 2009, 2011), pp. 19-20; Peterkin, p. 312.

<sup>549</sup> Cotter, pp. 28-9.

<sup>550</sup> Silins, p. 20-1.

<sup>551</sup> Cotter, p. 30.

<sup>552</sup> Ahern, pp. 211-2.

village elections. Thieu wanted those “by the end of March,” and proclaimed that province and district chiefs were to involve the villagers in decision-making and quit “boss[ing them] around.”<sup>553</sup>

CORDS moved forward with programs to promote community involvement, effective governance by elected leaders, and the devolution of power. Elections were held as soon as security was adequate, and CORDS offered additional self-help funds to villages that established functioning governments.<sup>554</sup> The new officials went to an expanded RD Cadre training center at Vung Tau for training.<sup>555</sup> The devolution of power was surprisingly substantive. In addition to their normal peacetime duties, village chiefs were to supervise the police, territorials, and the self-defense militias operating in their areas, and provide input on the disposition of Phoenix cases. The government also implemented a new land reform program that gave the land to those who had been farming it rather than making them buy it.<sup>556</sup>

The weakened state of the Communists as a result of Tet and Accelerated Pacification made the work easier. In many areas the VC were still a nuisance, but no longer a serious threat. Lieutenant George Ward recalled that as a result of their “overwhelming military defeat,” the VC ceased to be a problem in I Corps, and “the North Vietnamese took over all of the fighting.”<sup>557</sup> In James Landberg’s district in the same corps, even the North’s regulars were so weakened by 1969 that pacification started gaining traction.<sup>558</sup> Hugh Appling, an FSO serving in a border province in III Corps, recalled that the territorials had so effectively kept the enemy at bay that “a very large area” opened up for agriculture and other CORDS projects.<sup>559</sup>

Communist troops were still a threat, though, and there was more to establishing a functioning government than attending training. “The minute you become an official, you become a target,” recalled Peterkin, yet to get the full CORDS allowance for projects, village chiefs had to

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<sup>553</sup> *Abrams Tapes*, pp. 97, 122-3.

<sup>554</sup> Colby, pp. 264-5. To varying degrees, USAID had emphasized self-help since 1964; see e.g. Pickerell, p. 55; Reports Officer, “Monthly Report on Status of Rural Construction Program for the month ending 31 October 1965,” p. 4. For the way CORDS used the HES to allocate resources, see Colby, pp. 268-9.

<sup>555</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

<sup>557</sup> G.F. Ward, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (2001), p. 14.

<sup>558</sup> Landberg, p. 28.

<sup>559</sup> H.G. Appling, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (1990), p. 11.

prove they had a “functioning” government by spending their nights there.<sup>560</sup> Lieutenant Rich Webster’s boss—the district senior advisor—wanted a higher HES score, and therefore pressured a new village chief to stay in the village at night. The young man resisted but finally gave in, and was promptly assassinated.<sup>561</sup> When Peterkin caught his district chief helping officials pretend to stay in their village at night, he lowered the HES score.<sup>562</sup> That the district chief was concerned about the downgrade suggests the HES could have been used more effectively as leverage, but, as was the case with Cotter’s district chief that was cited above, the typical district chief seems to have wanted higher scores without the achievements to justify them. In this case, though, the Americans seem not to have comprehended that willingly staying in the village indicated security but doing so under duress did not, and that in neither case did spending the night there prove that the government was functioning.

Colby was pleased with the progress he saw reflected in the HES scores, but knew they told only part of the story. In 1970, he began a formal polling program “to measure the population’s attitudes,” and it revealed that citizens had a negative view of police, supported Phoenix’s goals but were concerned about its implementation, thought the “economic and social improvement” was substantial, and had “increasing confidence in local government.” Even with the negatives, Colby thought the findings “ratifi[ed] the basic pacification strategy.”<sup>563</sup> Some advisors, though, saw that even with the significant progress, many peasants continued to feel “little identity with the national government.”<sup>564</sup> It is understandable that correcting years of neglect would take time, but Colby never effectively addressed the systemic corruption that was at the root of questions about government legitimacy.

### **The Problem of Corruption**

Corruption was pervasive within Phoenix, but so was it elsewhere. John Loving’s district chief ran a brothel and a black market operation that sold stolen American fuel.<sup>565</sup> Morton Dworken, who worked on a province team from 1969 to 1971, spoke of corruption and “duplicity,” but like

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<sup>560</sup> Peterkin, p. 313; see also Appling, p. 11, who stated that his “community seemed to be fine during the day and then at night there would be Viet Cong in the streets and propaganda lessons, troops terrorizing the farmers for food to feed their guerrilla.”

<sup>561</sup> R. Webster, “Response to Nate Pulliam” (14 September 2012).

<sup>562</sup> Peterkin, pp. 313-4.

<sup>563</sup> Colby, p. 290.

<sup>564</sup> Appling, p. 11.

<sup>565</sup> J.C. Loving, *Combat Advisor* (New York, 2006), pp. 135, 137-8.

others seems to have concluded that it was a condition to live with rather than a problem to fix.<sup>566</sup>

John Hummon, a USAID staffer visiting from Washington in 1969, spent time with John Vann, who remained convinced the war could be won, but wanted Hummon to see the major drivers of instability. Vann took him to a typical village that seemed stable, but “endemic” corruption and the constant threat of terrorism lay just below the surface. Hummon left with an understanding of the peasant’s dilemma in such a situation: If he cooperated with the government, someone might report him to the Communists, and if they came after him, local security forces might not come to his assistance since some were “corrupt,” others were “inefficient,” and still others might be “apprehensive.” Under such circumstances, said Hummon, the peasant does not openly side with the government.<sup>567</sup>

The ability to actually recognize the corruption seems to have come with experience. Donovan described it as a “cesspool of government obliquity.” His district chief attempted to divert American funds from a maternity clinic to a boat for his own use, police and local bureaucrats were more likely to approve a request “if the right hands got some cash to grease the skids,” and the territorial company commander pinched a portion of each soldier’s pay. Some advisors thought they should ignore such practices in the interest of building the relationship that was the only real leverage they had for getting things done, but Donovan reported the company commander. “The province chief pretended great indignation” and pulled him to the province headquarters “for appropriate action,” but a few weeks later “he was back [and had been] promoted.”<sup>568</sup>

Another of Donovan’s stories illustrates how development, security, and corruption could intersect. A village that had insufficient troops to protect its merchants asked the district chief for help. He responded that he could meet their need for the right price. They were willing to pay, but the catch was that the district had too few troops anyway. He had decided that the only way he could shift troops there was by moving the company that guarded the district capital, and that would work only if he could get the village in question re-designated as the capital. That was a long shot, but his chances were better with American support, so he cautiously solicited Donovan’s support. Donovan, who

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<sup>566</sup> M.R. Dworken, interviewed by R. Ewing, ADST (2008), p. 33.

<sup>567</sup> J. Hummon, interviewed by W.H. North, ADST (1999), pp. 18-9.

<sup>568</sup> Donovan, p. 237.

already despised his incompetence,” saw through the scheme and now thought “double ill of him” because of his corruption.<sup>569</sup>

Peterkin saw it as well. A policeman in civilian life, he took a forensic approach to his duties, and knew that “the only way to find out what was going on was to get out and around.” When he went to an area with questionable security to inspect a stocked pond that USAID had funded, it did not exist. It turned out that “the village chief had kept the money” for the pond, paid the farmer for his silence, and “thought he'd get away with it because normally nobody went out to see.” The district chief appeared to have known what was taking place, but on a different occasion there was no doubt that he was corrupt. When the government gained control of a hamlet, CORDS provided cash to fund urgently needed projects based on the number of inhabitants. When Peterkin discovered that a hamlet that the district chief claimed had 800 people had only ten houses, he told his counterpart that he knew the government never provided him “enough money” and therefore understood the need to add “a few bodies here and there,” but that the chief had gone far beyond what was acceptable.<sup>570</sup>

Cotter, too, had decided it was not black or white. His counterpart did not “live ostentatiously,” as one would think the truly corrupt would, and he never noticed thefts from his projects. He had heard, though, that “more senior officers” were stealing aid, and suspected corruption was rampant. He thought such opportunism was understandable, though, since Vietnam, like other Third World countries, tended to “underpay [its] officials.”<sup>571</sup> This familiar argument has some merit, but the fact that the government was trying to convince the people that its officials were more interested in their welfare than the Communists were casts it in a different light.

Bruce Clark estimated that aid distribution in his district was only ten percent “effective,” meaning that an astounding ninety percent failed to reach intended recipients. Powered milk and cooking oil were intended to be gratis for the poor, but the province chief sold these to merchants who took them straight to the market, where the “milk went to feed pigs.” Clark reported this to James Engle, the province senior advisor, who had “several real hot arguments” with his counterpart, but nothing changed. Clark concluded the US was willing to live with ninety percent of its aid

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<sup>569</sup> Ibid, pp. 233-7.

<sup>570</sup> Peterkin, p. 313.

<sup>571</sup> Cotter, p. 33.

disappearing.<sup>572</sup> Engle said that province chiefs presented themselves as “poor little Vietnamese, scrambling...to make ends meet,” but in reality were consumed with “rak[ing in the] money,” even at the war effort’s expense. He thought that the pacification effort had gone reasonably well anyway, because advisors worked to make up for their counterparts’ deficiencies, but came to loathe his counterpart because of his self-serving attitude.<sup>573</sup> Both Clark and Engle recognized that there was a system that originated at the highest levels, so they tended to excuse the more junior officers since they could not have remained untainted even had they wanted to.<sup>574</sup>

The real victims were the peasants. The elite could use their “influence and contacts...to make a lot of money” and “buy their sons out of the military.” They did not want to lose the war, but did not want the burden of winning it, which could be borne by the Americans and the little people. Clark came to see the huge service contracts that Americans generated as part of a corrupt system. Senior generals typically got those contracts, though in their wives’ names so they could deny involvement.<sup>575</sup> Engle noted that the advisory effort was “never able to persuade [the colonels and generals] to fight the war as well as the North Vietnamese were fighting it.” Though a few gave their all, “the great majority” did not, and those who did “didn't fit in with their system and therefore, couldn't get ahead.” Engle, like Clark, came away jaded and decided the system made the war unwinnable.<sup>576</sup> Appling thought the “little people” viewed Saigon as focused on “power and wealth” rather than the good of the country, and the way he rationalized his involvement sheds light on how idealistic Americans could operate beside such a system without succumbing to despair: He “had hoped that [over] time, local democracy would grow up, [and] that with education and experience there would be greater confidence in the national government.”<sup>577</sup>

That Colby was aware of the corrupt elite is clear from his testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1970. Senator William Fulbright challenged Colby with the words from a 1967 RD Cadre handbook: Villagers living “under government control,” read the book, were

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<sup>572</sup> B.W. Clark, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (2002), pp. 19-20.

<sup>573</sup> Engle, pp. 20, 22.

<sup>574</sup> Clark, p. 19; Engle, p. 21.

<sup>575</sup> Clark, p. 19.

<sup>576</sup> Engle, p. 21.

<sup>577</sup> Appling, p. 11.

exploited by “petty tyrants,” “shakedown-artists,” “con men,” and “corrupt officials” who saw “the people as...vegetables...with whom they can do as they please.” As a result, it went on, “the countryside is destitute, deserted, racked with disease and hunger and the people feel that life has cheated them.” It was a damning indictment from the government itself. Colby responded that the situation had improved significantly since 1967 and noted that the pamphlet’s author was the school commandant, whose views were so well known that he had been able to raise the issue of “the corruption [of Vietnam’s] elite” with Vice President Humphrey. President Thieu knew of his views, continued Colby, and wanted him “to continue this kind of teaching...to all village and hamlet chiefs...to inspire in them this new spirit to change the situation in Vietnam.” Colby added that Thieu’s words reflected “the thrust of the pacification program over the past year or so.”<sup>578</sup>

Colby was right that there had been much positive change since the advent of CORDS, and by 1970, the situation had dramatically improved in much of the country. Still, his comments suggest two problems. First, Thieu seems to have taken a bifurcated approach to corruption, wanting village and hamlet chiefs to know it was wrong at their level while allowing it to flourish at his own. Second, it seems to have been lost on Colby that the only way the problem could have been solved was by eliminating the system operated by the “elite structure” to which he referred.

Indeed, Colby’s approach seems similar to that of Komer, who pounced on egregious conduct at the lower levels but acted as if that at his own did not exist. Dennis Harter was Colby’s assistant in 1970, and recalled that CORDS “discussions...about corruption [were] translated into proposals for the Embassy to approach the Vietnamese government,” and that when Colby met with Thieu, he routinely “pointed out individuals who were weakening the [government’s] image.” On Colby’s frequent trips to the field to see how things were going he invariably inquired about corruption, said Harter, and back in Saigon he “never hesitated to tell Saigon officials about what he learned in the provinces, good or bad.” But, said Harter, he viewed corruption “as a local issue.”<sup>579</sup>

Even Vietnamization offered the country’s elite opportunities for illicit profit. In January 1970, a Robert Shaplen essay entitled “Letter from Saigon” had appeared in *The New Yorker*, and

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<sup>578</sup> *Vietnam: Policy and Prospects, 1970, Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, Second Session on Civil Operations and Rural Development Support Program* (Washington, 1970), pp. 184, 189.

<sup>579</sup> Harter, p. 67.

Senator Fulbright incorporated it into the record of his hearings on CORDS. Shaplen noted that when the Vietnamese took over American “depot and maintenance facilities” as part of Vietnamization, corruption promptly entered the picture. He cited the example of scrap metal—a “lucrative source of corruption” with “high profits”—and said he had documentary evidence that “the wife of a Vietnamese general” had “official permission to ship more than half a million dollars’ worth of scrap, including shell casings, to Singapore.”<sup>580</sup>

Congress and the American press were now wondering whether Saigon was worthy of American aid. In that context, corruption adversely affected the war effort in three respects: it distracted the entire officer corps and civil service apparatus from their duties, it made it harder for the people to believe that Saigon really cared for them, and it was helping turn the American people against the war. Nevertheless, top advisors failed to recognize its impact or deal with it at the root, and bent over backwards not to use the considerable leverage that their aid might have offered. In the portion of his memoirs covering 1969 and 1970, Colby discussed organization, programs, and management, among other topics, but made just one mention of corruption, and it was incidental to Phoenix.<sup>581</sup> MACV’s internal historians recognized that “the quality of leadership” was probably Vietnam’s “most serious [military] problem” in 1969, but the solutions MACV pursued did little to address the bad leadership at the division, corps, and army levels.<sup>582</sup>

### **The Dysfunctional Advisory Effort**

Although the advisory effort was proving very effective in some ways, in others it remained dysfunctional. Dennis Harter’s interaction with John Vann sheds light on some of the conceptual issues. Before working for Colby, Harter had been a district advisor with a counterpart who was corrupt, but less so than “a lot of the other people.” The man had “come up through the ranks,” was “doing a pretty creditable job,” and had a good heart. In short, he was one of the many good officers who were caught in the system. In an attempt to improve the Vietnamese officer corps—and therefore

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<sup>580</sup> *Vietnam: Policy and Prospects*, p. 151. Even a province chief might use his wife as a front for illicit activities; “I knew that the province chief’s wife controlled the black market,” recalled Doug Hostetter, a pacifist who became a conscientious objector but chose to serve in Vietnam as a civilian aid worker. D. Hostetter, “Doug Hostetter,” in Harry Maurer, ed., *Strange Ground: Americans in Vietnam* (New York, 1989), p. 339.

<sup>581</sup> Colby, p. 280.

<sup>582</sup> Military History Branch, MACV, *Command History, 1969, Vol. II* (30 April 1970), DTIC, p. VI-76.

their performance—Vann required each advisor to write his counterpart telling him “exactly what he has done right and wrong during the previous month.” Harter, worried that the district chief would be so offended that he would “stop working with me...and try to get me removed,” ignored the requirement. When Vann discovered the insubordination, he “went through the roof,” and directed Harter to copy him on all future missives. Not to be outdone, Harter started writing the letters and copied Vann on each one, but never delivered them to the district chief.<sup>583</sup>

The story highlights several points. First, because an advisor had to rely on his relationship with his counterpart to get things done, they were loath to damage that. Second, Vietnamese officers could ask to have their advisors replaced. For most advisors, that seemed too much like getting sacked to want to risk the stigma. Third, Vann’s intent with the letters was to reform the officer corps from the bottom up by ordering his subordinates to pressure their counterparts to perform. The alternative would have been for Vann to attempt reform from the top by insisting that the corps commander take ownership of the problem of improving his weak performers. The two together would have been optimal.

At every level there was a tendency for Vietnamese commanders to inadequately supervise their subordinates, and for Americans to attempt workarounds. Top advisors had been trained to seek solutions to problems, so when they could not get the Vietnamese generals to enforce their own orders, they would change their approach and order their subordinates to fix the problem, probably not recognizing that in so doing they were delegating the most onerous task of advising. Three examples illustrate the point.

The first deals with the South’s high desertion rates. Abrams’ staff worked with their counterparts to find a solution, and the Vietnamese then issued orders to implement it. To his chagrin, though, the Vietnamese did not “vigorous[ly]” ensure that their orders were being followed, and as a workaround, he directed advisors “at all levels” to “convince their counterparts” that following them was “of major importance” and “to counsel...and assist them in [their] implementation.”<sup>584</sup> In other words, since Abrams could not get the Vietnamese to enforce their own orders, he would have

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<sup>583</sup> Harter, pp. 54-5.

<sup>584</sup> Military History Branch, *Command History, 1969, Vol. II*, pp. VI-68; see also pp.VI-71.

advisors do it for them. He does not seem to have realized that this signaled a failure at his level. It was, after all, his counterparts who were not doing their jobs. By directing Americans to “convince” Vietnamese to do something that their own chain of command apparently did not consider important, Abrams had in effect inserted Americans into their chain of command, even though they operated without any authority.

The second example involves the way Abrams dealt with the problem of the two bad division commanders who were discussed earlier. Five months earlier he had wanted to see the two sacked because they refused to get their divisions into the fight, but had been unwilling to push his counterparts too hard. They were still in command and their divisions were still doing nothing. Historian Jeffrey Clarke wrote that “Saigon’s stubborn resistance to even the most well-meaning foreign interference in its affairs had become gospel among American officials,” who had concluded that “if the Vietnamese leaders demanded complete authority...let them have it.”<sup>585</sup> There was a high price to pay for that approach, though. In this case, Communist troops remained untouched in large areas because of the tolerated malfeasance.<sup>586</sup>

Colonel Paul Braim, who advised a division in II Corps, had the same problem. Under pressure from General Gordon Duquemin, he pushed his counterpart to move his division from their barracks to the jungles to engage the Communists. The commander responded that Americans were always ready “to fight” because they were there “for [just] a year,” but Vietnamese, in contrast, were there indefinitely and “want[ed only] to survive.” At any rate, he said, his superiors would not reward him for going after the enemy but would sack him if he lost the province capital. Therefore, he told Braim, he would continue to keep his troops in their barracks in the capital. As a result, the Communists had a local sanctuary and could molest the villages at will. Braim remarked that an advisor’s dilemma was that he was held “responsib[le] for the performance of his counterpart’s unit...but lack[ed] authority to direct any action.” The division commander’s words suggest that had he been under orders that he knew would be enforced, he would have taken them seriously. No doubt General Arthur Collins, the corps senior advisor and Duquemin’s boss, had politely suggested to the

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<sup>585</sup> Clarke, p. 424.

<sup>586</sup> *Abrams Tapes*, p. 200.

corps commander that he issue such orders, and in all likelihood the corps commander had politely agreed, but then done nothing about it.<sup>587</sup>

In April 1970, Collins informed Abrams that the corps he advised had a “failure...of leadership...and...will.” The commander was General Lu Lan, and in August Collins confided to another American that Lan’s corps needed “more fighters and fewer shadow boxers.” That month Ngo Dzu replaced Lan, and four months later Collins told Dzu that several of his commanders “lack[ed] aggressiveness” and that this was a “fatal weakness.” Those are strong words for sure, but American generals avoided confrontation as if they were diplomats rather than advisors, and it is doubtful that Collins communicated to Dzu with sufficient clarity that Dzu alone was responsible for fixing the problem. As the Americans pulled their hair out over how to disrupt the inertia, Collins speculated that “we have perhaps overadvised them”—that “some of the lack of initiative...might be traced to overactive advisors.”<sup>588</sup> This makes little sense, and shows the confusion at the top of the advisory effort about the effort itself and their role in it.

Like General Collins, Duquemin thought that most Vietnamese commanders “avoid[ed] the enemy” if they could. In a June 1970 memorandum to Collins, he noted that a battalion had sat in its barracks for “all of 1969” with just ten kills to their credit. Without solving this “basic problem,” he told his boss, the advisory effort could not “expect to [accomplish] anything substantive.” He put much of the blame on the Vietnamese “officer personnel system” for putting incompetent officers in key positions and keeping them there regardless of performance. It was “patently ridiculous,” he had decided, for an advisor to tactically advise his counterpart since that was “attempting to force him to do something he does not want to do.” At any rate, he said, the problem was not so much their tactical decisions once in combat, but getting them there in the first place. Since advisors had to play the cards they were dealt, “prodding” the Vietnamese to fight was the advisory effort’s “major contribution to the Vietnamese process.”<sup>589</sup> How Duquemin rationalized prodding them to fight but not prodding them to accept advice is unclear.

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<sup>587</sup> P. Braim, in “Book Reviews,” *Parameters*, vol. xix, no. 4 (December 1989), p. 120.

<sup>588</sup> Clarke, pp. 364, 423.

<sup>589</sup> Clarke, p. 402.

The next month Duquemin expanded on his theme, maintaining that an advisor's two critical roles were coordinating American fire support and "motivating [his counterpart] to effectively employ his forces against the enemy." "The advisor's most important task," he continued, was "to insure [sic] his [counterpart] is supervising the execution of his orders, making sure they are understood and being vigorously and aggressively executed."<sup>590</sup> The words make it clear that Duquemin wanted his advisors to perform functions that are typically those of a commander—in this case, a Vietnamese commander. Why he would do that is understandable, but by taking such an approach, Americans were building themselves into the system as enforcers and thereby guaranteeing that the Vietnamese chain of command would never develop the capacity to stand on its own. Neither the Vietnamese nor Americans comprehended the weakness of this approach, but the Americans should have. Not that there is anything wrong with advisors emphasizing the importance of supervision. Indeed, doing so would fall under the category of coaching and mentoring. However, requiring advisors to "ensure" their counterparts were supervising takes the advisory relationship into a different realm. Conceptually, that was no different than requiring advisors to ensure that their counterparts were conducting ambushes or to ensure that they were leaving garrison to search for the enemy. We therefore conclude that Duquemin's emphasis on supervision was appropriate, but that his postulation that it was an advisor's responsibility, rather than his boss's, to motivate his counterpart to supervise, was not. If Duquemin's own counterpart had been supervising his subordinates, there would have been no need for Duquemin's advisors to do so.

A third example is the way the advisory system dealt with the night ambush. The only way to prevent the enemy's "nightly forays into the village," as Lieutenant Webster put it, was to interdict their movement by establishing a trap along a potential route, waiting patiently, and opening fire if they entered the kill zone.<sup>591</sup> American generals emphasized the importance of this practice to the

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<sup>590</sup> G.J. Duquemin, "Debriefing Report, Deputy Senior Advisor, II Corps Tactical Zone," HQ, US Army Advisory Group - II Corps Tactical Zone 96318 (3 July 1970), DTIC, pp. 6-7.

<sup>591</sup> R. Webster, "The Angels of Cam Tan" (19 May 2012), *The Vietnam Experience*. Donovan provides a detailed account of an American ambush, pp. 17-25. Both sides used ambushes, and they were standard practice for the Communists, who often conducted very effective ambushes; former US Army officer William Laurie discusses the challenge of avoiding them in W. Laurie, interviewed by L. Calkins, VCATTU (2004-5), pp. 120-1; see also P. Tompkins, *Ruff Puff: A "MAT" Leader's Story of Vietnam* (Smashwords pdf ebook edition, 2010), p. 56.

Vietnamese generals, who obliged by issuing the appropriate orders but once again, they did not then verify compliance; they seemed satisfied as long as units reported they were conducting ambushes, even if those reports were false. That American generals tried to compensate for this by pressuring their lieutenants and captains to ensure they were done is well documented. Lieutenant Bernie Lovett was required to get the unit he advised out on twenty ambush patrols a month, most of which were to be at night.<sup>592</sup> The unit Lieutenant Pete Mahoney advised did not conduct ambushes unless he “more or less forced them to,” and that was because his boss was forcing him. When they did do them they were sloppy and ineffectual.<sup>593</sup>

An American general told Webster to fly a government flag on the water tower to show that the village was under government control. Webster did as instructed, but knew it was not under government control. Guerrillas had recently sneaked in and “poured scalding water” on his team’s laundress, communicating to the village that the government’s daytime control was irrelevant. The Vietnamese company could have kept a few guerrillas out, but Webster discovered that their ambush patrols went straight to a nearby building to relax for the night, and the company commander would do nothing about it. Webster went to the district senior advisor, who presumably discussed the matter with the district chief, but still nothing happened. Before long the company commander asked to have the advisors removed, CORDS sent them elsewhere, and the village remained under Communist control. Webster deeply resented that while the Vietnamese conducted a “paper war” he had been given the “impossible task” of “motiv[at]ing them] to get out...and ambush the Viet Cong.”<sup>594</sup>

From the beginning of their careers, American officers were indoctrinated on the notion that supervision was vital. In 1934, for example, Colonel George C. Marshall—then in charge of tactical instruction at the Infantry School—issued a book of case studies that proclaimed that “a commander... must not only issue his order but...see to its execution.”<sup>595</sup> Duquemin and Abrams understood this, but were missing the point that this principle held so dear in their own army also applied to the Vietnamese, and that if a commander at any level was not supervising, it was the responsibility of his

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<sup>592</sup> S.A. Judycki, “Bernard James Lovett Jr.,” Western Massachusetts Vietnam Veterans Memorial (2002), sec. 11.

<sup>593</sup> Mahoney, p. 534.

<sup>594</sup> Webster, “The Angels.”

<sup>595</sup> The Infantry Journal Inc., *Infantry in Battle* (Washington, 1939), p. 195.

boss—not an advisor—to correct the deficiency. Instead, Duquemin and Abrams acted on the premise that junior advisors—without any command authority—should be *de facto* commanders. They would not have put it that way, of course, but Duquemin’s and Braim’s words combined leave no room for other interpretations.

This attempt to make American advisors enforce Vietnamese performance seems to have been a universal practice among generals who were also advisors. It not only put junior advisors in an impossible position, but virtually guaranteed that the Vietnamese chain of command would be unable to stand on its own after the Americans were removed from the system. Duquemin and Abrams seem to have been blind to the incongruity of the situation as well as the appearance of hypocrisy. Had those two been able to get the corps commander to perform his duties, everything else would have fallen into place. “Almost all [senior American advisors] continued to complain about poor South Vietnamese leadership,” observed Jeffrey Clarke, “but...no one did anything about it.” Actually, they tried to, but because they attempted to delegate the problem rather than owning it, their attempt was feeble and failed miserably.

### **Conclusion**

During 1969 and 1970, as the US was turning the war over to the Vietnamese, pacification continued full throttle. The number of pacified hamlets increased as the RD Cadre targeted new areas and the Viet Cong could not keep up. Advisors were energetic, and though some had doubts about the war’s outcome, most were optimistic. As CORDS matured, its achievements accelerated. As 1970 ended, it had been over four years since Robert McNamara penned his October 1966 memorandum to President Johnson. Had his concerns been addressed? There is no question that the unity of effort problem had been resolved, but what about the other three?

Had CORDS formulated an effective methodology for stimulating a peasant’s loyalty to the government? The emphasis on improving quality of life had continued unabated, and there had been great progress on bringing security to the villages. Village improvement programs continued to have an impact and were more effective than at any other time. However, because the US had decided that winning a peasant’s allegiance required not just security and an acceptable standard of living, but also a sense of political and economic empowerment, the government conducted local elections, trained

the victors, and devolved substantial power to them. By late 1969, 2,000 of the 2,100 villages and 8,000 of the 10,000 hamlets had elected chiefs, with the rest governed by “appointed officials” with instructions to hold elections as soon as possible. “By 1970,” said a CORDS document, “most villages had elected governments,” and those that held their first elections in 1967 were scheduled to hold new ones so incumbents could be voted out if the electorate did not approve of their performance, although it is unclear that such accountability ever materialized.<sup>596</sup> Despite the emphasis on engaging the people politically and socially, it is unclear how much that mattered in the end. Most seemed to think that what mattered the most was to be left alone to live in peace and provide for one’s family.

Top advisors were enthusiastic about the improved performance of the territorials, especially when compared to the regulars, and attributed the change to the mobile advisory teams and new rifles. The regulars also had advisors and the same rifle, so there must have been another explanation for the difference. The territorials may have been showing more initiative, even though they might have pretended to do so. One factor may have been that the regulars had to leave their bases to go find the enemy, but since the villages were crucial to the Communist strategy, the territorials had the enemy come to them. Now with their new weapons, training, and American support, they were willing to put up a fight.

Corruption, in addition to distracting officials from their duties and making it harder for the peasants to see the government as anything other than a self-serving elite, was now also contributing to the erosion of American support at home. The Americans, though, continued to view corruption as the discrete acts of individuals, and therefore did nothing to dismantle the system. Perhaps it was too late at this point to take on the system. Advisors in the field saw the corruption everywhere but quickly realized how helpless they were to do anything substantive about it. They came to view it as a condition to live with rather than a problem to fix. As for the inattentive commanders who would not supervise their subordinates, senior advisors took the path of least resistance and directed advisors with the units to “make” them do things—an approach that was both ineffective and damaging to long-term capacity building.

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<sup>596</sup> CORDS, *Handbook*, pp. 6-7.

Had the Vietnamese been “shocked out of their present pattern of behavior?” At best, and despite Thieu’s enthusiasm for pacification, only in part. The two divisions that so frustrated Abrams were commanded by generals recognized by all to be incorrigible, yet nothing had been done, and the units down in the villages and hamlets had to be prodded into routinely conducting effective patrols. Neither MACV nor CORDS had found the “the formula [or] catalyst” that would get them to do so.<sup>597</sup> Presumably McNamara would have been disappointed.

What did the American successes and failures say about the advisory effort? The strengths and weaknesses of that effort came into sharp focus in these two years. Despite the many successes of the lowest advisors, substantial problems remained, but true to form, the top advisors continued to try to fix them with workarounds, apparently not realizing that their approach stood in the way of sustainable solutions. American sergeants, lieutenants, and captains taught, coached, and mentored their counterparts, and they also cajoled them, but they could not get them to embrace necessary change. They often found themselves directed by their own chain of command to push things that their counterpart’s chain of command was not pushing, and any change under such circumstances was likely to be halfhearted and temporary.

An advisor relied on his relationship with his counterpart to induce change, and if a relationship was leverage, it was weak leverage on the things that mattered most. Since the Vietnamese worried about the HES, their scores might have been used as leverage, but the Americans did not press this. Without pressure from their own supervisors to address the problems that lay behind the scores, the HES could not be used as leverage. An important point, though, is that their concern over HES scores suggests that they would respond to pressure from their own chain of command, but the pressure needed to be about the right thing. The Vietnamese tended to look at the surface of things. If a district chief was corrupt and got caught by the Americans, the sin was getting caught, not being corrupt; and if a district chief was not advancing pacification in his area and got low HES scores as a result, the sin seems to have been the low scores, not the poor performance. Indeed, the Vietnamese learned to use their relationship with their advisors as leverage to get them to revise their scores.

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<sup>597</sup> McNamara, “Actions Recommended,” p. 732.

## Chapter 9 The Final Years of the Advisory Effort, 1971-1972

The declensionist historians would be surprised to learn that in 1971-72, America's final two years in Vietnam, the sense of purpose within the pacification community continued unabated. In 1972, five of Colonel Willard Holbrook's nineteen military advisors, apparently energized by the mission, asked to extend their tours.<sup>598</sup> Ted Mason, an FSO, transferred from the embassy to CORDS so he could make a difference in "a real working outfit."<sup>599</sup> Howard Lange, another FSO, recalled some cynicism on his team, but that all were doing their "best to make [it] work."<sup>600</sup> Colonel Metzner's classmates at the War College joked that he was a "missionary," and in early 1972 when he volunteered for yet another assignment, he felt like he "was going home."<sup>601</sup> In contrast, historians have given pacification little attention in these years. Sheehan did not mention the subject in his four pages on 1971, and the forty-five pages on 1972 ended with John Vann's death in June, just before Metzner returned.<sup>602</sup> Neither Herring nor Karnow discussed pacification in this period, and Karnow leaves one with the thought that anything after 1970 was a postscript.<sup>603</sup> Most historians unreflectively assume that at this point the US wanted only a face-saving way to end the debacle, yet that was not how the Americans in Vietnam saw it.

This chapter will explore the hindrances to the pacification effort in those final two years, but first will outline three major military campaigns—two Southern and one Northern—that affected pacification. The first was Cambodia, where Saigon continued to conduct spoiling attacks after an initial incursion in 1970. These operations facilitated the pacification effort by forcing the Communists to move their bases beyond Saigon's reach.<sup>604</sup> For similar reasons, the South attacked into Laos in February 1971. Despite the poor performance of some of the senior commanders, historian Lewis Sorley, who edited *The Abrams Tapes*, would note that in Vietnam both the Americans and Vietnamese viewed the results in a much more favorable light than had the American

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<sup>598</sup> W.A. Holbrook, HQ CORDS, Phu Yen Province (12 January 1973), DTIC, p. 11.

<sup>599</sup> F.G. Mason, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (2000), p. 22.

<sup>600</sup> H.H. Lange, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (2000), p. 23.

<sup>601</sup> Metzner, *More Than a Soldier's War*, p. 159.

<sup>602</sup> Sheehan, pp. 750-4 on 1971 and pp. 754-90 on 1972.

<sup>603</sup> Herring, *Longest War*, pp. 240-6 (on 1971), pp. 246-55 (on 1972); Karnow covers 1971 and 1972 in his last chapter, pp. 613-70.

<sup>604</sup> See Mason, p. 23, for an example of how an advisor thought it improved the situation within South Vietnam.

press.<sup>605</sup> According to Abrams, the incursion had disrupted the North's logistical support for ongoing and anticipated operations, and caused them to shift combat troops from elsewhere to secure their bases, which had been immune from ground attack.<sup>606</sup> The South had eliminated the two sanctuaries.

The third episode was the North's invasion of the South in the spring of 1972. Hanoi's resort to a massive conventional invasion suggests that they no longer believed that the southern insurgents—even augmented with tens of thousands of their own troops—were capable of overthrowing Saigon.<sup>607</sup> It was not clear at the beginning how things would end. Colonel Wallace Veaudry described the attack as a “shock wave” that produced “high casualties,” low morale, and “great concern,” but the territorials in his province eventually “regained the initiative,” and by early August the Communists were on the ropes. Having gone through Tet, the people recognized that this was Hanoi's second major “flop,” said Veaudry, and their confidence in the government grew.<sup>608</sup> Vietnamese troops had done all the ground fighting, but American bombers had been crucial. Like Tet, though, it set pacification back several months.

The US began reducing the advisory effort in 1971, but some in Congress were still not satisfied. Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield proposed deadlines for withdrawing all remaining servicemen, and though the final bill removed those deadlines, *Congressional Quarterly* noted that for “the first time the House had gone on record urging an end to the war.” That same year, Senators Cooper and Church tried to make military operations in Southeast Asia illegal, but Nixon ignored them, and in 1972 there was still enough support in the House that the increasingly anti-war Senate could not tie his hands.<sup>609</sup>

In Vietnam there were different views on withdrawing advisors. Some thought they should leave with the ground units, while others argued they should stay indefinitely. In 1971, Richard Funkhouser, the CORDS deputy in III Corps, so vociferously argued that he needed just 500 advisors rather than the 1,700 he had that Abrams nearly sacked him for insubordination. He thought Abrams

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<sup>605</sup> *Abrams Tapes*, p. 515.

<sup>606</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 567-71.

<sup>607</sup> See e.g. Barnes, p. 252, and Metzner, *More Than a Soldier's War*, p. 161.

<sup>608</sup> W.F. Veaudry, HQ Advisory Team 68, Vinh Long Province (12 February 1973), DTIC, pp. 7-8.

<sup>609</sup> “Vietnam Background: Congress and the War: Years of Support,” *CQ Almanac 1975* (1976).

adhered to the “more was better.”<sup>610</sup> Abrams probably did think more were better. In a May 1972 meeting, he blasted Funkhouser, who had just left, for claiming that there was little for advisors to do. If not for advisors, said Abrams, the South would have fallen to the North’s Easter Offensive.<sup>611</sup> George Jacobson, who had taken Colby’s place, said the Vietnamese still wanted advisors because that was how “they get their straight information.” This was an unwitting acknowledgement from one of the top Americans that even after a fifteen-year advisory effort there was still a culture of false reporting. This did not bode well for the Vietnamese chain of command being able to stand on its own.<sup>612</sup>

By the spring of 1972, advisors were leaving. In April, Robert Walkinshaw, who had replaced Funkhouser, noted that mandated cuts would result in thirteen of his districts having three men instead of five, another thirteen would have just one, and the rest would have none at all. Walkinshaw thought the overall impact would be minimal, but predicted Americans would have less situational awareness.<sup>613</sup>

In July 1972, Metzner was again assigned to Kien Gang province, where he had worked two years earlier. The team he took over was discouraged, thinking that because the province officials were so capable there was nothing for them to do. Metzner had worked with the province chief twice before and knew his capabilities, but also knew that any Vietnamese organization was likely to need advisors. He soon observed that the situation had improved substantially during his absence, but that the province continued to be plagued by “many of the...old weaknesses”: ineffective village and hamlet chiefs, “inept or unwilling” unit commanders, and the perennial “apathy, greed, indifference, and corruption,” which were still offending the people. There was much to do.<sup>614</sup>

### **The Role of Security**

By 1971, most of the Vietnamese regulars had been removed from provincial pacification missions to replace departing American units. The territorials were generally able to handle village

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<sup>610</sup> Funkhouser, p. 22.

<sup>611</sup> *Abrams Tapes*, p. 853.

<sup>612</sup> *Ibid*, p. 853.

<sup>613</sup> R.L. Walkinshaw, “The Military Region Overview for Period Ending 31 March 1972,” HQ, Third Regional Assistance Command (12 April 1972), VCATTU, p. 7.

<sup>614</sup> Metzner, *More Than a Soldier’s War*, pp. 160-1.

and district security without help, and during the Easter Offensive, many proved they could also stand their ground against North Vietnamese regulars. The US had continued to make the territorials a high priority. Colonel Veaudry considered those in his province “much more effective” than regulars would have been, and reported that in 1972 they had initiated more confrontations than the Communists (1,282 and 1,051 respectively), had suffered a third of the killed in action that the Communists had suffered (1,087 versus 2,700) and after recovering from the setbacks of the Communist Easter Offensive were now outfighting them.<sup>615</sup> Metzner thought that “the net effect” of the Easter Offensive and the government’s actions in its aftermath had been “positive” on his province’s territorial forces the security situation in general. The territorials had been toughened by the experience of standing on their own without the help of the regulars. The government had also made organizational improvements, expanded their size, and continued to field the M-16 rifle. Because many villages were no longer under guerrilla threat, numerous village troops were upgraded to regional forces so they could be used throughout a province or even beyond.<sup>616</sup> Advisors applauded the flexibility, but morale plummeted because these troops had been told they would never leave their villages. Metzner reported a temporary spike in desertions and “several operational catastrophies [sic].”<sup>617</sup> The hurried growth exacerbated the leadership problem, and Veaudry reported that by November 1972 the shortage of “trained officers and NCOs” was leading to sloppy tactics and heavy casualties. However, by the time he left in early 1973, they “had regained their initiative and were once again punishing the enemy.” Even then, there was a need for “improved training of junior leaders, elimination of inept leaders and a determination to do the job.”<sup>618</sup> What the junior officers really needed, though, was supervision, and what the country needed was generals who would aggressively take the fight to the enemy.

The Peoples Self Defense Forces were also making an important contribution. Much of their value lay in deterrence and the political statement made when someone too young or old for military service took up arms to protect his community. They were intended to provide early warning, but did

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<sup>615</sup> Veaudry, pp. 2, 8.

<sup>616</sup> Metzner, *More Than a Soldier's War*, p. 161; Veaudry, pp. 8-9.

<sup>617</sup> E.P. Metzner, “AFRIS-Province Advisor Completion of Tour Report,” HQ Advisory Team 55, Kien Giang Binh Province (14 February 1973), DTIC, p. 8.

<sup>618</sup> Veaudry, pp. 2, 8.

sometimes fight.<sup>619</sup> It was a robust program. Veaudry reported that at the end of 1972, his province had 113,089 PSDF enrolled, 36,665 of whom were trained, and “31,098 hardcore.” They shared “15,303 weapons.” An additional 82,000 men, women, and youth were enrolled as “support” personnel.<sup>620</sup> One advisor, though, noted that “like many other programs,” it suffered from a “lack of demonstrated interest” from the top.<sup>621</sup> In other words, the high-level supervision was missing.

Despite the improvements, the corruption and lack of supervision were as problematic as before. Veaudry observed that officers “rarely participated” in training with their men. Problems that advisors had complained about for years continued. Units went out in daylight but even if they encountered the enemy they called off the operation before dark and let their opponent escape. The Communists did not return the favor: “each time friendlies withdrew,” said Veaudry, “the VC planted new mines.”<sup>622</sup> Colonel Holbrook attributed the poor leadership to three factors: good commanders led their men in combat rather than sending them, and often got killed; commanders could advance no faster than staff officers, so many capable officers sought safer headquarters duty; and finally, “political patronage and the ability to buy [command] positions” led to incompetence.<sup>623</sup> According to Thomas Barnes, a “province chief had to pay for his job and the district chief [for his] and so on.”<sup>624</sup>

Notwithstanding the improved performance of the territorials, the incompetence and corruption at the top set the stage for everything below, and therefore limited how much they could achieve. Colonel Metzner attributed the ineffectiveness of some units in his province to “incompetent, corrupt or cowardly” leaders.<sup>625</sup> Colonel Robert Hallmark itemized the problems in his province: military units were dominated by “corrupt practices and broken promises”; commanders pocketed the pay of “flower soldiers” who were on the roster but not present for duty; soldiers had to pay to enlist in the first place and once in could “buy [safer] assignments”; low-level commanders often came to some type of accommodation with the enemy, having seen such arrangements modeled by their village, district, and province chiefs.

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<sup>619</sup> See for example Walkinshaw, p. 2.

<sup>620</sup> Veaudry, p. 9.

<sup>621</sup> Holbrook, p. 7.

<sup>622</sup> Veaudry, p. 9.

<sup>623</sup> Holbrook, p. 7.

<sup>624</sup> Barnes, p. 252.

<sup>625</sup> Metzner, “Report,” p. 8.

Hallmark, though, aimed at the root: There would never be a truly “effective force,” he said, unless the “corruption [were] eliminated,” and that would have to start “with the Commander-in-Chief [because] officials below [him] are caught in the ‘system’” and could not opt out of it.<sup>626</sup> Colonel Linton Beasley similarly recognized that the problem was not the discrete acts of individuals, but rather a system “starting at the top of the governmental bureaucracy.” The normal American approach was “nibbling at the bottom of the pyramid of corruption,” but that provided temporary solutions at best.<sup>627</sup>

The police were also a problem. In Colonel John King’s province their conduct was so egregious that they were turning the people against the government.<sup>628</sup> Colonel Griffin Dodge noted that a May 1972 survey had revealed numerous claims of “petty corruption,” and doubted that had improved in the following months.<sup>629</sup> Colonel Willard Holbrook reported that they used checkpoints to conduct shakedowns, and Colonel Robert Burgess said those in his province were “the most ineffective and corrupt...agency” there, and that the corruption “starts at the top and permeates the entire force.” He worried that it was seriously hindering the government’s attempts to persuade the people that it cared for them, and if not solved the people would “be reluctant to assist in eliminating subversive elements.”<sup>630</sup>

Metzner noted in early 1973 that if the corruption in his province were reduced, the people’s “commitment to the government would soar.” He thought many things were going well, but that corruption was negating its impact.<sup>631</sup> Burgess suggested “strong follow-on actions at the national level.” Despite “plenty of lip service,” he said, he had “not seen any heads roll.” He recalled the time Saigon sent a major “to investigate significant allegations against” the police chief, who outranked him. He completed the complicated investigation in just one day and nothing came of it. The whole

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<sup>626</sup> R.C. Hallmark, “AFRIS Province Advisor Completion of Tour Report,” HQ Advisory Team 72, Vinh Binh Province (12 February 1973), DTIC, p. 7.

<sup>627</sup> L.C. Beasley, “Province Senior Advisor Completion of Tour Report,” HQ Advisory Team 84, Kien Phong Province (19 December 1972), DTIC, p. 14.

<sup>628</sup> J.P. King, “AFRIS-Province Advisor Completion of Tour Report,” HQ Advisory Team 30, An Xuyen Province, (1 January 1973), DTIC, p. 7.

<sup>629</sup> G.N. Dodge, “Completion of Tour Report (CTR) and Interview,” Advisory Team Thirty-Two, Quang Duc Province, (6 February 1973), DTIC, p. 7.

<sup>630</sup> Holbrook, p. 7; R.L. Burgess, “AFRIS-Province Advisor Completion of Tour Report,” Office of the Province Senior Advisor, Kien Tuong Province (5 February 1973), DTIC, pp. 7-8.

<sup>631</sup> Metzner, “Report,” p. 6.

episode was “a mockery of justice,” said Burgess.<sup>632</sup> It is clear that as the advisory effort ended some advisors were finally comprehending the problem, but it was now too late for Americans to fix and the only Vietnamese who had the capacity to do so were themselves implicated. The Phoenix program further illuminates the problem.

### **Phoenix in the Final Years**

Phoenix went through three major changes in the last two years. As Colonel John Keefe, the deputy province senior advisor in Chau Doc province, noted in his final report in January 1973, the quotas had led to an emphasis on “quantity rather than quality,” as Lieutenant Cook had predicted. In the spring of 1972 CORDS ended them and required targeting of specific officials.<sup>633</sup> Robert Walkinshaw noted that during the transition in March, III Corps had neutralized 119 Communist officials (twenty-six defections, thirty-two detentions, and sixty-one killed), but under the new criteria only five counted, and they had been neutralized by chance rather than “specific targeting.” In other words, the corps had not neutralized a single person through intelligence-driven targeting, and that meant the program was working neither as originally conceived nor as prescribed under the latest orders.<sup>634</sup> The second change was that Phoenix was being “Vietnamized,” and as with other programs, the advisors had been the glue holding the system together. Colonel Robert McGowan reported in July 1972 that after his advisors were withdrawn, the different agencies quit sharing intelligence and the province chief showed no “interest” in the program.<sup>635</sup>

The third change was predicated on the interesting assumption that the Vietnamese expected terrorism to increase after the ceasefire, perhaps because the shadow governments would operate more openly but still resort to terror when necessary.<sup>636</sup> In late 1972, the Vietnamese closed the Phoenix directorate, moved the program to the National Police—the same organization described

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<sup>632</sup> Burgess, p. 2.

<sup>633</sup> J. Cook, p. 212-3; J.L. Keefe, “AFRIS Province Senior Advisor Completion of Tour Report,” HQ Advisory Team 64, Chau Doc Province (28 January 1973), DTIC, p. 12; Military History Branch, MACV, *Command History, 1972-1973, Vol. I* (15 July 1973), DTIC, p. D-16.

<sup>634</sup> Walkinshaw, p. 3.

<sup>635</sup> R.S. McGowan, “Completion of Tour Report (CTR),” MACV Advisory Team 17, Quang Ngai Province, (5 July 1972), DTIC, p. 12.

<sup>636</sup> Military History Branch, *Command History, 1972-1973, Vol. I*, p. D-34.

above as so corrupt—and renamed it “Protection of the People Against Terrorism.”<sup>637</sup> Apprehending subversives was rightly viewed as a police function, and after the ceasefire, police would have more operational latitude than the army. However, in some areas the transfer did not go smoothly. As Colonel Frederick Daly put it, police chiefs did not understand the program and had not been funded for it.<sup>638</sup> Even so, Veaudry thought they could have eliminated those in his province had they really wanted to, and that points to the province leadership as the problem.<sup>639</sup> The effort to make intelligence the program’s foundation regressed under the police. Too few intelligence officers had aggressively looked for intelligence anyway. Metzner attributed their proclivity to hoard to the culture. He attempted to overcome that with a “concentrated advisory effort,” but failed.<sup>640</sup> The villagers themselves were to serve as the program’s eyes and ears, much like a neighborhood watch, but they were not meeting that expectation.<sup>641</sup> There was, however, some regional variation. Holbrook reported in January 1973 that the “roundup [of Communist officials in his province] has been tremendously successful.” Even McGowan noted that the transfer to the police had “been orderly and complete.”<sup>642</sup> Metzner’s counterpart seems to have been one of the few to take the program seriously. His district chiefs therefore did as well, but when the police took over, the program suffered from a “lack of talent.”<sup>643</sup>

The war’s final province advisors were quite disgusted with the program. Hallmark noted that it had received “more advisory effort, money and command emphasis by the US than any program,” and was therefore a failure.<sup>644</sup> Colonel Lockridge found it puzzling that something with so much emphasis had “accomplished so little,” and Colonel Springman reported that Phoenix was his “most frustrating program.” Lockridge could recall only two truly “Phoenix” operations the whole time he

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<sup>637</sup> Veaudry, pp. 11-2.

<sup>638</sup> F.R. Daly, “AFRIS Province Advisor Completion of Tour Report,” HQ Advisory Team 71, Ba Xuyen Province, (15 February 1973), DTIC, p. 9.

<sup>639</sup> Veaudry, p. 12.

<sup>640</sup> Metzner, “Report,” pp. 12-3.

<sup>641</sup> Ibid, p. 13; Keefe, p. 12;

<sup>642</sup> Holbrook, p. 7; McGowan, p. 12.

<sup>643</sup> Metzner, “Report,” p. 12.

<sup>644</sup> Hallmark, p. 9.

was there.<sup>645</sup> None of these advisors, though, questioned the premise that for pacification to succeed the shadow governments had to be rooted out. Why, then, was Phoenix so unproductive?

The problem did not appear to be a lack of prioritization by the Vietnamese generals. Veaudry pointed out that they had proclaimed Phoenix a “top priority” for 1972. However, he noted in his final report that though the corps commanders engaged in a “great deal of lip emphasis.” They never followed up to make it an “operational priority.”<sup>646</sup> That the top Americans could heavily resource the program and persuade their counterparts to say all the right words but then see little for their efforts is yet another example of the pattern: Americans would develop a concept and the Vietnamese would agree to it and issue orders, but there was no subsequent oversight of implementation. Top advisors then relied on their subordinates in the provinces to keep the project moving.

This is not to say that Phoenix was an outright failure. Robert Walkinshaw and Tom Barnes, both CORDS directors at the corps level, were upbeat about the program.<sup>647</sup> It is perhaps understandable that senior advisors would see things differently from their subordinates in the provinces, who were high enough to know how the system was supposed to work, yet low enough to see its warts. Villagers often declined to report what they did know because of both “historic cultural restraints” and fear of reprisal.<sup>648</sup> Province and district chiefs often knew who the VC officials were as well, but left them “virtually untouched,” reported Colonel Springman.<sup>649</sup> Veaudry said that the operatives were “known and could [have been] apprehended with little difficulty,” but his counterpart overlooked them because “one’s first loyalty” was to family and friends rather than society at large. How someone planning the country’s “destruction” could remain a friend baffled Veaudry. There could also be pressure from well-placed government officials to “prevent apprehension of their relatives.” All this would explain Veaudry’s lament that “dossiers [were] developed” and movements tracked, yet “the final step of assigning responsibility and conducting a raid or operation [was] often aborted.” Province chiefs needed something to report, though, so they went after “the little men”

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<sup>645</sup> R.W. Lockridge, Long An Province, MR-3 (17 April 1973), DTIC, p. 14; R.W. Springman, “AFRIS-Province Advisor Completion of Tour Report,” HQ Advisory Team 85, Kien Tuong Province (19 August 1972), DTIC, p. 7.

<sup>646</sup> Veaudry, pp. 11-2.

<sup>647</sup> Walkinshaw, p. 3; Barnes, pp. 232-3.

<sup>648</sup> Metzner, “Report,” p. 13.

<sup>649</sup> Springman, p. 7.

rather than the high officials, and even those got light prison sentences and were soon back on the street.<sup>650</sup> Advisors came to the obvious conclusion that the Vietnamese were simply going through the motions.

The corruption and incompetence continued as well. Colonel Robert McGowan's counterpart showed no interest in Phoenix, so whether the program functioned depended on the initiative of the district chiefs.<sup>651</sup> In Colonel Beasley's province, the problems included "procrastination, improper interrogation, premature release, corruption involving payoff to police and other government officials and intimidation of probable loyal citizens."<sup>652</sup> Any program could be turned to profit, and this was a particularly lucrative one. One way was to leave the Communists alone for "protection money"; another was to release those who had been captured if bribes were paid. To finance the bribes, the Communists went to the peasants, and Hallmark estimated that a quarter of the taxes the VC collected in his province were for that purpose. "I would guess," he added, "that those few VCI who are eliminated through targeted operations had failed to pay protection money."<sup>653</sup> Another way to monetize the program was to extort cash from the innocent by threatening to charge them if they did not pay. Beasley warned that Phoenix was working against government legitimacy by generating "suspicion, distrust and fear."<sup>654</sup> Hallmark concluded that Phoenix could not possibly be effective until officials at every level in the system were "willing to close their gold mine."<sup>655</sup>

We may make several final conclusions about Phoenix. First, the theory was sound. The government would not have a chance of winning the people's allegiance if the shadow governments went unchallenged. Second, Phoenix actually did accomplish much, even if its return on investment was dismal, but it did not come close to fulfilling its potential. Third, the greatest hindrance to putting the theory into practice was the failure of top officials, who spoke of the program's importance but utterly failed to supervise it. Finally, we must conclude that the Americans were also at fault. They had designed Phoenix and pushed it, but they did not make it an issue when the Vietnamese generals

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<sup>650</sup> Veaudry, pp. 10, 12; Springman, p. 7.

<sup>651</sup> McGowan, p. 12.

<sup>652</sup> Beasley, pp. 8-9.

<sup>653</sup> Hallmark, p. 9; see also Veaudry, p. 12;

<sup>654</sup> Beasley, p. 9.

<sup>655</sup> Hallmark, p. 9.

gave it only lip service. Vietnamese at every level seemed to know instinctively that no matter how hard their advisors pushed them on this matter or any other, they could express agreement with the advice but then ignore it completely. Colby's multiple attempts at correction had been aimed at province and district chiefs when they should have targeted top officials in Saigon. Without that, what could advisors could achieve in the provinces was limited. As a result, Phoenix's failures were ultimately Colby's failures, and a reminder that deeply embedded cultural tendencies can contribute to strategic failure.

This propensity for top advisors to try to correct at low levels things that could have been fixed only at the top went well beyond Phoenix. In early 1973, Colonel Daly chastised senior CORDS officials for their perennial habit of trying to get him to persuade his counterparts to do things that top CORDS officials had been unable to sell to their own. "This team receives numerous directives...to push these programs" on the Vietnamese, and that, he said, never worked. On the other hand, he noted that if the Vietnamese received instructions from their superiors that they knew were serious, "then an immediate response occurs."<sup>656</sup>

### **Civilian Development**

CORDS proposed three themes for the 1971 pacification campaign: local self-defense, self-government, and self-development, each of which was intended to convey that authority and responsibility were being devolved to the lowest levels.<sup>657</sup> The government could devolve power only to villages under firm control, so the campaign's priority was gaining control of those held by Communists outright or only by day. John Finney, an FSO with a history PhD from Georgetown, was the deputy province senior advisor in the summer of 1972. He described how his province attempted to bring twenty-six hamlets into the fold. At dusk a district chief with a security detachment and province officials would arrive without notice. After the preliminary meetings, musicians, puppeteers, and magicians used a "vaudeville show" to propagate the government's narrative. Finney recalled that security was lax one night, and the VC halted the outreach with an attack. The approach was generally

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<sup>656</sup> Daly, p. 4.

<sup>657</sup> Colby, pp. 295-7.

successful, though, and half the twenty-six were “back in the government ledger” before he left in 1973.<sup>658</sup>

The aim was that every village and hamlet would have an elected and functioning government, which meant that those elected would need training and supervision.<sup>659</sup> Governance was difficult because of the war, the primitiveness of rural society, and the new development and security responsibilities. Metzner noted that even with the training program many officials seemed “inept and ill-prepared.”<sup>660</sup> They often lacked oversight as well. Colonel Daly encouraged his counterpart to “conduct more frequent and extensive inspections of village level government” both to improve them and give the him the situational awareness that he lacked.<sup>661</sup>

Reflecting the diminished threat and increased effectiveness of territorial units, in early 1971 the RD Cadre teams were reduced once again, this time from thirty to ten men. From the program’s inception, an important task had been to strengthen local government by serving as a temporary adjunct. By 1972, the teams were remaining in place as “technical and administrative assistants,” and were doing so with “credible results,” said Colonel John Keefe.<sup>662</sup> They took orders from the village chief, and the team leader became his assistant for development.<sup>663</sup>

Teams adapted to the needs. Colonel Robert Lockridge reported they were providing “invaluable” on-the-job training.<sup>664</sup> Some served as mail carriers, and an advisor noted that this regular contact with the people gave the Cadre “constant access to enemy information” and an understanding of the “needs and aspirations of the populace.”<sup>665</sup> As early as 1968, some of them went to teacher training so that they could re-open schools that no longer had teachers, and some hamlets even “built their own schools to entice the cadre to come to them.”<sup>666</sup> Teams also sent members for

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<sup>658</sup> J.D. Finney, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (2004), pp. 47-9.

<sup>659</sup> See for example Day, p. 5.

<sup>660</sup> Metzner, “Report,” p. 11.

<sup>661</sup> Daly, p. 16.

<sup>662</sup> Keefe, p. 10.

<sup>663</sup> H.D. McCown, “Senior Officer Debriefing Report,” HQ Delta Regional Assistance Command (14 May 1971), DTIC, p. F-45.

<sup>664</sup> Lockridge, p. 9.

<sup>665</sup> Keefe, p. 10.

<sup>666</sup> Metzner, *More Than a Soldier’s War*, p. 90; see also Dodge, p. 10.

medical training so they could reopen dispensaries, worked to improve prisons, and helped with land reform and assistance to war victims.<sup>667</sup>

The final advisors applauded their performance with a multitude of comments: They were the province's "best [and most] highly motivated administrative group"; they made valuable contributions despite "the turmoil of reorganization and the Easter Offensive"; they had "proven extremely beneficial"; they were "efficient"; they had played a "vital" role in winning back hamlets with low HES ratings.<sup>668</sup> However, there were also a few concerns. Colonel Dodge had observed that the teams in his province were "not well directed."<sup>669</sup> As the Vietnamese took over funding responsibilities in 1972, they reduced the size of the force without reducing its mission, and Colonel Keefe worried that that their expanded duties were "overtaxing their...capabilities."<sup>670</sup> Colonel Metzner noted that despite the fact that the smaller teams were well below strength and often "subordinate...to inept and ill-prepared village chiefs," his teams were present in "every village and hamlet" and having a positive impact.<sup>671</sup> Over time, many members of the Cadre had developed such confidence in the country's future that they stood for office in village and hamlet elections. "If they won," recalled Colonel Montague in 1969, "they dropped out...and took up their new duties," and that year, "several hundred ran and more than a hundred actually won office."<sup>672</sup>

The notion of self-development meant involving the people in the selection and management of the US-funded development projects. The Village Self Development Program had begun in 1969 to push decision-making about projects to the lowest level. In earlier self-help programs, province and district chiefs had picked the projects without considering "popular aspirations," and viewed the number initiated most important. The new program privileged popular participation above "technical excellence or cost-effectiveness."<sup>673</sup> The RD Cadre served as its "fuel and lubricant." An American general said that by the end of 1972 their contribution to the program had "surpassed all

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<sup>667</sup> Metzner, "Report," p. 11.

<sup>668</sup> Veaudry, p. 13; Metzner, "Report," p. 11; Lockridge, p. 9; Dodge, p. 8; Day, p. 4.

<sup>669</sup> Dodge, p. 8.

<sup>670</sup> Veaudry, p. 13; Keefe, p. 10.

<sup>671</sup> Metzner, "Report," p. 11.

<sup>672</sup> Komer, *New Model*, p. 142.

<sup>673</sup> CORDS, *Handbook*, p. 51; see also Metzner, "Report," p. 10, and Beasley, p. 9.

expectations.”<sup>674</sup> However, the program received mixed reviews from the final province advisors. Colonel Frank Day stated that his districts had made “considerable progress” in completing approved projects, but Colonel Linton Beasley reported that numerous projects in his province had never been finished due to lack of supervision, although that situation was “rapidly being corrected.”<sup>675</sup> Colonel John Smith said that the program was limited by the “poor administrative ability” of the local officials.<sup>676</sup> Metzner, though, thought of it as an “exercise in people-participation,” and noted that it did well in villages with capable officials and a sophisticated populace. Even in the others, it created a government “infrastructure” that could be built on.<sup>677</sup>

This program provides yet another example of advisors at the top getting their counterparts to issue orders but not ensuring enforcement. Colby followed the pattern of pushing the burden of enforcing the orders onto the shoulders of his subordinates without their having any authority to do so. He informed his province and district advisors that the top Vietnamese (his counterparts) were “strong advocates of the program,” but that because there would be “resistance at [lower] levels,” advisors were to be “forceful” with their counterparts, “insur[ing]” that program administrators received “proper training and guidance,” that their counterparts reviewed and approved projects, that provinces disbursed funds and materials in a timely manner, and that the Vietnamese were responsive to “village requests for assistance.”<sup>678</sup> The Vietnamese generals should have ensured these matters were done properly, but instead, American captains, majors and colonels were inserted into the process, which created various problems, not the least of which was sustainability. Though an effective advisor could have influence on these matters, only the Vietnamese chain of command had the authority to oversee their execution. By moving Americans from advisors to enforcers, Colby virtually guaranteed that the Vietnamese chain of command would not develop.

Meanwhile, economic development, humanitarian assistance, and work on healthcare and education continued.<sup>679</sup> “Development [was] the bright picture,” said Colonel Veaudry, who saw

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<sup>674</sup> CORDS, *Handbook*, p. 51; Garth, p. 17.

<sup>675</sup> Day, p. 4; Beasley, p. 9.

<sup>676</sup> J. Smith, p. 7.

<sup>677</sup> Metzner, “Report,” p. 10.

<sup>678</sup> CORDS, *Handbook*, p. 52.

<sup>679</sup> See for example Walkinshaw, p. 1.

businesses opening, roads and bridges improved, and schools and dispensaries “built, staffed and furnished.” Farmers, with disposable income for the first in their lives, were investing in new equipment and buying homes and luxury items. The province capital had new water and sewer systems, more electricity, and sidewalks, and the province boasted a new port and commercial and development banks.<sup>680</sup> Every province had a detailed and ambitious economic development agenda. Agriculture was the main effort in the countryside, and the US continued to work on increasing productivity, as it had for a decade. Robert Walkinshaw reported that in III Corps a new high-lysine corn had been introduced in one province and was being expanded to others.<sup>681</sup> Colonel William Tausch wrote that the switch to the high-yield “miracle rice” was continuing; sorghum had been introduced; more land was being cultivated because of the better security; roads had been paved or repaired; banks were opening; and home construction “of a permanent nature” had picked up throughout the province.<sup>682</sup>

There were other improvements. The popular land reform was on track in III Corps to meet its goals in 1972, despite the “long-term absence of landlords, destruction of land records, and [some] VC distribution of lands.”<sup>683</sup> Colonel Tausch noted that his province would “exceed its goals” despite “the usual problems,” which included local and national “instances of corruption.” The program would terminate at the end of 1972. Services were improving in many places as well. Tausch said his province had a “well staffed” hospital that was “one of the finest” he had seen, and he credited much of that to the “untiring efforts” of his medical advisor, who had been there five years. The public works program was well run; when the VC destroyed roads, the department quickly started repairs. Supervision made all the difference. Tausch attributed the department’s solid performance to its director staying on the road to inspect his projects.<sup>684</sup> Government revenue had suffered over the years because of the wartime decline in productivity and the difficulty of collecting taxes. With improved stability, some provinces could now cover their operating expenses with tax revenues and have money

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<sup>680</sup> Veaudry, p. 2; see also Walkinshaw, pp. 5-6.

<sup>681</sup> Walkinshaw, p. 5.

<sup>682</sup> W.H. Tausch, HQ Advisory Team 88, Kien Hoa Province (10 February 1973), DTIC, p. 10.

<sup>683</sup> Walkinshaw, pp. 4-5.

<sup>684</sup> Tausch, p. 10.

left over for development. In contrast, the VC were finding it increasingly difficult to collect their illegal taxes. “Only a catastrophe could stop” the “inevitable” “progress,” said Veaudry.<sup>685</sup>

Paralleling the stories of success were others of harmful corruption. The dark side to all the development money sloshing around was the dishonesty that seemed to come with it. In Colonel Linton Beasley’s province, it had “reached astronomical heights” with devastating results. “Projects [were] delayed, poorly constructed, partially constructed or cancelled all together,” he said, and making matters worse, “officials...convicted of corruption are almost always allowed to return to their posts for all to see.” He considered it folly to think that a government could win the “respect and support” of its people “when all they can see is wealthy officials and incomplete or poorly constructed public buildings.”<sup>686</sup> Most advisors did not make such reports, but Howard Lang, an FSO, recalled advisors catching Vietnamese making concrete with too much sand “so they could sell the leftover cement,” and as a result, “projects were often falling apart.”<sup>687</sup>

Colonel Daly saw “inefficiency and corruption” at the village level, but said that the province chief had managed to stop “much” of it in 1972.<sup>688</sup> Perhaps good supervision by honest officials could nip much of that below them in the bud, but since it was all part of a system, that might not have been a common occurrence. Colonel Robert Hallmark remarked that social welfare programs were “subject to graft and corruption.”<sup>689</sup> Corrupt officers often maintained a veneer of respectability by having their wives do the dirty work. Lange considered his province chief “more honest than most,” but even his wife engaged in illicit activities made available by his position. Indeed, Lange thought that the wives of most officials were “making the most of the short time they had to insure the future of their families.” In contrast, the people were “just trying to survive” and had no “illusions about their government or political leadership.” Lange later decided that given the uncertainty of the future, officials were “acting quite rationally.”<sup>690</sup>

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<sup>685</sup> Veaudry, pp. 2-3.

<sup>686</sup> Beasley, p. 14.

<sup>687</sup> Lange, p. 23.

<sup>688</sup> Daly, p. 15.

<sup>689</sup> Hallmark, p. 8.

<sup>690</sup> Lange, p. 23.

In January 1973, as Colonel Burgess was leaving after a year and a half as a province senior advisor, he rendered a report with his conclusions on the Vietnamese attempt to win hearts and minds. He argued that the government was pretending to be concerned about the people, and that they in turn were pretending to be loyal. Despite the years of American work at the local level, “a credibility gap” existed, and this was because the Saigon elite went through the motions of caring for the people, hoping that would be sufficient, but the people could see through that. “Much of the public display in support of [the government was] superficial and perfunctory,” he said. The government needed to do more to make its “goals and values...a reality at hamlet and village level.”<sup>691</sup> Actually, the problem was that the “values” of the elite emanating from Saigon did not generally include true concern for the peasantry, so he must have been referring to their stated values rather than the ones they practiced.

### **The Exceptions to the Rule**

However, there were many exceptions to such malfeasance. Throughout the war there were cases of patriotic and dedicated Vietnamese who did put the welfare of society ahead of their own interests. However, their values were out of sync with those of the institution they belonged to, and an institution-wide, self-correcting mechanism never took root among the Vietnamese. Even a good province chief could find it difficult to solve the problem of uncaring subordinates. Colonel John King’s counterpart replaced a man who had done nothing to improve the situation while in office. He, though, worked with “vigor and spirit” to secure the province, and waged an “untiring battle...against [the] lethargy and inefficiency” that his predecessor had tolerated. He was making progress, said King, but it came slowly.<sup>692</sup> Similarly, Colonel Tausch described his counterpart as “dynamic, professional and untiring,” and said it was largely due to his leadership that Communist forces had been kept under control. He “was never reluctant [to sack an] ineffective leader,” said Tausch, though finding a qualified replacement could be difficult.<sup>693</sup>

These officers and others like them operated within a corrupt system that greatly constrained their ability to clean up the mess. General Ngo Quang Truong, who was introduced in the fourth chapter, was one of the best, and would briefly become the South’s top soldier just before Saigon fell,

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<sup>691</sup> Burgess, p. 1.

<sup>692</sup> King, pp. 1-2.

<sup>693</sup> Tausch, p. 7.

when competence rather than cronyism finally mattered. It was too late by then, though, for competence to save the day.

General John Cushman, the IV Corps senior advisor, was so worried about corruption that he took his concerns to Truong, whom he greatly admired. Truong “had taken command [of IV Corps] in August 1970,” and in October of the next year, Cushman wrote him to warn that he thought the corruption was so bad that it might “ultimately [be] decisive.” It appears that Cushman wanted to document for the record that he recognized the problem and was trying to address it. Corruption was of “enormous importance,” he said, because it hurt “performance,” and also because it poisoned the South’s “reputation in the eyes of U.S. people, whose good opinion [was] essential for your continued support.”<sup>694</sup> The next chapter will reveal just how prophetic Cushman’s warning was, but that a senior American thought corruption might be “ultimately decisive” is noteworthy. The advisors at the top did not seem to recognize that. Cushman advised Truong that his “primary objective” should be to replace “dishonest and corrupt” subordinates with the “competent and honest.” “The Americans cannot do this for you,” he said, adding that there were any number of “decent, honest” men to replace the bad ones.<sup>695</sup> Three months after Cushman’s first letter he wrote a second one, again putting the matter in existential terms. “If your country is to survive,” he wrote, “corruption and favoritism cannot be tolerated at any level.”<sup>696</sup>

Since Truong had been in command well over a year, why had he not solved this problem? There are three possible reasons. First, unlike most Vietnamese, he actively supervised his subordinates, which may have left little time for other matters. Second, the corruption was so embedded that the system could adapt even to a corps commander who refused to participate in it. Finally, a corps commander was often unable to make personnel decisions about corrupt or incompetent subordinates because they had patrons in Saigon.

During the Easter Offensive, Thieu rushed Truong north to take command of I Corps from General Lam. Though politically savvy and connected, Lam was corrupt and incompetent, and I

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<sup>694</sup> Clarke, p. 479; J.H. Cushman, “Senior Officer Debriefing Report of Major General John H. Cushman,” HQ Delta Regional Assistance Command, DTIC (14 January 1972), p. 42.

<sup>695</sup> Ibid, p. 42.

<sup>696</sup> Ibid, p. 43.

Corps was bearing the brunt of the fighting. The move revealed not just that Thieu recognized Truong's abilities, but that in a crisis he valued competence over cronyism.<sup>697</sup> Shortly after Truong's arrival, General Frederick Kroesen, his new advisor, reported to Abrams that Truong's presence had immediately instilled hope in both soldiers and civilians, who recalled his integrity and genuine concern from his days as a division commander. "I've never seen anyone quite so...warmly received," said Kroesen, who observed "a growing enthusiasm among the troops" and a new conviction that they were going to defeat the invasion.<sup>698</sup> General Howard Cooksey, who replaced Kroesen, recalled Truong's "almost superhuman effort" during the crisis. Perhaps having taken Cushman's words to heart and for the first time feeling free to make potentially contentious personnel changes, Truong cleaned house, sacking "four of the five division commanders" as well as some of their subordinates. Cooksey noted that their "replacements [had been] selected for demonstrated competence rather than political ties."<sup>699</sup>

#### **The Evolution of Kien Hoa and Other Evidence of Pacification**

General Truong was the exception, but despite the norm of corruption and incompetence, there is overwhelming evidence that the pacification effort had achieved remarkable success by 1972. John Finney, an FSO who had volunteered for Vietnam in 1970 while posted to Peru, heard from speakers at the Vietnam Training Center that Tet had "severely damaged" the Viet Cong, the North Vietnamese "had been pushed back into their bases," and the situation was steadily improving. Soon after arriving in mid-1971, he concluded they had not exaggerated.<sup>700</sup> The Hamlet Evaluation System indicated the same thing, but Colby liked to validate the scores by seeing for himself. In the Delta, he saw produce-filled trucks moving to Saigon for the first time in years. "By late 1970," he wrote, "the war in the Delta essentially had been won."<sup>701</sup>

Examining the evolution of one particular Delta province illustrates the progress. Kien Hoa was especially important to the Communists as a symbol—the Viet Cong had been born there, and it

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<sup>697</sup> Clarke, p. 483, wrote that "Lam...refused to lend a hand and rarely visited the front line, choosing to monitor the progress of the battle through periodic reports back in Da Nang."

<sup>698</sup> *Abrams Tapes* pp. 842-3.

<sup>699</sup> H.H. Cooksey, "Senior Officer Debriefing Report, Major General Howard H. Cooksey," HQ First Regional Assistance Command (25 January 1973), DTIC, pp. 16, 35.

<sup>700</sup> Finney, p. 37.

<sup>701</sup> Colby, pp. 309-10.

was known as the hotbed of resistance in the early 1960s. A local woman had risen through the guerrilla ranks and become a top Communist official. On one of his visits, Colby noted that a cemetery had a section to honor the war dead, but the headstones were adorned with Communist red stars.<sup>702</sup>

Tran Ngoc Chau, who ran the early RD Cadre program and then resigned under protest in 1966, made his first visit to the province in 1960. Because of his background with the Viet Minh, Chau was better able to comprehend the government's challenge. He had joined the Viet Minh to fight the French, but deserted several years later after learning that Ho Chi Minh and the others were doctrinaire Communists rather than the open-minded nationalists they claimed to be. After partition, he joined the South's new military. On that visit to Kien Hoa, he detected an intense hatred for the government. He learned that the final French administrator had governed "as if he owned the territory," and when he departed with the rest of the French in 1954, "his autocratic philosophy and institutions [had been] enthusiastically adopted by a succession of Vietnamese province chiefs." "Nowhere in South Vietnam was the rural population more oppressed [by the government] than in Kien Hoa," he concluded, and he could understand why many peasants viewed the government as occupiers, Ho as a hero, and the guerrillas "as Ho's representatives," who were to be "honored, protected, and listened to." Chau also observed a cycle: the more active the guerrillas were, the harder the government was on the people, which in turn led to more recruits for the guerrillas.<sup>703</sup>

Chau soon became the province chief, and was ever mindful that while attempting to root out the Communists it was crucial that the government not needlessly alienate the peasants, regardless of their sympathies. Tinkering and experimentation characterized his tenure, and he had some success with two techniques that later evolved into the nationwide Census Grievance and RD Cadre programs.<sup>704</sup> Despite Chau's progress, the province continued to lean Communist, and in 1963 it was still "crawling with VC," according to military intelligence officer Bill Laurie, who studied the province's history. Though Chau had laid the foundation, the turning point did not come until mid-1968, when the VC began to disintegrate as a coherent force as a result of their Tet casualties. Their

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<sup>702</sup> Tran Ngoc Chau, pp. 191-2; Cotter, p. 26; Colby, p. 288; Laurie, pp. 111, 329.

<sup>703</sup> Tran Ngoc Chau, pp. 191-2.

<sup>704</sup> Ibid, pp. 195-6; 201.

commanders started defecting, frustrated that government troops were routinely defeating them and that they could no longer recruit replacements. Young men resisted conscription not because they liked the government, but because they had decided that the Communists were worse—brutal and destructive—and that joining was suicidal. According to Laurie, conditions continued to worsen, and after 1969, guerrillas “were defecting in droves.”<sup>705</sup>

Even after the turning point, there were still pockets of resistance. When Michael Cotter arrived in Kien Hoa in early 1970 to work on a district team, government troops did not go into half the district because there were insufficient territorials to take them on. On the other hand, the VC could not do much damage outside the areas they controlled. When Cotter was reassigned to a second district, it was already “pacified” and his small team could travel everywhere.<sup>706</sup> Near the end of that year, Colby and Vann relied exclusively on territorial troops for protection when they spent the night in rural Kien Hoa, which was previously unthinkable.<sup>707</sup> Cotter thought the incursions into Cambodia in 1970 and 1971 had been pivotal in shielding the province’s pacification activities, and when he left Vietnam in 1971, he thought that “the war was going quite well.”<sup>708</sup>

Colonel William Tausch, Kien Hoa’s final senior advisor, arrived in May 1971, and remained until February 1973. His end-of-tour report did not gloss over the problems, but was consistent with Colby’s, Cotter’s, and Laurie’s accounts. He noted that the December 1972 HES scores indicated that the province was 90.4% pacified—higher than ever—and felt confident that the territorials could handle the remaining Communists. It had taken years, but now the cycle was on the government’s side: improved security enabled greater strides in development, which in turn led to even better security because the people were more satisfied, and people who are satisfied with the status quo do not support revolution. The government had delivered “security, roads, schools, dispensaries and a chance for prosperity,” said Tausch, but the Communists could deliver only “ideological promises.”<sup>709</sup>

In early 1973, Cotter came back to Kien Hoa and discovered that the Viet Cong had been so weakened that the North had moved its own troops in to “sustain [their] effort.” Cotter saw that as

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<sup>705</sup> Laurie, pp. 82, 111-4, 329; see also Metzner, *More Than a Soldier’s War*, p. 162.

<sup>706</sup> Cotter, pp. 30, 33-4.

<sup>707</sup> Colby, pp. 288-9.

<sup>708</sup> Cotter, pp. 32, 36.

<sup>709</sup> Tausch, pp. 6, 12.

proof that the South had defeated the Viet Cong, “because the North Vietnamese were practically as foreign in accent and behavior as Americans were.”<sup>710</sup> Similarly, Metzner, elsewhere in the Delta, noted that Hanoi had felt compelled to buttress the VC by putting their own cadre in units, which “had created open dissent and conflict with the VC southerners”—“a fact not lost on the rural population.”<sup>711</sup>

The transformation in Kien Hoa, though perhaps more dramatic because of its past, was not an outlier in the Delta, or even in other parts of the country.<sup>712</sup> Tom Barnes, who had left Vietnam in 1968 for an assignment in Udorn, Thailand as US consul, returned in 1971 to head CORDS in II Corps. He was surprised at the extent of the progress. Unlike three years earlier, he said, “one could travel...from Nha Trang to Dalat without [worrying about] being ambushed.”<sup>713</sup> In some places guerrillas could still interdict roads at night, but they dared not try in daylight. Ted Mason, who was based in Saigon, drove unimpeded through numerous rural areas, and was so confident of his safety that he took his wife on a lengthy sightseeing trip from Saigon to the Cambodian border and then down to the coast. On the way home in 1971, Mason told General Vernon Walters, a friend who was the defense attaché in Paris at the time, that “the people are with us,” and “unless some outside force [comes] in...Vietnamization will succeed.”<sup>714</sup> By the end of 1970, Colby was overnighting in areas throughout South Vietnam “that had been ‘Indian country’ the year before.”<sup>715</sup>

When Colonel Metzner returned to Kien Giang in the summer of 1972 after a two-year absence, he too noticed the progress, and attributed much of that to the province chief, who took the initiative in conducting aggressive operations to keep the Communists off balance. Furthermore, he ensured his subordinates did the same. In short, he supervised. He had only territorials, and while there were too few to drive the Communists out of some areas, they were “strong and motivated enough to maintain the [existing] balance of power.” Metzner observed that the province was sustaining previously unimaginable economic growth and a concomitant increase in the standard of

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<sup>710</sup> Cotter, p. 34.

<sup>711</sup> Metzner, *More Than a Soldier's War*, p. 161.

<sup>712</sup> Cotter, p. 34; Colby, pp. 288-9.

<sup>713</sup> Barnes, p. 233.

<sup>714</sup> Mason, pp. 23-4.

<sup>715</sup> Colby, p. 288.

living, and when the Communists attacked schools, clinics, and roads, they damaged their own credibility as peasants noticed the disconnect between their words and deeds. The people had decided that Saigon, despite its substantial shortcomings, was their best hope for the future.<sup>716</sup>

Laurie acknowledged that a low-level “terrorist problem” continued till the end of the war, but the Viet Cong were no longer a significant threat in Kien Hoa and many other places. The Viet Cong had been weakened to such an extent that they were better viewed as something like the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi, said Laurie, than as an existential threat. “Their recruitment was down to nothing,” and he concluded that by 1971 “if there were no [North Vietnamese troops in the South] there would be no war.”<sup>717</sup>

CORDS continued using the HES to monitor progress and allocate resources. When Barnes arrived in II Corps, the scores reflected many more hamlets now “secure” or “relatively secure” than before, and far fewer under enemy control. Years later when he was asked if he had had confidence in such scores, he replied that he was skeptical of all statistics, but that in this case while “two and two usually equals five,” once the inflation was taken into account, the system accurately reflected a “much calmer situation...than existed before.”<sup>718</sup>

Why have historians tended to overlook this story? Part of the answer lies in the matter of causality. Laurie, who earned a history doctorate after the war, concluded that historians overlook the successful story of pacification because it was due to “the sum of many factors” rather than a discrete event. The success lacked “dramatic explosive impact” to be noticed—especially by those who began their analysis with the presupposition that the project was failing. Laurie thought it was indisputable that from mid-1968 on, the Viet Cong went “on a downward trajectory [that] just kept going down,” and that by the end of 1972, the pacification effort had accomplished much of its aim, despite the mistakes, failings, and Communist push-back along the way.<sup>719</sup>

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<sup>716</sup> Metzner, *More Than a Soldier's War*, p. 161.

<sup>717</sup> Laurie, pp. 82, 329.

<sup>718</sup> Barnes, p. 232. Despite the skepticism of some that HES was used to report success when there was none, scores could change in either direction. For example, see Cooksey, p. 35, which reports that I Corps, which had been hit particularly hard in the Easter Offensive, and its scores dropped precipitously in April and May and took over six months to fully recover.

<sup>719</sup> Laurie, pp. 112-3.

## Conclusion

The years 1971 and 1972 were the final two of the advisory effort. The ceasefire agreement, which will be discussed in the next chapter, went into effect in late January, and two months later both MACV and CORDS had closed their doors, and the final American soldiers in Vietnam had moved on to their next assignments. To complete our examination of these last two years, we need to discuss how the continuing corruption and incompetence that so alienated the people can be reconciled with the assertion that by the end of 1972 most populated areas of the country had been pacified. We will also form some conclusions about the final two years of the advisory effort.

As we have seen, the pervasive corruption and incompetence continued unabated, and seem to have reached their zenith in the Phoenix program. Indeed, we may regard Phoenix as a paradigm for the way the elite approach practically everything; the government took a program that was necessary, conceptually sound, well resourced, and reasonably well advised, and through corruption and incompetence made it all but ineffective. The Vietnamese went through the motions of doing the right thing, especially when the Americans were pressuring them to do so, but never truly embraced Phoenix in particular or the pacification effort in general. If an officer was unwilling to participate in the system of corruption, there was a limit to how far he could advance. General Truong was a noteworthy exception to the rule, but for all practical purposes it was a rule, even though unwritten.

The final advisors worried about the impact of this self-centered behavior on the allegiance of the people. Ints Silins, an FSO who served as Ambassador Bunker's aide, observed on travels throughout the country that despite the dedication of the advisors he encountered everywhere, the "corruption [and] insufficient motivation" of Vietnamese officials had resulted in a "lack of trust" by the people. The more he saw, the more pessimistic he became, and he feared for the future.<sup>720</sup> Laurie, the young army officer, saw much the same thing as he traveled the Delta. The people there viewed the government as "stupid, bad, corrupt, and inefficient," he recalled.<sup>721</sup> Metzner too was concerned about the "apathy, greed, indifference, and corruption [that] continued to alienate segments of the

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<sup>720</sup> Silins, p. 22-5.

<sup>721</sup> Laurie, p. 82.

rural population.”<sup>722</sup> Even the optimistic Colonel Tausch was concerned that after the ceasefire, corruption would be as bad or worse than before, and might provide an opportunity for the Communists to regain some of their lost popularity. The National Police would have a more prominent role under the ceasefire agreement, and that would give them “unlimited opportunities for corruption.” He also expected that literally every level of government would engage in “the buying and selling” of office in addition to its other forms of graft.<sup>723</sup>

We are therefore left with two conclusions that on the surface seem to contradict one another: On the one hand, the government had successfully pacified most of the country by the end of 1972, and on the other, corruption and incompetence, which went hand in glove, continued unchecked, and were so egregious that they posed an existential threat. Since pacification is about winning hearts and minds, is it possible to reconcile these two? Indeed, it is. Though Laurie observed that the people considered the government “corrupt,” “bad,” and “inefficient,” he also observed that they had come to view the Communists as far worse; if the Communists were nationalists, then they wanted nothing to do with that type of nationalism.<sup>724</sup> Part of the answer to the apparent dichotomy, then, lies in the fact that in counterinsurgency, it is not a matter of which side is perfect, but which side is relatively better.

A second part of the explanation, though, relates to the concept of “winning hearts and minds.” This topic will be explored more fully in the final chapter, but for now suffice it to say that by the end of 1972, the government had not won the heart of the peasant, but had won his mind, and in the end, that was what mattered. In other words, the peasant could never feel affection for a government that he saw as corrupt and self-serving, but he could appreciate the way it had improved his life and was continuing to do so, and especially economically. He could see that the Communists offered little but words, were brutal, wanted to tax him and take his sons, and frequent destroyed the very things that the government was providing to improve his life. In other words, the government could succeed at pacification without winning both hearts and minds.

As for the advisory effort, the Abrams-Funkhouser dispute is enlightening. Funkhouser thought Abrams wanted more advisors than were necessary at that point in the war. It is clear from

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<sup>722</sup> Metzner, *More Than a Soldier's War*, p. 161.

<sup>723</sup> Tausch, pp. 8, 12.

<sup>724</sup> Laurie, p. 82.

Abram's comments near the end of the Easter Offensive, though, that he did see the value of having many advisors. However, when he said that the advisors had kept the South from falling to the North, he was not referring to the quality of their advice. Instead, he was speaking of the well-known fact that American helicopters and B-52 bombers had often halted the North's advance toward government lines, and those were always coordinated by advisors on the ground with the Vietnamese units.

This does raise the question of what advisors are for. Abrams liked them because they got things done. In addition to coordinating American fire support, they got territorials out on ambushes, they trained soldiers, and they kept Abrams and his staff informed about where Vietnamese units were and what they were doing. We may conclude, though, that Abrams did not understand his own advisory system. The unit-level advisors were effective at teaching and coaching, and Abrams liked that, but they were not good at pushing, which he and the CORDS hierarchy also wanted them to do. They could not possibly have been effective at pushing, because they had neither authority nor leverage.

At every level above the platoons and companies that did the actual fighting, the fundamental tasks were issuing orders and then supervising to ensure they were followed. Since those tasks were the most important in higher headquarters, it was on those that the American generals and colonels advising at those levels should have focused. Yet it was those that Abrams and the others seemed to ignore, because they could tell those young advisors with the units to make sure things were getting done. We must therefore conclude that though advisors could accomplish much, they had limited capability to influence change, and were therefore only partly functional, and at the top where they did not even see their most important task, they were utterly dysfunctional. The advisory effort, then, must be deemed a failure. This is clear even from the words of one of the most experienced advisors of the war. In 1972 when Colonel Metzner returned to the same province he had left two years earlier, he discovered that many of the "old weaknesses still existed." This was after a ten-year advisory effort in the provinces, and that suggests that there was some type of glass ceiling limiting what they could accomplish. No matter how hard they worked, they could not fix the greed and apathy that lay at the root of the visible problems. A good corps commander might have been able to establish and

enforce a standard that would have forced the “inept or unwilling leaders” to buck up or leave, but ultimately an advisor could offer little more than advice.

William Colby was a very bright man. Did he not see that the problem was at the top rather than in the province and district capitals? This inquiry has not discovered anything suggesting that he knew that his attempt to reform the officer corps by getting rid of corrupt and incompetent province and district chiefs was hopeless. Yet his testimony in the Senate makes clear that he knew there was a problem with the country’s elite. Why, then, did he not act on that? We do not know. Perhaps he viewed the corruption at the top as beyond reach and at any rate tolerable because Asian countries seemed to go through such a stage on the way to democracy and economic growth. In his memoirs, he noted that at one time or another “South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Thailand” had been accused of having “corrupt” governments that make them “unworthy” of American support, yet all had continued to receive American support and gone on to achieve “dramatic economic success,” and then “the inexorable growth of democratic aspirations.” Such rationalization was probably common. Hugh Appling, one of Colby’s subordinates at CORDS, explained a common view that he would later see as naive—“that given time, local democracy would grow up, and with education and experience there would be greater confidence in the national government.”<sup>725</sup>

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<sup>725</sup> Colby, p. 377, and see also p. 367; Appling, p. 11.

## Chapter 10 The Ceasefire and the End, 1973-1975

Although the ceasefire did not come until January, it had been expected for some time. In the last months of 1972, Colonel Metzner watched the people in his province turn against the Communists, but hoped it was not “too late.” As people sensed an imminent agreement, all were hopeful, but their socioeconomic class shaped their expectations: the “lowest” were “naive and almost blind [in their] hope,” the “middle” were “cautious [and] reserved,” and the “upper” were leery.<sup>726</sup>

On 23 January, Nixon announced “peace with honor.” The agreement, which would be “internationally supervised,” stipulated the release of POWs, MIA searches, and the withdrawal of American troops, and “guaranteed [the South Vietnamese] the right to determine their own future.” Americans had neither “betrayed” the South nor “ended the war for us but [not] the 50 million people of Indochina,” he said, adding that Thieu was in “full support,” and that the US would “continue to aid [the South] within the terms of the agreement.” He did not mention the tens of thousands of North Vietnamese soldiers allowed to remain.<sup>727</sup>

The agreement established an International Commission of Control and Supervision (ICCS) consisting of Poles, Hungarians, Canadians, and Indonesians, but they were “tasked with observing [rather than] enforcing” recalled FSO John Helble.<sup>728</sup> The only recourse either side really had, after complaining, was to return to violence. Nixon understood this, and had signaled that he would resume bombing in the event of serious violations.<sup>729</sup> Almost immediately, though, the Communists attempted a “land grab,” assuming that the ICCS would arrive before the South could take back what they had seized. Aggressive counterattacks foiled the scheme, and the ICCS had not yet deployed anyway.<sup>730</sup> In Metzner’s province, villagers fled as a combined force of VC and North Vietnamese took three hamlets. Counterattacks drove them off, but when the villagers returned they found “the usual death and destruction,” and expressed hatred for the Communists.<sup>731</sup> Parker Borg was surprised that there

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<sup>726</sup> Metzner, *More Than a Soldier's War*, pp. 163, 165.

<sup>727</sup> R.M. Nixon, “Nixon’s ‘Peace With Honor’ Broadcast On Vietnam” (23 January 1973), *Watergate.info*; Metzner, *More Than a Soldier's War*, p. 165.

<sup>728</sup> J.J. Helble, interviewed by T.F. Conlon, ADST (1996), p. 147.

<sup>729</sup> Metzner, *More Than a Soldier's War*, p. 165.

<sup>730</sup> W.E. Le Gro, *Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation* (Washington, 1985), pp. 21-32.

<sup>731</sup> Metzner, *More Than a Soldier's War*, pp. 164-5.

were only “a couple of skirmishes” in his province, and in Lacy Wright’s area both sides tried “to clean things up.” According to Borg, there was also a “war of the flags,” with each side attaching flags to trees to convince the ICCS that they controlled an area, whether or not they did so.<sup>732</sup>

The changes within the US Mission were considerable. Except for American marines to protect the embassy and a fifty-man defense attaché office to help with logistics and intelligence, the remaining 20,000 soldiers had to leave by the end of March.<sup>733</sup> Metzner observed that district chiefs felt “resentful [and] abandoned,” and though the province chief remained personable, Metzner was embarrassed at the “ignominious” way the US was ending the war.<sup>734</sup> Civilians returned to embassy control, and though USAID managed national-level programs, a “‘rump’ CORDS structure” under George Jacobson, the final CORDS director, continued rural development. The State Department established four consulates to take over from the regional CORDS offices, each with a consul general.<sup>735</sup> To monitor the situation, Washington quickly deployed fifty FSOs, all with Vietnam experience, from around the world.

Major General John Murray, MACV’s final logistics chief, became the defense attaché. Metzner joined Murray’s office as liaison to the Vietnamese General Staff, where he was to report on their operations. When General Ralph Maglione, Murray’s deputy, required Metzner to pressure his counterparts to provide details of pending operations, Metzner wondered how he “expected [junior] officers to divulge sensitive information...without the approval of their bosses,” who were Maglione’s and Murray’s counterparts.<sup>736</sup> The ingrained practice of delegating the heavy lifting continued.

The initial consuls general were career diplomats with extensive Vietnam experience. Frederick Brown was already in I Corp’s Da Nang, James Engle was in Washington heading the State Department’s Vietnam Working Group when ordered back to II Corps, Robert Walkinshaw was already in III Corps as the CORDS deputy, and Thomas Barnes was the consul general in Tangier when directed to IV Corps. Their consulates were smaller and had no soldiers, but otherwise

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<sup>732</sup> P.W. Borg, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (2002), pp. 59-61; L.A. Wright, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (1998), p. 35.

<sup>733</sup> Metzner, *More Than a Soldier’s War*, p. 165. Dunlop, p. 111; Helble, p. 150; F.T. McNamara, p. 110; S.T. Johnson, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (1997), p. 46.

<sup>734</sup> Metzner, *More Than a Soldier’s War*, p. 169.

<sup>735</sup> L. Wright, p. 35; Engle, pp. 26-7.

<sup>736</sup> Metzner, *More Than a Soldier’s War*, p. 175.

resembled the CORDS headquarters they replaced. They supervised both development and the reporting mission.<sup>737</sup> Most of the fifty FSOs came on six-month tours, and were to report “what happened and how it happened and what sort of abuses of the treaty might take place.”<sup>738</sup> According to FSO Richard Teare, because the Paris agreement implied that there would be “peaceful political competition with the Communists,” they were also to report on how the government was preparing for that.<sup>739</sup> General Charles Timmes, who had commanded the advisory group in 1962 and returned with the CIA in 1967, would remain till the end, engaging the generals “to get their candid views of what was going on.”<sup>740</sup> Was anyone in Washington reading the volumes of data being generated? Stephen Johnson, who had a key role in the process, had no idea.<sup>741</sup> Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese were going through a reorganization of their own. Douglas Keene thought it “surreal” to see their soldiers sauntering down the streets in one area while locked in combat in another.<sup>742</sup> On 29 March, the last American soldiers left and the reorganization was complete.

### **Developments After the Reorganization**

Within the US Mission there were different opinions on the prospect of peace. In the spring, when optimism was still easy, Ambassador Bunker would assure his staff that Nixon had achieved the “right solution,” the US was there for the “long haul,” and “the cost [was now] tolerable.” He compared it to Korea, where continued American support after the ceasefire had facilitated stability.<sup>743</sup> When John Finney left in August, he felt “very good” about CORDS’s accomplishments,

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<sup>737</sup> J.B. Treaster, “Civilians Taking Over U.S. Task in Vietnam,” *The New York Times* (9 February 1973); F.Z. Brown, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (1998), pp. 29-37; Engle, pp. 26-30; Barnes, pp. 273-98, 312-3, 320-1.

<sup>738</sup> Borg, p. 57. See also Helble, p. 147; Engle, p. 27; S. Johnson, p. 46; T.F. Conlon, interviewed by A.W. Gray, ADST (1992), p. 21.

<sup>739</sup> Teare, p. 51. Numerous FSOs have left accounts of the period after the ceasefire. In addition to Teare, pp. 51-6, see also K. Quinn, “From Whitehouse to the White House,” *The Foreign Service Journal*, vol. 92, no. 3, April 2015, pp. 25-31; D.R. Keene, pp. 16-8; Hyde, pp. 28-32; Borg, pp. 55-76; Thomsen, pp. 75-92; Dunlop, pp. 111-9; L. Wright, pp. 20-1, 33-52; Wisner, pp. 19-22, 27; D. Watson, interviewed by T.J. Dunnigan, ADST (2000), p. 8; Finney, pp. 54-61; Conlon, pp. 21-2; J.F. Mack, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (2004), pp. 29-40; P.R. Cook, interviewed by M. Stearns, ADST (1996), pp. 12-26; C. Dunkerley, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (2004), pp. 9-13; Helble, pp. 41, 146-55; M.J. Spear, interviewed by T.J. Dunnigan, ADST (1993), pp. 16-23; G.L. Matthews, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (1996), pp. 38-9.

<sup>740</sup> L. Wright, p. 38; C. Timmes, “General Charles Timmes Remembers the Fall of Saigon,” *Pushing On* (19 December 2012).

<sup>741</sup> S. Johnson, p. 46; see also Teare, p. 53.

<sup>742</sup> Keene, p. 17.

<sup>743</sup> Dunlop, p. 111.

and was “reasonably optimistic” peace would prevail.<sup>744</sup> Back at the State Department, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Indochina Monteagle Stearns concluded in October 1973 “that the South Vietnamese were capable of maintaining their independence from the North but would require substantial U.S. assistance for some time to come.”<sup>745</sup> The fact that State started staffing the embassy and consulates with personnel on “regular tours of duty” suggests that they anticipated a normalized, long-term American commitment.<sup>746</sup> Some were skeptical. Douglas Keene, who departed Vietnam in March, suspected that “for domestic political reasons” Nixon had accepted an agreement that would not hold, and when Stephen Johnson left in August, he assumed that “war would continue.”<sup>747</sup>

In the early months, Americans saw both sides committing violations, but viewed the North’s as more frequent and serious.<sup>748</sup> The US encouraged Saigon to adhere to the agreement even when Hanoi did not, recalled Richard Teare. According to Lacy Wright, some Vietnamese felt the US was “bending over backwards to play fair, to the benefit of the other side.” This perception would grow, and in the end cause Americans to worry that the Vietnamese might turn their guns on them.<sup>749</sup>

Bunker left in May, and his replacement, Graham Martin, was still somewhat optimistic in December, even though Communist forces were by then on the attack across the country. He cabled Nixon that Communist “proselytizing [had] been unsuccessful,” and that the army had “held well [and] kept the other side off balance.”<sup>750</sup> However, intelligence suggested that Hanoi was preparing for a major offensive. Road construction on the Ho Chi Minh Trail was the obvious indicator, recalled Johnson; Richard Teare noted that they were “building up their supply system,” “lines of communication,” and “intelligence.”<sup>751</sup> General Bruce Palmer recalled that starting that summer, the US Air Force operating out of Thailand provided “a steady stream of photographic...evidence” of the buildup near the border in Laos.<sup>752</sup>

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<sup>744</sup> Finney, p. 56.

<sup>745</sup> M. Stearns, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (2013), p. 70.

<sup>746</sup> Teare, p. 52.

<sup>747</sup> Keene, p. 18; S. Johnson, p. 46.

<sup>748</sup> Teare, pp. 51-2; P. Cook, p. 19; see also Quinn, p. 26.

<sup>749</sup> Teare, p. 52; L. Wright, p. 36.

<sup>750</sup> Le Gro, *Vietnam*, p. 81.

<sup>751</sup> S. Johnson, pp. 46-7; Teare, p. 52.

<sup>752</sup> Palmer, p. 142; see also P. Cook, p. 19.

Although it was much smaller than CORDS, the US continued a robust development effort under Jacobson, whose title was Special Assistant to the Ambassador for Field Operations.<sup>753</sup> In II Corps, for example, there were representatives in each province, sections working on economic development, agriculture, social welfare, health, highways, and land reform, and 2,000 mostly Vietnamese employees.<sup>754</sup> As under CORDS, the arrangement created tension with USAID. John Bennett, AID's deputy director, disliked Jacobson's "direct line to the ambassador" and that AID resourced all projects yet controlled only the national ones.<sup>755</sup> Soon after the ceasefire, the US planned to scale back. On the first of April, Jacobson informed the four consulates that Washington intended to significantly reduce their staff by the end of the year. Tom Barnes, the consul general in IV Corps, thought this "end of an empire" was appropriate.<sup>756</sup> Even a year later, though, the II Corps consul general still had 100 Americans and 700 Vietnamese.<sup>757</sup>

Bennett's priorities at USAID were "raising food output, resettling refugees, providing medical care, [and] improving tax collections," and on frequent visits to the field he observed that the presence or absence of security remained the principal determinant of success.<sup>758</sup> The Communists did not permit development in areas they controlled, and actively opposed it elsewhere. The insurgency continued, but the government could no longer target enemy bases. By the summer of 1973, though, Hanoi was conducting larger operations, and Montcrieff Spear, who became the II Corps consul general in September, recalled that a "pitched battle" ended just as he arrived.<sup>759</sup>

American work in the countryside had been viewed as essential to the pacification effort, and though it continued, there was a push to complete unfinished projects while resources were still available. President Thieu had seemed on board with political development before the ceasefire, but some accounts suggest that if he had truly embraced open political competition, he soon gave up on it. His "idea of political organizing," said Teare, was to form a government party and call for civil

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<sup>753</sup> Finney, p. 54.

<sup>754</sup> Spear, p. 17; USAID, *Telephone and General Information Directory* (15 July 1973), USAID, p. 12; L. Wright, pp. 33, 35; Finney, p. 54; Teare, p. 53.

<sup>755</sup> Bennett, p. 36.

<sup>756</sup> Barnes, p. 297.

<sup>757</sup> Spear, p. 17.

<sup>758</sup> Bennett, p. 35.

<sup>759</sup> Spear, p. 17.

servants to join, docking the pay of those who did not. As a result, said Teare, “loyalty was skin deep,” but the fear of Communist rule mitigated the damage.<sup>760</sup> By December, Ambassador Martin had observed a “consolidation of...support for President Thieu,” but perhaps this was a case of “rally around the flag,” since it was clear to all by then that Hanoi was not adhering to the agreement.<sup>761</sup>

By the fall of 1973, most of the FSOs who had been rushed in had returned to their duty stations, and diplomats new to Vietnam began to arrive. Although Ambassador Martin had lost a son in Vietnam, neither he nor Barnes’ and Engle’s replacements had served there before.<sup>762</sup> Vietnam was no longer the priority, and those with much time there needed to get back to the mainstream for career purposes. Had the ceasefire held, this would have been insignificant, but under the circumstances the experience was missed.

Government forces had held off most of the Communist attacks in 1973, but suffered high casualties and materiel losses in the process. The US had continued to provide fuel and ammunition, allocating \$2.67 billion in military aid for fiscal year (FY) 1973, which had started in July 1972 and ran through June 1973, five months after the ceasefire.<sup>763</sup> Before the ceasefire, Congress had funded the Vietnamese through the budgets of the American services, but for FY 1974, which would start in July 1973, funds would be via military assistance acts. Until Congress could pass one to cover the entire year, it used a series of continuing resolutions with the understanding that they would total \$1.1 billion. In early 1973, the defense attaché had given that figure to the Vietnamese, who used it for budgeting ammunition, fuel, and maintenance.<sup>764</sup> Under the assumption that post-ceasefire combat would be negligible, the 1974 budget ended up just forty percent of that for 1973. The fighting was intense, though, and nobody had anticipated the high inflation resulting from the oil embargo. By the end of 1973, it was clear that the \$1.1 billion budget was woefully inadequate.

Other Washington decisions would affect Vietnam’s destiny. Nixon had continued air operations in Laos and Cambodia, but in May an angry Congress used a supplemental appropriations

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<sup>760</sup> Teare, pp. 53-4.

<sup>761</sup> Le Gro, *Vietnam*, p. 81.

<sup>762</sup> Spear, pp. 1-2, 16-7; F.T. McNamara, p. 109; W.J. Lehmann, interviewed by R. Martens, ADST (1989), p. 2; Barnes, p. 281.

<sup>763</sup> “Talking Points: Supplemental Assistance for South Vietnam” (undated), Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library & Museum, p. 2.

<sup>764</sup> Le Gro, *Vietnam*, p. 80.

bill to prohibit American operations anywhere in Indochina. Knowing he could not override a veto, Nixon signed the bill. In July, though, when Congress imposed a sixty-day limit to combat operations they had not authorized, Nixon vetoed.<sup>765</sup> Reflecting the growing antiwar camp, Congress overrode the veto in November, and in December, halfway through the fiscal year, they reduced the already inadequate \$1.1 billion by twenty-six percent. According to Colonel William Le Gro, the attaché's intelligence officer, \$723 million of that "had already been obligated," so just \$90 million remained for the next six months. Then the Pentagon, worried that they might inadvertently violate the law, canceled all funds "for the rest of the fiscal year," meaning that once Vietnam consumed the ammunition, fuel, and parts on hand or on order, there would be no more.<sup>766</sup>

Fearing that the news would be "too unsettling politically," Ambassador Martin ordered Murray not to tell the Vietnamese, who continued normal rates of consumption. Requisitions took four months to arrive, so they kept coming until April 1974, at which time "the supply line dried up," and would "never [fully] recover." To lessen the impact on the most critical items—ammunition, medical supplies, and meals—Murray terminated dependent housing and infrastructure projects, and canceled replacement parts for ships and planes.<sup>767</sup>

Martin cabled Nixon on 26 December that Saigon had "up to now kept the other side off balance," and as if to counter the narrative that Vietnamese troops would not fight, he noted that the South had incurred more casualties since the ceasefire than the US had during the entire war. Furthermore, Hanoi's forces were stronger than at any time since their failed 1972 offensive, and Martin anticipated another offensive if Hanoi perceived that the South was receiving inadequate support.<sup>768</sup> He reminded Nixon of his promise to replace weapons, ammunition, fuel, medical supplies, and spare parts, and emphasized that he had made this commitment not just once, but "before the January agreements, at the time of the January agreements, after the January agreements, again at the time of the June communiqué, and most especially at the San Clemente meeting in April." To illustrate the problem, he explained that at the time of the ceasefire, the South had 107,000

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<sup>765</sup> "Vietnam Background."

<sup>766</sup> Le Gro, *Vietnam*, p. 80.

<sup>767</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 80-1.

<sup>768</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

handheld antitank rockets, but because of the heavy fighting and budget cuts, only 21,000 were projected by June. Though Martin did not explain the obvious, when an army is short ammunition it gives up ground to conserve what it has. He also discussed the F-5 fighter. Not only was the US not replacing Saigon's losses, it had just taken eight "perfectly flyable" F-5s from the Vietnamese and sent them to Korea and Iran to honor commitments there. Thieu had therefore ordered his pilots "to inflict maximum possible damage in retaliatory raids...but to lose no aircraft in the process." Instead of less money in FY 1974, said Martin, the South needed forty-four percent more.<sup>769</sup>

### **The Situation Worsens in 1974**

As Martin worried about decisions in Hanoi and Washington, he continued to plan for long-term development, and had USAID develop a proposal that would make the South "self-sufficient" in five years. Congress was not receptive.<sup>770</sup> As the South's weakened forces lost ground, USAID was forced to cancel many local projects, but agricultural production actually increased in safe areas as AID continued to provide more productive strains and pumps, fertilizer, and pesticides.<sup>771</sup>

The more urgent problem was assisting the tens of thousands of new refugees created by the Communist attacks. This understandably overwhelmed province chiefs, recalled John Bennett. Refugees had long been a pet concern for some members of Congress, and the same ones cutting military aid were faulting the South for inadequately dealing with the problem rather than the North for causing it. Bennett recalled that it was easy for Washington visitors to find evidence of malfeasance, including "torture" and "corruption," and they tended to become preoccupied with that rather than what they could do to help. Representative Bella Abzug visited several times, but never seemed interested in anything but the misconduct. Bennett came to view her as "the personification of what we opposed."<sup>772</sup>

Bennett observed that "individuals [in the government] could function but the whole did not." Rarely were Saigon's directives carried out in the countryside, but Americans were now limited in how they could help; he saw it as the advisor's perpetual dilemma of doing what the Vietnamese

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<sup>769</sup> Ibid, pp. 81-2.

<sup>770</sup> Bennett, p. 36. General Palmer wrote, "During the final years..., few if any of our national level civilian leaders were inclined to take much interest in the fate of South Vietnam" (Palmer, p. 140).

<sup>771</sup> Bennett, p. 39.

<sup>772</sup> Ibid, pp. 37-8.

should have been doing or it would not get done. Since advisors at every level had been the glue holding the Vietnamese system together, this should have been expected. Much got done that way, but senior officials were never forced to fulfill their supervisory responsibilities, and the system seems to have begun a slow-motion collapse after advisors were removed. Bennett began weekly meetings with key officials to explore ways to improve things. He knew that in the past such improvements had not lasted, and he hoped to change that, apparently not realizing that the reason they had not lasted was that the Americans, rather than Vietnamese, had been the driving force behind them.<sup>773</sup> The US had squandered nineteen years of opportunity for such things, and it was now too late.

In September, Terry McNamara returned to be the IV Corps consul general. He was the only senior American with Vietnam experience, and thought that was hurting decision-making. He had been with CORDS, and was gratified to discover that the “old CORDS people” were his best staff; they were action-oriented, while the rest tended to be lethargic.<sup>774</sup> He noticed that corruption remained a major problem. He described General Nghi, the IV Corps commander, as “Thieu’s instrument for skimming the wealth off the countryside.” “The patronage machine had to be” fed, he said, and because US aid “was fast drying up,” officials felt a sense of urgency to “squeeze [what they could] out of the people.” Their “web of corruption...went from the palace in Saigon down to the corps commanders to the province chiefs to the district chiefs down to the...village [and] hamlet chiefs.” Nghi was at the pinnacle of the scheme in the Delta. Even when officers looked professional, incompetence and corruption often lay just below the veneer, and Nghi was the perfect example of that. He was a briefing “spellbinder,” but “a great deal of [what he briefed] was absolutely false.” Many of his province chiefs were no different, reporting that all was well when they had “grave security problems,” said McNamara. “The North Vietnamese were re-infiltrating into areas that had been cleaned out,” because province chiefs were preoccupied with “making money and were neglecting...security.”<sup>775</sup>

There were issues with the III Corps commander as well, as will be discussed below, and Richard Teare had observed the previous summer that General Toan, the II Corps commander, was

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<sup>773</sup> Ibid, p. 40.

<sup>774</sup> F.T. McNamara, p. 113.

<sup>775</sup> Ibid, p. 118.

“quite corrupt.”<sup>776</sup> General Murray concluded that Toan’s corruption—which Americans had recognized for years—was so egregious that he persuaded Ambassador Martin to pressure Thieu to sack him, which Thieu did. Colonel Le Gro, though, considered Toan “one of the most effective corps commanders,” and thought removing him was a mistake regardless of how corrupt he might be.<sup>777</sup> Although Americans had concerns with three of the corps commanders, they continued to regard General Truong in I Corps as the most honest and competent senior officer in the country.

Even without a major offensive, the cumulative effect of the attacks was taking its toll. From January through March 1974, the number of wounded troops requiring hospitalization averaged 8,750 a month. In early January, General Murray recommended that the Vietnamese husband their resources, and they began to ration “critical ammunition items.”<sup>778</sup> North Vietnamese troops were under no such constraints, and in late 1973 and early 1974 they launched several limited-objective operations, one designed to separate Saigon from the Delta. The South generally prevailed, but the enemy was able to retain bases putting them closer to Saigon, and “the situation was grim in” the northern half of the country.<sup>779</sup>

When the supplies that had been ordered in December arrived in April, military aid began to dry up. Le Gro noted that government troops continued to fight hard, but by that summer “many of its vehicles were on blocks, its aircraft grounded because of parts and fuel shortages, its radios silent for lack of batteries, and its far-flung outposts suffering from inadequate artillery support.” The aid would never again flow in the quantity needed, and over the summer the fighting escalated to the point that Saigon was hospitalizing 10,000 soldiers a month.<sup>780</sup> Around that time, Lacy Wright, the interim consul general in IV Corps, submitted a “very pessimistic” sixteen-page warning that in the Delta troops no longer had adequate ammunition to defend against the frequent attacks. He described the eighteen months since the ceasefire as the “progressive disarming of our side,” and he thought it understandable that many soldiers, feeling abandoned, were deserting.<sup>781</sup>

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<sup>776</sup> Teare, p. 52.

<sup>777</sup> W. LeGro, interviewed by L. Calkins, VCATTU (2005-06), p. 519.

<sup>778</sup> Le Gro, *Vietnam*, pp. 83, 85.

<sup>779</sup> Palmer, p. 141.

<sup>780</sup> Le Gro, *Vietnam*, pp. 84-5.

<sup>781</sup> L. Wright, p. 35.

While living with the ill effects of the 1974 budget, General Murray was preparing for FY 1975, which would start in July. Guessing at requirements months in advance was difficult. In September 1973, he had anticipated the need for \$1.45 billion, but this was before the high inflation and increase in attacks, so it fell considerably short. By the spring of 1974, though, the mood of Congress was clear. Murray had warned that a budget of \$750 million would “have a disastrous effect”—equipment would not be replaced, “critical...fuel, ammunition, spare parts, medical and communications [needs] would not be met,” “flying hours would be further reduced,” and “training [and maintenance] would be slashed severely.” The bottom line, said Le Gro, was that if only \$750 million were appropriated, Saigon “could no longer defend” itself, and as Murray put it, would “abandon large segments of the country and weaken [prospects for] a negotiated settlement.”<sup>782</sup> Despite the warning, Congress gave them just \$700 million, and because that included the attaché’s expenses and other charges, the Vietnamese would net just \$500 million. After the November elections, war fatigue continued to grow. Metzner thought that American officials “were more distrustful of the South [than] the North.”<sup>783</sup> Congress planned to eliminate all funding for FY 1976, which would start in July 1975.

In April 1974, the inventory of the 105-mm artillery round—“the most critical item of ammunition”—was “dangerously low.”<sup>784</sup> A few months later, Metzner saw this firsthand when he visited General Le Minh Dao, whom he had advised when both were majors. Dao now commanded a division northwest of Saigon. North Vietnamese troops had them pinned down, firing “ten, twenty, fifty [artillery] rounds at anything that move[d],” while his own guns could shoot back just four times a day. On top of that, he had insufficient fuel to move artillery or tanks where they could be most effective. “My soldiers want to fight,” he said, but each got just 100 bullets for an entire month. His division ceded everything beyond its positions to the Communists. Dao considered the American-imposed shortages the immediate problem, but knew they were compounded by the incompetence above him. He complained that the corps commander was “unsupporting, dense, and uncaring,” and told Metzner that if the US would give them the means, they would do the fighting and dying. Though

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<sup>782</sup> Le Gro, *Vietnam*, pp. 84-7.

<sup>783</sup> Finney, pp. 55-6; Metzner, *More Than a Soldier*, p. 166.

<sup>784</sup> Le Gro, *Vietnam*, p. 84.

Dao never got what he needed, his division fought to the end, and he would then spend seventeen years in prison.<sup>785</sup>

Nixon resigned on 9 August, and Gerald Ford had neither his combative spirit nor emotional commitment to the war, but at any rate was hamstrung by Congress. That month General Murray came to the end of his tour, and as General Palmer recalled, was “bitter about [Washington’s] indifferent attitude,” and became “outspoken in his critic[ism]” after retiring. The next month, Creighton Abrams died. Former Pentagon official Warren Nutter visited Vietnam that fall, and told Palmer that the South’s morale was “shattered” and “Thieu felt betrayed and abandoned.” America’s stated goal of an independent South “was only a sham,” he said; “the real policy was to cut American losses and get out.”<sup>786</sup>

Into the summer, the US command in Thailand continued providing unambiguous evidence that Hanoi was preparing for another massive invasion. The Ho Chi Minh trail had been so improved by October, that a Communist official who traveled its length described it as “a modern highway dotted with truck rest and service areas, oil tanks, machine shops, and other installations, all protected by hilltop anti-aircraft emplacements.”<sup>787</sup> Back in Washington, James Bullington, a “Vietnam desk officer” at State, saw disaster looming. By simply taking the Pentagon’s estimates of how quickly the South was consuming parts, ammunition, and petroleum, and comparing those with what the US was providing, he determined in December that if the fighting continued at the current rate, the South would simply “run out of bullets” by late 1975 or early 1976. If the North “perceived this growing...weakness” and thought the US was unlikely to help, “the end would come a lot quicker.”

Bullington went to Vietnam to verify his calculations, and saw “artillery tubes...limited to one or two rounds a night,” “soldiers [with just] one hand grenade,” and the air force “essentially grounded for lack of spare parts and [fuel].” Vietnamese officers complained bitterly that America’s betrayal was making defeat almost certain. “It became evident to me that the end was nigh,” said Bullington, but Ambassador Martin appeared to understand neither the military situation in Vietnam nor the political one in Washington. USAID’s John Bennett recalled that Martin “would spring on any

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<sup>785</sup> Metzner, *More Than a Soldier’s War*, pp. 180-1, 185, 190.

<sup>786</sup> Palmer, pp. 141-2, 146.

<sup>787</sup> Karnow, p. 663; see also Palmer, p. 142.

expression of faint-heartedness.” Bullington submitted his conclusions to Phil Habib, Assistant Secretary for East Asia, but they had no impact. John Finney, in Vietnam at the time, said that America’s perceived abandonment was “psychological[ly] unraveling” the South’s army.<sup>788</sup>

The North was indeed following Washington’s changing political landscape and its affect on Saigon. In October, Hanoi’s commander in the South pressed for permission to launch a major offensive as early as December. To test the waters, Le Duan, the Communist Party’s General Secretary, approved a limited scale attack against Phuoc Long province on the Cambodian border. If that succeeded, it would confirm Saigon’s weakness and Washington’s unwillingness to help, and the foothold gained would provide “a springboard for an eventual assault against Saigon [which could then] be captured during the dry season of 1976.” They attacked on 12 December 1974.<sup>789</sup>

### **Early 1975 Through the End**

Using “eight thousand North Vietnamese regulars who pulverized the town with artillery and rocket fire before storming its perimeter,” North Vietnamese troops took Phuoc Long in early January.<sup>790</sup> Control of the province threatened Saigon and facilitated moving troops and supplies into the country from Cambodia. Hanoi had worried that Ford might respond with B-52 strikes, but he “made no mention of Vietnam in his State of the Union message” a week later, and a few days after that said he could envision no scenario where the US would actively participate in the war. Hanoi decided “the time to strike for the kill had come.”<sup>791</sup>

Ford had not given up, though, and on 28 January responded to Martin’s increasingly worried reports by asking Congress for emergency funds. Congress waited a month to dispatch a delegation to evaluate the request, and American officials in Saigon were dumbfounded when Bella Abzug, instead of inquiring into the dire situation, demanded to see “political prisoners.” The bemused government accommodated her, recalled Le Gro, but “what constituted a political prisoner [under such circumstances] was a subject of no little dispute.”<sup>792</sup> Lawrence Hyde, who translated for the group,

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<sup>788</sup> J.R. Bullington, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy, ADST (2001), pp. 34-5; Bennett, p. 38; Finney, p. 58; see also P. Cook, p. 18.

<sup>789</sup> Karnow, p. 663.

<sup>790</sup> Ibid, pp. 663-4.

<sup>791</sup> Palmer, p. 143.

<sup>792</sup> Le Gro, *Vietnam*, p. 144.

thought they understood when they left in early March, “that things [would] fall apart unless they did something,” but as they departed, the North attacked along multiple axes throughout the country.<sup>793</sup>

When it looked like the key II Corps city of Ban Me Thuot would fall, Thieu ordered General Truong to send the country’s elite Airborne Division south to protect Saigon. He then decided to give up II Corps north of Ban Me Thuot so those forces could withdraw and counterattack from the south. That, however, would separate I Corps from the rest of the country, so he ordered Truong to evacuate all of I Corps except Da Nang, which would become an enclave inaccessible from the ground.<sup>794</sup> As II Corps attempted to extricate its forces, civilians panicked and fled with the army units, clogging the road. Communist forces ambushed the mix of soldiers and civilians. Montcrieff Spear, the II Corps consul general, recalled the “heroic work” of government troops who tried “to fight their way up to [the ambushed] column” from the coast, but soldiers and civilians alike were massacred and “thousands of civilians [who survived the ambush then] died of thirst and hunger on this horrible march down to the sea.”<sup>795</sup> Communist forces pursued, and once on the coast they rolled through one city after another. Quang Ngai fell on 24 March, Qui Nhon and Nha Trang on 1 April, and Cam Ranh Bay on 3 April. It had taken the North just a month to take the northern half of the country.

Back in Washington, a few continued to pursue emergency funding. On 26 March, Senator Robert Griffin reminded his colleagues in the Senate of JFK’s boast that America would pay any price to further the cause of liberty, and warned that Congress was on the verge of breaking that promise. He recalled that Ho Chi Minh’s 1954 “purge [had] resulted in an estimated 50,000 executions and, indirectly, in the deaths of several hundred thousand more,” and referred to the Hué mass executions during Tet. He acknowledged that Americans were “tired of Vietnam,” but said that a senator’s job was to exercise judgment, not “echo...public opinion.” Some rationalize, he continued, that without American aid the Vietnamese would have to “settle their own problems and the rest of the world can live in peace.” Others say that “the people... prefer Communism anyway,” but “the hundreds of

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<sup>793</sup> Hyde, p. 32.

<sup>794</sup> Le Gro, *Vietnam*, pp. 158-70; see also Finney, pp. 55-6, and on the concern over Saigon as early as 9 March, see Le Gro, *Vietnam*, p. 149.

<sup>795</sup> Spear, p. 19.

thousands of refugees” fleeing the Communists were proving that wrong.<sup>796</sup> A set of “talking points” prepared for Griffin listed three reasons for the South’s predicament: the North’s twenty-division juggernaut, reductions in American support, and “poorly executed... withdrawals severely hampered by the flood of refugees.” Because of the dearth of American support, the Vietnamese air force had reduced flying hours by fifty per cent, and “many aircraft [were] grounded for lack of fuel and spare parts.”<sup>797</sup> The aid being discussed, though, would have been too little, too late. By March only the B-52 strikes might have turned the tide, and Ford had ruled those out.

Near the end of March, Ford dispatched Army Chief of Staff Fred Weyand, who had replaced Abrams, to assess the situation.<sup>798</sup> He met with Thieu and conveyed Ford’s message that he was “hamstrung by congressional actions and domestic opposition,” and would do what he could, but under no circumstances would resume fighting.<sup>799</sup> That must have been a blow to Thieu and the Americans in Saigon, because both Colonel Le Gro and his boss, General Smith, who had replaced Murray as defense attaché, knew the South could not survive without B-52 strikes, and Le Gro told Weyand that.<sup>800</sup> Le Gro summarized his comments in a memo for Weyand on 31 March: Giving up the northern half of the country to save the southern half would work only if I and II Corps forces were able to get out intact, if the North did not commit new units to the fight, and if the US resumed aid for “as long as the North’s aggression makes it necessary.” Le Gro warned that in fact most units were not making it out, the North was pouring in reinforcements, and there was no indication Congress would turn the spigot back on.<sup>801</sup> Weyand returned to Washington and recommended “a massive...aid program” that might have been sufficient a year earlier, but not now.<sup>802</sup>

In the midst of the defeats there was often stiff resistance, and the Army’s official history of the period, which Le Gro authored, is replete with stories of both regulars and territorials fighting tenaciously. That they fought so hard in those final weeks despite their logistics problems is generally

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<sup>796</sup> W.T. Kendall, “Memorandum for the President” (25 March 1975), Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library & Museum; Griffin speech, pp. 1-5.

<sup>797</sup> “Talking Points,” pp. 1-3.

<sup>798</sup> Le Gro, *Vietnam*, p. 170.

<sup>799</sup> Palmer, p. 147.

<sup>800</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 148-9; Le Gro, *Vietnam*, p. 170.

<sup>801</sup> Le Gro, *Vietnam*, pp. 170-1.

<sup>802</sup> Palmer, p. 149.

lost on historians.<sup>803</sup> Yanek Mieczkowski, for example, in a general history of the Ford presidency, referred to “North Vietnam’s quick, easy invasion,” said that Hanoi’s army “easily overran any South Vietnamese soldiers it encountered,” and concluded that “no amount of aid could have helped such a weak ally.” “The country proved utterly incapable of defending itself against North Vietnamese advances,” he asserted.<sup>804</sup> This fits the prevailing narrative, but is contradicted by the evidence. Americans there at the time knew that the proximate cause of the defeats that started in 1974 was the lack of the promised American aid, and that had it been provided it might have made all the difference. They recognized at the end, though, that simply restoring the aid could not have made up for fifteen months of broken promises, and it would have to be combined with the B-52 strikes Nixon had promised.<sup>805</sup>

Some in Congress were angry that the White House, and even some of their colleagues, seemed to be blaming them for the debacle. On 8 April, Senator Henry Jackson protested that Congress knew nothing of the “commitments” and “obligations” that the White House kept referring to. If “secret agreements” had been made without the consent of Congress, said Jackson, they were inappropriate, and the White House must “make [the documents] public” so “Congress [could] play [their] constitutional role in constructing a coherent foreign policy.” The next day the White House responded that Nixon had indeed privately “assured” Thieu that the US “would ‘react vigorously to major violations’ of the Paris peace accords,” but that these “confidential exchanges” did not differ in substance from what was stated publicly when the Accords were signed. Nixon had “clearly and publicly” stated US intentions to provide adequate aid and enforce the ceasefire agreement, said the White House, but at any rate, the promise had been made somewhat “moot” in August 1973, when Congress had made American combat anywhere in Indochina illegal. Jackson demanded a vigorous

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<sup>803</sup> For example, see Le Gro, *Vietnam*, pp. 156-7, and his dedication, which says “with enduring respect to all the fighting men of South Vietnam, especially the infantry, rangers, airborne troops, and marines. May this book preserve at least a partial record of those who fought long, bravely, and under great handicaps and hardships to preserve individual freedom in their country.”

<sup>804</sup> Y. Mieczkowski, *Gerald Ford and the Challenges of the 1970s* (Lexington, 2005), pp. 290-2.

<sup>805</sup> Hyde, p. 29.

investigation, and Senate Majority Leader Mansfield joined in, saying that he anticipated a full inquiry regarding these “secret pledges.”<sup>806</sup>

John Finney, back at the State Department, marveled at the “wishful thinking,” “confus[ion],” and lack of “focus,” and concluded that Ford’s lack of “political will” both to use B-52s and “to take the kind of emergency effort [that the US had taken during] the Berlin Airlift, or to make a stand at Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin” was a major part of the problem.<sup>807</sup> But Ford did make one final effort on the money. On 10 April, he went to a joint session of Congress to ask for \$722 million in military aid—the amount Weyand told him was indispensable—and an additional \$250 million of non-military aid. His reception would have embarrassed any President, but for one who had so recently been Minority Leader of the House it must have been especially humbling. Half of Congress boycotted the speech, and those there “gave him a chilly reception, listen[ed] in a demurring silence [and] offered no applause.” When he mentioned the amount he was asking for, “some Democrats hissed [and] two first-term Democratic congressmen [got] up and walk[ed] out.” Ford was appalled.<sup>808</sup>

Opponents cited various reasons for their opposition. Some argued that the Vietnamese had not effectively used what they had received over the years and therefore did not deserve more. Others said simply that their constituents wanted no more involvement in Vietnam. Some claimed the money was needed for domestic purposes, and even the Republicans were disinclined to support Ford. Senator Jacob Javits told Ford he would support an evacuation, “but not one nickel for military aid.” Congress “spurn[ed]” Ford’s request.<sup>809</sup>

Ford seems to have given up entirely on Vietnam after that. “I had come to the conclusion,” he would say later, that “even though I wanted Congress to give us the money for weapons...the American public was not going to tolerate a never-ending Vietnam War.” He decided that it was the public that was “realistic,” and that his duty was to fall in line. A speech at Tulane University on 23 April—a week before Saigon fell—makes clear that he was already putting Vietnam behind him. He announced that America could now “regain a sense of pride that existed before Vietnam,” and

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<sup>806</sup> “Vietnam Background.”

<sup>807</sup> Finney, p. 60.

<sup>808</sup> Mieczkowski, p. 291.

<sup>809</sup> Ibid, pp. 290-2.

affirmed that “refighting a war that is finished as far as the American people are concerned” would be inappropriate.<sup>810</sup>

Saigon did fall, of course, and the well-know evacuation is an interesting story in its own right, but outside the scope of this inquiry. The significant point for us is that in just a few months everything the US had attempted to accomplish over the previous twenty years had evaporated. The standard view would be that this was inevitable denouement of a story long in the making, but as we have seen, the evidence tells a different story. In March, the North had no idea that by the end of April the entire country “would crack open like a rotten egg,” said Finney.<sup>811</sup> Cambodia and Laos also fell to Communist troops in April, and on 12 May, as if a postscript, the Khmer Rouge captured the *Mayaguez*, a merchant ship traveling in international waters en route Thailand. Ford used attack jets and marines to rescue the ship, and there were casualties.<sup>812</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Despite the guarded optimism in early 1973, by the spring of 1975 all had been for naught. Even though CORDS ceased to exist after the ceasefire, the fighting and civilian development continued, so we will review the period using the hindrances to the pacification advisory effort. Although there were far fewer Americans to observe Vietnamese behavior, Terry McNamara’s account makes clear that the corruption continued unabated: it was a “web” extending from the top of government to the bottom, and as province chiefs focused on “making money” rather than their duties, the Communists seized new areas.<sup>813</sup> The corruption went hand in glove with poor duty performance, and in the final months of the war, General Truong appears to have been the only corps commander not distracted. The negligence that accompanied corruption was manifested in various ways, but the failure to supervise was the most obvious.

The corruption and negligence also affected Congressional support back in Washington. Congress turned against funding the Vietnamese for various reasons, but one often cited was the moral depravity of the South’s elite. Congressmen found it unconscionable that after twenty years of

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<sup>810</sup> Ibid, p. 292.

<sup>811</sup> Finney, p. 60.

<sup>812</sup> Mieczkowski, pp. 294-6.

<sup>813</sup> F.T. McNamara, p. 118.

help, the Vietnamese were still alienating the people while Americans footed the bill. Had the problem been addressed in the early years rather than ignored, and its elimination made a condition of further aid, perhaps there would have been more sympathy after the ceasefire.

It was predictable that when Vietnamese officials did not do their jobs and their advisors stepped in to compensate for that, there would be trouble when the advisors were no longer there. The advisory effort had never forced the Vietnamese institutions to function on their own, and without the advisors serving as the lubricant, many Vietnamese systems quit working as intended. Vietnamese commanders were at fault for inadequate supervision, but we must also fault the advisory system for allowing this to happen.

How did President Thieu view winning “hearts and minds” under the agreement? Had the ceasefire held, winning the people’s loyalty rather than taking it for granted would have been as important as ever, because the Communists could now engage in open political competition. However, any democratic inclinations the government may have had understandably took a back seat to survival as the Communists continued to use coercion and violence. The lack of American support had returned the insurgency from a manageable nuisance to an existential threat. That civilians continued to flee toward government lines when Communist troops were on the attack certainly suggests that they did not see them as liberators. That said, most peasants did not possess a clear sense of political identity, and apparently did not need one for pacification to succeed. In the end, what satisfied them was productive rice, corn, pigs, and land, and being treated decently.

Keeping the South non-Communist required preventing it from falling to a conventional invasion, effectively countering the insurgency, and enabling the South to stand on its own after an American departure. The first and second were not mutually exclusive. Mao Tse Tung’s doctrine on insurgencies, which informed the North’s approach, culminates in conventional war.<sup>814</sup> The conventional invasion that had been feared in the fifties, ignored in the sixties, and become reality in the seventies was the proximate cause of the failure. The South had been able to deny Hanoi’s 1972 attempt, but only with American logistics and B-52 bomber support. Because of the war weariness of the American Congress and their disdain for Saigon’s elite, that support was not there in 1975, and

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<sup>814</sup> S.B. Griffith, *Mao Tse-tung on Guerrilla Warfare* (Washington, 5 April 1989), pp. 21-2.

defeat was all but inevitable. On the other hand, the indicators are that there had been considerable success at keeping the Communists from achieving their goals through the Viet Cong insurgency. We must acknowledge in the end that contrary to the dominant historical narrative and despite the dysfunctional Vietnamese chain of command, the American-led pacification effort was largely a success. The indicators include the North's resort to a conventional invasion not once, but twice, suggesting that they knew the insurgency was not working, and that the peasants, whose loyalty both sides sought, had lost all affinity for the Viet Cong and had never had any for the North Vietnamese. That they were ambivalent about their government seemed to be OK. As for preparing the South to stand on its own, the American failure was colossal. At every turn, the advisors at the top took the path of least resistance, and squandered the opportunity to develop the Vietnamese chain of command.

## **Chapter 11**

### **Conclusions on the Pacification Advisory Effort**

This thesis has argued that there were four major hindrances to the pacification advisory effort, but in the end it is clear that the greatest impediment to achieving American goals in Vietnam was how the Americans conceptualized that effort. In this final chapter, we will briefly review those goals and how the four hindrances affected them. We will then explore different ways that the US could have conceptualized the effort, and how they could have used leverage with each. We will close with some final thoughts on this project and its place in the historiography.

There is a tendency to assume that because the US lost the war, both the pacification effort and its supporting advisory effort must have failed. In the end, the advisory effort did fail, but the South's collapse is not *prima facie* evidence of that. To demonstrate that, we turn once again to the overall American objective, which was the survival of a viable non-Communist state, and the three goals inherent in that: preventing the North from conquering the South, preventing insurgents from conquering the South, and preparing the South to stand on its own.

The US completely solved the problem of achieving unity of effort among its agencies that were involved in the pacification project. Never before had there been a need to synchronize the efforts of such diverse organizations, and the Johnson administration concluded that it could not accomplish that without resorting to a single structure. By the end of the war CORDS was almost universally regarded as having solved the problem, and this inquiry agrees with that assessment. Other writers have addressed this, so we will move on to the other three hindrances.

#### **An Ambiguous “Hearts and Minds” Approach**

There was always some understanding that the two sides were competing for the allegiance of the people. Could the government win that competition by simply separating the people from the other side, or must the people willingly choose the government over the alternative? If the latter, then how should the government go about persuading them that they were the best choice? These were the questions that Saigon and its advisors wrestled with during most of the war, and even when they thought they had the answer, putting it into practice was often the hard part.

Agglomeration, Agrovillage, and Strategic Hamlet had in common an emphasis on physically separating the people from the guerrillas, and this often required involuntary relocation. For Strategic Hamlet, though, the Kennedy administration stepped in to help the government win the people by funding projects to improve their quality of life. In the end, all three programs failed for essentially the same reasons: Any goodwill that the projects generated was more than offset by the forced relocation, the perception that local officials viewed the peasants as vassals, and the ineffectiveness of defensive measures, which enabled the VC to continue to control from the shadows. Some villagers favored the Communists, but the government managed to alienate many who did not. The programs were counterproductive.

Chien Thang and Hop Tac ended most of the forced relocation, placed additional emphasis on improving security and quality of life, and stressed slow, steady expansion. The concept was mostly sound, but its implementation was hampered by inadequate supervision and a failure to connect with the people. Problems with security remained, the peasants were noncommittal, and progress was limited. William Colby would later refer to these “lost years of the middle sixties.”<sup>815</sup>

Colby and others began to voice concern over the government’s approach to winning the people to its side. He argued that they were attempting “to impose ‘pacification’...rather than engaging [the people] in a common effort,” and warned that without popular support, there was little point in attempting to pacify an area.<sup>816</sup> John Vann, Tran Ngoc Chau, and Nguyen Ba Lien suggested that pumping American money into the countryside did not win the people’s allegiance. Both Vann and Chau considered Saigon unresponsive and out of touch. Even after the national elections of 1967, Chau thought the country’s elite only feigned interest in the countryside. They wrongly assumed that they could simultaneously defeat ragtag guerrillas, benefit from American largesse, and pretend to care for the people without making true reforms. In fact, those guerrillas were generally much more disciplined and motivated than the government troops or their leaders.

Robert Komer’s adjustments to the “hearts and minds” effort during the CORDS era were profound. To address the problem of guerrilla access to the peasants, he shifted attention from the

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<sup>815</sup> Colby, p. 269.

<sup>816</sup> Ahern, pp. 211-2.

regular army to the territorials. He also took steps to engage the villagers in their own welfare, increased the number of civilian advisors, and pushed Saigon to more aggressively use the RD Cadre to reach hamlets where local government was either ineffective or nonexistent. Within months Komer's programs were bearing fruit, but then Tet set them back six months. After recovering from Tet, Komer went on the offensive with the Accelerated Pacification Campaign. It extended varying degrees of control over huge swathes previously contested or dominated by the Communists. The territorials continued to improve, but because of weak leaders, guerrillas continued to have some degree of control over many villages.

In 1969-70, President Thieu enthusiastically supported Colby's plans to involve peasants in their communities, conduct local elections, develop effective governance, and devolve power, which included giving village chiefs control of police, territorials, and militias. CORDS offered extra funds to villages with functioning governments, and trained the local executives and their staffs for their many duties. The work on education, healthcare, agriculture, and law enforcement continued. By the end of 1970, there had been great improvement in local security across the country, though many villages remained somewhat vulnerable at night. Much of the progress was due to the increasing effectiveness of the territorials, but other factors were the Viet Cong's post-Tet decline and the government's incursions into Cambodia and Laos, which had relieved pressure on the villages. Some areas were so stable that advisors felt like Peace Corps volunteers. The land reform program had been revitalized, giving peasants both the land they had been farming and a reason to protect the status quo.

The achievements were reflected in the rising Hamlet Evaluation System (HES) scores, but the polling that Colby initiated in 1970 revealed both positive and negative perceptions of the progress. The peasants thought local governance, security, and economic development had shown marked improvement, and while they supported Saigon's effort to eliminate the shadow governments, they disapproved of some of Phoenix's methods. Their view of the police bordered on hostile. Even with the negatives, though, Colby rightly viewed the feedback as corroboration of the HES scores.<sup>817</sup> Nevertheless, some advisors noted that even the many improvements did not generate affection for the government.

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<sup>817</sup> Colby, p. 290.

CORDS accomplished much in the two years before the ceasefire. The improved stability facilitated a steady rise in the quality of life, but despite the accomplishments of 1969 and 1970, two significant holes remained in the effort to win hearts and minds: the corruption and attitude of local officials, and the ability of the guerrillas to sneak into villages at night. Many peasants continued to keep the government at arms-length. Colonel Burgess, one of the final advisors, expressed a common sentiment when he wrote in early 1973 that the peasants noticed that Saigon's stated "goals and values" did not match its actions at the local level. He sensed that what appeared to be heartfelt support for the government was actually "superficial and perfunctory."<sup>818</sup> Offsetting the peasants' lack of affection for the government, though, was the outright disdain they now felt for the Communists. The pacification effort had so improved their lives that they were willing to tolerate a great deal of government misbehavior. Many were enjoying disposable income for the first time.

In the end, did the advisory effort overcome the confusion about hearts and minds, and did the government succeed at winning them? If anything, the US made it harder than it needed to be. It is not clear that the peasants wanted a voice in self-help projects or cared who governed, whether in Saigon or locally, as long as they were left alone, could earn a living, and had schools for their children, access to healthcare, and so on. Fortunately for the government, most peasants eventually decided that the Communists were less compatible with that vision of the good life than were the self-serving government officials, and the improvements in the rural economy had improved their lives in tangible ways. By the time of the ceasefire, most of the populated areas of the countryside were considered pacified. Indeed, the North's massive conventional invasions in both 1972 and 1975 were an acknowledgement that the insurgency had failed. We may therefore conclude that in both measurable and anecdotal ways—and despite the fact that the US had been unable to get Vietnamese officials to abandon their self-serving ways—the US had for the most part achieved its second goal by the time of the ceasefire. Most historians have missed this. The government had not won the hearts, but they had won the minds, and that was ultimately more important.

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<sup>818</sup> Burgess, p. 1.

### **The Failure of the Advisory Effort to Solve the Problem of Corruption**

The third major hindrance to the pacification advisory effort was the pervasive corruption. In the early years, if advisors saw the problem, they seem to have ignored it. By the mid sixties, they recognized it as widespread and harmful, but were baffled by how to react. They steered aid away from the most corrupt districts, but that was “inadequate at best,” recalled an embassy official, who noted that advisors lacked authority to stop corrupt practices even when they saw them.<sup>819</sup>

General Thang’s 1967 conversation with Edward Lansdale should have sounded the alarm. He explained that Americans had no idea how bad the problem was. Virtually every officer was preoccupied with wealth, leaving little time for his duties. There were a few Vietnamese generals interested in reform, but they could solve the problem only if Americans would get much more involved than they had been. Lansdale reported the conversation, but the US did not act on it, at least not in the holistic way that Thang had suggested.<sup>820</sup> When CORDS was formed that year, Komer did make corruption a priority, but because the pacification effort focused on the provinces, he chose to address the problem at that level. He prodded Saigon to remove province chiefs whose advisors could document that their conduct was particularly egregious. Many were relieved, but some were reassigned or kept in place. When Komer left at the end of 1968, Colby continued the same approach.

The frequent removal of mid-level leaders gave the appearance of progress, but the problem never seemed to diminish. In May 1969, General George Eckhardt warned that “too many officers and civil servants [were] still more concerned about personal gain than” the people, and this was having an “extremely deleterious” effect on morale. Some Americans wondered whether the problem was so culturally embedded that there was no point in taking it on. Indeed, by the time he left Vietnam, Robert Komer seems to have shifted to accept at least some of that argument, perhaps realizing that his approach of pressing Saigon for the removal of multiple province chiefs had not solved the problem. That same year, though, Eckhardt was adamant that it was not culturally

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<sup>819</sup> R.B. Oakley, interviewed by C.S. Kennedy and T. Stern, ADST (1992), pp. 30-1.

<sup>820</sup> Clarke, pp. 230-1.

acceptable. The people “resent[ed] it deeply,” he said, and if it were allowed to continue the government would not win “genuine popular support.”<sup>821</sup>

Despite Eckhardt’s sentiment, the notion that some of what Americans saw as corruption was indeed acceptable to the Vietnamese gained ground within the American community. Colby’s 1970 handbook for advisors explained that the honesty of village chiefs should be measured “by village [rather than American] standards,” which meant that it was acceptable “from time to time” for an official to divert ten percent of the project’s value “into his own pocket.” Otherwise, he would be unable to support his family. On the other hand, if he took too much, engaged in “cronyism,” “demand[ed] bribes from those who cannot afford them,” or “accept[ed] favors and then fail[ed] to deliver a quid pro quo,” that would be culturally unacceptable.<sup>822</sup> Though well intended, the American document sanctioned a Vietnamese process that lacked transparency, allowed considerable latitude for misconduct, and opened the door to much more. There is no indication that Saigon wanted such transparency. Indeed, the ambiguity created opportunity, and as long as Americans accepted that some corruption was tolerable, it was difficult to know when the line was crossed. At any rate, providing an appropriate living wage that was pegged to inflation would have been better than making the ten percent official, which would have forced local officials to rely on a commission on every contract processed.

The situation was still dire in 1971 and 1972. General Cushman warned his counterpart that the pervasive corruption was adversely affecting the “country’s performance” and eroding American support, and was therefore an existential threat.<sup>823</sup> In contrast, General Abrams’ in-house historians downplayed the problem in their coverage of 1971. Their strongest comment was that despite the Phoenix program’s successes, “a lack of qualified and trustworthy personnel did permit some corruption in the system.”<sup>824</sup> Phoenix, of course, suffered from massive corruption, and the history made no mention of Cushman’s warnings or any like them. Since these uniformed historians relied on

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<sup>821</sup> Eckhardt, pp. 21-2; Komer, *New Model*, p. 153.

<sup>822</sup> CORDS, *Handbook*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>823</sup> Cushman, p. 42.

<sup>824</sup> Military History Branch, MACV, *Command History, 1971, Vol. I* (undated), DTIC, p. VII-23.

MACV documents, their reticence suggests that those documents did not convey its significance or that Abrams, viewing the problem as insuperable, did not want it documented.

In early 1973, though, some of the final province senior advisors were unequivocal in describing the problem as an existential threat and pointing out that it originated in Saigon and would have to be solved there. Colonel Smith reported that, “Any crack-down on corruption must start at the top and there has been little evidence that the top brass, from Saigon on down, have any inclination to voluntarily sacrifice their illicit incomes.”<sup>825</sup> Colonel Burgess recommended “strong follow-on actions at the national level to eliminate corruption.” “I have heard plenty of lip service along these lines,” he continued, “but I have not seen any heads roll.” If “corruption [is not] stamped out,” he warned, “every sacrifice and effort that the United States has expended here will soon be dissipated.”<sup>826</sup> Colonel Hallmark wrote that “eliminat[ing]” corruption “must begin with the Commander-in-Chief [because] officials below this level are caught in the ‘system’ and have relative[ly] little flexibility.”<sup>827</sup>

MACV’s final official historians were more open as well. They prepared the last edition of MACV’s internal history, which covered both 1972 and early 1973, in Hawaii after MACV had been deactivated. This one acknowledged that corruption was a major problem. MACV had accomplished many of its “political, economic, social, and military goals,” it said, but had been hindered by the “pervasive corruption.” Interestingly, the historians referred to this as a problem “yet to be successfully addressed” rather than one the Americans had failed to address.<sup>828</sup>

The corruption continued after the ceasefire, as did the American tendency to downplay it. Wolf Lehmann, who was a consul general in 1973 and would be deputy ambassador at the end, later acknowledged that there had been “some corruption” in Vietnam, but that the country was as corrupt under Communist rule as it had been during the war. What Americans thought of as corruption, he said, was actually “accepted practice in Asia or other parts of the world.” It was precisely the same argument Komer had made in 1969.<sup>829</sup>

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<sup>825</sup> A.M. Smith, “Province Senior Advisor Completion of Tour Report,” HQ Advisory Team 84, Kien Phong Province, (12 February 1973), DTIC, p. 11.

<sup>826</sup> Burgess, pp. 2, 11.

<sup>827</sup> Hallmark, p. 7.

<sup>828</sup> Military History Branch, *Command History, 1972-1973, Vol. I*, p. 1.

<sup>829</sup> Lehmann, p. 10.

What may we conclude? First, top advisors had some sense of the problem, but could never overcome it. It was not until CORDS that they deliberately set out to address it, but even then they did not see it as an existential threat or address it as a system. Komer tried to fix at lower levels what could have been fixed only at the top. Perhaps he adopted this approach because that was the way the Americans handled their own personnel problems. When an American violated codified values, he was disciplined. Unlike Vietnam, the problem was one of individuals rather than the system.

Second, the failure to fix the problem had an impact on each of the three American goals. Lehmann and others have correctly argued that corruption did not cause the South's collapse, but as General Cushman had predicted, some in Congress justified those devastating cuts by arguing that the self-serving regime in Saigon did not deserve American support. As for defeating the insurgency, the corruption certainly slowed that down, and since the government won the peasants' minds but not their hearts, the victory was less secure. On the matter of preparing Vietnam to stand on its own, we may assume that corruption would have been the major barrier to sustaining the gains of CORDS without American oversight.

### **Working Around the Dysfunctional Chain of Command**

The inability of the advisory effort to overcome the fourth of the major hindrances—the dysfunctional Vietnamese chain of command—may have been its greatest failure, yet this has gone unexplored in both the general and specialist historiographies. As we have seen, a pattern was evident throughout the war: The top advisors would identify a Vietnamese problem and conceive a solution. They would then press their counterparts to issue an order that would solve the problem. Those counterparts would then draft an order—probably with the help of their advisors—and issue it. The Americans would assume they had solved the problem until they observed that the Vietnamese were not enforcing the order. At that point, they would bypass the Vietnamese chain of command and direct their advisors at the point of execution to ensure that their counterparts were following the order. A variation on the pattern was that if the Vietnamese would not agree to the proposal, the Americans might pursue it through the advisory chain of command anyway. We will review some of the examples from previous chapters.

As a corps senior advisor in 1963, Colonel Bryce Denno would identify a problem in a Vietnamese unit and attempt to solve it by going straight to the concerned Vietnamese commander rather than by encouraging his counterpart to discover and address it. That he saw the burden of supervision on advisors rather than Vietnamese generals is clear from his comment that “the measure of an advisor’s success or failure is the performance by his counterpart.”<sup>830</sup> It is also clear that the failure of Strategic Hamlet in late 1963 was to some extent due to officials in Saigon issuing orders without verifying that they were being followed, accepting reports at face value without inspecting, and not holding subordinates accountable. The tendency continued. In 1964, when Colonel Jasper Wilson, the senior advisor in III Corps, could not get the Vietnamese to move an armored cavalry squadron into the field to engage the enemy, he directed the squadron’s advisor to badger his counterpart until it moved out of its barracks. The commander finally succumbed to the pressure, but the Americans had once again circumvented the Vietnamese chain of command.<sup>831</sup>

The tendency grew stronger under CORDS. Colonel Phil Bolté, a province senior advisor, recalled that when Komer could not get his counterparts in Saigon to issue an order, he might go around them and attempt “to get it done through the advisory chain.”<sup>832</sup> During the chaos of Tet, an American general demanded to know why Captain Ronald Ray was not getting the battalion that he advised into the fight. Ray was incredulous that a general in his own chain of command thought advisors had that kind of authority.<sup>833</sup> However, night ambushes provide the best example of Vietnamese commanders issuing orders but not enforcing them, and Americans working around rather than through the problem. To bypass the dysfunctional Vietnamese chain of command, the advisors in Saigon assigned quotas to unit advisors, and it was their responsibility to ensure that their counterparts met the goal.

By 1970, some of the more senior advisors had accepted that they were unable to get their counterparts to take their duties seriously, and concluded that the only way to get things done was to make advisors at the point of execution responsible for them. General Gordon Duquemin, the deputy

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<sup>830</sup> Denno, p. 25.

<sup>831</sup> Baird.

<sup>832</sup> Hemingway.

<sup>833</sup> R. Ray, interviewed by Eric Osborne, Adams Center, VMI (2006), p. 25.

senior advisor in II Corps, wrote that the problem was the deficient leadership of Vietnamese commanders “at every level,” and that “initiative and supervision” seemed alien concepts to them. Rather than addressing this point at his level, he concluded that advisors could make their greatest contribution by prodding their counterparts to engage the enemy. When one of Duquemin’s subordinates, Colonel Paul Braim, pressed his counterpart to deploy his division to the field, the commander simply refused. “So much for persuasive American leadership,” Braim later wrote, alluding to two facts: first, that he had no authority over his counterpart; and second, that the power of persuasion was a weak tool.

Duquemin’s approach underlines the flawed American approach. Clearly the corps commander was not requiring the division commander to deploy his division to the field, and as a result that division was contributing little to the war effort. It seems odd that Duquemin would think Braim could goad his counterpart into action when Duquemin had been unable to goad his own—the corps commander—yet this was the norm within the advisory effort. In his final report, Duquemin asserted that one of an advisor’s most important functions was serving as the unit’s “pusher,” which meant that his “every effort must be directed towards motivating the [Vietnamese commander] to effectively employ his forces against the enemy.” In other words, he said, it was the advisor’s job to “motivate” and “prod” his counterpart into fully and effectively “employing” his unit. Some who received such instructions noticed the absurdity. Braim explained an advisor’s dilemma: he was held “responsib[le] for the performance of his counterpart's unit [yet] lack[ed] the authority to direct any action.”<sup>834</sup>

Variations of the problem continued in the final year of the advisory effort. Colonel Daly reported that he had been frustrated on multiple occasions by his supervisor’s office directing him to “push [particular] programs” when they had not first gotten their own counterparts on board.<sup>835</sup> Colonel Holbrook observed that his counterparts did not take even the most important programs seriously unless they could tell that there was “interest [at] the highest levels.”<sup>836</sup> In other words, if a Vietnamese corps commander made clear that a task was truly important, his province chiefs would

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<sup>834</sup> Braim, p. 120.

<sup>835</sup> Daly, p. 4.

<sup>836</sup> Holbrook, p. 7.

take it seriously, but if he did not, they tended to ignore it. Even if Saigon issued orders, commanders down the chain could tell whether they were serious about them. Colonel Edward Porter noted in his final report that the advisory effort had been unable “to convince the Vietnamese...that their survival ultimately depend[ed] on the quality of their leaders.”<sup>837</sup>

The unit-level advisors who were instructed to goad their counterparts into action achieved a great deal, even if it was halfhearted and temporary, but in so doing they had become the glue holding the Vietnamese chain of command together. Their achievements created a false sense of accomplishment and their ownership of the problem prevented the Vietnamese chain of command from learning how to deal with it. The advisory effort’s failure to transform the dysfunctional Vietnamese chain of command was immense and affected all three American goals. Obviously, the South’s army would have been unable to stand on its own after the American departure if it had never tried to do so while Americans were still there. This failure presumably harmed the South’s military performance after the ceasefire, and we have seen throughout this dissertation that despite the overall success of the pacification effort, this particular failure hindered that effort at every turn.

### **Advisory Efforts and Leverage**

We have now seen how the four hindrances adversely affected the advisory mission. However, each in some distinct way related to the advisory effort itself: The challenge of achieving interagency unity of effort concerned the internal structure and functioning of the advisory effort. The problem of understanding hearts and minds—how the indigenous government could win the people to its side—was an intellectual one for the advisors. The Vietnamese corruption and dysfunctional chain of command, though, deal with the very essence of advising. What do they reveal about how the advisory effort tried to induce change at various points in the Vietnamese chain of command?

A 1972 Pentagon study referred to “the bootlessness of trying to cajole local officials into pressing forward with American-sponsored programs...not actively supported by their own government.” Vietnamese officers typically responded to such prodding, said the study, by “stone walling, dissembling,” “playing one American official off against another,” or “supine acquiescence

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<sup>837</sup> E.J. Porter, “AFRIS-Province Advisor Completion of Tour Report,” HQ Phuoc Dinh Province (15 November 1972), DTIC, p. 2.

[that] rarely translated into action.” It concluded that the advisory effort had been largely dysfunctional, and questioned the very notion of advisors pushing their counterparts rather than teaching them. The study also suggested that before deploying advisors, the US and Vietnam should have come to an agreement on definitions and responsibilities. With less than a year to go, the study identified problems, but did not provide a conceptual framework for understanding them.<sup>838</sup> This inquiry will now aim to do so.

Inductive analysis suggests that there are two theoretical ways to approach an advisory effort. With the bottom-up approach, there is an assumption that the indigenous chain of command will perform its supervisory responsibilities weakly if at all, and that advisors at the unit level where operations are executed will therefore need to be heavily involved with that function. Those advisors—sergeants, lieutenants, and captains—are likely to achieve results in the near term by badgering their counterparts, but because their counterparts’ own supervisors are not involved, the results are halfhearted and temporary. Furthermore, the indigenous chain of command does not develop the capacity to stand on its own.

By contrast, the top-down approach induces change at the top that will then trickle down to the rest of the force. The burden is on the most senior advisors to equip their counterparts not just to issue orders, but also to ensure they are obeyed. There is an assumption that the junior officers actually conducting the operations will obey their orders because their own supervisors rather than their advisors are insisting that they do so. Unit advisors are still needed, but they teach and coach rather than enforce. Even though this approach might achieve less in the near term, it builds a sustainable foundation that achieves more over time. It also prepares the indigenous chain of command to stand on its own.

However, the two approaches have in common that the counterpart who is being pressured to perform, whether he is a general at the top of the chain of command or a captain at the bottom, cannot be forced by the advisor to do something he does not want to do. The advisor in either case needs some type of leverage. There are four theoretical combinations of approach and leverage. With the bottom-up approach and weak leverage, the advisor at the unit level is responsible for his

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<sup>838</sup> Cooper *et al.*, *Vol I*, pp. 27, 33-5.

counterpart's performance, but has little that his counterpart values. With the bottom-up approach combined with strong leverage, he probably has some type of aid he can withhold, and may therefore be perceived as a puppet master. The top-down approach combined with weak leverage would be appropriate when the indigenous generals are duty conscious but lack knowledge, and their advisors focus on equipping them to manage and supervise. In contrast, the top-down approach with strong leverage would be for situations in which the generals at the top do not take their duties seriously, and must be forced to do so through some kind of threat.

In Vietnam, the US used a bottom-up approach with very weak leverage at all levels. Senior advisors helped the Vietnamese plan orders, but did not use leverage to ensure they were followed. To compensate, senior advisors held their subordinates at the unit level responsible for their counterparts' performance, yet those at the bottom had the weakest leverage of all. Two problems resulted: the US tried to solve a problem at the unit level that could have been solved only at their own, and they ruled out the fulcrum that had the potential to generate the most power—the entire aid program. Returning to the example of the problematic night ambushes will illustrate the problem.

When senior advisors directed their subordinates to ensure the Vietnamese were conducting the prescribed ambushes, an advisor needed a fulcrum to exercise leverage. In theory he had three from which to choose: his relationship with his counterpart, the threat of reporting him, and withholding critical support. How practical was each? The unit commander's supervisor was typically the district chief, and if that man was not already ensuring that his subordinates were following orders, hearing about it from an American was unlikely to make a difference. Nor was it realistic to withhold helicopters and artillery, because that could result in avoidable casualties. Even if the commander valued his relationship with his advisor, which was not always the case, it was a weak fulcrum. The commander might accept the counsel, pretend to do so, or simply ignore it, as the 1972 study observed. In any event, a change tended to be temporary because it was the advisor rather than the officer's own chain of command pushing it, and the existence of the problem in the first place is *prima facie* evidence that the chain of command was not doing its job.

Indeed, the failure of district and province chiefs to ensure their subordinates were following orders was so common that Americans came to view it as passive rather than active malfeasance and

tempered their reactions accordingly. However, when province advisors judged that malfeasance was so egregious that it was significantly harming the pacification effort, they brought the evidence to Komer. In such cases the goal was to have the appropriate authority at the top discipline the offender, and the fulcrum was Komer's relationship. Komer got along quite well with senior officials, but it was a weak fulcrum, and the offender, regardless of how damaging his behavior was, might be removed, transferred, or left in place.

Was Komer's approach effective? Actually, his goal was wrong, his fulcrum was weak, and the apparent progress was illusory. He approached the problem as one of bad individuals, when in reality the problem was the system. In other words, Komer went after the symptom of the problem rather than its root, and even when the individual was dismissed the system adapted, eventually incorporating the replacement into the network. Progress, then, was temporary at best. It is not clear that Komer comprehended that the problem might rest above the province chiefs. Corps commanders had great autonomy, and though Komer claimed tangential involvement in having two of them removed, there is no evidence that he recognized that solving the problem required addressing their role in it. Clay McManaway, one of Komer's assistants, later admitted that CORDS had not pursued corps commanders because they were "too high to deal with."<sup>839</sup> If Komer and his colleagues at the top recognized that the corps commanders and their superiors in Saigon were the real problem, they went to great lengths to pretend otherwise.

Komer claimed to believe in the efficacy of leverage, but was skeptical of heavy-handedness. "The State Department was always writing silly papers on leverage," he said, and he bristled at insinuations that his approach might have been inadequate. He assiduously cultivated relationships with top Vietnamese officials, believing that with "persistence plus access" he could "get the Vietnamese to do things by the proper combination of cajolery and persuasion [and not need to resort to] threat or sanction."<sup>840</sup> This was consistent with MACV's philosophy that advisors at every level had a duty to get along with their counterparts, but it is clear that influencing behavior through the

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<sup>839</sup> McManaway, p. 20.

<sup>840</sup> Komer, *New Model*, pp. 144-5.

power of one's relationship was insufficient if the counterpart was disinclined to accept the advice in the first place.

At various times during the war there were critiques of the status quo, but they focused more on the need for leverage than the approach itself. As a province senior advisor 1963-64, Colonel Volney Warner experienced two problems: First, he found that his relationship with his counterpart was woefully inadequate as a form of leverage, and decided that advisors needed something "other than having to please him and deal on a personality basis." Second, it was American policy to turn aid over to the Vietnamese when it arrived in Vietnam, but much of it disappeared because of the "inept, corrupt, [and] vile" government that took possession of it. He thought both problems could be solved by giving control of the aid to the province senior advisors and allowing them to use it as leverage. In the summer of 1967, he sent Komer a copy of his proposal. Komer recalled "mark[ing] it up with all sorts of nasty comments." On the one hand he viewed it as "an academic exercise," which suggests that it was nice in theory but impractical, but on the other he claimed that CORDS was "already moving along these lines." In the end, Warner did not succeed in pushing the change through, and years later as a retired four-star general he looked back on this as one of his career's largest disappointments.<sup>841</sup>

Though Komer may have thought he was "moving along [Warner's] lines," neither he nor Colby ever allowed province advisors that kind of power, and he would have opposed that on two grounds. First, he thought finesse rather than heavy-handedness was needed. Second, he thought one of CORDS's strengths was its centralized management of the pacification effort, and giving subordinates the ability to suddenly cut off aid would have interfered with that. Both were valid concerns, but Warner's proposal had more serious problems: Like Komer's approach, it did not tackle the fundamental problem, which was in Saigon and at the corps headquarters, rather than the provinces, and it would have done nothing to stop the damaging practice of unofficially inserting Americans into the Vietnamese chain of command. The relationship at the province level would have been an adversarial one, opening the advisor to charges of being a puppet master rather than a teacher or coach, and the practice would have stunted the growth of the chain of command. In terms of our

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<sup>841</sup> Warner, pp. 74-5; Komer, *New Model*, p. 152.

theoretical ways to approach an advisory effort, Warner was advocating a bottom-up approach combined with strong leverage.

How should the US have approached the advisory effort? The status quo was the bottom-up approach with weak leverage, which was not working. Warner's proposal was the bottom-up approach with strong leverage, which was conceptually flawed. That leaves only some variation of the top-down approach. Only top-down could have prepared the Vietnamese chain of command to stand on its own, and only top-down could have held unit commanders in the field accountable for their compliance. What about leverage—strong or weak, and applied where? Little leverage would have been necessary at any level had most generals had been like General Truong, who was scrupulously honest and actively supervised his soldiers. He did not need to be prodded into action; rather, he prodded his men into action. Most generals were nothing like that, though, so the US should have combined the top-down approach with strong leverage at the top. With anything less, most Vietnamese would not have taken their duties seriously.

Furthermore, the strong leverage should have been exercised only at the top. If it worked there, the effect would trickle down as the Vietnamese generals took their supervisory duties seriously and ensured their subordinates were following orders. The province, district, and unit advisors would be there only to teach, coach, and mentor rather than to enforce Vietnamese orders, so they would need no leverage. To make the top-down approach work, the senior advisors in Saigon and at the four corps headquarters would need to see themselves as advisors rather than troop commanders and portfolio managers. Their top priority would be to coach the Vietnamese generals on how to run an army.

Employing a top-down approach with strong leverage would not have been well received by the Vietnamese. It would be important, therefore, for the US to lay out its expectations and require the Vietnamese to agree to them before making a commitment; disengaging after deploying advisors and funds would not be a simple matter. If the Vietnamese objected during negotiations that the terms were too onerous based on violations of sovereignty or anything else, that would be a sure sign that they were not fully committed to the reform that was essential for success, and that the endeavor would probably end badly. Furthermore, if the Vietnamese committed to high standards of

professionalism and then reneged on the agreement, the US would have to be ready to cut its losses and leave, as painful as that might be. The bottom line is that if the Vietnamese did not want the aid under such conditions, they would not have to take it, but the US should have intervened only if they did.

Had the US considered such an approach in the early sixties? That is not entirely clear, but it does appear that the reluctance to use American aid as leverage to force reform had started under President Kennedy, who was apparently concerned that the US might be viewed as having neocolonial interests. The Vietnamese used that argument whenever they thought Americans were meddling, and probably would have used it had Kennedy conditioned the aid on reform right from the start. After decades of colonial rule, their interest in sovereignty was no doubt genuine, but it seems to have been secondary to self-interest. If so, having no military aid when the North was getting it from both China and the Soviet Union might have made them more receptive.

Despite its flaws, the bottom-up approach with weak leverage achieved a great deal more than is conventionally acknowledged. The territorial army improved greatly during the CORDS years, and advisors were the key reason for that. In theory, the US could have sought temporary, near-term improvement without regard for long-term sustainability, and an example of such an approach was the British advisory effort led by T.E. Lawrence on the Arabian Peninsula during the First World War. Britain was more interested in defeating the Ottomans than nation building, and a bottom-up approach may be appropriate in such cases.

The decision to use weak leverage was deliberate, but why did the US choose the bottom-up approach? Actually, there is no indication of deliberation. It seems that the US just drifted into it, and several factors may have contributed to that. First, the US had limited experience with advisory efforts, and there had been little theoretical work to compensate for that. Second, they recognized that to counter the insurgency the focus would be on the provinces, districts, and villages, and it must have seemed logical to direct the advisory effort at those same levels. As the 1972 study had noted, the advisors were under great pressure from Washington to generate quick results.<sup>842</sup> Third, though the Americans at the top were advisors in their own right, they also commanded American troops,

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<sup>842</sup> Cooper *et al.*, *Vol I*, pp. 27-30.

managed development programs, and supervised the advisors beneath them. It was easy to be distracted by other duties, and when it came to their own advising, they were reluctant to push their high-level counterparts to do the things that would make the greatest difference. They do not seem to have realized that by taking the path of least resistance as advisors—by delegating the heavy lifting to their subordinates—they were privileging near-term results over the long term, and shortchanging the near term as well.

In the end, the advisory effort had focused on the wrong things. The South had needed a dedicated, disciplined officer corps that would ensure their troops were doing the things that mattered, but instead, the US had “overwhelmed [them] with fancy, costly and sophisticated programs,” as Colonel Porter put it at the end of 1972. In their rush to give the Vietnamese material support, he said, the US had failed to use the “leverage and clout required to push the things that really counted.”<sup>843</sup> They learned the importance of good leadership from the beginning, could see that its lack in the South’s army was a major hindrance, discussed the problem often, and noted it in their reports. When it came to solving it, though, they tried by setting up schools patterned after their own, thinking that values taught were values absorbed.

### **A Final Look at the Historiography**

We will now return to the historiography, examining it in terms of how it treats the pacification effort. The early orthodox historians—the journalists who went on to write histories and the academics who followed—ignored, inadequately covered, or did not understand pacification. They seem to have formed their conclusions based on what had happened before CORDS, and did not take seriously the changes that its structure and leadership brought over time. Revisionist historians soon appeared, though, and to varying degrees recognized the significance of the pacification effort. More recently, a few of the orthodox historians, examining new evidence, have conceded at least some ground to the revisionists in terms of acknowledging that there was something different about the later years. This is due in part to the *Abrams Tapes*, which one cannot read without developing an

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<sup>843</sup> Porter, p. 2.

increased awareness that the pacification effort was being taken seriously and having a profound impact.<sup>844</sup>

Three of the orthodox historians who have incorporated some of the new evidence into their work are John Prados, Larry Berman, and John Dumbrell. Prados, in part because of Sorley's work, now seems more aware of the pacification effort's accomplishments during the Abrams era, and there may have been a slight softening of his position. For the most part, though, he has continued to discount the progress as meaningless, quickly discarding evidence that does not suit his narrative. For example, he described Abrams as "a visionary commander" whose pacification projects had "achieved considerable progress," but almost immediately dismissed that progress as "misleading." The illusion existed, he claimed, "because Tet changed the texture of the war itself, because the data problem conveyed a mistaken impression of actual conditions, and because South Vietnamese society also mutated."<sup>845</sup> The gist of his comment is quite clear: Claims of pacification success in the years after the 1968 Tet offensive were unjustified because the alleged success would have been impossible without the weakened state of the Viet Cong that followed Tet; because American reports, as they had throughout the war, exaggerated progress; and because the South Vietnamese people had grown tired of war, were seeing increased stability, and were in some cases experiencing a higher standard of living. Let us briefly examine each of those.

His argument that heavy VC losses during the 1968 Tet offensive made it look like the pacification effort was succeeding when it in fact it was not is a weak one. In war, when one side makes a mistake or overextends itself and the other is able to turn that to an advantage, the fact that the victory was achieved at least in part because of the failings of the opponent does nothing to cheapen the success. On the Hamlet Evaluation System, as we have seen, the American mission used it not to boast of success but as a management tool to monitor progress and regression. Even with its well-known inflation, it was useful for that. Indeed, McNamara and Komer may have been ahead of their time on this. The editors of *Harvard Business Review* recently wrote that "Leaders must learn to

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<sup>844</sup> *Abrams Tapes*.

<sup>845</sup> Prados, *Vietnam*, p. 544.

shift from making decisions using gut and intuition to a more evidence-based approach.”<sup>846</sup> While the data in Vietnam were never entirely accurate, the users knew that and factored it in. Finally, Prados’s charge that the changes in South Vietnamese society only made it look like the pacification effort was making progress seems illogical. Chief among the changes were war weariness and a growing disenchantment with the Communists, but that those would favor the government should take nothing from the successes of the pacification effort. The government had worked to eliminate grievances and promote democratic participation. Its efforts were often clumsy, and some of the problems were never addressed, but the progress in the South was due to much more than VC losses. For example, in the North where the Communists had complete control and allowed no dissent, Hanoi could consistently raise new soldiers to replace those lost year after year. In the South, though, they lost their ability to do that after Tet 1968. While their ability to keep their numbers high in the North depended on control, in the South it depended to a great degree on popularity in addition to control. The fact that their ability to recruit new Viet Cong had plummeted after Tet would seem to reflect both the success of the pacification effort and that many in the South no longer accepted the political legitimacy of the Communists.

While it seems unlikely that John Prados would ever substantively change his position, Larry Berman may be coming around. As we saw in *Perfect Spy*, he seems to have recognized that Hanoi had a different view from his own on the extent of the threat that the pacification effort posed to the Communists. On top of that, in his recent book about Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, who had supervised US Navy operations in Vietnam, he noted that Zumwalt had viewed the pacification effort as “one of the most important keys to the success of a free South Vietnam.”<sup>847</sup> John Dumbrell is another who sees himself as orthodox yet is willing to make considerable concessions to the revisionist camp. Indeed, a reader of *Rethinking the Vietnam War* might at times conclude that he is a revisionist.

This thesis views the revisionists as generally correct on the major points—the war could have been won, the US had honorable intentions, and the pacification effort had substantial if limited success—but diverges from them on some points and fills in gaps on others. Sorley has made an

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<sup>846</sup> Editors, “Find the Gems in Your Data,” in “The Data-Driven Manager: Make the Numbers Work for You,” *Harvard Business Review: Onpoint* (Winter 2017), p. 2.

<sup>847</sup> Berman, *Perfect Spy*, p. 137; L. Berman, *Zumwalt* (Annapolis, 2012), p. 183.

impressive case, but he was wrong on three points. First, his charge that Abrams implemented revolutionary change is not supported by the evidence. This thesis has traced the pacification effort from beginning to end, and that the change was evolutionary rather than revolutionary should now be clear. However, even if one were to concede that it was revolutionary, the revolution had started well before Abrams—probably with Komer in the White House before CORDS—and Abrams would have adapted to it rather than initiated it. Second, this thesis does not subscribe to Sorley's view that the war had indeed been won at one point, only to be thrown away by American politicians. Even with the successes of the pacification effort during the CORDS era, too much remained unfinished or inadequately addressed to claim victory. Finally, we have shown that contrary to Sorley's understanding, Abrams did not disapprove of large operations to engage similarly large Communist units. Actually, he viewed them as indispensable, but wanted them carried out in smart, precise ways rather than in the willy-nilly fashion that had been popular in the Westmoreland years. (For that matter, surely the clearest evidence of Abrams' willingness to go after large Communist units in their sanctuaries is the invasion of Cambodia and Laos.) There was a change in emphasis under Abrams, but it was a logical one at that point in time. American units were now to use small units and new technology to look for large enemy units, and once found, the large American and Vietnamese units would pile on.

Mark Moyar, too, was mostly right, but this thesis has demonstrated that his assertion that Saigon had solved its leadership problems by the end of the 1960s was wrong. Given that the corruption and failure to supervise were systemic problems, any solution would have had to start at the top. Some advisors at the end pointed that out, but the US had never been willing to tackle the problem in an effective way. Another revisionist, Dale Walton, was right about most things as well. Though he devoted little space to the pacification effort, his point was that if it were to succeed but Hanoi continued to dispatch tens of thousands of its troops to the South, the outcome would remain uncertain without American involvement.

For all practical purposes, though, the historiography, whether orthodox or revisionist, has missed those three crucial items: first, the extent of corruption, its systemic nature, and its impact on both government legitimacy and military effectiveness; second, the dysfunctional Vietnamese chain

of command that failed to exercise oversight; and third, that the US should have used strong leverage and a top-down approach, but instead went with the ineffective bottom-up approach with weak leverage.

### **Closing Thoughts**

This project has conducted an inductive analysis of the hindrances to the pacification advisory effort, and in the process has examined the pacification effort itself and the strengths and weaknesses of the approach the Americans took to advising it. In addition to its findings on those matters, the inquiry has produced a new analytical tool for examining advisory efforts by asking these questions: Does the approach seek to induce change from the top down or bottom up, and does it rely on heavy or light leverage, and where is that leverage applied?

The inquiry has identified four hindrances and concluded that the Americans overcame the problem of achieving interagency unity of effort, mostly overcame the confusion over how Saigon should approach winning hearts and minds, and utterly failed to overcome the pervasive and systemic government corruption and the corresponding dysfunctional Vietnamese chain of command. The problems resulting from the two that were not overcome were so substantial that they directly or indirectly affected all three of the United States' Vietnam goals. While it would be counterfactual to assert that the South would have won the war had these final two hindrances been overcome, the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that the stability at the end of 1972 might have been achieved two or three years earlier, and that probably would have affected American public opinion and led to a different outcome.

While the US did not achieve its overall objective of keeping the South non-Communist, we may draw some conclusions about the three goals that made up that objective. The first was to prevent the country from falling to a conventional invasion, and this was obviously a failure. We may conclude that given the North's 1972 and 1975 invasions, the US was not wrong in the early years to build an army that could counter such a threat. We may also conclude that President Nixon negotiated a ceasefire by making promises he could not keep, and that while the ubiquitous corruption and incompetence of the country's elite were not a direct cause of the South's collapse, they contributed to it indirectly. In the end, the proximate cause of the collapse was the insufficient American aid.

In an immediate sense, the US achieved its second goal, which was to pacify the country. The creation of CORDS resulted in the interagency unity of effort that enabled other problems to be solved. While involving the peasants in their own development and welfare no doubt helped, it appears that once the foundation of security had been established, the greatest contributor to stability was the ability to earn a living. The agricultural programs were therefore very important. Though the corruption bothered the peasant, when it came to hearts and minds, it turned out that winning his heart, meaning his affection, was much less important than winning his mind, meaning his judgment that the government, despite its shortcomings, was better for him and his family than the alternative.

The US failed to achieve its third goal, which was developing the South to stand on its own. An army must have a functioning chain of command to survive without props, and the bottom-up approach to advising could never have accomplished that because of its conceptual flaws. The US appears to have chosen that approach without considering any other options. Furthermore, the US needed strong leverage but ruled that out based on the assumption that such heavy-handedness encroached on Vietnamese sovereignty.

The contributions of this project may be viewed in terms of how it reinterprets the war and adds to the historiography. It does so in three ways. First, while the dominant historians have treated the pacification effort as a sideshow, this dissertation has positioned it at the very center of American strategy. Indeed, the war does not make sense unless seen through the lens of pacification. Lacking such a lens has led historians to make these mistakes: They have concluded that the US sought a military solution to a political problem. They have noticed the problems of corruption and incompetence, but not how the US approached them or the inadequacies of that approach. They have rightly pointed out that some elements of the rural populace preferred the Communists, yet not reflected on how that changed during the CORDS era.

Second, this work has identified and explained several apparent dichotomies that historians overlook: how the US lost the war, yet had succeeded with pacification; how the government won the minds of the peasants, but not their hearts; how the conceptual flaws of the advisory effort destined it to fail in the long term, yet enabled a modicum of success in the short term. Historians have assumed

that the South's collapse was prima facie evidence that the pacification effort and the advisory effort that supported it failed, but this project has demonstrated that it was much more complicated than that.

Third, and most importantly, this inquiry treats the advisory effort as a subject worthy of historical inquiry in its own right. Since even the US Government failed to recognize the strategic significance of its decisions about the advisory effort, it is understandable that the historians have done the same. In the overall scheme of things, though, these decisions were more important than such subjects as troop levels and strategic bombing, because they caused the US to fail at one of its three goals, indirectly contributed to the failure of the second, and greatly hindered the success of the third. Historians have not understood how the advisory effort worked, why it failed, and why it was destined to do so from the start. The question of whether to use the top-down or bottom-up approach and how to integrate it with leverage has profound implications for national policy, and should certainly be of interest to historians.

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