THE AMERICAN AND SOUTH VIETNAMESE PACIFICATION EFFORTS DURING THE VIETNAM WAR

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Liberal Arts

in

The Interdepartmental Program
In Liberal Arts

by
Matthew D. Pinard
B.A. The University of Michigan, 1996
May 2002

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my family for encouraging me to continue the pursuit of higher education. I would especially like to thank all the members of my family who have served in the military, in particular, John, Thomas, David, and Sean Cannon. I would also like to extend a special thanks to MAJ Joel E. and MAJ Jeannine C. Hamby for their support with my thesis, and Dr. Stanley E. Hilton, DeGrummond Professor of History, for his encouragement throughout the process. Finally, I wish to thank all the men and women who faithfully served with honor throughout the Vietnam War including my uncle, Thomas Cannon.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ii

ABSTRACT iv

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION 1

II. THE VIET CONG INSURGENCY 5

III. ALLIED PACIFICATION EFFORTS 46

IV. FRUSTRATION AND FAILURE 91

V. CONCLUSION 117

BIBLIOGRAPHY 121

VITA 129

ABSTRACT

This thesis closely examines the American and South Vietnamese pacification efforts in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War. The perspectives of the United States military and civilian organizations that supported the war effort, the South Vietnamese government, and the Viet Cong insurgents are discussed in detail. This includes an analysis of military strategy, theory, and practice of the combatants in the Vietnam War in order to gain an understanding of the reasoning behind decision-making policies of military leaders on both sides of the war. A dissection of the Viet Cong insurgency, from the origins of insurgent political movements leading to the formation of the Viet Cong forces and the aggressive application of these beliefs throughout the war, provides an understanding of the motivations and goals of the foe that the Allies faced. The basic strategy of the North Vietnamese Army sheds light on the reasoning behind monumental decisions regarding the military treatment of South Vietnam. A detailed analysis of the relationship between The United States and the Government of South Vietnam provides the context surrounding the trials experienced by the Allies in the battlefield throughout the countryside of Vietnam. A presentation of basic military tactics and beliefs embraced by The United States military will focus on questions of how and why the war progressed in the manner it did between the two enemy forces. A discussion of the motivations of each side in the war will lead to a greater insight of why the Vietnam War occurred, and how the outcome affected U.S. military strategy.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The pacification initiative in Southeast Asia throughout the Vietnam War consisted of numerous efforts to rid the Vietnamese countryside of Communism. These efforts supported a multitude of specified programs, including the *Chieu Hoi* program, the CIA-supported Phoenix operation also known as *Phung Hoang*, and the strategic hamlet program, and implemented strategies with the intent of gaining control over the villages in South Vietnam. The Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) structure, and the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) assumed responsibility for programs. Pacification was the organizational structure for the policies of the combined U.S. and South Vietnamese military efforts for destroying the Viet Cong (VC). The theory behind the pacification initiative was to win the "hearts and minds" of the South Vietnamese villagers: "pacification had become a catchall description for the self-interests of a dozen different US agencies, all with their Saigon government counterparts. The results were little more than a shared cliché—'winning hearts and minds,' and with the military in overall control the priority was reflected in a slogan bandied by the Marines: 'Get 'em by the balls and their hearts and minds will follow.'"[1]

The goal of this thesis is to examine the dynamics of these individual programs that shared common goals throughout the Vietnam War. Analysis of each of these programs and the various factors affecting them will lead to a greater insight into their success or failure.

Pacification is defined as:

> the military, political, economic, and social process of establishing or reestablishing local government responsive to and involving the participation of the people. It includes the provision of sustained, credible territorial security, the destruction of the enemy's underground government, the assertion or re-assertion

[1] Michael Maclear, *The Ten Thousand Day War*, *Vietnam: 1945-1975*, p. 255.

> of political control and involvement of the people in government, and the initiation of economic and social activity capable of self-sustenance and expansion.[2]

The American pacification effort, designed as a means to battle Communist insurgency, hoped to build a national political community in South Vietnam. The main goal of pacification was to endorse an independent and sovereign South Vietnamese government. Pacification assumed many roles throughout the Vietnam War with a multitude of different programs exerting varying degrees of authority and responsibility for the village hamlets. This included guaranteeing the financial and social futures of the villages. The U.S. Army in concert with American civilian agencies played a critical role in the attempt. Pacification "advisers" provided technical, administrative, and military support to South Vietnamese villages. Unfortunately, a number of influential factors weakened the initiative, the most notable being the attempt to merge the management of military and civilian agencies under one unified command. This problem, exacerbated by the South Vietnamese determination to preserve their independence vis-à-vis the American military and political organizations, was not easily solvable. Lack of a coordinated effort between these dueling governmental bodies, and a general mistrust between an increasingly corrupt South Vietnamese government and the U.S. military weakened the effort.

Pacification discovered its roots between the 1950s and 1960s at a time in history when the effort against insurgency in the Third World attracted much attention. Fighting the Cold War meant "getting our hands dirty" in poor, under-developed nations struggling to resist the grasp of Communism. Defeating insurgency required combating Communism from all aspects of society—militarily, socially, economically, and diplomatically. In Vietnam, this meant attacking the issue from both the military and civilian sectors. In the civilian sector, pacification

---

[2] Tran Dinh Tho, *Pacification*, v.

influenced economic development, land reform issues, and the political structure of the South Vietnamese. In the military sector, South Vietnamese and U.S. military police agencies provided security with U.S. paramilitary and counterinsurgency forces supported by mobile, light infantry units operating to defeat the guerrillas. The South Vietnamese military also trained special "cadre" teams to improve rural economic and social structures in the villages. By enhancing the social and economic lives of the villagers, pacification advisers offered a political alternative to rural villagers: freedom from oppressive Communist based policies and the opportunity to build a democratic process throughout the countryside. The effort required joining the fight against Communist insurgency.

The doctrinal beliefs embraced by American military leaders demonstrated how a failure to adapt a consistent and compatible strategy toward pacification approaches and general military policies led to a long, protracted, and unsuccessful struggle against the VC. Evaluation of the doctrines of the VC military and insurgent infrastructures will provide a greater understanding of the enemy the United States encountered. Different schools of military thought, previous examples of counterinsurgent operations, and internal memoranda and reports generated by the military/civilian command structure of the United States will focus on fundamental problems existing within the American approach to Vietnam.

The American military engaged the enemy openly in large offensive operations, attempted to discourage enemy infiltration with a massive bombing campaign, and sought to dismantle the VC infrastructure (VCI) in the countryside with an effective counterinsurgency program. These efforts failed to quash the enemy insurgency, and the Allied Forces failed to abandon their strategy in favor of alternative approaches. The combination of an ineffective policy and the

determination of the VC to drive the Americans from Southeast Asia resulted in the eventual withdraw of U.S. troops from Vietnam.

CHAPTER II: THE VIET CONG INSURGENCY

Nationalistic organizations flourished within South Vietnam in the 1940s following World War II and continued throughout the Viet Minh War against the French in the 1950s. The Viet Cong party grew strong in the 1960s under the leadership of North Vietnamese President Ho Chi Minh and North Vietnamese military leader General Vo Nguyen Giap. Both leaders instituted principles consistent with the teachings of China's Mao Tse Tung. These principles would become the foundation of beliefs that would motivate the North Vietnamese during the Vietnam War. The Viet Cong (VC) party existed in South Vietnam as an extension of the political leadership in North Vietnam. Through the use of propaganda and violence VC party members sought to control the rural population in South Vietnam to pave the way for the North Vietnamese Army to reunite Vietnam under one nationalistic government.

In order to understand the success achieved by the VC, one must understand the basic structure and function of an insurgency, or more specifically, a People's Revolution. Based on his experiences in Malaya, Sir Robert Thompson, who served as a consultant in Vietnam to the Allies, recognized parallels between the British occupation in Malaya and the French and American experiences in Vietnam. In, *No Exit From Vietnam*, Thompson stated that the primary objective in an insurgency is a political rather than a military focus: "The primary weapon is this underground organization within the population. The secondary weapon is the guerrilla force which depends on that underground organization for all their requirements, but which, at the same time, supports the advance of the underground organization into the heart of the threatened

government and country. The political aim is, therefore, dominant and guerrilla operations were designed to achieve political rather than military results."[1]

The aim of a subversive movement, therefore, is to defeat the enemy on a moral and psychological plane while simultaneously attempting to exhaust him. For the Communists, political concerns determine the significance of military targets: "On the Communist side, the military target is always chosen according to its political impact. On our side, the enemy revolutionary warfare fighter seems to be the major target, if not the only one. *The military "kill" becomes the primary target—simply because the essential political target is too elusive for us, or worse, because we do not understand its importance.*"[2] America learned that the battlefield tactics of their new enemy proved to be unlike any they had seen in previous wars. "The weapons by which this war is fought include politics, diplomatic blackmail, interference in the domestic affairs of other nations, propaganda and controlled terror, all of which have somewhat dirty connotations in the American mind."[3]

To achieve the political goals of the revolution in Vietnam, the VC maintained a local guerrilla force. The guerrilla units consisted of rural farmers in the villages:

> The other kind of Viet Cong was the local guerrilla: farmer by day, fighter by night. While main force units roved as far as 50 to 100 miles from their base areas, guerrilla units stayed generally close to home. These local units provided the day-to-day presence of the insurgent government in the countryside. Virtually every hamlet not immediately under the control of government forces had a Viet Cong squad. There was usually a platoon in each village.[4]

---

[1] Sir Robert Thompson, *No Exit From Vietnam*, p. 32.
[2] Bernard B. Fall, *Viet-Nam Witness, 1953-66*, p. 265. Italics added.
[3] Malcolm W. Browne, *The New Face of War*, p. 274.
[4] John H. Cushman, "Pacification: Concepts developed in the Field by the RVN 21st Infantry Division," p. 22.

Local VC units disguised among village populations proved very mobile. VC guerrillas moved relatively undetected between villages. This made their capture much more difficult and allowed them to incite subversive actions at will in any location. VC units were highly organized, and their strict adherence to objectives and proper strategy demonstrated they were an enemy capable of controlling village areas:

> The Viet Cong have taken over large parts of the countryside through a combination of excellent organization, well developed and tested doctrine, and disciplined cadres. If the Republic of Vietnam is to regain these areas of the countryside, it must have an equally effective organization, an equally sound concept—and dedicated people. . . .Pacification must be planned and executed slowly, and in the greatest detail. Broad generalities were not enough. It is not enough to say we must win the hearts and minds of the people. Someone must go out on the ground and organize, train and equip a "people-winning force," take this force step by step into each hamlet, and win the hearts of the people one heart at a time.[5]

At an early stage in a revolutionary movement, organization and discipline are virtues for the revolutionary. Solid foundations of subversion formed years before any battles took place, and an effective doctrine propagated among the people of South Vietnam before American intervention. A VC political structure was functioning at a very high level of efficiency by the time the United States decided to deploy ground forces in Vietnam. In *Banner of People's War, the Party's Military Line*, North Vietnamese military leader General Vo Nguyen Giap describes the growth of the people's army over two decades of insurgency:

> Our army is truly a people's army, born of the people and fighting for them. In twenty years, it has gradually developed from guerrilla units and masses' self-defense units into independent armed groups; from small guerrilla cells into increasingly concentrated units, including main-force, regional, and militia units; and from poorly equipped infantry units into armed forces with numerous branches and services operating with modern equipment.[6]

---

[5] Ibid., p. 21.
[6] Vo Nguyen Giap, *Banner of People's War, the Party's Military Line*, p. 30.

In Vietnam, the people's revolution developed through years of struggle against foreign enemies. The improvement in military capabilities by North Vietnam was only possible if the revolutionaries pursued political objectives in conjunction with a military build-up. One was not possible without the other; revolution was not possible without the Vietnamese farmer.

In contrast to the environment of Vietnam, the Malayan insurgency against the British was subject to many different factors affecting the outcome of effective counterinsurgency. The social, economical, and geographical boundaries encountered by the British in Malaya did not compare to the United States' situation in Vietnam:

> In view of what has happened in Viet-Nam since, the transposition of the Malayan example could not have been more disastrous—for of course the *economic* and *social*, as well as political and military, conditions under which the Malayan operation succeeded, did not in the least exist in Vietnam. In Malaya the terrorist element rested on the Chinese minority; *ipso facto,* any Malay or Indian inhabitant of Malaya (about 55 percent of the total) could be reckoned as loyal or even actively unsympathetic to the terrorist cause; in Vietnam both the population and the guerrillas were of exactly the same stock.[7]

Counterinsurgency in Malaya succeeded in part because of this discrepancy. In Vietnam, the fact that the villagers being "pacified" and the VC were many times of the "same stock" made successful counterinsurgent efforts problematic. Many of the revolutionaries in Vietnam were from South Vietnam. Many of them moved North after the Vietminh War in 1954 in hopes of returning to their homes after conditions in the South changed. In *A Soldier Reports*, General William C. Westmoreland, Commander of U.S. Forces in Vietnam, described his own perceived differences between the Malayan insurgency and Vietnam:

> While committed to Malayan independence, the British still constituted the government and thus commanded both their own and native civilian officials and military forces. That enabled them to place a unified committee of three officials—political, military, and police—at every level, from the top to the hamlet, with the political official in over-all charge. In addition the insurgency in

[7] Fall, *Viet-Nam Witness*, p. 272. Italics added.

> Malaya had been mounted by ethnic Chinese who, unlike the Viet Cong, were distinguishable from the bulk of the populace. It was also a relatively small insurgency, lacking sanctuaries and major support outside the country.[8]

The guerrillas knew the geography and the language of the politically contested regions in the South. Infiltration from the North proceeded with little difficulty. For example, from 1959-1963 infiltration rates from North to South increased dramatically:

> North Vietnam brought 4,500 infiltrators down the Ho Chi Minh Trail in 1959 and 1960, 6,300 in 1961, and nearly 13,000 in 1963, increasing the Main Force Vietcong from 3,000 people in 1960 to 10,000 in 1961, to 17,000 in 1962, and to 35,000 in 1963 . . . . Secret intelligence reports indicated that the Vietcong were gaining strength, that they were fielding 600- to 700-man battalions supported by communications and engineering units, and that the Ninth Vietcong Infantry Division would soon be ready for full deployment.[9]

Cambodia and Laos served as safe zones of retreat: "In Malaya, there was no 'active sanctuary' next door since the only contiguous country, Thailand, was staunchly anti-Communist. In Viet-Nam, North Viet-Nam openly supports guerrillas, Laos is a complete sieve, and Cambodia, in view of its persistent bad relations with Saigon, makes no particular effort to halt guerrilla operations in hard-to-survey border areas."[10]

Revolutionaries in Malaya received less support and security with regards to guerrilla operations. Vietnamese revolutionaries, however, had time to train and support an insurgency in South Vietnam. In addition, Communism flourished in Vietnam for many years, but in Malaya, Communist doctrines were not able to enjoy such favorable surroundings: "In Malaya, the Communist Party had not even had time to indoctrinate the Chinese segment of the population before it was forced underground. In Viet-Nam, the Communists have had twenty years to

---

[8] William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 86.
[9] James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam, 1945 to 1990*, p. 97.
[10] Fall, *Viet-Nam Witness*, p. 272.

indoctrinate much of the countryside without ever being effectively challenged by a competing philosophy."[11]

In addition to these conditions within Malaya, the military strategy employed by the British and their Malayan counterparts differed from U.S. military strategy. During the Malayan revolution a strategy of "clear-and-hold" rather than "search-and-destroy" provided effective security. A clear-and-hold strategy favored establishing a defensive perimeter in village areas before attempting to annihilate the guerrillas in quick, decisive offensive engagements. "Clearing operations were conducted to drive enemy forces away from populated areas and to allow small units to carry on securing activities among the people. These operations upset the pattern of mutual support that was essential to the enemy's integrated main force-local force effort."[12] By clearing and holding defensive postures, it was easier to conduct offensive movements against the insurgents. Once the government established security, the guerrillas were isolated from the rest of the population, and the government was then able to address political and economic concerns. "Major emphasis was also placed on winning over the people by redress of grievances and by good government that clearly looked to their interests. Most important, the guerrillas were gradually isolated from the people. Cut off from sources of supplies, recruits and intelligence, and confined to inhospitable areas, their organization weakened and died."[13] At this point, the movement weakened such that offensive operations were able to proceed with little resistance. Anti-infrastructure operations achieve success when it can detect an anti-governmental movement in its infancy. There is a better chance of slowing

---

[11] Ibid., pp. 272-273.
[12] John H. Hay, Jr. (Lt. Gen.), *Tactical and Materiel Innovations*, p. 170.
[13] Cushman, "Pacification," p. 62.

and eventually ending a revolution when the government addresses issues at the earliest indication of instability and resentment among the people.

In order to understand the dynamics of a subversive movement it is necessary to identify the different levels at which the VC organization operated. The political agenda included attempting to invade every aspect of a society and seeking to control the elements within that society that allow the government to grow and become strong. Sir Robert Thompson simplified these dynamics in a structured organization of an insurgency represented at different levels labeled "A, B, C, and D." These levels represent the movement from its local individuals to a highly organized political and military machine.

The "A" level represents the underground organization that existed within the villages in South Vietnam. This segment of the village existed within individual "cells" inside the population, and their personal identities were either known or unknown to the enemy. Each cell within the village promoted the movement through subversion, penetration, intimidation, terror, propaganda, and sabotage. Terrorist tactics had two main purposes:

> First, it aims to destroy the local government leadership notably as the main source of order, and to destroy or intimidate other natural or potential leadership which would otherwise compete with the Communists. Second, it aims to create fear and a sense of insecurity among the people in general in order to make them responsive to Viet Cong demands upon them, and reluctant to support or collaborate with Government efforts.[14]

In 1953, Communist government officials began a campaign of terror throughout North Vietnam to assert control over the local population. The campaign involved torture of local peasants who had not paid their taxes to the party. "These 'classical' tortures were common to every village, but there were others which were the produce of local

---

[14] Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge To Lyndon B. Johnson, 19 August 1966, www.ddrs.psmedia.com, p. 1.

ingenuity. In one village, for instance, the victims were placed in a bamboo basket and immersed in water for a couple of minutes at a time, until confessions were obtained. In another village the victim's thumb was held in a vice belonging to the local bicycle repairer, and with every turn of the screw the torturer repeated his question."[15] Such tortures eventually became commonplace amongst communist controlled villages throughout Vietnam. "During 1960, Communist guerrillas and terrorists killed or kidnapped more than 3,300 civilians, local officials, and military and security personnel. They also caused the closing down of 200 elementary schools, affecting 25,000 students and 800 teachers, and partially or completely destroyed 250 bridges."[16]

The VC cells were extensions, or arms reaching into the population. The cells at level "A" were also responsible for supplying the higher "B," "C," and "D" levels with new recruits, military supplies, and intelligence on the enemy. Level "B" represented the guerrilla warfare units. The "B" units, usually the size of a military squad, were responsible for operations surrounding their villages as well as providing armed support to the cells at level "A." Consisting of the regional guerrilla forces about the size of a platoon, the main objective of the "C" level units was offensive operations in support of the "A" cells by offensively engaging police forces and military posts. The "C" platoons often aggravated and incited government forces with guerrilla warfare; in addition, they were responsible for providing defensive protection to the counterinsurgent populations in the area. The "D" forces indicated guerrilla units of battalion and regimental sized forces. These units trained in VC controlled areas and were held in reserve until the time came for a full-scale advance.[17] The VC were highly

---

[15] Hoang Van Chi, *From Colonialism to Communism*, p. 76.
[16] Department of State, intelligence report, 10 March 1961, www.ddrs.psmedia.com, p. 1.
[17] Thompson, *No Exit*, p. 33.

proficient in maintaining their "D" units by constantly moving them from post to post, and patiently saving them for the larger attack. "D" unit forces proved instrumental in the Tet Offensive (Note: The 1968 Tet Offensive will be discussed in greater depth in later sections) during which VC forces seemed to literally appear out of every area of the jungle to attack military bases and South Vietnamese cities. The most important of these levels in a counterinsurgent movement is at level "A." Level "A," like the roots of a tree, must expand and invade every aspect of the local society whether the movement was clandestine or open. The VC cells at the "A" level reproduced until secured areas under Communist control were established. Within these smaller communities the VC organization established itself as a model of a political unit that is self-propagating and self-sustaining:

> In the "armed liberation" strategy of both Mao tse-Tung and Ho Chi Minh, the establishment and gradual extension of "secure" base areas is a primary objective in the struggle. Within such secure areas, the Viet Cong have, since the beginning of resistance against the French in 1945-46, attempted to carry out quasi-governmental functions. Their purpose is two-fold and sometimes contradictory. They seek to win the voluntary support of the population by various activities of a welfare or civic-action nature. By example they try to show that they were more efficient, honest, and humane as administrators than the enemy regime. At the same time, they were concerned with exercising control and extracting support in the form of manpower, food, and labor; these requirements frequently take priority and undo any favorable effects from their psychological operations.[18]

As this 1963 CIA assessment of the VC infrastructure (VCI) illustrates, the VC were masters of propaganda and population control. VC maintained rigid control over secured areas in terms of dissemination of information. The population, which the VC converted to Communism, was the same population that remained submissive to the "will of the people." Promises of liberation

[18] Central Intelligence Agency, memorandum for The Director, 29 November 1963, www.ddrs.psmedia.com, p. 1.

from the oppression of democratic powers diminished as the communist policy makers instituted repressive measures on the community.

The "A" level was responsible for converting potential recruits and for reducing the enemy's will to fight. The VC were the perfect embodiment of this hypothetical organization. They were able to reduce the enemy's morale and secretly entice the rural population into pledging support to the VC movement. The VC achieved support of the population with deception:

> A favorite tactic of the insurgent...This is what might be called the tactic of "promises." The insurgent promises land reform to the peasant oppressed by landlords and moneylenders, autonomy to ethnic groups or tribes, self-government to hamlets and villages. The insurgent can promise almost anything since he knows he need deliver nothing until victory is won. It is an excellent tactic. It has the further advantage that, once the insurgent is in power, he need not deliver anything at all. Further, the legal government cannot counter him effectively merely by promising in its turn; it must deliver—now, by actual performance. This may be difficult or impossible in the middle of an insurgency.[19]

The underground organization within the VC movement was the "popular base" of support. If this base flourished then the movement gained momentum and shifted the numbers in favor of a revolution. "A country's capacity to wage war depends on the strength of its home base and the same is true of People's Revolutionary War. Its home base is within the population of the threatened country. The base is not outside the country nor is it situated in jungles and swamps. It is the populated areas of the country under insurgent control from which the tentacles can reach into, and suck support from, areas still ostensibly under government control."[20] Giap described the building of a strong rear base and guerrilla base as essential in increasing the large geographic regions in which an insurgency could begin to grow. "Through various forms of

---

[19] Richard A. McMahon, "Indirect Approach," p. 58.
[20] Thompson, *No Exit*, p. 34.

struggle—from illegal to legal struggle, from economic to political and armed struggle—and through the fierce fight against the enemy, the clandestine political bases of the masses gradually turned the areas under the enemy's temporary control into guerrilla-infested areas and guerrilla bases that, small and isolated at first, became linked into increasingly vast areas."[21]

Giap foresaw victory by North Vietnam through the successful cooperation of the VC and the NVA to make certain that the Allies did not have a safe rear base. The North Vietnamese did this by first strengthening their own rear base in the North, and then focusing on establishing revolutionary VC bases in urban areas under Allied control:

> To advance the revolutionary war toward victory, we must build revolutionary bases in the urban areas and create conditions for attacking the enemy directly in the cities in every suitable way, thereby, depriving him of a safe rear base. We must also insure close coordination between the urban revolutionary forces in order to attack the enemy directly in his lair, insure that the revolutionary war annihilates more and more extensively his military and political forces, extend the people's control from lower to higher echelons and from small to large areas, and advance toward winning final victory.[22]

The popular base of the VC existed in occupied areas of South Vietnamese cities, provinces, and hamlets. The strategy included expanding the movement by increasing the base within these communities. In this scenario, the government was not truly in control of its own territory, but subject to the plans and designs of the enemy. In order to develop a secure rear base, the North Vietnamese focused on building a people's army comprised of guerrilla units, regional force units, and main force units. Giap accomplished the processes of mobilization and infiltration through a concentrated synergy of these forces:

> In our country, experience in implementing people's war over the past twenty-five years has proved that the three categories of troops—main-force units, regional forces, and guerrilla and self-defense militia forces—are the most appropriate organizational way in which to mobilize all of the population to fight the enemy.

---

[21] Giap, *Banner of People's War*, p. 44.
[22] Giap, Banner of People's War, p. 47.

> Great attention must be paid to building up main-force units as well as regional forces. The building up of main-force units must be closely associated with the building up of regional forces, on-the-spot forces, and mobile forces. In forming our army, we have developed our forefather's traditions of organizing a force of all the people for the war.[23]

The VC built their home base literally within the villages in the countryside. The sites held a tremendous strategic importance for the VC, and security of occupied areas was an important objective. "To protect themselves, VC cadre had to build their activities around security in the villages. In Communist-controlled areas cadre lived in their houses by day, moving to alternate quarters each night. No matter how secure a village seemed, there was always the possibility that the enemy might learn where cadre members lived and send special teams to capture or kill them."[24] Mobility and secrecy were valuable commodities to both the VC and the Americans. The elusiveness of VC members allowed them to remain alive. It was difficult to destroy "cells" if they could not be located or captured.

In order to maintain the strength of the insurgent movement at the "A" level, the VC had to replace lost or destroyed cells. In a process described as "bead-stringing," a new cell replaces a lost cell to maintain the strength of the roots.[25] The VC facilitated this process by using promotions to fill vacated positions. The bead-stringing process had to function efficiently in order to strengthen the cause.

To facilitate the expansion of its political objectives, the VC supporters helped to create the National Liberation Front (NLF). The organization offered an alternative to the South

---

[23] Ibid., p. 32.
[24] Dale Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War—Cover for Assassination or Effective Counterinsurgency?*, p. 11.
[25] Thompson, *No Exit*, p. 36.

Vietnamese government much like the National Liberation Committee had offered during French occupation.[26] "The National Liberation Front was organized into regional People's Liberation Committees similar to the Local Liberation Committees the Viet Minh used against the French, with subordinate committees at the provincial, district, and village levels."[27] During the French occupation of the 1950s French forces encountered a highly structured insurgent organization. "The Viet Minh, in their war against the French, performed a remarkable organizational feat in constructing the political/military apparatus that extended throughout the entire Vietnamese society. This organization, and the skills it developed, have been maintained and transmitted to the southern revolution."[28] Many observers have mistaken the NLF as a separate organization from the North Vietnamese command in Hanoi. In reality, the NLF represented an extension of the VC movement, created to provide a political base in the South. The NLF supported a separate and independent political organization, but existed as an extension of the command in Hanoi. In addition to generating credibility of the VC movement among the people, the NLF attempted to build the popular and political base of the VC organization: "The emergence of the NLF marked the beginning of open political revolution in South Vietnam, but it was not the true center of political power that many believed. Hanoi had intended to create an illusion, leading casual observers to conclude that the NLF was a spontaneous uprising of Southern discontent, while still controlling the reins. Those reins formed the crucial link between North and South Vietnam."[29] The NLF was a sounding board for the ideals and goals of the revolutionary movement. As Ho Chi Minh describes in *On Revolution*, the NLF sought to win its freedom

---

[26] Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, p. 146.
[27] William R. Andrews, *The Village War: Vietnamese Communist Revolutionary Activities in Dinh Tuong Province, 1960-1964,* p. 39.
[28] Department of Defense, 17 August 1964, www.ddrs.psmedia.com, p. 90.
[29] Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*, p. 7.

from an oppressive government. "Under the leadership of the South Viet-Nam National Front for Liberation, the genuine and only representative of the South Vietnamese people, the heroic people and fighters in South Viet-Nam are marching forward to record ever greater successes so as to liberate the South and defend the North."[30] In later years, as the Vietnam War escalated and U.S. involvement deepened, North Vietnamese President Ho Chi Minh reaffirmed North Vietnam's resolve against what he labeled American aggression:

> The U.S. imperialists fancied that with the savage destructive force of bombs and shells they could weaken the North, prevent the support rendered by the great rear to the great front, and reduce the fighting capacity of the South. The fact, however, is that the more the North fights the U.S. aggressors, the stronger and steadier it becomes in every respect while constantly extending wholehearted support to the liberation struggle of the heroic compatriots in the South. Also, the more the compatriots in the South fight the U.S. aggressors, the closer their unity, the bigger their strength, and the greater their victories.[31]

The NLF movement received direction from the North through the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN). "The Central Office has divided the country into seven regional zones each with its own supervisory committee. The regional committees, in turn, have special sections in charge of tax collection, training, propaganda, personnel, maintenance of military bases, liaison, and other activities. A military command structure parallels the political organization and is integrated with it at all levels."[32] Both the NLF and the People's Revolutionary Party (PRP) served as links between the North and South, and, although the two organizations were separate, each relied on the other for guidance and support: "The PRP was organized to be independent of, but enmeshed with, the NLF, which was the subordinate entity. The PRP had three functions: to provide the NLF with political guidance; to carry out general administration; and to act as

---

[30] Ho Chi Minh, *On Revolution*, p. 362.
[31] Ho Chi Minh, "Appeal to Compatriots and fighters throughout the country," p. 2.
[32] Gerald L. Stone, *War Without Honour*, p. 81.

logistics manager for the increasing infiltration of arms and men down the Ho Chi Minh Trail."[33] Infiltration from North Vietnam proceeded down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, "a small and ill-defined network of jungle paths"[34] that cut through South Vietnam.

Although the NLF was subordinate to the PRP, both worked toward similar goals. The PRP maintained control over the NLF to assure that its objectives were in agreement with the command in Hanoi. In 1962, the PRP officially stated its political objectives and distributed these objectives throughout South Vietnam. These objectives included the following goals:

1. We will overthrow the Ngo Dinh Diem government and form a national democratic coalition government.
2. We will carry out a program involving extension of democratic liberties, general amnesty for political detainees, abolition of agrovilles and resettlement centers, abolition of special military tribunal law and other undemocratic laws.
3. We will abolish the economic monopoly of the U.S. and its henchmen, protect domestically made products, promote development of the economy, and allow forced evacuees from North Vietnam to return to their place of birth.
4. We will reduce land rent and prepare for land reform.
5. We will eliminate U.S. cultural enslavement and depravity and build nationalistic progressive culture and education.
6. We will abolish the system of American military advisers and close all foreign military bases in Vietnam.
7. We will establish equality between men and women and among different nationalities and recognize the autonomous rights of the national minorities in the country.
8. We will pursue a foreign policy of peace and will establish diplomatic relations with all countries that respect the independence and sovereignty of Vietnam.
9. We will re-establish normal relations between North and South as a first step toward peaceful reunification of the country.
10. We will oppose aggressive wars and actively defend world peace.[35]

---

[33] Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*, p. 8.
[34] Merle L. Pribbenow, "North Vietnam's Master Plan," p. 2.
[35] Douglas Pike, *War, Peace, and the Viet Cong,* pp. 14-15. Note: *agrovilles* were relocation villages set up as a pacification initiative and are discussed in further detail in the next chapter.

On May 8, 1969, at the 16th session of the Paris Conference on Viet Nam, Tran Buu Kiem, head of the South Vietnam National Liberation Front would reiterate similar demands. In his address, Kiem, stated:

> The U.S. Government must withdraw from South Viet Nam all U.S. troops, military personnel, arms and war material, and all troops, military personnel, arms and war material of the other foreign countries of the U.S. camp without posing any conditions whatsoever; liquidate all U.S. military bases in South Viet Nam; renounce all encroachments on the sovereignty, territory and security of South Viet Nam and the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam.[36]

This was a demand the VC would stand by throughout the entire Vietnam War. It became the basis for the movement and the primary objective of the revolution. In terms of direction and guidance, Hanoi controlled the NLF. The objectives of the NLF included political advancement of Communism through the unification of North and South. The tactics of the VC supported the insurgent movement in South Vietnam. These tactics included subversion and terror within the occupied areas of South Vietnam. Subversion existed as an exploitation of issues that seemed to created dissent within the ruling government. Throughout an insurgency, subversion was a practical tool and the VC maintained rigid control over its constituents. The goal was to generate a large body of VC members primarily within the boundaries of the rural population. With the use of forceful persuasion, the VC could then introduce Communist ideals into the villages in order to convert potential members into full-fledged VC:

> The basic characteristics of the NLF and its activities were the use of a united-front organization to establish a mass base of support; organization of the rural people, employing both rational appeals to self-interest and coercion, and then using the specially created social movements in antigovernmental activity; heavy use of various techniques for the communication of ideas to foment social strife; use of specialized military actions, selective in nature and psychological in intent;

[36] Tran Buu Kiem, "Principles and Main Content of the Overall Solution to the South Viet Nam Problem to Help Restore Peace in Viet Nam," p. 1.

> use of the Communist party *apparat*, and Communist doctrine among the leaders and full-time cadres to establish orthodoxy and maintain discipline.[37]

Direct subversion was the process by which active members of the VC apparatus engaged either openly or secretly in subversion of the government. Indirect subversion was a less conspicuous process. Villagers who professed no affiliation to either the government or the insurgency often engaged in indirect subversion by accommodating the VC. "Subversion can be either indirect or direct. The main area for subversion—the exploitation of contradictions within society. Issues which already exist can be aggravated and new ones provoked, particularly when the government is compelled by the insurgency itself to take strong measures which can be classified as oppressive and unpopular."[38] This accommodation came in the form of providing support to the VC with food, shelter, and clothing, or simply refusing to disclose VC troop movements to the government soldiers. Between indirect and direct subversion in a movement there were populations caught on the fringes that both the VC and pacification advisers attempted to convert. There was no middle ground or neutrality in an insurgent movement. The revolution affected every segment of the population, whether in occupied cities or rural villages. "On the boundary line between direct and indirect subversion, there is always the stratagem, towards those who were reluctant to support either side, that they had better insure. In fact, when an insurgency is well under way, there were no fence-sitters and no neutrals within the community supporting neither side, but there were plenty of people supporting both sides."[39] This contradiction plagued the American pacification advisers throughout the war. With many of the villagers working to appease the VC, it was nearly impossible to secure a village or hamlet

---

[37] Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam*, p. 374. Italics added.
[38] Thompson, *No Exit*, p. 37.
[39] Ibid., p. 38.

as a safe zone for U.S. troops. The VC movement had both direct and indirect support in the community. Enticing the fence sitters proved difficult for the pacification movement, yet it remained a fundamental goal of the VC leadership in the North. "Hanoi's propaganda on South Vietnam," The CIA noted early in 1964, "continues to emphasize familiar themes; successes by the revolutionary forces, defeats and disillusion on the other side, suggesting that the US imperialists will suffer complete defeat if they do not withdraw."[40] The CIA assessment during this time concluded that "the over-all situation in South Vietnam remains extremely fragile. Although there has been some improvement in GVN/ARVN performance, sustained Viet Cong pressure continues to erode GVN authority throughout the country, undercut US/GVN programs and depress South Vietnamese morale."[41] During this same period, Sir Robert Thompson, in a memorandum to his superiors in London echoed similar fears about the status of the war in Vietnam. "'I am now convinced that we are passing the point of no return,' Thompson wrote. 'Defeat by the Viet Cong, through subversion and increased guerrilla activity, is inevitable, and this prospect will become gradually more apparent over the next few months.'"[42]

Indirect and direct subversion created an atmosphere in Vietnamese villages conducive to "direct subversion through accommodation." This phenomenon described the fence-sitters who, although they have professed no affiliation with the insurgent movement, ended up indirectly supporting it: "It is a very short step from insurance to direct subversion through accommodation. Cases of this nature were quoted all the time in South Vietnam of the 'If you

---

[40] Central Intelligence Agency, report, 20 March 1964, www.ddrs.psmedia.com, p. 15.
[41] Central Intelligence Agency, memorandum, 15 May 1964, www.ddrs.psmedia.com, p. 2. GVN stands for Government of Vietnam and ARVN stands for Army of the Republic of Vietnam.
[42] Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam*, p. 222.

don't attack us we won't attack you' type. This has frequently occurred in isolated posts or district towns in Vietnam. It is only a short step from a sin of omission to a sin of commission."[43] By not supporting the American effort or by not joining in pacification, the villagers engaged in direct subversion through accommodation. In accommodating the insurgents and not pledging support to one side or the other, the villagers indirectly supported the insurgency in its political objective. Much of the difference remained a cultural understanding of the definition of war. To the Vietnamese farmer, war represented an unwelcome disruption. There was no urgency to choose sides. "The average rural Vietnamese could plant his rice, watch it grow, harvest it, and begin the cycle again, placidly unconcerned, unaffected by the swirl around him. The result was that he did not perceive the situation in Vietnam as a 'war' in the same way that Americans regard the Vietnam 'war.'"[44]

With the militant VC devotees engaging in subversion and terror, villagers remained reluctant supporters of the movement through "defections-in-place," to borrow a term from Thompson. As he put it, "While there have been negligible defections from the government side in South Vietnam, even among the large number of deserters from the armed forces, there have been an increasing number of what might be called defections-in-place, where the individual stays in his normal occupation but is in fact working partly for the other side, at least sufficiently to secure the future of himself and his family."[45]

Recruiting peasants and cadre for their cause became a major focus for the VC organization:

> The Viet Cong movement embraces a mass of Vietnamese, ranging from the casual peasant supporter who occasionally buys supplies for the Viet Cong on a trip to the local market, to the most deeply dedicated cadre in the main forces. The main forces fall into two generations of recruits: the hard-core Viet Cong

[43] Thompson, *No Exit*, p. 38.
[44] Pike, *Viet Cong*, p. 372.
[45] Thompson, *No Exit*, p. 39.

> cadre and Party member who usually is a Southern Vietnamese "returnee" from North Vietnam where he received, after 1954, five to ten years of systematic training and indoctrination; and the younger generation comprising those recruited mainly after 1958.[46]

With the NLF, the VC looked to expand their base of support. "The National Liberation Front engaged in a variety of recruitment activities ranging from kidnapping to enlistment drives, from drafting eligibles in entire villages to carefully planned and protracted propagandizing of single individuals, from overt threats to patriotic and nationalistic appeals."[47] The Vietnamese youth were the direct target of the VC for recruiting into NLF organizations. In an atmosphere conducive to conformity, the VC were able to entice young Vietnamese farmers:

> The Vietnamese youth was first surrounded by a social organization that he had no hand in creating but to which he somehow belonged. Through a process of insinuation the youth came to realize that he was part of the NLF, never quite sure of how this happened and never with any choice presented to him. The process of glacially slow recruitment came first, the mystique was developed later. Or, as it has been aptly put, conversion followed subversion.[48]

The intelligence network within the VC structure proved to be very effective in isolating the youthful members of a community from those deemed a threat to the advancement of the cause. A member of the community labeled as harmful to the status quo could expect a rather violent fate:

> The aim is not just to cow the population, but to eliminate from within the population what might be called the potential opposition. The intelligence network of the political underground organization is able to list over the years all members of the community and to identify those who might be expected to rally and lead the community against the Viet Cong at a time of crisis. Everyone is familiar with Mao Tse-tung's famous phrase: 'Every Communist must grasp the truth, political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.'[49]

---

[46] The White House, memorandum, 28 June 1965, www.ddrs.psmedia.com, p. 1.
[47] Paul Berman, *Revolutionary Organization: Institution-Building Within The People's Liberation Armed Forces*, p. 49.
[48] Pike, *Viet Cong*, p. 376.
[49] Thompson, *No Exit*, p. 40.

Threats of violence were the most effective methods of VC recruiting. Those villagers who openly criticized the Communist government faced reprisal:

> Fear and a sense of insecurity were common in South Vietnam. Locally, the antagonism and hatred roused by the Viet Cong terrorism were usually concealed, for fear of the consequences of overt opposition to the Viet Cong, and there is a corresponding reluctance to give overt support to the government. The people do not like the Viet Cong, but without security they cannot stand up to them alone—and the Viet Cong destroy security. That is why many people leave the areas where the Viet Cong have a strong prescence.[50]

Some villagers had family members who held VC affiliations. With the constant threat of attack on one's family, a "defection-in-place," as Thompson labels it, became a safe way to ensure protection without openly declaring a VC affiliation. In Vietnam, corruption was rampant throughout South Vietnam. Even those who proclaimed to be working for the government were vulnerable to bribery: "In both accommodation and defection-in-place, while insurance is one motive, there is also corruption. There have been frequent cases in South Vietnam where an important Communist cadre has been captured and held in jail until the appropriate price has been paid to the right people for his release."[51] This point illustrates a major disadvantage for the U.S. military. The rampant corruption within the South Vietnamese and the local security forces adversely affected the security of the hamlets. The VC manipulated many personnel from the government side to aid the insurgency. The motive to support the VC in this case was simply a financial one. Village officials would look the other way if the price were high enough, and their role in aiding the VC amounted to direct cooperation. These problems affected nearly every pacification program during its cycle. The inability to put an end to corruption thwarted every counterinsurgency program.

---

[50] Lodge to Johnson, 19 August 1966, www.ddrs.psmedia.com, p. 2.
[51] Thompson, No Exit, p. 39.

The VC also engaged in the infiltration of government organizations. By placing operatives inside the government, the VC not only improved their intelligence capability, but they could also influence future government decisions and plans. The insertion of deep cover agents took many years to develop, and penetrations were more successful in "outside" government organizations:

> The direct insertion of a hard-core Communist into a government organization takes a very long time to bear fruit and the risk of him being uncovered increases with time . . . . Direct penetration does, however, take place outside the government in other organizations, particularly in student associations and labour unions where it is the aim of the Party member to get into a controlling situation, such as secretary to a committee at any level, but the higher the better. From this position he can manipulate the agenda and angle the discussion.[52]

The planting of agents was more successful during the Vietminh War with the French than during the Vietnam War with the United States. Operatives were more identifiable. One of the major objectives of Phoenix and most other pacification programs was to uncover VC operatives within government organizations, or, at the very least, track down enemy sympathizers whether they were passively or actively involved in the revolution.

The North Vietnamese struggled to "liberate" the South and reunify Vietnam under one government for many years before the post-war French occupation. As Westmoreland observed, the brutal methods of the VC served more than one purpose:

> The Viet Cong's methods were both violent and political. The more visible was the violent, but it was only an adjunct to the political, a way to coerce recalcitrants, eliminate effective government officials, and demonstrate strength. The focus was on enlisting the masses in hamlets and villages so that in time the government centers in the towns and cities would be surrounded and choked.[53]

---

[52] Ibid
[53] Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 68.

Through the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, the Viet Cong were unwilling to accept defeat regardless of the cost of human lives:

> The essential reality of the struggle was that the Communists, imbued with an Almost fanatical sense of dedication to a reunified Vietnam under their control, saw the war against the United States and its South Vietnamese ally as the continuation of two thousand years of resistance to Chinese and later French rule. They were prepared to accept limitless casualties to attain their sacred objective. Ho Chi Minh, their leader, had made that calculation plain to the French as they braced for war in the late 1940s. "You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours," he warned them, "but even at those odds, you will lose and I will win."[54]

Guerrilla warfare employed terror tactics. The nature of guerrilla war was to force the populace into submission. In instances where the civilian inhabitants affected the ease with which an insurgency effectively operated, terror became a method of asserting control. The British realized this fact during the Boer War. Noncombatant populations were vital lifelines to the insurgency, and thus represented a potential accomplice of insurgency:

> The methods by which guerrillas were overcome were, for humane men, unpalatable because they involve making war upon entire populations, upon those who in orthodox warfare were considered noncombatants. But as guerrillas were dependent upon the noncombatant population for supplies, information, and other necessities, and the passive, if not active, support of the people among whom they move is essential, these people—housewives who count the men and guns in the passing column, small boys who have seen the hiding soldiers in their ambush, old men who know forgotten paths—become a danger to the counter-guerrilla forces and minatory action is taken against them. So terrorism becomes a standard feature of guerrilla wars.[55]

Terrorism in the extreme sense during the Boer War included assassinations, burning of homes, destruction of property, torture, and imprisonment.[56] Although reluctant to employ such methods in the Boer War, the British recognized the effectiveness of terror in subduing

---

[54] Karnow, *Vietnam*, p. 17.
[55] Byron Farwell, *The Great Anglo-Boer War*, pp. 348-349.
[56] Ibid., p. 349.

a populace and created concentration camps in which many civilians lost their lives. The VC subjected rural villages to the terror of war in an effort to "shell shock" civilians into joining their cause. The fact that the VC lived within the villages in South Vietnam made villagers easy targets for assimilation into the movement:

> Viet Cong control of the countryside was gained by careful organization at the rice-roots level, by patient construction of military forces from the ground up, by systematic use of terror and intimidation, and by gradual erosion of the confidence of the people in the protection of the legitimate government . . . . [T]he very presence of the VC, the persuasive nature of their influence, and the undeniable fact that that influence was strong, eroded the will of the loyal Vietnamese to resist, undermined the confidence of the local official in his side's eventual success, and persuaded him that he should resign himself to the VC's eventual victory. It added to the feeling of hopelessness or futility that leads the average citizen to search for alternatives to the tedious task of fighting the VC—to neutralism or worse.[57]

The terror the VC instituted during the war included "indirect terror," placing villagers in the middle of war zones and subjecting them to gunfire. This generated hatred and fear of American soldiers. Many VC troops chose villagers as shields. This strategy created a "shock" effect:

> A more subtle form of indirect terror, designed to put a village or town into a state of shock which can then be exploited, is to induce the government forces to take retaliatory action. It is only necessary for the Viet Cong to take some minor action, such as firing a few shots from within a village before they themselves disappear, to induce a government or American response which then does their work for them. People who were previously innocent and uncommitted peasants were then likely to be turned into willing Viet Cong.[58]

The strategy employed by the VC imitated the "grab 'em by the balls, and their hearts and minds will follow" attitude of the U.S. military. The VC sought to subdue the villagers by maintaining a constant threat of violence, whether or not that violence came from the VC themselves, or the U.S. Army. This strategy proved successful during the 1968 Tet

---

[57] Cushman, "Pacification," p. 23.
[58] Thompson, *No Exit*, p. 41.

Offensive. The overall effect of the offensive left villages, towns, and cities in South Vietnam "shell-shocked" from a massive attack that placed many innocent civilians in the line of fire. This shock created a state of mind among the villagers, and easily manipulated them because "the towns were made riper for terror."[59] The Vietnam War was a civil war, and it was a war on civilians.

The fighting that took place in Vietnam literally pitted brother against brother. Vietnam's battlefield split families down the middle in terms of which side they pledged their allegiance to. There was no middle ground, and no such thing as an "innocent bystander":

> As the insurgency expands its base and the scale of the war develops, then it gradually takes on the nature of a civil war with large areas of the country held by each side and an equally large area contested between them. It even takes on the characteristics of civil war in that family is split against family and the fighting becomes extremely bitter, as in most of the civil wars of the past, with no quarter being given or taken and with no individual being able to claim the position of innocent bystander.[60]

The Vietnam War placed civilians directly in the middle of battle. Civilian villages manned strategic posts, and the VC used villagers to disguise the transportation of supplies across jungle paths and over bordering countries. It was difficult for U.S. soldiers placed in this environment to distinguish between the enemy and innocent civilians. The VC forced villagers into a policy that required appeasing both sides. By maintaining a presence in the hamlets, the VC were aware of the fact that violent confrontations would occur in civilian areas. What they hoped to generate was hatred of the U.S. forces. By enticing the U.S. military to invade civilian villages, the VC brought the horror of war directly into unsuspecting civilian areas. This fact was horrifically realized in the "massacre" that occurred in the Vietnamese hamlet of My Lai. My

---

[59] Ibid
[60] Ibid., p. 42.

Lai was one of many villages suspected of aiding the NVA in the Quang Ngai Province on the coast of South Vietnam:

> In a province deemed correctly to be overwhelmingly sympathetic to the Viet Cong, this meant eliminating the countryside. The villages were bombed, burned down, and pulverized. Sometimes villagers would be warned in advance that their homes were about to be wiped off the face of the earth. Sometimes not. It was common practice to shell or bomb any village from which US soldiers had taken any fire, even small arms fire, without any warning at all.[61]

On March 16, 1968, members of C Company, 1/20th Infantry led an assault on the hamlet of My Lai in the Quang Ngai Province. The assault began with an artillery bombing of the area and resulted in the deaths of over 500 civilian men, women, and children after C Company had completed its assault. Most of the civilian casualties were the result of rapes, tortures, and murders in spite of a lack of return fire from the civilian population. The incident at My Lai resulted from a "moral vacuum, and a moratorium on restraint and self-control."[62] The incident at My Lai was an extreme example of how villagers became innocent casualties of the Vietnam War. Unfortunately, it was not an isolated event. Soldiers often fired at civilians, mistaking them as VC sympathizers:

> These areas became free-fire zones. Anything that happened to someone who chose to remain in, or return to, a free-fire zone was their own fault; they could expect the worst. The belief that the people had been given a chance to get out and had made their choice made the strategy morally workable. In a free-fire zone, the pursuit of a high body count could proceed unencumbered by the need to discriminate between combatants and civilians at all.[63]

The event at My Lai demonstrated how American infantry units perceived the villagers. Every GI who marched through the villages cast the inhabitants in a suspicious light. This was largely because it was very difficult to distinguish a villager from a soldier. Both wore the same

---

[61] Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, p. 59.
[62] Ibid., p. 79.
[63] Ibid., p. 60.

black pajamas, and the physical features of the civilians and the soldiers were identical. The VC successfully generated distrust and hatred between two groups who were supposed to rely on each other for support and protection. The event irrevocably damaged relations between the Americans and the rural population they were supposed to be protecting. The incident served only to further alienate those populations "on the fence" from the Allies and created an atmosphere of sympathy for the revolution.

In Vietnam, outside support for the insurgency came from North. Infiltrators traveled down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to aid the revolution. The initial popular base in the South was comprised of defectors who had fought with the Vietminh and subsequently chose to migrate into North Vietnam following the 1954 Geneva Accords. This group included more than 30,000 South Vietnamese that moved back to the South from the North to support the revolution. During the People's Revolution this outside support proved critical to VC success, "In a People's Revolutionary War there will always be support for both sides at least on the political, diplomatic and propaganda fronts. When conditions permit there will also be more direct support, not necessarily with forces, but with weapons, supplies, money, and training."[64] The defectors who moved North after 1954 became the population that would lead to the formation of political movement. Many of these men returned the South to infiltrate the villages they once lived in and to serve as political cadres, weapons specialists, and leaders of VC units. Even with such a force, the VC still had to secure the support of the local population:

> The key point about infiltration is that it is limited by the absorptive capacity of the insurgent movement within the country. Once the infiltrator has entered the country he is completely dependent on the insurgent logistic base for his continued existence. It follows from this that, if the insurgent base is expanding, so is the capacity to absorb infiltration. The infiltration rate is, therefore, likely to

[64] Thompson, *No Exit*, p. 42.

> represent a fairly constant percentage of the strength of the insurgent movement within the threatened country.[65]

The VC depended on the capacity of the local population to help them. In terms of the Vietnam War, this capacity could exist if there were enough resources controlled by the insurgents, and if there was enough safe terrain to support a large increase in men, supplies, and other resources. Infiltration is subject to the limitations of the insurgency's success, but, if unrestricted, an influx of resources could greatly accelerate the movement. For example, in response to the deployment of U.S. troops in South Vietnam, "the infiltration rose (according to U.S. estimates) to 35,300 during 1965, to 89,000 in 1966, to between 59,000 and 90,000 in 1967, and then to about 150,000 in 1968,"[66] from North to South Vietnam.

In Vietnam, the environmental conditions of the countryside were ideal to support such a large invasion of personnel. The dense foliage provided natural cover for troop movements along the jungle pathways bordering Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. If the terrain was conducive to travel without threat of attack, then such an influx of VC units could proceed unencumbered. "The second point about infiltration is that, if conditions of terrain are favorable, it is almost immune to interdiction and obstruction and cannot, at least in the early stages of an insurgency, be prevented," Thompson noted, "When there are long mountainous jungle borders or long coastlines with jungle headlands and swampy estuaries, there is no great problem in effecting entry."[67] Giap commented on the problem that rugged terrain presented for the Allies. "The countryside, jungles, and mountains, with their dangerous terrains, are important military

---

[65] Ibid., pp. 42-43.
[66] Jon M. Van Dyke, *North Vietnam's Strategy for Survival*, p. 34.
[67] Thompson, *No Exit*, p. 43.

strategic areas where the ethnic peoples are very eager for and loyal to the revolution. [In these areas] the enemy reveals almost all of his weaknesses and gaps," he stated.[68]

The VC were masters of concealment and secrecy as was evident in the Tet Offensive. The VC built an elaborate system of underground tunnels that provided protection from bombing and prevented detection by the counterinsurgent forces. Such conditions not only provided travel routes for troops, but also secured safe training bases for the VC:

> Because the landlords and the soldiers with their foreign airplanes owned the surface of the earth, the guerrillas went underground in both the literal and the metaphorical sense. Settling down among the people who lived, like an Orwellian proletariat, outside the sphere of modern technology, they dug tunnels beneath the villages, giving the people a new defensive distance from the powers which reigned outside the village. The earth itself became their protection—the Confucian "face" which the village had lost when, for the last time, its hedges had been torn down.[69]

The underground tunnels provided security from bombing, defoliation of the jungle, and counterinsurgency patrols. They represented the elusiveness of the VC and penetrated the South secretly from the North.

There is an important distinction between a People's Revolutionary War and previous conventional wars involving offensive invasions. A People's Revolution is a phenomenon that begins from within and works its way toward the periphery. A conventional invasion is a thrust from the periphery. An insurgency is not an invasion in this sense. It is a less visible offensive that affects every aspect of a society. However, the primary objective of a revolution is political, whereas in an invasion the objective is first a military one. In the Vietnam War, the U.S. military relied too heavily on the offensive search-and-destroy mission. The VC had been fighting

---

[68] Giap, *Banner of People's War*, p. 46.
[69] Frances FitzGerald, *Fire In The Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam*, pp. 144-145.

against such tactics during the Viet-Minh war with the French. Giap was prepared for such a scenario with the U.S. based on his experiences in the Viet-Minh war. He predicted a long war with the French, and he would later incorporate these same methods of warfare when engaging the Americans:

> The enemy will pass slowly from the offensive to the defensive. The *Blitzkrieg* will transform itself into a war of long duration. Thus, the enemy will be caught in a dilemma: he has to drag out the war in order to win it and does not possess, on the other hand, the psychological and political means to fight a long drawn-out war…Our strategy early in the course of the third stage is that of a general counter-offensive. We shall attack without cease until final victory, until we have swept the enemy forces from Indochina. During the first and second stage, we have gnawed away at the enemy forces; now we must destroy them. All military activities of the third stage must tend to the same simple aim—the total destruction of French forces.[70]

Giap believed in the theory that the best defense was a strong offense. He taught patience in his planning, and recognized the importance of forcing the enemy to retreat into rear areas:

> Attacks—strong attacks—are the best way to defend and broaden our rear bases, to shrink the enemy rear bases, and to develop strongly and comprehensively the contribution of our rear bases. This is also the essential requirement of the building of the strongholds and rear bases of the liberation war, starting from nothing—from small to large scale—and aiming at regaining, maintaining, and developing—from partially to comprehensively—the people's right to rule.[71]

The strength of the North Vietnamese forces was in their ability to build safe rear bases hidden underground or deep in the jungle. These bases served as command centers for the VC units in the South:

> Whereas the infrastructure and guerrillas could hide among a population that was either sympathetic, apathetic, or cowed, the regular VC units had to have safe base areas or sanctuaries. There they could rest, conduct training and indoctrination, and prepare for operations. The bases were usually located within a reasonable distance of densely populated areas and often had elaborate, literally underground facilities, such as hospitals, command posts, kitchens, and printing plants, all connected by vast tunnel complexes. No one has ever demonstrated

---

[70] Bernard B. Fall, *Street Without Joy*, p. 34. Italics added.
[71] Giap, *Banner of People's War*, p. 50.

> more ability to hide his installations than did the Viet Cong; they were human moles.[72]

The strategy of the North Vietnamese did not change at all throughout the war. Based on previous military struggles against stronger, better equipped foes, the North Vietnamese adopted a strategy that allowed for an equal fight. It was a strategy fashioned during the war with the French. U.S. forces made many of the same mistakes in battles with the VC as the French did. They fought too many battles away from their centers of troop strength. They employed conventional methods against an enemy well trained in guerrilla tactics, and they underestimated the NVA's ability to mount counter-offensives, maintain lines of battle, and conduct offensive operations.

Sir Robert Thompson described three phases typical of an insurgency. In phase one, the insurgency begins in the "build-up" or "defensive" stage. Phase two consists of the guerilla war phase, and phase three culminates in the "offensive" stage. Proper planning and execution of an insurgency, with few unforeseen obstacles, allows for success in the earlier stages:

> Normally a People's Revolutionary War must go through three phases—the build up or defensive phase, the guerilla war phase, designed to achieve equilibrium and a balance of force with the government, and the offensive phase to take over the country. If all the factors were favorable, such as a good cause, a strong organization, popular support and a weak government, then obviously the war might be won in the first phase or early in the guerrilla war phase.[73]

The initial, build-up phase can take years to develop into an insurgency. In Vietnam, this stage began in the 1930s and accelerated during the Japanese occupation of Vietnam. During the Vietminh War with the French, the build-up grew from a base that was present before French occupation.

---

[72] Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 69.
[73] Thompson, *No Exit*, p. 47.

Westmoreland realized the importance of denying the North Vietnamese access to rural populations that were ripe for recruitment during the initial phases of the insurgency, and who were of the greatest importance during the massive uprising that would occur in a successful revolution:

> In Phase One, the insurgents remain on the defensive but work to establish control of the population and conduct terrorist and guerrilla operations. In Phase Two, regular military forces are formed, guerrilla attacks increased, and isolated government forces engaged. In the climactic Phase Three, large insurgent military units go on the offensive to defeat the government's large units and to establish full control of the population. A peculiarly Vietnamese aspect of the final stage is the *khoi nghai*, the general uprising, wherein the people theoretically arise and overthrow the government.[74]

Giap described the three phases of a revolution against the French and American Armies as crucial steps necessary to develop a long-term revolutionary war. These stages included "stage of contention, stage of equilibrium and stage of counter-offensive,"[75] and proved to be a modification of previous strategies regarding revolutionary warfare. Each phase was a stepping-stone toward the next phase and each had a specific purpose in the revolution:

> Phase one is concerned with cadre organization, defensive actions, and survival when the enemy has decisive military superiority; phase two is the period of active guerrilla warfare (great mobility, intelligence work, and the use of surprise attack and dispersal tactics); phase three begins at that stage when the enemy's forces have lost their decisive superiority and the Party's armed forces are sufficiently strong to initiate a general revolutionary offensive.[76]

Expanding on these principles, Giap characterized the communist insurgency in Vietnam by three distinct, yet interconnected, levels of warfare to achieve its goals. These levels were guerrilla warfare, mobile warfare, and positional (or conventional) warfare. In revolutionary

---

[74] Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 67. Italics added.
[75] Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War People's Army*, pp. 46-47.
[76] Frank N. Trager, *Why Viet Nam?*, p. 71.

warfare Giap believed the offensive stage of the war to be the most important, yet it was dependent on success in the defensive stage of the war:

> In all wars, the activities of the armed forces are either offensive or defensive. A revolutionary war also uses both these forms but regards offensive activities as the most essential. As a result of concrete practice of revolutionary armed struggle, our military art has created original forms of struggle: *guerrilla warfare*, *mobile warfare*, and *positional warfare*. All these forms, in offensive and defensive operations, can raise to the highest degree the determination of the people's armed forces to wipe out the enemy, to defeat what is strong with what is weak, that is, their determination to carry out a thorough revolution . . . .[77]

Giap foresaw such stages developing after years of engaging the government with guerilla warfare tactics and productive insurgency. His belief centered on the fact that the military presence of both the French and American forces was so great that, following a build-up of such forces, a general offensive would not be enough to win the war. Rather, Giap believed success lay in the application of guerrilla warfare that would lead to mobile warfare and eventual victory:

> At variance with other countries which waged revolutionary wars, Viet Nam, in the first years of its struggle, did not and could not engage in pitched battles. It had to rest content with guerilla warfare. At the cost of thousands of difficulties and countless sacrifices, this guerilla war developed progressively into a form of mobile war that daily increased in scale. While retaining certain characteristics of guerilla war, it involved regular campaigns with greater attacks on fortified positions . . . . People's war, long-term war, guerilla warfare developing step-by-step into mobile warfare, such are the most valuable lessons of the war of liberation in Viet Nam.[78]

Giap instituted a systematic process that required patience supported by strategically sound decision-making. As he prudently asked, "Is the enemy strong? One avoids him. Is he weak? One attacks him."[79] He called for a focused attack on the enemy once he is weak. "Having a strong knowledge of local geography, [we must] keep a firm hold on the enemy situation, hitting

---

[77] Marvin E. Gettleman, Jane Franklin, Marilyn Young, and H. Bruce Franklin, *Vietnam and America: A Documented History*, p. 199. Italics added.
[78] Giap, *People's War People's Army*, p. 49.
[79] Ibid., p. 48.

him accurately and, furthermore, attacking him as soon as he arrives in any given place. We must erode, annihilate, disperse, and [harass] the enemy everywhere, creating conditions for mobile forces to launch concentrated blows to annihilate him wherever his gaps are exposed."[80] The American intelligence community realized the VC would use a mobile warfare strategy enforced by small unit engagements at various times and places in Vietnam. Such tactics were expected and did not indicate the capabilities or lack of logistical power by VC guerrillas. "Widespread small-unit actions do not necessarily mean that the Viet Cong are on the defensive any more than a series of battalion-size operations necessarily heralds the advent of positional war. Each type of action is an integral part of the strategy known as 'mobile warfare'—essentially a war of attrition."[81]

The guerrilla warfare stage lasted from 1960 to 1964 in Vietnam. Communism and the indoctrination of leaders such as Mao Tse-tung heavily influenced this phase. Mao stated the strategy of guerrilla warfare was to "pit man against man," but the tactics employed by guerrilla soldiers were to "pit ten men against one man."[82] He believed in the prudence of building a strong base of support and then expanding this base of support with action:

> In the next phase, direct action assumes an ever-increasing importance. Acts of sabotage and terrorism multiply; collaborationists and "reactionary elements" were liquidated. Attacks were made on vulnerable military and police outposts; weak columns were ambushed. The primary purpose of these operations is to procure arms, ammunition, and other essential material, particularly medical supplies and radios. As the growing guerrilla force becomes better equipped and its capabilities improve, political agents proceed with indoctrination of the inhabitants of peripheral districts soon to be absorbed into the expanding "liberated" area.[83]

---

[80] Giap, *Banner of People's War*, p. 34.
[81] Central Intelligence Agency, memorandum, 11 January 1963, www.ddrs.psmedia.com, p. 3.
[82] Thompson, *No Exit*, p. 47.
[83] Samuel B. Griffith, *Mao Tse-tung on Guerrilla Warfare*, p. 21.

This was the offensive stage in successful operation. "Inhabitants of the periphery" drifted toward the insurgency which promised liberation, and uprisings supported the general offensive. The VC sought to establish a flow of men, supplies, and weapons from the North to the South. As an offensive operation occurred, every military or terrorist act became valuable to the cause:

> On the tactical level, the thrust of the VC insurgent effort clung to the doctrine that the purpose of a battle is not necessarily to win it, but simply to fight it. Every strike that levels a village or cuts a road or kills innocent civilians contributes to the ultimate victory even if the military engagement is lost—even if the guerrillas lose both ground and men. For all such military operations, by their very nature and destructiveness, alienate the people among whom they occur.[84]

As villages became military strike zones, the alienation of the rural population from the counterinsurgents progressed until many turned into VC sympathizers. Along the periphery, the insurgency found momentum, and shifted the movement toward the general offensive.

The variables of time, space, and cost affect the outcome of military confrontation. In Vietnam, these aspects played a role in deciding the war. Time in the context of Vietnam and pacification required patience on each side in realizing its goals. The VC placed a premium on patience in the battlefield. The benefit is that the movement does not proceed until the right moment. The VC practiced this doctrine in everyday operations. They were prepared to wait until the conditions for attack or movement were ideal. The Americans, on the other hand, conducted operations in every type of weather and at every hour of the day. Impatience on behalf of the Americans led to mistakes and a greater haphazardness with the way in which the pace of the war progressed. This left them more vulnerable to the VC. Time allowed the VC to exploit their opportunities:

---

[84] Cecil B. Currey, *Self-Destruction: The Disintegration and Decay of the United States Army During the Vietnam Era*, pp. 60-61.

> An insurgent movement must be capable of advancing when the trends of world events or circumstances within the threatened country were favorable, or of lying low or even taking "one step backward" if trends were unfavorable. It is part of the doctrine of People's Revolutionary War that victory is inevitable, even if it takes half a century. Time and patience endow them with endurance. From the beginning all were indoctrinated with the prospect of a long protracted war so that, even if things go wrong for a period, problems of morale and resolution were reduced to proportions which the discipline and self-criticism sessions of the movement can handle without great difficulty.[85]

The North Vietnamese chose the time and the place to confront the enemy on the battlefield. The strategy embraced by their leaders dictated that battles were chosen based on the probability of success. Conversely, in Vietnam the American military did not incorporate prudence in choosing their battles. The U.S. Army looked to confront the enemy openly at all possible opportunities regardless of the probability of victory.

The second factor affecting war was the "space" of the war. Space incorporated the physical boundaries or territory involved in the war, and the people and villages within this territory. If an insurgency was confined to one area of space within the country then it would be easy to identify this segment and dispose of the threat. If, however, the revolutionary movement was able to permeate all sections of the society, then the elements of that movement would be unable to be easily identified and destroyed. The VC made use of the four golden rules of guerrilla warfare established by Mao Tse-tung. These rules stated:

1. When the enemy advances – we retreat.
2. When the enemy halts – we harass.
3. When the enemy avoids battle – we attack.
4. When the enemy retreats – we follow.

> To put these rules successfully into practice certain conditions must be present and these are basically space, population, external support and a secure supply line. The first condition, that of space, is essential to enable the guerrillas to "retreat when the enemy advances", [sic] where Government troops cannot easily

[85] Thompson, *No Exit*, p. 48.

> follow. This enables the guerrillas to observe the first principle of guerrilla warfare, "to preserve oneself."[86]

Westmoreland described a war that expands the space (i.e. territorial boundaries) as an "area war." In Vietnam, it was difficult to measure the effectiveness of military operations based on reports and statistics, and, therefore, it was nearly impossible to assess the military situation of the Allies:

> In an "area war," as the war in Vietnam was, there were no front lines to provide a gauge of progress. Reading every day of American troops fighting and winning, hearing pronouncements by national leaders that we were making steady progress, people unaware of how few American troops were actually engaged tended to see an early end that under the circumstances could not be. Even with large forces, a war of attrition can never be concluded swiftly.[87]

In Vietnam, the VC attempted to invade all elements of society by introducing Communist re-education camps, creating political parties, and reaching out to members of student organizations. In the build-up phase of the revolution the insurgent party sought to increase control of targeted regions in the South. The difference between the VC and the Americans lies within the concept of the importance of space. The Americans viewed a successful operation in terms of how much space they were able to take militarily. However, even when successful, the space conquered did not remain under their control. It only meant that the VC could break camp and relocate as necessity dictated. The VC viewed space in a much different way. Space was not how much territory one controlled, but how much territory one affected. If the VC convinced American military leaders to concentrate a greater number of men and resources on the security of one base or village, they would face fewer men and less firepower somewhere else. The greatest problem American leaders often faced was second-

---

[86] Edgar O'Ballance, *The Wars in Vietnam: 1954-1973*, pp. 178-179.
[87] Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 199.

guessing VC strategy. American leaders were not able to pinpoint military targets the VC might attack or identify the areas they would try to infiltrate. The VC believed in extending their control by first infiltrating the villages and then moving towards the cities in South Vietnam. They operated on a concept taken from the doctrine of Mao Tse-tung. By "using the villages to encircle the towns,"[88] the VC affected the space of the war, and more importantly, the space of the enemy. When U.S. planes began to bomb North Vietnam, and U.S. troops committed to the South, the space of the war greatly expanded, thereby increasing the VC advantage:

> In terms of space this had a number of effects. First, it spread the war into North Vietnam and brought into play all the population of the North instead of only those being infiltrated into the South. All could now make a direct contribution to the war. Secondly, within the South, the additional strength provided by American combat troops meant that the space already gained would have to be held by fighting and that the American effort would have to be neutralized if further space was to be gained. Finally, the war, which up to date had not made a great impact on men's minds outside Vietnam, became one of decisive world importance. World-wide controversy was kindled and dissent within the United States itself became one of the vital factors in the strategy.[89]

In expanding the space of the war, American leaders believed they held the advantage in terms of firepower and manpower. Bombing campaigns into North Vietnam and secretly into Cambodia were not effective in diminishing the morale of the enemy. Rather, the bombings seemed to produce the opposite effect:

> Over the past ten years, the U.S. imperialists and their henchmen have carried out an extremely ruthless war and have caused much grief to our compatriots in South Viet-Nam. Over the past few months, they have frenziedly expanded the war to North Viet-Nam. In defiance of the 1954 Geneva Agreements and international law, they have sent hundreds of aircraft and dozens of warships to bomb and strafe North Viet-Nam repeatedly. Laying bare themselves their piratical face, the U.S. aggressors are blatantly encroaching upon our country. They hope that by resorting to the force of weapons they can compel our 30 million compatriots to

---

[88] Thompson, *No Exit*, p. 49.
[89] Ibid., p. 50.

> become their slaves. But they are grossly mistaken. They will certainly meet with ignominious defeat.[90]

The VC remained determined to drive the Western power from their home. The expansion of space held tremendous strategical importance to the VC and did not produce the military effect desired by the Americans:

> In considering space, therefore, it should not be regarded only from the aspect of holding ground as in positional warfare. Space is held in People's Revolutionary War if freedom of movement over a wide area is obtained, together with a limited control over the population living in it, and if a military threat is maintained over a much wider area, preferably the whole country, so that the government does not feel secure anywhere. If the war can be further spread outside the threatened country, both from the point of view of territory and people, it is to the advantage of the insurgent.[91]

The VC maintained freedom of movement over vast regions in both the North and the South. Trails along the border of Cambodia and Vietnam allowed the NVA to infiltrate from a neutral country. Underground tunnels traveled for miles through NVA held territory, and jungle trails connected the North and South. The VC threatened large regions in the South with a military threat. The sense of security felt by the Americans was false considering the always-present possibility of a surprise attack by the VC. The U.S. military focused on held territory and positional strategies not realizing that the key to winning the war lay in teaching the South Vietnamese how to improve internal security:

> Judged by the results of the war, the basic mistake. . . .was that we saw their guerrilla operations as a strategy in itself. Because we saw it as a strategy, we attempted to understand it in terms of "people's war" theories of Mao Tse-tung, and devised elaborate theories of counter-insurgency. We attempted to counter it by using such models as the British model in Malaysia. These theories and models had some relevance for the government of South Vietnam which ultimately had to neutralize the internal threat to its existence, but they had only secondary relevance to the United States. Ironically, we had seen this clearly in

---

[90] Minh, *On Revolution*, p. 359.
[91] Thompson, *No Exit*, p. 51.

> Korea. While we could protect them from external attack, internal security was a problem only they could solve.[92]

The third element that affected every battle was cost. In every conflict, there are always costs associated with manipulating resources to achieve victory. For both sides involved this cost included human lives and material resources. In order to maintain control over space and time, one must sacrifice human lives and resources. Heavy casualty rates existed on both sides of the Vietnam conflict. Many soldiers died in countless battles fought over relatively small geographical areas. For the VC, strategy called for maintaining offensive operations, whatever the cost, in hopes of winning a psychological and political victory. For the U.S., the questions arose of where to concentrate its resources, and whether to use manpower in offensive operations or whether to use it for defensive purposes:

> By maintaining the offensive and keeping the strategic initiative Hanoi presented the United States with the constant and unsolvable military dilemma of choosing between concentrating for offensive operations and dispersing for the defense of vulnerable targets. It was also Hanoi's aim to entice the Americans into conducting operations which were only tactically offensive and which, however successful, could not possibly regain the strategic initiative. This continually confronted the Americans with a situation where there was a need for more troops but where a further build-up could only have more damaging political consequences in South Vietnam, the United States and the world.[93]

The VC gained political victory by maintaining strategic ground and forcing the opposition to "up the ante." U.S. military leaders advocated an increase in pressure and a loosening of congressional restraints: "Graduated pressure depended on the assumption that the limited application of force would compel the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table and exact from them a favorable diplomatic settlement. There was no need to pursue military victory because negotiations would achieve the same political objectives with only the threat of more severe

---

[92] Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*, pp. 79-80.
[93] Thompson, *No Exit*, p. 56.

military action."[94] As the bombing and accompanying defoliage increased, the will and determination of the North Vietnamese increased as well:

> Inescapably, the more punishment North Vietnam was willing to take, the more power the United States was willing to use. The more power the United States used, the less difference it made how much more power it would use, for beyond a certain point, degrees of destructiveness begin to lose their meaning . . . . This was the vicious cycle which had been set in motion by transferring the main arena of the war from South to North Vietnam and by deciding to use bombing to impose the will of the United States on North Vietnam.[95]

The VC held the advantage in this respect. Decisions by American leaders were out of fear for security and military positioning, and yet they were never able to achieve the security they felt they needed to swing the balance in their favor. The VC kept the U.S. military in a passive strategic position: "Our *tactical offensives* in "search and destroy" operations in South Vietnam masked the fact that in reality we had committed ourselves and our South Vietnamese Allies to just such a *passive strategic defense.* As we have seen, the alternative was an *active* strategic defense to deny North Vietnamese infiltration and isolate the battlefield."[96]

With the U.S. in such a position, the VC influenced the balance of the war by disrupting the equilibrium between the forces in the North and South. American soldiers often fought the battles for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) soldiers, thereby wasting American resources on another's battle. This produced heavy casualties among the NVA, but these casualties were an acceptable result of achieving political goals. The VC escalated their efforts in the war as the Allies did. No matter what losses the VC suffered, they remained resilient in their dedication to the struggle.

---

[94] H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, The Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the lies that led to Vietnam*, p. 94.
[95] Theodore Draper, *Abuse of Power*, p. 213.
[96] Summers, *On Strategy*, p. 156. Italics added.

CHAPTER III: ALLIED PACIFICATION EFFORTS

Pacification began as a national initiative to improve economic, health, and educational conditions within South Vietnam. Early programs aimed to increase nationalistic sentiments toward the Government of Vietnam (GVN) in hopes of settling unrest and thwarting the revolutionary movement. When the Viet Cong (VC) began to increase in numbers throughout the countryside the focus began to shift toward improving the security of hamlets. The Allies instituted early security based programs such as the agroville and strategic hamlet programs with the intent of keeping the VC out of the villages. When such attempts proved futile, the U.S. civilian and military organizations such as the Military Assistance Command in Vietnam (MACV) and the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) structures worked to establish pacification as a primary goal in South Vietnam and to drive the VC from the rural areas in the South.

Early efforts at pacification by the Diem government sought to increase government control in the countryside. "Pacification was designed to achieve three basic objectives: (1) to end the war and restore peace; (2) to develop democracy; and (3) to reform society."[1] Diem's attempts at pacification began in 1959 with the agroville program. The program called for the relocation of South Vietnamese peasants into secure rural areas that served as agricultural communities, hence agrovilles. Diem's program attempted to end the kidnapping and assassination of rural village officials, and to improve education, medical services, social services, and electricity while providing new training programs in advanced agricultural techniques to the relocated

---

[1] Dinh Tho, *Pacification*, p. 19.

villagers. Others, however, viewed the relocation programs as a means to force the government's will upon the people. "'Relocation' consists of destroying the fabric of rural society, using every military means possible to uproot the people and lay waste their homes for the purpose of creating a captive mass of people with their spirits broken in the hope of facilitating easier penetration with the new ideology."[2] "Theoretically designed to provide a range of new social services and other amenities to the two to three thousand peasants who were required to live in them, these fortified concentrations became ongoing symbols of peasant hatred for Diem's government."[3] Coercive tactics used by the Diem regime to effect the relocation of peasant populations hindered the success of the agroville program:

> The placing of local peasants who were or might become anti-RVN where they could be neutralized was far different and implied varying degrees of coercion, and small efforts along this line were attempted in early 1959, culminating in the *agroville* program of July 1959. Had the half a million or more peasants assigned to move cooperated, a series of strategically placed farm communities organized on military lines would have extended from the North to Saigon, but peasants refused to build these *agrovilles*, and the program instead became the focus of peasant resistance.[4]

Friction between the peasant population and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) government of Diem led to an early dismantling of the agroville initiative. The agroville program was unsuccessful due to the establishment of a "clumsy, dishonest administration serving Diem and to the physical hardship of peasants being to far from their fields and the psychological wrench of being separated from ancestral homes and burial plots."[5] For the Vietnamese farmer ancestral lands represented more than a way of life. The land was the spiritual basis for all life:

---

[2] Philip Jones Griffiths, *Vietnam Inc.*, p. 76.
[3] George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam*, p. 100.
[4] Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience*, pp. 95-96. Italics added.
[5] Neil Sheehan, Hedrick Smith, E. W. Kenworthy, and Fox Butterfield, *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 129.

> In the old ideographic language of Vietnam, the word *xa*, which Westerners translate as "village" or "village community," had as its roots the Chinese characters signifying "land," "people," and "sacred." These three ideas were joined inseparably, for the Vietnamese religion rested at every point on the particular social and economic system of the village . . . . They believed that if a man moved off his land and out of the gates of the village, he left his soul behind him, buried in the earth with the bones of his ancestors.[6]

The forced relocation from ancestral lands was a major reason the agroville program failed. The reality of the situation peasants faced once relocated to an agroville was similar to an internment camp with forced labor:

> The peasants resented the uprooting, particularly the move to undeveloped locations sometimes far from their rice paddies and gardens. They were also incensed at having to provide the labor to construct communal facilities . . . . The peasants also had to build their own houses, and the 300 piasters provided by the government were rarely sufficient to cover costs. The resentment occasioned by the disruption facilitated Viet Cong support and recruiting. Far from improving security, the agrovilles produced such an increased tempo of Viet Cong countermeasures that by early 1961 the program had virtually ground to a halt.[7]

Diem failed with the agroville initiative and remained isolated from the people of South Vietnam. The government of Diem became nothing more than an oppressive dictatorship to many. "By his brazenly favoring Vietnam's Catholic minority with respect to political patronage and basic freedoms, the larger Buddhist population soon came to hate Diem. Diem's authoritarian techniques included the abolition of all opposing political parties, strictly enforced press censorship, and brutal repression of the Buddhists."[8] Diem seemed to separate himself from the people he was supposed to represent. "Diem was alien to the bureaucracy of French sycophants and hangers-on, alien to the Bao Dai monarchists, alien to the sects and to some extent to the Buddhists, alien to the remnant nationalist organizations, and, of course, alien to the

---

[6] FitzGerald, *Fire In The Lake*, pp. 143-144. Italics added.
[7] Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years—The U.S. Army in Vietnam*, p. 333.
[8] Larry Berman, *Planning A Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam*, p. 15.

Communists. He had no party faithful, no corps of loyal political cadres, no trusted organization. Until the army opted for him he had no means of enforcing a governmental order."[9]

The VC successfully carried out propaganda attacks on the South Vietnamese government under Diem. U.S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge asked General Ed Lansdale to serve as an "executive agent" between the U.S. and South Vietnamese officials to improve the pacification effort.[10] As a Colonel, Lansdale served in the Office of Strategic Services in WWII and helped to defeat the Huk Rebellion in the Philippines, and later in 1954 Lansdale helped set up the Saigon Military Mission in Vietnam to create dissent between the Viet Minh and China during the Viet Minh War.[11] As Lansdale describes in *In the Midst of Wars,* he noticed a fundamental difference in military training and indoctrination between the Allies and the North Vietnamese:

> [T]he best Vietminh teams were composed of personnel trained for political-military action in an isolated school, where their final examination was conducted personally, individual by individual, by Ho chi Minh himself—similar to what Mao Tse-tung had done in China. This personal involvement in turning out cold war professionals would be an alien concept to any of the Western leaders I know, none of whom had any real familiarity with the daily actions on cold war battlegrounds . . . . In this respect the Communists had the edge over us. Their leaders asked their field lieutenants to do tasks which they themselves had performed.[12]

In early 1961, members of the U.S. Country Team Staff Committee comprised of officers from four U.S. foreign agencies and the U.S. embassy, provided "indispensable recommendations" to the Government of Vietnam (GVN) regarding pacification policy. During a visit to Vietnam, General Lansdale delivered a basic counterinsurgency plan based on

---

[9] Pike, *Viet Cong*, p. 57.
[10] Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds*, p. 67.
[11] Karnow, *Vietnam*, pp. 220-221.
[12] Edward G. Lansdale, *In The Midst of Wars,* p. 161.

recommendations of the committee that focused on the weakening of Diem's rule by VC propagandists:

> Further aggravating many of the government's problems is the active and partly successful campaign of the Viet Cong to discredit President Diem and weaken the government's authority through political subversion, as well as through military action. Among other factors making this possible is the void between the GVN and its people which stems from the failure of the GVN to communicate understandably with the population and, in reverse, the lack of an effective mechanism whereby the people can in their terms communicate with the GVN.[13]

Large communication gaps existed between the GVN and the people due to a lack of social understanding: "All the problems between the GVN and the Vietnamese people were problems of *social relationships*, questions of class structure, culture, and political power; none of these problems were solvable by either the production of death or the production and distribution of commodities."[14] Diem's government was a corrupt organization, and his plan for dislocating rural villagers from their ancestral homelands further alienated his people from him.

In 1961, Diem again tried to improve security in the countryside by launching the strategic hamlet program. The idea for the initiative came from Sir Robert Thompson, who served as the head of the British Advisory Mission to Vietnam, and drew upon his experiences with similar circumstances in Malaysia. Thompson's theory incorporated the building of a backbone of political support for the program, and forcing the government to provide genuine protection to the villages. Ngo Dinh Nhu, the brother of Diem and leader of the Can Lao Nhan Vi Dang, or Personalist Labor Party,[15] was in charge of the strategic hamlet program:

---

[13] United States, Department of State, "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, volume I: Basic Counterinsurgency Plan for Vietnam," p. 1. www.state.gov.
[14] James W. Gibson, *The Perfect War: The War We Couldn't Lose and How We Did Lose*, p. 275. Italics added.
[15] Karnow, *Vietnam*, p. 230. Members of the Can Lao Nhan Vi Dang, many of them Catholic, held key positions in the government of South Vietnam (GVN).

> Instead of surrounding hamlets with security forces, as Thompson proposed, Diem and Nhu devised the strategic hamlet program with a different emphasis—security would begin within hamlets. Fortified hamlets would protect the people. Nhu, who directed the program, established three goals for it. First, the government would tie the people in fortified hamlets into a communications network, providing them with local defense forces to ward off guerrilla raids and stationing reaction forces nearby in case of emergency. Second, the program would strive to unite the people and involve them in governmental affairs. Third, the program would improve living standards.[16]

By August 1962, the government of South Vietnam declared that over 2,500 of these hamlets were completed, and an additional 2,500 under construction.[17] GVN officials claimed that this figure "represents an increase of 1,300 since January 1962, indicating a monthly construction rate of something over 200. GVN sources claim that 7,000 were scheduled for completion by the end of the year."[18] Nhu assumed full responsibility for the program and emphasized the importance of strengthening government politics in the village. Improvements in the living conditions included health reforms and educational advancements: "In health and education, the effort concentrated on eliminating illiteracy, making primary and secondary education available to the rural population, providing free medical care and improving sanitation. Such programs as the construction of classrooms, dispensaries, maternity wards, and the recruiting and training of teachers, nurses, technicians, were undertaken as pacification progressed."[19]

Villages had to rely on an internal security structure and a political core of leadership to combat guerrilla attacks. The hamlet program, designed to combat VC efforts to control the rural areas in South Vietnam, focused on the internal problems within the village. The Americans believed that "although a secure peasantry is essential to full mobilization of

---

[16] Hunt, *Pacification*, p. 21.
[17] Sheehan, Smith, Kenworthy, and Butterfield, *The Pentagon Papers*, p. 129.
[18] Central Intelligence Agency confidential report, 16 July 1962, www.ddrs.psmedia.com, p. 4.
[19] Dinh Tho, *Pacification*, p. 7.

the populace in support of the government, security and political action must go hand-in-hand—the one complements the other, and in some cases political action can precede, and contribute to, the attainment of security."[20] Pacification in the strategic hamlet program assumed many of the same characteristics of the VC villages in terms of organization. The strategic hamlet advisers lived among the villagers and provided village security round-the-clock. The advisers and the villagers relied on cooperation for security. Colonel John H. Cushman described his experience with hamlet security in training the ARVN 21st Infantry Division:

> We were instructed to reduce outpost liabilities and generate mobile forces from among the static units committed to manning these outposts. We were to use guerrilla tactics against the Viet Cong. Taking a leaf from the insurgent's book, our pacifying forces were to identify themselves closely with the people they were protecting. They were to "live among the people" . . . . We would use the "oil spot expansion concept," gradually extending our control outward from areas that were not under our control.[21]

The "oil spot" concept allowed for success in one village hamlet to extend outwards toward other hamlets located near enemy occupied areas in Vietnam. In combating the insurgent forces, the counterinsurgents sought to employ the very tactics and strategies the VC practiced. U.S. and ARVN commanders believed that a successful combination of village security and VC anti-infrastructure based programs would lead to an expansion of secure regions:

> We were convinced that, if we worked steadily, in due time the interaction of pacification groups, people, and village and hamlet officials would result in success. Hamlet militia would be trained in hamlet defense, the hamlets would be organized, the VC understructure would be eliminated from the area, and the legitimate government would be firmly rooted and growing in the hamlets. It was not clear to us exactly how this mysterious process called "pacification" would actually take place. We knew it was a subtle process of the mind—a psychological procedure not unlike the one experienced by a young man in winning the heart of his lady.[22]

---

[20] The White House, Memorandum for the President, 22 March 1965, www.ddrs.psmedia.com, p. 3.
[21] Cushman, "Pacification," p. 24.
[22] Ibid., p. 27.

Population studies conducted during this period (1962-1963) for the purpose of determining how much control each side had over the rural areas of Vietnam reported a significantly greater percentage of the villages studied under the effective control of the government of Vietnam (GVN). Such early reports led observers to conclude that early efforts at establishing village security appeared to be working. However, many of these figures in certain regions were suspect. "The reporting was oversimplified and of poor quality and exaggerated the amount of security that actually existed in the countryside. For example, after the death of President Ngo Dinh Diem in November 1963, the number of 'secure' hamlets in Long An Province was revised downward from over 200 to about ten."[23]

Although the American military and civilian command supported the strategic hamlet initiative, the program had logistical and fundamental shortcomings. "Many hamlets were improperly constructed and inadequately defended, and little attention was given to the psychological, sociological and economic preparation of the populace, or to the proper qualification of administrative personnel, with the result that a basically sound idea got off to a weak start."[24] Village defenses sometimes consisted of "weakly constructed bamboo stakes," and the weapons of some cadre guard units were "eight-foot poles with ropes used for hitting VC cadres and tying them up."[25] The manner in which the GVN implemented the strategic hamlet program widened the gap of trust between the villagers and the GVN officials in Saigon. The program forced the relocation of millions of peasants (an estimated 4.3 million or 33.3% of the population by the end of September 1962).[26] "But the burning of homes and fields, often

---

[23] Thomas C. Thayer, *War Without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam*, p. 137.
[24] Department of State, "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, volume II, Subject: Viet Cong Attacks on Strategic Hamlets," p. 1. www.state.gov.
[25] Hunt, *Pacification*, p. 22.
[26] Karnow, *Vietnam*, p. 256.

involved in these measures, only increased the people's hostility and resentment."[27] Peasants objected to being forced to leave villages containing ancestral graves, and there was nothing in the program, such as meaningful land reform, [that] bound the peasants to the hamlets or to the South Vietnamese government.[28] The program, intended to keep the VC out of the villages, did little to dissuade the VC from influencing the villager's loyalties:

> [T]he government tried to push it too far and too fast. In the interest of projecting itself into as many places as possible, it vastly overextended itself and insisted on creating strategic hamlets, replete with barbed wire, moats, and so on, where no real security existed. As a result, the Vietcong invariably moved in quickly and wrecked or burned out the hamlets, or applied the old Communist tactic of boring from within and sowing dissension.[29]

Communist agents attempted to thwart the strategic hamlet program with a campaign of propaganda regarding the program and then with armed attacks on hamlet fortifications and communication lines. "Only about one third of the hamlets had armed defense elements. The VC exploited this condition, combining armed attacks with intensive propaganda, sabotage, and terrorist activities designed both to shake the confidence of inhabitants in inadequately supported hamlets and to try to demonstrate the continuing insecurity of the populace even inside protected ones."[30] Although the hamlet program achieved moderate success in the later years of the war, early attempts at providing rural security failed to address the issues affecting the villages at that time.

In addition to the strategic hamlet program, Diem implemented two additional pacification-based policies. The Chieu Hoi program was an initiative that offered clemency to any NVA soldier or VC affiliate who agreed to lay down their weapons and join the Allies. Chieu Hoi

---

[27] Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, p. 57; Sheehan, et al., *Pentagon Papers*, p.131.
[28] Sanford Wexler, *The Vietnam War: An Eyewitness History*, p. 54.
[29] Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution: The U.S. in Vietnam, 1946-1966*, p. 167.
[30] Central Intelligence Agency, 17 January 1964, www.ddrs.psmedia.com, p. 9.

reception centers openly encouraged Communist soldiers to defect. "The deserter from the Vietcong is first taken to a camp, where he stays in the main for about two months. In this camp he is first interrogated by a group of specialists: Why did he join the Vietcong? What were his activities while with them? Why has he now decided to leave them? It is natural that an important role in this stage is given to intelligence information – which is gleaned and carefully collated."[31] The program, however, achieved less success than it could have achieved due to a lack of financing and increased attacks against Chieu Hoi centers. In 1963, the program claimed to contribute to the defection of 11,000 VC with an additional 5,000 conversions the following year.[32] These numbers were questionable because many of the "converts" eventually rejoined the VC. In addition, a poor record-keeping system did not allow defectors to prove their new loyalty, as many were simply VC agents attempting to undermine the system by feigning conversion, resting in a Chieu Hoi center, and then re-circulating back into the VC network. In spite of such criticism, the Allies declared Chieu Hoi a successful program during the war. "During a decade of implementation, from 1963 to 1973, the *Chieu Hoi* program produced impressive results; 159,741 enemy troops and cadre rallied to the GVN cause (97,696 military personnel; 45,173 political cadre; and 16,872 others)."[33]

In addition to Chieu Hoi, the Diem government attempted to create a national police force accompanied by an intelligence organization, the goal of which was to capture members of the VC infrastructure (VCI). A special police branch, created to maintain internal security and gather intelligence data against VC agents, operated in conjunction with anti-infrastructure agencies. A police combat unit struggled against heavily armed VC terrorists, and the regular

---

[31] Peter Sager, *Report from Vietnam*, p. 37.
[32] Hunt, *Pacification*, p. 23.
[33] Dinh Tho, *Pacification*, p. 134. Italics added.

police force maintained checkpoints to disrupt the flow of VC supplies and personnel, and to make criminal arrests of suspected VC agents. The national police force would be primarily responsible for attacking the VCI:

> In counterinsurgency, priority in intelligence gathering is focused on the insurgents' infrastructure, since only by eliminating the roots of the insurgency can local security forces truly protect the people from a resurgence of enemy activity from within. Traditional counterinsurgency doctrine accords the role of attacking the insurgent infrastructure to the national police. It is their work in the towns and villages that, ideally, leads to the elimination of insurgent cells among the people. Once this is accomplished, guerrillas in the area are denied information, and the people can cooperate with the government without fear of insurgent reprisals.[34]

The Central Intelligence Agency station in Saigon, then headed by William Colby, assisted the Diem regime in setting up a South Vietnamese Central Intelligence Office (CIO) with a primary mission of gathering intelligence, infiltrating the VCI, and monitoring the activity of enemy movements in the countryside. The CIO, however, encountered numerous budgetary constraints, a lack of sharing of intelligence information, and problems in training personnel qualified for intelligence work. As Colby points out in *Lost Victory*, much of the problem was a result of the separate Allied intelligence organizations failing to share information with each other. "Each acted as a separate fiefdom, however, so that information known to one was zealously guarded and used for its own purposes and only rarely shared with others."[35]

Popular support for Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu reached an all-time low after a multitude of successive failures of Pacification efforts. In November 1963, the Diem regime fell victim to a coup. While U.S. forces did not actively participate in the coup against Diem and his brother, the administration encouraged the military plotters who executed

---

[34] Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam*, p. 227.
[35] William Colby, *Lost Victory*, p. 218.

it. As Robert McNamara reflected, the Diem coup generated instability in the South during the Vietnam war. "In retrospect, the most shocking thing was that we faced an utter political vacuum in South Vietnam and had no basis for proceeding on any course compatible with U.S. objectives."[36] Pacification now had to seek support from an organization composed of a joint military-civilian command structure, and this command structure had to rely on a successor for Diem who could provide stability within a disintegrating political structure.

By 1965, all attempts at pacification by the government of South Vietnam had been unsuccessful. Political instability followed the overthrow of Diem's regime, and the pacification effort searched for a more stable American support structure for guidance. U.S. Special Forces teams drafted counterinsurgency plans that included "a phased, and combined military-civil counterinsurgency effort designed to accomplish the following objectives: (a) destroy the Viet Cong and dictate a secure environment; (b) establish firm government control over the population; and (c) enlist the population's active and willing support of, and participation in the government programs."[37] U.S. forces also aimed to dismantle the enemy infrastructure with clandestine operations. "In addition to stepping up the tempo of its tactical operations, the government followed through on other measures to improve its military posture. New tactics emphasizing ambushes, night patrols, and widespread small-unit actions were instituted."[38] South Vietnamese leaders answered the call for security with new programs designed to improve conditions in the countryside. One notable attempt to renew the pacification effort occurred in 1966 under the leadership of Major General Nguyen Duc Thang. General Thang was the current secretary general of the Central Revolutionary Development Council, an organization that served

---

[36] Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, p. 85.
[37] Department of Defense, 1 January 1965, www.ddrs.psmedia.com, p. 1.
[38] Central Intelligence Agency, 17 January 1964, www.ddrs.psmedia.com, p. 9.

much like a cabinet to the South Vietnamese President. Thang, who had a great deal of power over pacification in this role, hoped to strengthen the cadre support teams by uniting them under one front, the Revolutionary Development Cadre, known as the RD program. Under this new program, cadres had a multitude of responsibilities for village security and development:

> In each hamlet the cadres were assigned a staggering array of tasks: restore local elected government, assist in community self-help or government-subsidized development projects (such as repairing roads, buildings, and bridges), provide medical treatment to the ill, and aid farmers in getting credit. Teams would also issue identification cards to citizens, recruit people for the armed forces, organize and train self-defense groups, uncover and arrest members of the Viet Cong, and conduct political rallies.[39]

Unfortunately, the RD program was no more successful than the strategic hamlets. Increased armed attacks on villages and increased efforts to undermine the cadre support structure through propaganda and intimidation crippled the program. Difficulty in recruiting suitable cadre and maintaining existing cadre members remained a major obstacle for the program:

> Revolutionary Development ran afoul of many of the problems that had frustrated earlier pacification programs. The creaking Saigon bureaucracy and poor coordination between Americans and Vietnamese hampered administration of the plan. It was impossible to recruit sufficient personnel in a country short of manpower, and less than half the cadres needed actually went into training. Candidates were trained on a mass-production basis for a mere three months and in most cases were inadequately prepared for the formidable task that lay ahead. Once in the field, the RD teams were frustrated by local officials who regarded them as a threat. Funds promised for many projects never reached their destination. Having seen so many other programs come and go, the villagers greeted the arrivals with a mixture of apathy and caution. Because of the chronic manpower shortage, many cadres were often shifted to new areas before their work was completed, and any gains were quickly erased.[40]

---

[39] Hunt, *Pacification*, pp. 36-37.
[40] George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, p. 158.

With each successive failure in pacification efforts, the Regional and Popular Forces (RF/PF), a primarily civilian defense force created from the South Vietnamese Self-Defense Corps and trained by the U.S. Army and CIA, began losing the constant battle against insurgency:

> Even in the many places where the NLF was ready to work semilegally, the United States and the RVN had no political and social option for the masses, much less an organizational structure capable of co-opting the Revolution's reform program. Their alternative to the Revolution was population displacement, which generated a vast number of new problems for the NLF but even more for the United States and the RVN. Pacification in this context remained a chimera until late 1968, by which time the war's military, political, and economic consequences had destroyed whatever lingering hopes had existed for such puny efforts.[41]

Primary support of the pacification program generated from American military and civilian agencies. Rural development programs received support from U.S. military forces. "Within the first six months of 1966 alone, U.S. forces built 78 schools, 29 dispensaries, 43 bridges, and repaired 246 miles of rural road. In addition, a total of 12,860 tons of clothing, food, and medicine donated by the International Catholic Relief Service were distributed to the local population during military operations."[42]

In the civilian sector, the Office of Civil Operations (OCO) assumed responsibility for civil support of pacification in Vietnam. At the top of the OCO command structure was the U.S. ambassador to Vietnam. Directly below him was the Deputy Ambassador and Deputy for Revolutionary Development followed by the Information Office, the Director of Civil Operations and the Deputy Director of Civil Operations, and the Executive Secretariat. The Office of the Director of Civil Operations divided into: the Management Division (administrative) and the Plans and Evaluation Division (responsible for policy, concepts, strategy, plans, and programs

---

[41] Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, p. 238.
[42] Dinh Tho, *Pacification*, p. 65, a quote taken from General William C. Westmoreland, *Report on the War in Vietnam*: 1964-1968, Ground Operations, Appendix E, p. 239.

and for reporting and evaluating all pacification activities). At the operational level the OCO consisted of six separate divisions: the Refugee Division, the Psychological Division, the New Life Development Division (improvement of economic conditions in the villages), the RD Cadre Division, the *Chieu Hoi* Division (program for encouraging VC defections), and the Public Safety Division. Each of these divisions separately represented the OCO in one of four regions of Vietnam. Heading each region was a Director that oversaw Province Representatives. The OCO had nearly a thousand American civilians on staff and directed programs costing more than $128 million dollars.[43]

The OCO, responsible to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge and Deputy Ambassador William Porter, directed all civilian efforts at pacification within Saigon and surrounding provinces. American civilians employed in the various divisions reported to a chain of command headed by Porter. Typically, a single official reported to the OCO Director running operations in each region and corps. The OCO was to not last more than three months from its inception. U.S. leaders designed the program as a transitory organization until they could establish a more permanent office. "OCO once again reinforced the bifurcation of the military-civilian effort. This new office was supposed to coordinate the activities of all civilian operations in Vietnam and ensure their compliance to a new detailed national plan. But the director of OCO was not empowered to strip the civilian agencies of their independence—they continued receiving funds and direction from their Washington headquarters. Responsibility to manage pacification without the ability to directly control those who implemented the programs could only prove taxing."[44] As a result, most of the budgetary and planning oversight came from the CIA station

---

[43] Scoville, *Reorganizing for Pacification Support*, p. 44. Italics added.
[44] Michael A. Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam: The Marines and Revolutionary Warfare in I Corps, 1965-1972,* p. 117.

chief. It was difficult, therefore, to coordinate efforts between divisions and the OCO "had no visible effect on the war in the countryside, where the situation was ill-disposed to quick improvements."[45] Despite the appointment of strong leaders such as John Paul Vann (a former U.S. Army Colonel who continued to direct pacification efforts as a civilian) as a regional director, the OCO wasted too much time in appointing division leaders for an office with such a short life span. In addition, the OCO had to compete with the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) and the CIA for authority to direct pacification. The OCO was a program that would serve as a foundation for further military and civilian efforts. It did little to shift the focus away from a military solution to pacification:

> The root problems that the pacification program sought to overcome—insecurity and political indifference to the Saigon government in the countryside—were hardly amenable to quick fixes. The president and others recognized that. OCO consolidated civilian pacification support, but it could not really address the pivotal security question. That would have required added time to strengthen territorial forces and, most likely, more extensive involvement by American soldiers in clearing and holding populated areas. OCO failed to stem the inexorable drift toward military responsibility for pacification support.[46]

If pacification were to succeed, an organization that would combine civilian efforts with military security would be necessary. Such a program would have to rely on patience and compromise to achieve success in the countryside. The next logical step was to combine civilian and military resources:

> First, so intimately involved in pacification was every U.S. agency in Saigon, and so interwoven were civil and military tasks, that normal governmental coordination was inadequate. Second, the problem was simply too large and complex for the civilian agencies to handle alone. Third, pacification was failing for lack of adequate military security, and the military would take security more seriously if directly responsible for pacification.[47]

---

[45] Scoville, *Reorganizing for pacification support*, p. 46.
[46] Hunt, *Pacification*, p. 85.
[47] Scoville, *Reorganizing for Pacification Support*, p. 54.

CORDS developed because of President Johnson's desire to give the military greater authority in terms of the pacification efforts. CORDS formed in May 1967 under MACV Directive 10-12 as an initiative that now incorporated the joint efforts of the OCO and the U.S. military command (MACV):

> Crucially important was the integration of all military as well as civilian pacification-type programs under a single unified management. To cope with a problem of the magnitude that had developed by the middle 1960s in Vietnam, pacification had to be both a civil and a military process. The local security requirement had grown far beyond the capability of the police or paramilitary forces to meet. Given the massive military support required, it made good sense on the U.S. side to put the new unified U.S. advisory structure under military command.[48]

The new organization was a joint effort between Robert Komer and General Westmoreland, and attempted to unify civil and military operations under one command with Komer and General Creighton Abrams serving as co-deputies of CORDS and Westmoreland as commander of MACV. "A key point of the reorganization was that half of South Vietnam's provinces would have senior advisors who were military, with civilian deputies, and the other half would have civilians in the top position, with military deputies. Most of the civilian advisers were foreign service officers; five or six came from the CIA. Their provincial staffs were further integrated between military and civilians."[49] Komer went to work immediately after the formation of CORDS to establish an organization that would be unlike any other in history:

> The able Komer nicknamed the 'Blowtorch' for his aggressive management style, quickly hammered out a completely new organization. At the corps level he established CORDS advisory groups composed of both civilian and military personnel under the senior U.S. military adviser (normally the U.S. corps-level commander); at the province level he merged civilian and military advisory staffs, making the senior U.S. military adviser, a lieutenant colonel, the team commander, and the senior civilian his deputy. The new CORDS province teams

---

[48] Robert W. Komer, "Pacification: A Look Back and Ahead," p. 23.
[49] Zalin Grant, *Facing The Phoenix*, p. 292.

> also supervised the subordinate district detachments, which remained entirely military.[50]

President Lyndon Johnson desired to turn the pacification effort over to Westmoreland by appointing him as both ambassador and MACV commander, but he abandoned the idea because of negative pressures from civilian agencies. The responsibility for the pacification program ultimately rested in the MACV command, however, and the emphasis on military leadership of civilian agencies stemmed from the aggressive attitude of military indoctrination:

> American military domination of pacification could not be discounted as a possibility. Pacification would now be run from within a large military headquarters that had little appreciation of the managerial style of civilian agencies. The assumption of military responsibility could be read as implying failure on the part of the civilians. The military services prided themselves on their ability to carry out difficult missions under duress, a self-ascribed "can-do" attitude, and to act and organize quickly and decisively.[51]

The Military Assistance Command in Vietnam sought "to assist the Government of Vietnam and its armed forces to defeat externally directed and supported communist subversion and aggression and attain an independent South Vietnam functioning in a secure environment."[52] Westmoreland instituted three military phases or tactics to use as a means to achieve the goals of MACV. The approach focused on offensive operations and village security:

> The first was "search and destroy," operations designed to find, fix in place, fight, and destroy (or neutralize) enemy forces and their base areas and supply caches, essentially the traditional attack mission of the infantry. The second was "clearing," operations to drive large units from a populated region so that pacification could proceed. Although the region might not be totally secure in that some guerrillas might remain, "clearing" removed the graver threat to pacification posed by large units. The third was "securing," operations to protect pacification teams, eliminate local guerrillas, and uproot the enemy's secret political infrastructures.[53]

---

[50] Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years—The U.S. Army in Vietnam*, p. 211.
[51] Hunt, *Pacification*, p. 89.
[52] Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 71.
[53] Ibid., p. 104.

Westmoreland realized the need to carefully plan an offensive operation. He did so with the understanding that the best strategy would be to engage the VC as they themselves were preparing offensive operations:

> [O]ur strategy has been and is to contain the enemy through offensive tactical operation (referred to as spoiling attacks because they catch the enemy in the preparation phases of his own offenses), force him to fight under conditions of our choosing, and deny him attainment of his own tactical objectives. At the same time we have utilized all forces that could be made available for area and population security in support of revolutionary development.[54]

With such strategic goals in mind, the Allied forces set out to improve the effectiveness of the RF/PF forces in South Vietnam. Komer took full responsibility for increasing village security while General Abrams sought to improve the South Vietnamese Army's (ARVN) logistical contributions. He described the new approach to pacification as a learning process that evolved constantly:

> Why was the "new model" pacification program so flexible and innovative, at least compared with most other major U.S. or GVN efforts? In large measure, this occurred precisely because it was new and different and thus suffered less from the bureaucratic constraints which impinge upon the adaptability of older, more highly structured organizations. CORDS was a wartime expedient, designed exclusively for Vietnam. We wrote the field manual as we went along.[55]

To achieve the goals of CORDS the American approach to the pacification effort would have to be a multi-faceted strategy. While the effort would continue to focus on pacification and the build-up of the ARVN forces, an aggressive military plan was necessary to protect the pacification program from the North Vietnamese. As Westmoreland reflects in *A Soldier Reports*, his military plan was divided into three phases:

> As I saw the three phases of my strategy, American combat troops were to be used at first to protect developing logistical bases, although some might have to

---

[54] Department of Defense, top secret memorandum, 26 August 1966, www.ddrs.psmedia.com, p. 1.
[55] Komer, "Pacification," p. 22.

> be committed from time to time as "fire brigades" whenever the enemy's big units posed a threat . . . . In the second phase, we were to gain the initiative, penetrate, and whenever possible eliminate the enemy's base camps and sanctuaries. So long as the Communists were free to emerge from those hideouts to terrorize the people, recruit or impress conscripts, glean food, levy taxes, and attack government troops and installations, then to retire with impunity back into their sanctuaries, there was little hope of our defeating the insurgency. Invading the sanctuaries also might bring the elusive enemy to battle, affording an opportunity to destroy his main forces. In the third and final phase, we were to move into sustained ground combat and mop up the last of the main forces and guerrillas, or at least push them across the frontiers where we would try to contain them.[56]

Many critics would soon label this strategical approach as "search-and-destroy" combat tactics. This strategy would receive a great deal of criticism, especially in the later years of the war, when it became apparent that the Americans and their South Vietnamese Allies were not gaining any ground against North Vietnam.

Under the new CORDS command structure Komer assumed the position of Deputy to the Commander of MACV. His responsibilities included oversight of all civilian and military Revolutionary Development programs. He insisted on a unified command within the CORDS structure, and therefore appointed a single commander at each level. "Although at peak strength the military component of CORDS would outnumber the civilian element by roughly 6 to 1 (about 6,500 to 1,100), civilians held most of the top positions and exercised a measure of control greatly disproportionate to their numbers."[57] While CORDS remained a mixture of civilian and military personnel, a senior advisor (usually a civilian) was responsible for leading the pacification efforts. It was common for a civilian to oversee the progress of military subordinates. This oversight included maintaining progress reports and evaluating

---

[56] Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, pp. 187-188.
[57] Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, p. 218.

performance.[58] The Assistant Chief of Staff (CORDS), with the aid of the Deputy ACS (CORDS), was ultimately responsible for:

> Providing advice on all aspects of US Civil/Military support for the Community Defense and Local Development Program; in conjunction with GVN authorities, developing joint and combined plans, policies, concepts, and programs concerning US Civil/Military support for community defense and local development; providing advice and assistance to GVN, including the Central Pacification and Development Council, and other GVN agencies . . . [;] managing and directing US civil assistance to the autonomous cities in the fields of integral security, political mobilization, and technical support; serving as the focal point for local development programs, population and resources control, and for civic action by US forces . . . .[59]

The next level of command consisted of the Assistant for Operations and the Executive Secretariat. Four programs or divisions comprised the next level, including Management Support, Research and Analysis Division, Plans and Program Division, and Reports and Evaluation Division. The final level of CORDS consisted of the same divisions present in the OCO. These divisions included the Chieu Hoi Division, the New Life Development Division, the RD Cadre Division, the Refugee Division, the Psychological Operations Division, and the Public Safety Division.[60] Komer still maintained authority over most CORDS operations, and either he or the Assistant Chief of Staff of CORDS approved all important decisions. In order to maintain a successful organization, Komer designed the Pacification Studies Group comprised of U.S. and South Vietnamese evaluators whose job consisted of conducting field investigations of different CORDS staff operations.[61] This group reported directly to Komer in an effort to improve CORDS operations. The focus of pacification centered on social and economic changes within the rural societies:

---

[58] Hunt, *Pacification*, p. 90.
[59] Dinh Tho, *Pacification*, p. 57.
[60] Scoville, *Reorganizing for Pacification Support*, p. 58.
[61] Hunt, *Pacification*, p. 96.

> Programs instituted or energetically supported by the United States—Land to the Tiller, Village Self-Development, People's Information, public health, education, and every other aspect of economic development, social reform, and local self-determination—hit on crucial and decisive issues. These were the programs pushing the people to make the choice, many times for the sake of their children rather than themselves. While guns and security still were essential, the most powerful weapons were the social and economic changes replacing centuries of oppression, indifference, and empty promises.[62]

During the early days of CORDS operations in 1967, Komer introduced Project Takeoff in an effort to promote the program among the South Vietnamese. This initiative outlined eight programs of action that gave focus to the general effort. Each represented a goal necessary for pacification to succeed. The basic idea, Komer explained was that of "saturating the enemy and enabling us to build faster than he could destroy."[63] The programs included the improvement of planning, acceleration of the Chieu Hoi program, mounting attacks on the VCI, expanding and improving the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam (ARVN), broadening and making more efficient the Revolutionary Development (RD) team effort, increasing capability to handle refugees, revamping police forces, and pressing land reform.[64] The overall thrust of the new multifaceted program, Komer hoped would make it one in which the South Vietnamese could take pride. To others, however, it represented a disorganized and inefficient approach.

CORDS looked to affect every aspect of the lives of the South Vietnamese villager, yet the current strategy seemed to divert energy and resources towards military operations. The focus of CORDS and programs like Project Takeoff were, perhaps, too broad to begin with, and the programs would eventually take second chair to large-scale, costly offensive operations during the later years of the war.

---

[62] Edward P. Metzner, *More Than a Soldier's War: Pacification in Vietnam*, p. 156.
[63] Komer, "Pacification," p. 24.
[64] Hunt, *Pacification*, p. 100.

ARVN units participated in a variety of missions during the pacification effort. The main responsibility of the units was to serve as a protective force within the villages. The major dilemma that these forces faced was the decision to abandon their position within a community in order to meet an imminent threat outside of the village boundaries or remain as an internal security force inside the village. As Westmoreland states, these units faced a decision that was costly no matter what alternative was available:

> Because of growing enemy strength in units of battalion size or larger, ARVN units often had to abandon their pacification assignments, their relatively static defense of the population, in order to oppose the big units. Ignore the big units and you courted disaster. Failure to go after them in at least comparable strength invited defeat . . . . A basic difficulty was that the ARVN simply lacked the numbers to be everywhere at once. If ARVN units sought or chased the enemy's big units, local guerrillas could move in and regain control in the face of a militia that was poorly equipped, poorly led, and poorly motivated. Yet without defeat of the big units there could be no security.[65]

In May 1967, Westmoreland assigned responsibility for territorial security forces in Vietnam to the CORDS program. Primarily, CORDS was responsible for local village security. Komer expanded this directive by assigning additional advisers to assist the Regional and Popular Forces with mobility and performance in combat. These advisers led the mission in the Vietnam countryside:

> Mainly U.S. Army personnel, the advisers had several functions. They monitored American assistance programs, aided the South Vietnamese in planning and carrying out operations, and provided higher commands with evaluations of the local security situation and South Vietnamese performance. In recognition of their importance, Komer labeled them CORD's "eyes and ears in the countryside" and believed that additional advisers would help obviate the need for a major new U.S. troop commitment.[66]

---

[65] Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, pp. 125-126.
[66] Hunt, *Pacification*, p. 106.

At this point, American "advisers" played an active role in training ARVN soldiers for combat situations. The structure aimed at improving the GVN ability to model its programs around the CORDS organization:

> While pacification remained from the outset a primarily Vietnamese effort, CORDS not only unified the U.S. support and advisory effort but provided impetus to getting the GVN to move in the same direction. CORDS helped make the ARVN and U.S. military more pacification-conscious, more aware that the conflict was as much political as military and that a more effective leadership was essential. It was better to do this because it was an integral part of U.S. military command.[67]

The CORDS program, once the GVN structure could grow strong enough to maintain the pacification effort on its own, would defer to its ally. Until that point, pacification existed as a merging of U.S. military and civilian command structures. The merging of the two, however, did not result in a frictionless companionship. Many of the civilian agencies responsible for pacification prior to military intervention viewed the creation of CORDS as a ploy to divert power from the civilian agencies to the military command structure. Many civilian leaders did not subscribe to the policies and practices of the aggressive military management.

When President Johnson committed 100,000 American troops to Vietnam in 1965 it was the beginning of a full U.S. military commitment in Southeast Asia. Once American soldiers had been operating in Vietnam in counterinsurgency-based operations, a shift in policy occurred, reflecting a greater preference for larger scale offensive operations. Westmoreland planned to attack the VCI by wearing down the North Vietnamese with an attrition strategy. While the military paved the way toward a defeat of VC and NVA forces, the struggle to dismantle the VCI became a necessary battle in order to achieve a comparable victory:

> No single aspect of pacification was more crucial than the effort to dismantle the Viet Cong infrastructure—the clandestine Communist command-and-control

[67] Komer, "Pacification," p. 27.

> organization within South Vietnam that provided political and military direction to the guerrilla war. The infrastructure recruited manpower for the Viet Cong; engaged in subversion, terrorism, propaganda, and intelligence gathering; and collected taxes and supplies. A highly structured bureaucracy, the infrastructure sustained the Communists in their long struggle against the government of South Vietnam. The infrastructure was also a direct political rival of the government. Defeating the infrastructure would give the Saigon regime the chance to build a political community without interference from its deadly adversary.[68]

The VC had two supporting organizations: The People's Revolutionary Party (PRP) and the National Liberation Front (NLF). The VCI operated at all levels within South Vietnam. Communist forces in South Vietnam consisted of three principal components. "(1) the infrastructure (political and support) and guerrillas; (2) regional forces; and (3) regular or main forces. There were two types of guerrillas: the para-military and the full military or unattached. Guerrilla activities were generally localized and consisted of sabotage, assassination, harassment, which were aimed at sowing confusion, terror and loss of confidence among the population and forcing the RVN forces to spread thin and lose mobility."[69]

The People's Revolutionary Party (PRP) was active in the Central Office of South Vietnam (COSVN), and the region, province, district, village, and hamlet levels of government. In order to attack the infrastructure, VC agents had to be identified and classified as legal or illegal citizens: "American intelligence analysts divided the VCI into two types of personnel. They termed an unarmed member secretly affiliated with the party but openly living among the people a legal operative since outwardly he or she was indistinguishable from other law-abiding citizens. The other type, the illegal cadre, was an armed member, openly affiliated with the Communists, who lived in heavily fortified villages or secret bases in the jungles."[70]

---

[68] Hunt, *Pacification*, p. 109.
[69] Dinh Tho, *Pacification*, p. 10.
[70] Hunt, *Pacification*, p. 110.

The process of categorizing members of the VC as either legal or illegal was a difficult process as clandestine members of the VC were able to hide amongst apparently neutral Vietnamese citizens. The VCI was so intricately woven into the village political organizations that a method of identification proved nearly an impossible task. Support for intelligence had to come from a combination of a National Police Field Force (NPFF), military intelligence, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Through the gathering of intelligence on villagers suspected of maintaining active VC associations, the intelligence network of the Allied Forces divided suspects into separate categories, and charted their network of associations:

> The Allies drew wiring diagrams (charts resembling family trees) of the local hierarchy and tried to identify by name the person who held each position on the chart. If they identified particular civilians as legal cadres, they could find and arrest them easily because these cadres lived as normal citizens. When the Allies obtained information on the identity of illegal cadres, they improved their chances for specific identification of those individuals if they happened to capture them during an operation. They also could use information to find friends or relatives of cadres who might convince the cadres to defect or spy for the Allies.[71]

Defections and the use of double agents in the intelligence network was commonplace among all of the pacification programs in Vietnam. The information pinpointed illegal cadres to a specific location where Phoenix operatives attempted to capture or neutralize them. Many times a captured VC suspect was a useful source of information about other VC agents or the movements of entire enemy units. However, it was common for captured agents to not reveal identities simply because other "suspects" might be relatives of his, the fear of retaliation or reprisal against a "traitor" was more unbearable than torture or interrogation.[72]

In an attempt to gather information on the identities of enemy agents, dossiers in the intelligence centers and police agencies of ARVN and Phoenix operations bases aimed to

---

[71] Moyar, *Phoenix and The Birds of Prey*, p. 59.
[72] Ibid., p. 73.

identify enemy agents and operatives. Each file contained valuable biographical data, personal histories, and a timeline of involvement in enemy operations. Although these files represented complete histories of known suspects, much of this information was misleading and inaccurate. For instance, most VC agents maintained aliases within the community. The name on a file in a dossier might have been the name of the individual used by the villagers. This made locating suspects much more difficult. In addition, many suspected individuals might have held many different jobs at one time or over a short period. This meant that most suspects were highly mobile and could disappear within the community under an assumed name. "Often the VCI is known by name, rank and job history long before he can be found and arrested. Equally often the VCI's "cover" is not shattered until interrogation of a large number of hamlet people results in a clear line of testimony pointing directly at him."[73] The fact that the central files of VC suspects did not have pictures or fingerprint data in the file, meant that more than one file existed on the same individual or that different intelligence agencies might have conflicting information on the same suspect. Attempts by the Allies to create a national database failed because of a fundamental disorganization of information.[74]

The Census Grievance tracked and identified members of the VCI. Cadres visited each village and personally interviewed peasants to determine their lineage and the number of currently living relatives. This information, tracked along a flowchart, contained names of individuals considered to have VC affiliations. Detailed maps were created of the villages and specific households identified as having suspected involvement with the VC. Most of the

---

[73] "Security Comes to Hamlet," *Vietnam* 4 (September 1971), p. 10.
[74] Moyar, *Phoenix and The Birds of Prey*, pp.61-62.

Census Grievance cadres reported directly to the CIA with information on VC sympathizers as well as active Communist agents.[75]

In addition to the information received from the Census Grievance, the CIA used informants and agents in collecting valuable intelligence on the VCI. Phoenix operatives identified possible informants during routine arrests made in the villages. Villagers arrested in a round up of the area were interrogated in hopes of finding information that could be used to uncover VC activity. If a villager provided accurate information, he was given the choice of becoming an informant or facing further arrests and possible relocation. The risks from the VC, which an informant assumed when cooperating with Allied officials were far greater than any threats he received during the course of an interrogation. Informants always faced the possibility of exposure by VC agents, and such exposure usually resulted in the death of the informant and his entire family in a fairly brutal manner. As often as possible, the GVN and CIA operatives went to great lengths to disguise the informants. Many informants maintained the appearance of allegiance to the VC, and they dressed and acted accordingly. Informants continued to hold jobs in the community, and their CIA "handlers" encouraged them to hold jobs that allowed for interaction with members of the village. Some informants were able to travel into remote jungle areas without arousing suspicion in order to view suspected areas of NVA or VC occupation. Informants made anonymous tips to their GVN or CIA contacts, but unfortunately, they often led to the discovery of the identity of the informant, especially if a VC double agent working in the police force was involved in collecting tips. Informants were paid for the information they provided, however, their compensation was not substantial enough because any increase in wealth would make it obvious to the VC that the money was a result of intelligence work. In some cases, informants

---

[75] Ibid., p. 37.

simply disappeared after the information they gave resulted in action against the VC. The limitations of the informant system were a result of incompetent Allied contacts failing to use the information properly and to protect the informant, and of the ability of the VC to uncover the identities of informants and neutralize them.

In January 1967, the Allies instituted the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES). The HES quantitatively measured the security of each village in the south and assigned a rating of A to E ("A" being the highest rating given to the most secure villages; "E" being the worst rating given to villages under VC control). "Each hamlet was evaluated on six factors. . . .Three of the factors related to the security status of the hamlet: communist military activities, Viet Cong political and subversive activities, and Allied capabilities. The other three measured development status: administrative and political activities, economic development and health, education and welfare."[76] Government officials in Washington entered HES figures into a database and closely monitored them Based on the recorded figures the major trends in hamlet security evaluations suggested the following:

1. A total of 8.2 million people were made "secure" (an "A" or "B" HES rating) during the five years between December 1967 and December 1972. This raised the percentage in this category to 80 percent of the total population in South Vietnam.
2. The Tet offensive losses were recovered by the end of 1968. Largely because of the Accelerated Pacification Campaign, some 1 million people were added to the secure category by the end of that year.
3. The pacification effort really took off in 1969, when 4.3 million people were added to the secure category. The contested and VC/NVA controlled population fell below all previous levels.
4. The VC/NVA offensive in 1972 (Easter Offensive) eroded the gains, but not in any major way for the country as a whole.[77]

---

[76] Thayer, *War Without Fronts*, p. 138.
[77] Thomas C. Thayer, "On Pacification," p. 235. The NVA/VC offensives of 1968 and 1972 are discussed in greater depth in this chapter and the next chapter.

HES figures generally indicated success or failure with regard to village security. The system was only a flat indicator based on a subjective rating scheme and did not account for fluctuations due to peasant relocation programs and natural birth rates in the villages. For instance, an increase in "secured" populations may have been to due a growth in birth rate, or an increase in the village population due to a relocation of villagers from one village to another. A number of studies conducted from 1967 to 1969 concluded:

1. Changes in the HES security scores were sensitive enough to identify progress or regression in areas over time.
2. HES measurements are not precise enough to make point estimates—i.e., to measure precisely the position along a scale from "least secure" to "most secure." The precision, naturally, increases for higher levels of aggregation. At lower levels (village, district, province) it is generally agreed to be on the order of plus or minus one letter grade (A – E).
3. Comparisons between different geographic areas in South Vietnam at a single point in time may be of questionable validity, because of wide differences in the characteristics of various areas.[78]

In 1967, the HES rated 62 percent of 16 million South Vietnamese villagers as "relatively secure", 18.5 percent as "contested", and 19 percent as VC-controlled. In January 1967, 46 percent of the rural population rated as relatively secure. By the end of 1967, the figure was just below 50 percent, and this number dropped further after the 1968 Tet offensive. By 1971, the HES rated 97 percent of the South Vietnamese population of 17.9 million people as relatively secure, 3 percent as "contested," and only 7,000 as still under VC control.[79] The HES seemed to be a reliable indicator of security trends in the countryside. As VC initiated attacks increased during 1968 and 1972 offensives security decreased in the villages. Conversely, in years when pacification was improving (such as the period of 1969-1971) then HES numbers would reflect a

[78] Ibid., p. 236.
[79] Ibid., p. 220.

large increase in an overall security rating. While the system did not account for natural or explainable increases in secured populations, the HES did show that pacification appeared to achieve great success in the later years of the war. As Colby recalled, the effects of pacification showed up in increasingly larger South Vietnamese forces:

> On the Vietnamese side, the balance of forces began to reflect the requirements for a people's war, as the village-level Popular Forces rose to 215,000, the province-level Regional Forces to 260,000, and the People's Self-Defense Forces to some 400,000 armed—finally exceeding in numbers the Vietnamese Army of some 400,000. The National Police had grown from some 75,000 toward their goal of 120,000, with the 1969 plan calling for half of them to be assigned to villages rather than almost exclusively to the urban areas.[80]

The HES data recorded was only reflective of populations considered under Allied control. A discrepancy existed between areas deemed as being under control by neither side and those that were under the control by one side or the other. To account for this discrepancy the HES data included an "indicator of rural control". The indicator used ten carefully selected questions to determine the level of control by either side in a village. Undetermined or doubtful cases are assigned a "neither side controls" category.[81] Taking this undetermined category into account new HES data suggested the following:

1. In December 1969, the total HES scores suggested that 71 percent of the population is "secure." However, only 48 percent of the rural population is under South Vietnamese "control." In 1972, the figures are 80 percent versus 63 percent.
2. The total HES scores indicated that pacification progress was slow in 1970 (gain of 4 percentage points) after large gains in 1969, but the rural control indicator suggested that pacification really began to take hold in the countryside during 1970 (gain of 19 percentage points).
3. The impact of the 1972 offensive shows more clearly in the rural control indicator. GVN control slipped 8 percentage points (versus 4 percent for total HES scores), and VC/NVA control rose 3 percent (versus 0.2 percent).[82]

---

[80] Colby, *Lost Victory*, p. 270.
[81] Thayer, "On Pacification," W. Scott Thompson, and Donaldson D. Frizzell, eds., *The Lessons of Vietnam*, p. 237.
[82] Ibid., pp. 237-238.

What the HES data suggested is that while pacification was successful (and conversely, damaged during VC offensives) the amount of "control" by either side varied when taking into account the fact that many of the areas in the survey fell under the category of neutral. These contested areas were focal points for many of the offensive operations of both the Allies and the VC. If anything, the HES system proved that any indicator of success was subject to a multitude of factors and a sharp negative or positive swing in either direction could occur with uncertainty based on the success or failure of a "clear and hold" operation in that area. Critics of the system claimed that the HES purposefully inflated figures (due to explainable phenomena) to give the appearance that the security based programs were working. Other skeptics described the system as being a subjective quantification of raw data that was often misleading:

> Part of that system was the American-derived Hamlet Evaluation Survey (HES) questionnaire, which was the basis for determining who controlled the hamlets. Unfortunately, the questionnaire dealt primarily with subjective observations that could be readily manipulated, and overlooked many issues which actually determined whether or not the government controlled a hamlet. Regardless of real, substantive progress and honest, encouraging answers to the questionnaire, any vulnerability of the hamlet people to VC influence or pressure after the sun went down meant at best that government control was spotty and at worst that the VC was in control.[83]

With such a subjective classification system, the HES came under fire for attempting to present an overly optimistic view of how pacification was progressing. Many claimed this was used by leaders in Washington to increase troop levels and bolster public opinion of the war back home.

The most important goal of the Phoenix program was infiltrating the enemy infrastructure. "Phoenix was not a military program. It was instead an intelligence- gathering, sharing and coordinating effort designed to identify the estimated 70,000 members of the Vietcong

---

[83] Metzner, *More Than a Soldier's War*, p. 156.

infrastructure (VCI)—the VC political leaders—so that armed Vietnamese forces and National Police could take action against them. Members of the VCI could be 'neutralized' through either arrest or execution."[84] In the early 1960's, the CIA, in cooperation with the Diem government, trained special reconnaissance units known as Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRU's). Critics described such units as nothing less than "gangs of thugs"[85] determined to root out VC sympathizers whether they had proven VC affiliations or not. PRU teams operated in conjunction with U.S. Special Operations Groups (SOG) and U.S. Navy SEAL (Sea, Air, and Land) teams. "PRUs were not regular military forces. Although some wore an ARVN-type field uniform (it included a shoulder flash depicting the fabled phoenix bird rising up out of the ashes), many others did not. That caused some regular army types to view them as mercenaries, undisciplined and with decidedly felonious intentions."[86] Despite such misperceptions, the PRU teams in conjunction with SOG operations began to make significant headway in the elimination of the enemy infrastructure:

> [T]he PRUs and their SEAL advisers quickly began to produce large numbers of VC prisoners, KIAs, and *chieu hoi* defectors. Because the PRUs were operating in their own backyards, their ability to act on information dealing with the identity and location of VC or VCI suspects was immediate . . . By the end of 1968, the SEALs and the PRUs were neutralizing seven hundred to eight hundred VC and VCI per month in the Delta and RSSZ.[87]

In an effort to concentrate the efforts of counterterrorism in Vietnam, the CIA revised the PRU program into more focused Counter Terror Teams (CTT).[88] The Allies formed CTT units

---

[84] Wexler, *The Vietnam War*, p. 213.
[85] Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes,* p. 41.
[86] Joel M. Hutchins, *Swimmers Among The Trees: SEAL Operations in the Vietnam War,* p. 201.
[87] Ibid. Italics added. The Delta refers to the Mekong Delta region or lowlands of South Vietnam. The RSSZ refers to the Rung Sat Special Zone, a dense area just south of Saigon that was used as an encampment for NLF forces.
[88] Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes,* p. 41.

in the provinces and province chiefs controlled the teams. The units consisted of highly trained South Vietnamese soldiers and villagers experienced in combat and prepared to undertake deep incursions into enemy territory. The CTT units were to capture and kill enemy agents. The primary goal was capturing the members of the infrastructure in hopes of gaining valuable intelligence, and kill only if necessary:

> The counterterror teams, later changed to the more euphemistic but no less murderous provincial reconnaissance units (PRUs), became an arm of the Phoenix program, and there was always confusion about who they were, where they came from, and what they did . . . . The CIA was constantly trying to develop techniques to identify the Viet Cong who were working as committee chiefs, recruiters, province representatives, and tax collectors. Once they were identified, the National Police arrested them or the counterterror teams were sent to kill or capture them at night.[89]

Once a unit extracted the information it needed from a captured enemy agent, it could decide his fate. In conjunction with the CTT teams, the CIA funded Provincial and District Intelligence Coordination Centers (PICC and DICC) for the collection and dissemination of information on the enemy infrastructure.[90] This information filtered to the CTT teams for operations against the VC. Unfortunately, this program performed almost too well. Shortly within a year, the PICC's and their matched CTT teams grew so much that the counterterrorism effort suffered from both a saturation of intelligence and an over-concentration of CTT units per region. In addition, press stories of kidnappings in the middle of the night and ruthless murders by CTT teams generated negative media coverage of clandestine activities. CTT and PRU teams built the foundation for the Phoenix program. With an increase in the number of military advisors came better training of the Counter-Terror Teams. The teams had better supplies, training, and military strategies offered by the U.S.

---

[89] Grant, *Facing The Phoenix*, pp. 287-288.
[90] Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*, p. 42.

On July 9, 1967, MACV directive 381-41 created an anti-infrastructure program to support pacification efforts. This initiative of the pacification movement referred to Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation (ICEX) fell under the regime of Robert Komer, director of CORDS operations, and operated with the intent to address the problems of current pacification programs. The primary mission of ICEX was to "draft initial, basic mission and functions statements further defining responsibilities and relationships for Corps, Province, and District organizations" to be completed by July 15, 1967, and to "prepare initial guidelines for DOICC operations, based on experiences of existing DOICCs" to be completed by July 31, 1967.[91] The man chosen to head the program, Evan J. Parker, a retired Lieutenant Colonel in the Army reserves, was a CIA man and his appointment added intelligence strength to pacification. ICEX represented a new system for organizing pacification programs to achieve their directed goals. ICEX initiated the development of the District Operations and Intelligence Coordinating Centers (DOICCs), and implemented it on a nationwide basis.[92] This bold new strategy eliminated infrastructure activities by improving intelligence collection and dissemination, and by improving action operations against the enemy. Specifically, it sought to capture enemy cadre members and agents. CIA Officer Nelson Brickham, assigned to Saigon to study anti-infrastructure methodology, described the purpose of ICEX:

> [T]he strategy was to sharpen up intelligence collection and analysis and to speed up the reaction time in responding to intelligence, whether on a military or a police level. So the idea was to set up a structure in which agencies *had* to participate and *had* to bring their own resources and funds to bear, without interfering with their legislative mandate or financial procedures . . . . "The key to ICEX was decentralization"—in other words, forcing field officers to do their jobs by putting responsibility on the scene, while at the same time trying to deliver to these officers the kinds and amounts of information they needed, fast.[93]

---

[91] Hunt, *Pacification*, pp. 61-62.
[92] Ibid., pp. 60-61.
[93] Douglas Valentine, *The Phoenix Program*, pp. 129-130. Italics added.

Since ICEX fell under the direct supervision of Komer and CORDS, it became an important program within the MACV hierarchy. From the beginning, the program held great expectations. ICEX met with many of the same problems of other pacification programs, among them budgetary constraints and a bureaucracy that demanded certain quotas. "In theory, a sound pacification program was inherent in successfully combating counterinsurgency. In practice, however, the program during the early years was marked by confused policies and goals, divided authority and fragmented administration, all of which permitted corruption and created little or no progress."[94] ICEX fell victim to many of these problems. ICEX was an attempt to consolidate all intelligence organizations together under one, unified command. South Vietnamese intelligence leaders viewed this as an effort to diminish their base of power in the intelligence community throughout Vietnam, and in the end it created distrust and dissent among GVN and MACV leaders.

In addition to diverting power from the regional and provincial levels, ICEX met with considerable frustration in attempting to cycle VC suspects through the legal system. For counter-terrorism to be successful in Vietnam, the legal system had to provide the proper handling of VC suspects. However, the most notable loophole in dealing with VC suspects was within the interrogation process. Vietnamese civilians suspected of cooperating with the VC were questioned, but were not held as suspects or prisoners of war since the rules governing the interrogation of prisoners of war dealt only with soldiers and not civilians. Since many villagers were members of the Communist party, this made it difficult to extract valuable information

---

[94] Charles R. Smith, *U.S. Marines In Vietnam: High Mobility and Standdown, 1969*, p. 280.

from captured civilians. As William Colby points out in *Lost Victory*, the focus with regards to questioning the enemy centered on gaining strictly military information:

> The predominance of the American military during the mid-1960s produced the problem that intelligence concentrated on the military aspects of the enemy. Obviously—and legitimately—American military commanders and, consequently, their intelligence officers were concerned primarily with intelligence about enemy military units that might attack them or that they saw as their targets. Their focus, therefore, was the Communist military enemy rather than the "civilian" activists who inhabited the rural communities or visited them to conduct the basic elements of the people's war strategy—proselytizing, taxing, conscripting. Military interrogators of prisoners thus would ask every detail of the activities of a main or local force unit in the neighborhood, or even of a guerrilla squad, but ignore the identity or activities of a local tax collector or *agitprop* activist.[95]

ICEX represented an approach centered on counterinsurgency and covert operations that would allow the Allies to target such VC agitprop operatives. ICEX would provide the foundation for the beginnings of what would eventually become the Phoenix program. As Colby would testify later, the Phoenix program proved much more successful at dismantling the infrastructure than previous attempts. "Despite its flaws and excesses, William Colby, the CIA executive who ran Phoenix, claimed in his congressional testimony that some 17,000 VCI sought amnesty, 28,000 were captured and 20,000 were killed (some 85% in military actions)."[96]

Despite such positive figures, another problem that plagued the interrogation process for captured VC operatives was sending captured suspects for processing in Saigon or a Combined Interrogation Center in Danang[97] where information was gathered and placed into ICEX intelligence files. If ARVN forces captured the suspect, then he was sent to the district or province interrogation center, or higher up to division or corps headquarters. These differences

---

[95] Colby, *Lost Victory*, pp. 218-219. Italics added. "Agitprop" refers to agitation/propaganda by the Viet Cong activists.
[96] Wexler, *The Vietnam War*, p. 213.
[97] Hunt, *Pacification*, p. 66.

in the treatment of suspects worsened the problem of collecting information for a national database. Although ICEX sought to improve the national intelligence database of information taken from suspects at different centers and by different authorities, it did not allow for an exchange of information. At the provincial level suspects could bribe the provincial chiefs if the price were right. Many times an operation produced a large number of VC suspects only to see the provincial chief accept a ransom or bounty for their release. This practice was a result of corruption, but also due to a lack of jail space to detain thousands of VC suspects. VC detained in prison systems were not isolated from the rest of the population. They roamed free within the prison often recruiting for their cause or passing false information among other prisoners to purposely mislead the interrogators.

The goal of ICEX was to lay a solid foundation at the province, district, and corps levels throughout the countryside, and to expand this base at the height of counterinsurgency operations during the war. In December 1967, the term "Phoenix" replaced ICEX for good. "The government called the ICEX program *Phung Hoang*, or 'All-seeing Bird.' The closest English term was *Phoenix*. After the December 1967 signing of the directive, the Americans called the South Vietnamese anti-infrastructure program Phoenix, not ICEX. The term ICEX passed into obscurity, while Phoenix was destined to achieve notoriety."[98] If ICEX was to build the foundation that provided the necessary support to crush the insurgency, then Phoenix was the apparatus needed to carry out the destruction of the VCI.

At the heart of the Phoenix Program was the home base of intelligence information located at Phoenix centers throughout the country. The CIA, the Military Security Service, the National Police Field Force, and U.S. military intelligence made use of the centers as points of

---

[98] Ibid., p.116. Italics added.

information collection and dissemination. Phoenix centers had greater success operating at the provincial level than at the district level because the CIA and the GVN agencies had more experience than CORDS advisers and GVN at the district level.[99] The CIA controlled operations and had significant influence on many of the GVN organizations in terms of sharing intelligence. Although the CIA did not exert pressure on other South Vietnamese organizations with regard to the Phoenix Program, its withdrawal proved indisputable. The other main source of power and influence in Phoenix operations were the provincial chiefs. If a chief opposed a Phoenix operation, the mission had little or no chance for success. The CIA had to convince the province chiefs that their blessing was necessary for any operation to succeed:

> A few of the South Vietnamese had the power to make the Phoenix centers work. Foremost among them were the district chiefs and province chiefs. They could make many of the agencies share intelligence and could order action forces to mount operations with Phung Hoang intelligence. The province chiefs were especially important because they appointed and fired the district chiefs and told them what to do. Once the CIA pulled out of the program, the stability of the Phoenix centers to function, and especially to stimulate intelligence sharing, depended mainly on the efforts of these chiefs.[100]

In abandoning the effort, the provincial and district chiefs were under greater pressure to continue with the pacification effort. Many chiefs assigned little value to *Phung Hoang* (Phoenix) because of the time-consuming requirements to run such an operation. Many of the leaders also feared reprisals from the NVA for supporting intelligence operations against North Vietnam. In addition, the superiors of the district and provincial chiefs did not allow further participation in *Phung Hoang*. Chiefs were prone to corruption by the VC and their general lack of trust in U.S. governmental control led to a weakening of the Phoenix program. By 1971, in response to a lack of effort in the provinces and districts to support *Phung Hoang*, the leaders of

---

[99] Moyar, *Phoenix and The Birds of Prey*, p. 133.
[100] Ibid., p. 136.

CORDS and the GVN created Police Operations Centers to replace the Phoenix centers. The National Police Field Forces appointed new committees to oversee the operations at the district and provincial levels. Such changes brought success. "The period from the inception of the Phoenix program up to 1971, which was considered the best year of the RVN in terms of security and pacification achievements, saw a marked decline in the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI) activities. Out of an estimated total of 40,000 members recorded by 1971, the VCI suffered 15,603 eliminated or neutralized, broken down into 5,615 killed, 4,391 detained, and 5,597 returnees, or more than one third of its strength."[101]

At the provincial level the interrogation of subjects occurred in special Province Interrogation Centers (PICs). Ultimately the CIA managed operations in the centers before ending their participation in the pacification program. Torture often was part of interrogation, particularly if the GVN interrogators were at work. These methods frequently included water torture, electroshock, and mutilation. Most of the South Vietnamese interrogators tortured many or all of the suspected Communist prisoners during the course of their incarceration. Such methods often led to further abuses within the interrogation system. Many of these abuses stemmed from GVN hostility toward the VC after years of their torture and execution of family members and friends. Many GVN interrogators were further inflicting sexual abuse on female suspects, mutilation of body parts, beatings with bamboo rods, and sawing through body parts with serrated "K-bars."[102] Information obtained was often misleading since it came from a subject who had been painfully tortured and was willing to say anything to end the pain. Many interrogations of VC prisoners resulted in death. Often prisoners were set "free" only to be murdered once released:

---

[101] Dinh Tho, *Pacification*, p. 73.
[102] Moyar, *Phoenix and The Birds of Prey*, p. 91. K-bars were metal bars, serrated on one side, used as torturing devices by the GVN in interrogations.

> For a variety of reasons, the GVN set free many of the VCI and VCI suspects who went through the civilian detention system shortly after their capture. Killing these VC cadres was the only sure way to put an end to their activities, and the South Vietnamese forces wanted to make certain, at any cost, that their adversaries did not return. Usually the GVN personnel killed people for this reason only when they were positive that they were VC, and they spared some of the known VC who provided information. Some pacification forces executed people to prevent them from slipping through the jail system only if they had been released from prison previously.[103]

Many other prisoners died at the hands of overzealous interrogators to "stimulate the others," or because of battlefield anger. If a prisoner died after capture in the battlefield it usually occurred during the aftermath when tensions remained high between the enemy and the Allied forces. South Vietnamese forces usually did the killing. Indeed, GVN leaders openly encouraged the torture and execution of their prisoners. American soldiers rarely killed unarmed or captured opposition soldiers, unless, it was a battlefield necessity. CORDS advisers and CIA interrogators, forbidden by American pacification leaders to participate in the killing or senseless torturing of VC prisoners of war, nevertheless, were witnesses to the brutality. The fact that torture and execution took place, however, ignited a fury among other neutral countries and the U.S. forces received much of this public backlash. Although Vietnamese society and religious beliefs strictly forbade such gruesome practices, the violence in the Vietnamese countryside for many years prior to the Vietnam War led to a desensitization of participants and a relaxation of normal codes of conduct. Most South Vietnamese killed out of a repressed rage fueled by witnessing the deaths of loved ones at the hands of the VC.

Corruption within the South Vietnamese government undermined pacification efforts. ARVN Officials frequently accepted bribes and exaggerated statistics:

> The Phoenix operation aroused an outcry from American antiwar activists, who labeled it "mass murder." But several Americans involved in Phoenix described

[103] Ibid., p. 93.

> it instead as a program riddled with inefficiency, corruption, and abuse. South Vietnamese officials, interested only in promoting themselves, balked at working together, robbed much of the U.S. aid appropriated for the exercise, and were so receptive to bribes that 70 percent of the Viet Cong suspects captured bought back their freedom. Worse yet, Phoenix required village authorities to fulfill monthly quotas, which they did by classifying anyone killed in a skirmish as a member of the Viet Cong—thereby distorting the figures of "enemy" dead. They also rounded up innocent peasants in order to inflate police blotters, then spared those who could pay them off, and they frequently tortured villagers on no more evidence than the accusations of jealous neighbors.[104]

Corruption was a part of tradition in the government of South Vietnam. The most common forms included:

> [T]he misappropriation of funds, the cheating of soldiers of pay or food, kickbacks from contractors, the sale of promotions or safe posts, and the diverting of gasoline or medicine to the private market to the charging of other military units for the provision of transport and even artillery support during combat. The entire ARVN system was corrupt on a daily basis down to the smallest unit. The most widespread sources of gain were the so-called ghost soldiers, who may have accounted for as much as one-quarter—and never less than one-tenth—of its rolls at various times. Ghost soldiers were dead men, deserters, or soldiers who held civilian jobs and whose superiors pocketed their pay and allowance.[105]

Serious forms of fraudulent practices included "extortion, the arrest and torture of people with marginal ties to the Communists, looting, monopolization of commodities that villagers needed, and impressments of the villagers for GVN construction projects."[106] Illicit policies grew from a long-standing tradition of nepotism, bribery, and patronage within the South Vietnamese political and military organizations. This type of system differed greatly from the system of democracy and merit-based awarding of positions in the American political and military structure:

> In fact, two entirely different systems were involved, one based on promotion according to merit, strict adherence to a hierarchical chain of command, and separation from and subordination to civil authority, and the other based on

---

[104] Karnow, *Vietnam*, p. 602.
[105] Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, p. 253.
[106] Moyar, *Phoenix and The Birds of Prey*, p. 22.

> alliances and arrangements between families and cliques, promotion and assignment based on patronage and political compromise, and the performance of the most important political functions by the military. In American tradition military officers were men who sacrificed opportunities for wealth and material gain to serve their country. Vietnamese tradition held that wealth and opportunities for gain were the normal rewards of higher rank.[107]

The marked differences in cultural understanding of corruption to the Americans and the South Vietnamese was an example of a misunderstanding of language, culture, and tradition that proved to weaken the relationship between the Allies. "Corruption" as defined by the Americans was a normal and acceptable practice for the South Vietnamese:

> GVN personnel engaged in a wide range of activities that Americans would call corrupt involving aspects of their jobs besides the attack on the VCI. For example, they imposed their own "taxes" on local businesses, formed their own businesses and shut down any potential competition, sold materials that the Americans had given to the GVN for free distribution to villagers, took kickbacks from contractors, and skimmed off some of the pay of their subordinates. The hamlet populations usually accepted such activities, when practiced in moderation, as a normal part of life.[108]

American leaders recognized the role that corruption played in the political structure of the villages. In response to reports of abuse and corruption, "CORDS sought and obtained the removal of 14 of the 20 province chiefs the government replaced for prejudicial reasons in 1968, 1969, and 1971. Over the same time span, the government removed 124 district chiefs for cause. Of that number, the United States had sought and obtained the removal of 84 district chiefs."[109] While this practice proved effective in rooting out corrupt officials, often times their replacements continued the practices of the

---

[107] Ronald H. Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam*, p. 113.
[108] Moyar, *Phoenix and The Birds of Prey*, p. 284.
[109] Hunt, *Pacification*, p. 276.

previous official as the promotion system relied on bribery and familial alliances, and not performance.

The corruption ran to the upper echelons of the South Vietnamese government. According to a Rand Corporation study after the fall of Saigon in 1975, "there was not one high-ranking person in the Saigon government who was not accused by at least some of the respondents (of the study) as having participated in the corruption and profited from it."[110] Among the most notable beneficiaries of these crime rings were South Vietnamese generals who engaged in a wide array of rackets including the use of their military forces to protect or promote criminal activities including drug trafficking of opium. Another treasonous practice by these generals included trade with the VC as "large quantities of food, gasoline, medicines, and equipment, much of it supplied by the United States, were sold to the Communists by South Vietnamese soldiers, usually through middlemen."[111] A South Vietnamese officer would often look the other way when soldiers deserted because this provided an opportunity to collect their pay. Many commanders purposely avoided battles with enemy forces claiming that it was not wise to put men unnecessarily in harm's way. The more reasonable explanation would be that the company had few men available to fight. In 1968, military desertion rates reached a staggering average of 10,000 per month.[112]

The negative impact of illegal practices by the South Vietnamese throughout the war received attention following U.S. withdrawal from the South. The U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) concluded that "'corruption was pervasive throughout

---

[110] Spector, *After Tet*, p. 104.
[111] Ibid., p. 103.
[112] Ibid., p. 107.

the period of U.S. involvement at all levels.' Specifically within the RVN system, 'there was an inordinate amount of corruption—by any standard.' It was 'far beyond' lower-level affairs 'greasing-the-wheels' of the state, 'often involving fantastically large amounts of money—among top officials and generals.'"[113]

The relationship between the Americans and the South Vietnamese was delicate and influenced by barriers of language, culture, and understanding. Many South Vietnamese viewed the war effort as a means to profit. American soldiers resented having to fight the battles of a people who used their presence as a means to a financial end. The Americans found in its ally a nation rife with corruption, victimized by its own political traditions, and vulnerable to a Communist revolution.

[113] Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, p. 228.

CHAPTER IV: FRUSTRATION AND FAILURE

The strategy of choice for the Americans during the Vietnam War centered on military principles enforced by "search and destroy" missions. These principles were disharmonious with the guerrilla warfare that U.S. forces encountered in the jungles of Vietnam. The selection of strategy by the Americans based on conventional military theory proved to be an approach not suited to an unconventional situation, and this method of choice adversely affected Allied efforts during the war. U.S. military strategy focused heavily on offensive operations as opposed to relying on a pacification-based approach. Large military offensives into guerrilla occupied territories characterized the later years of the war while pacification was all but abandoned in favor of this aggressive stance.

The Americans faced a number of disadvantages when it entered the Vietnam War. The most important of these resulted from a large South Vietnamese Regular Army (ARVN). Vietnam was, and remains, a Third-World country, a primitively structured agrarian society. The massive influx of a large army unbalanced the Vietnamese economy, society, and political organization. The Vietnamese economy could not support a large army. While the South Vietnamese government exerted an effort to build the military, it failed to recognize the importance of maintaining a strong national police force and large paramilitary organizations to combat Viet Cong (VC) terrorism and provide protection to the villages. Existing pacification programs attempted to remedy this problem, but officials witnessed negative results in the failure of the government to provide growth to these much-needed agencies. Most importantly, the South Vietnamese government had not established a competent internal security intelligence force to gather intelligence on the VCI. The establishment of such an agency became the goal of

American-led pacification programs. Over 17 different U.S. and ARVN intelligence agencies existed, but they did not share intelligence information. Therefore, a body of valuable intelligence on the enemy was not readily accessible or available to any one organization at any given time.

The American military may have inherited disadvantages in waging war on behalf of the South Vietnamese, but the military strategy that was chosen certainly contributed to the final misfortune. Impatience and impulsiveness of American decisions regarding military strategy greatly influenced how the war progressed. U.S. military leaders believed that they could win the war with the VC early on, and when that did not happen, decision-making became somewhat haphazard. The problem was that the U.S. military was trying to win a war on more than one front:

> The Americans realized that to win the war they would have to defeat both enemy components at the same time—the main forces by large-scale attacks on the units and their bases and the guerrillas by a pacification campaign to root out the enemy's political and military underground while providing security and economic and social improvement for the people. Throughout the war, however, American commanders differed in the degree of emphasis they placed on each element of strategy.[1]

In the early stages of the war, the U.S. relied on the bombing campaign to win the war with limited involvement of American soldiers. At the very least, they expected the bombing of the North to have an impact on the VC infiltration routes that was opposite of the effect that it did have. "The air war, while in large part the result of a doctrinal astigmatism which placed borders in the center and a political fugue that sought agreement through bombardment, was not the

[1] Graham A. Cosmas and LTC Terrence P. Murray, USMC, *U.S. Marines In Vietnam: Vietnamization and Redeployment, 1970-1971*, p. 6.

policy of choice. The air war was a result of the policy of choice having failed."[2] Even when the bombing campaign failed to produce the desired military effect, U.S. leaders continued to ignore the counterinsurgency option (or at least kept it as a second choice) as a viable means of battling North Vietnam:

> While Army participation in pacification, given the chronic corruption and absence of leadership displayed by the GVN and RVNAF, would not have provided a cure-all for the problems involved in achieving population control and security, it is clear that MACV could have eased those problems considerably had it adopted a more flexible approach to the conflict. If the Army had followed a counterinsurgency strategy, both the human and financial costs of the war would have been significantly lower.[3]

Impatience on behalf of American military planners produced a "try anything once" attitude toward strategy and planning that resulted in failed campaigns and wasted resources. The Americans lacked the ingenuity in planning that the VC possessed. They failed to realize the importance of strategically using their resources and then gaining a maximum output from these resources. In addition, resentment between the American forces and the South Vietnamese military increased because of these failed strategies. Each blamed the other for the shortcomings of planning and execution that existed during the war. The Americans were more aggressive than their counterparts were, and their approach of "search and destroy" did not reconcile with the ineffective South Vietnamese forces. Search and destroy operations took precedence over alternate strategies:

> Search and destroy operations began in 1964, before U.S. ground forces were committed. These operations were conducted to locate the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong main force units in and around their base areas and to attack them by fire and maneuver. Since enemy infiltration of the populated areas

---

[2] Larry E. Cable, *Conflict of Myths: The Development of American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and the Vietnam War*, pp. 280-281.
[3] Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, p. 233.

> depended heavily on the availability of base areas near the population centers, destruction of close-in base areas received priority attention.[4]

American aggressiveness led to distrust between U.S. soldiers and their South Vietnamese Allies. The failure of the U.S. military to defeat insurgency occurred because the U.S. military did not adjust to the strategies of the enemy:

> The Vietnamese conflict, like all wars, was indeed a political war. Politicians did place certain limitations upon the United States Army's freedom of action. All armies face such restrictions. Within the bounds of those political restraints, America's military had wide latitude of action and clear opportunity to win in Vietnam. It met defeat because it failed to "know the enemy" and therefore could not adopt the strategy and tactics that were specific to the particular enemy it faced, and because it forgot vital lessons learned in its own history. Vietnam showed clearly that our strategic and tactical military thought can be shamefully shallow and palpably wrong.[5]

The basic failure in adapting successful strategies and the inability of the U.S. military to modify and correct these strategies when they failed, ultimately led to defeat. Greater attention to political and economic programs that would help achieve military objectives was necessary. The search and destroy missions conducted had less effect on the NVA main force units than an effective counterinsurgency program might have had, as one expert has noted, "our so-called *strategic* offensive in the South was never more than a *tactical* offensive, since we were unable to carry the war to the enemy's main force—the North Vietnamese Army—and instead expended our energies against a secondary force—North Vietnam's guerrilla screen."[6] Search and destroy missions did not prevent the enemy from continuing with the revolution. "Americans might come in greater and greater numbers but they would always be aliens in a strange land. This basic fact was incarnate in Westmoreland's tactic of 'search and destroy,' both in its conception

---

[4] Hay, *Tactical and Materiel Innovations*, p. 169.
[5] Currey, *Self-Destruction*, xi.
[6] Summers, *On Strategy*, p. 106. Italics added.

and in its repeated failures. Once any battle was over, the Americans returned to their bases; the NLF, indigenous and ubiquitous, would move back in, recruiting among the ruins."[7]

Another flaw that hurt American strategy was a reliance on a massive pool of wealth. The U. S. had vast resources to pour into the war effort, while the South Vietnamese were used to saving their limited resources in the interests of efficiency. The seemingly endless resources at the disposal of the Americans were not enough to dissuade North Vietnam from abandoning its struggle. Rather, it seemed to strengthen Hanoi's determination to win the fight for liberation from Western influence:

> In order to prop up that "backbone" of their neo-colonialist policy in South Viet Nam, the American imperialists have pumped more dollars, weapons and up-to-date equipment into it, while pushing forward their plan for "general mobilization" with a view to scraping up more cannon fodder. But no measure of theirs could revive the collapsing puppet army. The latter's disintegration, together with that of the puppet administration and the ever heavier losses suffered by the aggressors, show the defeat of the U.S. is a foregone conclusion.[8]

The marked imbalance of resources made it decidedly more difficult to sustain a coordinated effort against the VC. It also failed to convince the American people that their tax dollars were working toward a necessary goal:

> There was a clear need to set a limit somehow to the investment the U.S. was willing to risk. But this was never done; on the contrary, the impression was created that there was no limit to the investment. The more Americans came to feel that the war was not an essential American interest, the more those in charge tried to prove the opposite. But they could not arrest the strong feeling that the U.S. did not need Vietnam as a military base and that economically it was of no importance to America.[9]

---

[7] Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990*, pp. 172-173.
[8] "The Puppet Army is Disintegrating," *Vietnam* 133 (October 1968), p. 16.
[9] Henry Brandon, *Anatomy of Error: The Inside Story of the Asian War on the Potomac, 1954-1969*, pp. 5-6.

Discontent on the home front with the progress of the Vietnam War led to a growing sentiment that the American government was operating with an open checkbook supporting a war in a country that seemed to have no significance to life in the U.S. Thousands of lives had been lost fighting for a cause that seemed to be unrelated to the security of America. Concern over the lives of American soldiers influenced the decision-making process of American commanders, and at times shortcomings in strategies resulted from command decisions based on the belief that the U.S. soldier was in harm's way. With each casualty that did occur came the belief that the war must continue. "Vietnam made a change in course more difficult. Every American death made it more important to win, whatever that meant to the succession of war planners in Washington, to avoid the accusation that American soldiers had died for nothing."[10]

The theories of von Clausewitz and von Moltke significantly influenced the American military doctrine of "search and destroy." Faulty American impressions of how these theories, applied in war, resulted in bad policy decisions. "With regard to military strategy Americans seem to have been influenced only by the very worst interpretation of Clausewitz's doctrines and by the Prussian example of Moltke, so that the sole aim of most American orthodox military commanders has always been 'the destruction of the enemy's main forces on the battlefield.'"[11]

Carl Von Clausewitz viewed war as an extension of national policy. He also believed that terror was necessary to hasten victory. "Clausewitz had prescribed terror as the proper method to shorten war, his whole theory of war being based on the necessity of making it short, sharp, and decisive. The civil population must not be exempted from the war's effects, but must be made to feel its pressure and be forced by the severest measures to compel their leaders to make peace.

---

[10] Loren Baritz, *Backfire: A History Of How American Culture Led Us Into Vietnam And Made Us Fight The Way We Did*, p. 120.
[11] Thompson, *No Exit*, p. 129.

As the object of war is to disarm the enemy, 'we must place him in a situation in which continuing war is more oppressive to him than surrender.'"[12] U.S. leaders sought to bring the war into the villages and dislocate the VC from their base of support. The American military commanders justified their heavy-handed response by stating it was necessary to force a quick surrender. "Clausewitz, oracle of German military thought, had ordained a quick victory by 'decisive battle' as the first object in offensive war. Occupation of the enemy's territory and gaining control of his resources were secondary. To speed an early decision was essential. Time counted above all else. Anything that protracted a campaign Clausewitz condemned. 'Gradual reduction' of the enemy, or a war of attrition, he feared like the pit of hell."[13] A war of attrition was exactly what the U.S. military resorted to after a quick victory became unattainable. This decision represented a weakness in American strategy. The Americans then adopted strategies incompatible with their goals:

> There were seemingly universals in war: the Clausewitzian principles of mass, surprise, concentration and so forth. There were seeming universals in insurgent war also: intelligence, the eschewing of area, denial, and high-lethality weapons, the centrality of non-military measures, unity of command among others. But it is most important that the universals be modified to fit the requirements of the local situation rather than the local situation be interpretively manipulated to fit the requirements of the universals. Such an exercise in intellectual thaumaturgy and policy formulating prestidigitation breeds counterproductive results.[14]

American commanders still believed in the effectiveness of the frontal offensive as practiced in earlier wars. U.S. military commanders sought opportunities to use this approach even if it meant waging battle at the first available opportunity instead of waiting for the more

---

[12] Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August*, pp. 313-314.
[13] Ibid., p. 20.
[14] Cable, *Conflict of Myths*, p. 281.

advantageous position. The search-and-destroy tactics, however, opened the U.S. military to additional dilemmas:

> Search-and-destroy operations, far from insuring that government forces hold the initiative, actually surrender some aspects of the initiative. The enemy can choose whether he wishes to fight the force entering his jungle lair or to refuse combat and simply withdraw. The enemy decides the nature of the combat. Shall he lure the government force into a carefully prepared ambush, merely harass it, or stubbornly defend and counterattack? The choice is his, and the government force must be prepared to deal with any and all of them.[15]

The U.S. military planners hoped to use superior technology to win battles convincingly. What they did not expect was a foe who possessed something much more valuable, an unbreakable spirit supported by an effective strategy. What may have hindered U.S. efforts in the Vietnam War was poor leadership. "In all, the Vietnam war revealed a shockingly low caliber of military leadership, which in turn was an indictment of the selection and promotion process within the United States armed forces . . . . America did suffer a political defeat in Southeast Asia, but even more, it suffered a military defeat in Southeast Asia brought about by the ineptness of its soldier leaders. Most of them quite naturally sought to lay the blame for failure elsewhere."[16] American military leaders failed in their ability to direct the fighting in an effective manner, and they failed in their advisory roles as effective and reliable strategists. "Our military leaders evidently assumed that although their strategies were preferable, the United States would prevail regardless of what strategy was adopted . . . . Because they made the cardinal military error of underestimating the enemy, our military leaders failed in their role as 'the principal military advisors to the President.'"[17] Many would suggest that the war in Vietnam was merely an extension of the U.S. political arena with the votes of Americans at

---

[15] McMahon, "Indirect Approach," p. 59.
[16] Currey, *Self-Destruction*, p. 2.
[17] Summers, *On Strategy*, p. 109.

stake. "We have seen that each successive administration had as one of its goals not combating Communism, or fighting an international conspiracy, or defending the Western world, but rather winning the next election; any decision that would save the next election was chosen, without necessarily anticipating the long-term effect of those decisions on the overall United States foreign policy posture."[18]

The U.S. military brought ideals of democracy and independence to a country where it promoted military rule. Intervention in Vietnam came as not only an attempt to "police" Communism, but as a function of American ideas of what is morally correct and what is politically reprehensible:

> Observers have faulted our intervention in Vietnam as evidence of American arrogance of power—attempts by the United States to be the World's Policeman. But there is another dimension to American arrogance, the international version of our domestic Great Society programs where we presumed that we knew what was best for the world in terms of social, political, and economic development and saw it as our duty to force the world into the American mold—to act not so much the World's Policeman as the World's Nanny.[19]

Much like the British Empire, the U.S. believed in the need to insert their beliefs and political will into a Third World Country. Just as the British offered those ideals to Malaya, so, too, did the Americans attempt to win the "hearts and minds" of the South Vietnamese with the promise of freedom from Communist oppression. However, a military presence reinforced that promise and the Americans, like the British and French, seemed to push minority parties in South Vietnam toward the fringe where the VC lay in anticipation of a discouraged South Vietnamese people. The VC made a credible counter-promise of freedom from foreign military intervention. The insurgent organization welcomed the weary and confused into its open arms with the

---

[18] Michael P. Sullivan, *The Vietnam War: A Study in the Making of American Policy*, p. 153.
[19] Summers, *On Strategy*, p. 153.

promise of liberation from oppression. The VC promoted the idea that joining their cause would create a chain reaction that would ultimately result in the demise of American occupation and the demise of the South Vietnamese government.

In the eyes of certain U.S. military leaders, the issue remained simple. Superior technology and round-the-clock bombing could bring Hanoi to its knees. By using nearly every conventional modern weapon in its arsenal, the Allies would force surrender. "The military establishments in particular knew how to mobilize resources, provide logistic support, deploy assets, manage large efforts. So they employed all these skills to develop irresistible momentum toward fighting their kind of war, while the counterinsurgency advocates had a hard time even getting anything started."[20] It soon became clear that Hanoi would not succumb to political avenues of negotiation in spite of a heavy bombing campaign. The State Department expressed its misgivings forcefully:

> We agree with the estimate expressed that the Viet Cong will be willing "to submit to heavy punishment rather than give up their long-sought objective of a Communist State covering the whole of Viet Nam." We also believe that they consider that their present course of action will bring ultimate success. Hence it is hard to see why, under these circumstances, they would consider it advantageous "to move the conflict from the military to the political arena."[21]

Others such as Westmoreland did not believe in the bombing strategy as a means to force surrender, "Even had Washington adopted a strong bombing policy, I still doubt that the North Vietnamese would have relented. To force the North Vietnamese to desist, we had to do more than hurt their homeland; we had to demonstrate that they could not win in the South, and South Vietnam had to make real progress in pacification."[22] The U.S. military initiated a limited

---

[20] Komer, *Bureaucracy at War: U.S. Performance in the Vietnam Conflict*, p. 149.
[21] Department of State, memorandum, 20 May 1965, www.ddrs.psmedia.com, p. 1.
[22] Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 143.

bombing campaign into North Vietnam and the decision inflated the costs of the war and expanded the space of the war as the military constructed large airfields throughout Vietnam. Extra soldiers were needed to defend the airbases. Natural resources were necessary to build and replace expensive weapons and planes. This in itself represented a victory for North Vietnam. By forcing the U.S. to keep its costs high, the North Vietnamese gained an advantage. North Vietnam refused to be intimidated by America's military policy as is evident in this statement by a member of the VC, "By escalating the war and launching air and naval bombardments against North Viet Nam, the U.S. hoped to bend the will of the Vietnamese people and keep down its military and political failure in the South. But the result is that over 3,000 U.S. planes have been shot down in North Viet Nam and L. Johnson had, against his own will, decided on a 'limited bombing.'"[23]

The reliance on vast resources for the "search and destroy" tactics increased. The policy supported the premise that containment of Communism was an absolute necessity for all Western foreign nations:

> Escalation in Vietnam—bombing the North and the Americanization of the war in the South with the commitment of over one-half million American soldiers by the fall of 1967—is a policy which is based upon the administration's interpretation of the nature of the Vietnam war. . . .This policy of escalation, and the costs of that policy, stem from the interpretation by the administration of the nature of the war in South Vietnam and the consequences of that war. Again and again, administration spokesman return to a basic theme to explain this war in Vietnam: "Aggression from the North."[24]

The gradual escalation of the war effort by American military leaders served a purpose that went far beyond U.S. military efforts in Vietnam. The use of increased force by the Americans

---

[23] Tra Chau, "U.S. Failure is Obvious," p. 5.
[24] Vance Hartke, *The American Crisis in Vietnam*, p. 64.

had more to do with U.S. foreign policy and how NATO Allies and American voters would view the U.S. as a world power:

> The use of force has, in fact, become ever more concerned with a global image and the wish to demonstrate to an international audience (and to voters in the United States) that the Administration is resolute and that America's allies can rely upon its power for their protection. More and more the weight of American power in Vietnam has been increased because of considerations transcending that country and even Southeast Asia as a whole. Thus, insofar as escalation involves a relationship between ends and means, in its involvement in Vietnam the United States is concerned with ends that go far beyond that country itself.[25]

An example of technical overreach was the American helicopter. "As American critics of the choppers predicted, they were extremely vulnerable to ambush; and though they provided mobility, they also revealed troop numbers and location. Like tactical aircraft, they eliminated the element of surprise."[26] Although they were marvels in technological achievement, helicopters in Vietnam represented the impatience behind American military policy. Aside from the helicopter's vulnerability to ground attack (a single VC rifle could disable or destroy one American helicopter), the helicopters represented a miscalculation in American strategy. The helicopter was the main resource relied upon in the "search and destroy" assaults on the VC. Even though the helicopter is responsible for success in many battles, it in some ways encouraged errors in judgment by American military commanders. Many commanders viewed effective strategy as winning battles by conducting fire missions from the air. What the helicopter should have been used for were effective clear-and-hold operations, the defense of secured areas, and the surprise advance:

> Our large fleet of helicopters can take us almost anywhere. Under a clear-and-hold strategy, instead of moving forces into the insurgent's stronghold, helicopters would be used to reinforce parts of the defensive-ambush belt under attack, or to

---

[25] George McTurnan Kahin and John W. Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam: An Analysis in Depth of the History of America's Involvement in Vietnam*, p. 182.
[26] Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, p. 192.

> counterattack an enemy force or cut off its escape. They would take advantage of positive intelligence, such as in destroying supply caches, or in swooping down suddenly on a base or reserve areas when surprise was assured.[27]

The helicopter held a distinct advantage while flying over VC troops at high speeds with heavy machine guns firing out its cargo doors, but the advantage of conducting these types of missions was illusory at best. Advancing U.S. troops could gain no ground in an insecure area, and, although the helicopter might force a temporary retreat of VC forces, these units simply returned to the jungles undetected without an accurate number of casualties being determined. The most important role of the American helicopter came not from fire missions, but from its ability to extract wounded men from all types of terrain day and night.

In their effort to secure and hold South Vietnamese villages, the U.S. Marines achieved success with the introduction of "Combined Action Companies" or platoons. The platoon consisted of twelve to fourteen marines whose sole mission was providing protection for the village population.[28] Such securing operations "were directed at the enemy in the hamlets—at the infrastructure and the farmers by day and at the Viet Cong guerrillas by night—who operated individually as well as in squads and platoons."[29] Unlike the U.S. Army, the Marines did not rely on the helicopter for incursion or extraction procedures, rather they secured a village population by engaging the enemy in ground warfare day after day until the region was secure. Once an area was secured the Marines continued to conduct patrols and maintained a presence in the area to discourage VC activities, "In what may be called a pacification approach to anti-insurgency warfare, the marines achieved some noteworthy results, particularly with one of the more ingenious innovations developed in South Vietnam, the Combined Action Platoon.

---

[27] McMahon, "Indirect Approach," p. 61.
[28] Thompson, *No Exit*, p. 138.
[29] Hay, *Tactical and Materiel Innovations*, p. 170.

Composed of marine volunteers and Vietnamese militia, the platoon would move into a village and stay, getting to know the people, winning their trust, and working closely on civic action projects."[30] The Marines provided assistance in "education, training public works, agriculture, transportation, communications, health, sanitation, and public security."[31] Despite such programs the Marines could never occupy enough villages because of the expanded space of the war. After a period of time, the Americans reduced mobile operations in favor of a positional war strategy that required exhaustively defending previously secured areas, thereby, diverting Marine resources from the villages.

American military operations in Vietnam failed to defeat the North Vietnamese main force units openly on the battlefield and to reduce infiltration in the countryside. The Americans never controlled infiltration routes, and they were unable to penetrate the insurgent infrastructure in South Vietnam. In the political ring of war, not winning the war outright meant losing it. Essentially, the American military tried to fight a conventional war against an unconventional enemy: "Many of the army's various tactics were developed in *ad hoc* fashion depending upon our abilities at any given time, i.e., the number of troops we had in-country . . . Somehow that makes it even worse. To lose a guerrilla war for which we were unprepared would have been one thing. To lose a conventional war against a rag-tag, bobtail collection of ill-equipped soldiers is quite another."[32]

Military strategy is the responsibility of military leadership. In Vietnam, American leaders failed to apply proper strategies compatible with the situation:

> Certain inhibiting factors—called *friction* by Clausewitz for want of a better word—in the American culture impeded the efficient prosecution of the war.

---

[30] Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 216.
[31] Department of Defense, report, 2 May 1978, www.ddrs.psmedia.com, p. 1.
[32] Currey, *Self-Destruction*, p. 59. Italics added.

> These included the people, their elected political representatives, potentially unacceptable political and military risks, and faulty military doctrines and beliefs. In addition, an incorrect assessment of the true nature of the war, coupled with a departure from certain general principles of war, contributed to the American failure. Ultimately, all of these ills evolved from the shallowness of the top political and military leaders in the United States.[33]

The U.S. could not win a guerrilla conflict using conventional tactics. The attrition strategy forced a stalemate rather than a victory. As Westmoreland recalls the only option was a war of attrition due to the constraints he believes existed for U.S. forces in Vietnam:

> In any case, what alternative was there to a war of attrition? A ground invasion of North Vietnam was out, for the U.S. national policy was not to conquer North Vietnam but to eliminate the insurgency inside South Vietnam, and President Johnson had stated publicly that he would not "broaden" the war. Because the number of American troops at my disposal would for long be limited, attacking the enemy inside Laos and Cambodia would be beyond my means for months, even years; I would grapple with restrictions on those operations when the time came, although I was destined never to overcome the restrictions. Meanwhile, I had to get on with meeting the crisis within South Vietnam, and only by seeking, fighting, and destroying the enemy could that be done.[34]

What strategy should the U.S. have adopted in Vietnam? This question may be answered by looking at previous insurgencies, and how the counterinsurgents responded. One theory, presented by LTC Richard McMahon, derived from the theory of "indirect approach" presented by Sir Basil Liddell Hart. With an indirect approach, the focus of the counterinsurgency must be in "dislocating" the enemy from its support structure:

> Basically, the indirect approach seeks to dislocate the enemy rather than destroy him. It is a strategy which tries to reduce physical combat to the absolute minimum. It relies heavily on surprise and psychological means to lower the enemy's morale, and upon maneuver to disrupt his dispositions, interdict his lines of supply and cut off his routes of escape . . . . It would avoid search-and-destroy operations in favor of clear-and-hold actions designed to drive the insurgent permanently and completely from his population base. It would concentrate on securing and winning over the people, rather than annihilating the

---

[33] Peter M. Dunn, "*On Strategy* Revisited: Clausewitz and Revolutionary War," p. 95. Italics added.
[34] Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, pp. 198-199.

> insurgent. It would rely on intensive patrolling by small units and highly effective intelligence agencies to find insurgent bases and caches, and to round up insurgent leaders, agents and sympathizers.[35]

The indirect approach was what pacification advisers desired to accomplish in Vietnam, yet could never effectively institute due to the fact that their agenda seemed to take second chair to large-scale military operations. In fact, the U.S. pursued similar strategies early in the Vietnam conflict. The problem was that the decision to wage conventional war shifted strategy, and, having done so, the U.S. could not revert back to an unconventional warfare policy:

> The demands of conventional and unconventional warfare differ so greatly that an organization optimized to succeed in one will have great difficulty in fighting the other and in adapting itself to meet changing requirements in the course of the conflict. In fact, the very organizational culture that makes an institution effective in one area may blind it to the possibility that its strengths in that field were crippling deficiencies in a different situation-the more debilitating for being so deeply rooted in the culture that they were never even recognized, much less questioned.[36]

The difference between the indirect approach recommended by Hart and the direct approach adopted by the U.S. military in Vietnam was evident in the search-and-destroy missions conducted:

> A successful search and destroy operation had to contain several elements to achieve maximum effect. Timely, reliable intelligence was essential. Commanders had to be able to discern the presence of enemy forces in a general area and then to pinpoint the precise locations of individual units within that area before an attack could proceed. Once the assault began, they then had to be able to hold the enemy in place long enough to defeat him.[37]

Search and destroy missions required a great deal of resources. However, dislocating the enemy through indirect action would have succeeded much better with fewer losses. An indirect

---

[35] McMahon, "Indirect Approach," pp. 57-58.
[36] John A. Nagl, "Learning to eat soup with a knife: British and American army counterinsurgency learning during the Malayan emergency and the Vietnam War," p. 3.
[37] John M. Carland, *Combat Operations: Stemming The Tide, May 1965 to October 1966*, p. 160.

approach "would adopt a strategy that appeared defensive (clear-and-hold) but which would actually be offensive (gradually expanding control over an ever-larger population base)."[38] This objective simultaneously covered issues of village security, government policy reforms, and allowed for the containment of the insurgent army. By establishing security first, further military objectives could be obtained by advancing the operations: "What the opponents of a clear-and-hold strategy perhaps fail to appreciate is that it is not defensive, but offensive. Although it establishes a defensive ambush belt around a particular populated area, it is not static. Once it has established positive security and control in the first area, it moves forward, slowly but inexorably encompassing more and more people."[39] A clear-and-hold strategy would have made infiltration difficult for the enemy. The strategy of indirect approach distinguished itself from search-and-destroy tactics because it would not seek to reduce the geographical boundaries at the enemy's disposal. "'Clear-and-hold' differed greatly from 'search and destroy,' which was widely employed during the initial stage of active US participation in the war. For even when Communist units had been effectively defeated or driven away from a certain area, they were still able to return and renew their activities if there were no friendly force to secure the area."[40] In a memorandum to the U.S. Secretary of State, declassified in 1978, Assistant U.S. Secretary of State Roger Hilsman suggested to the Secretary placing emphasis on a clear and hold approach in Vietnam. Assistant Secretary Hilsman stated:

> [T]he strategic concept calls for primary emphasis on giving security to the villagers. The tactics are the so-called oil-blot approach, starting with a secure area and extending it slowly, making sure no Viet Cong pockets are left behind, and using police units to winkle out the Viet Cong agents in each particular village. This calls for the use of military forces in a different way from that of orthodox, conventional war. Rather than chasing Viet Cong, the military must put

[38] McMahon, "Indirect Approach," p. 58.
[39] Ibid., p. 59.
[40] Dinh Tho, *Pacification*, p. 20.

> primary emphasis on clear-and-hold operations and on rapid reinforcement of villages under regular units off balance by conventional offensive operations, but these should be secondary to the major task of extending security.[41]

While the approach may have been a primary objective in the early phases of intervention in Vietnam, the strategy employed by the U.S. during the later years of the Vietnam War more closely resembled offensive search and destroy methods. Unfortunately, the clear and hold alternative was not pursued or allowed to flourish during the years of U.S. intervention.

Another alternative approach presented itself in the early phases of U.S. intervention in Vietnam. This strategy involved the use of enclaves, secured regions close to the coast and urban areas in South Vietnam, to create a buffer zone from the North Vietnamese. The theory, endorsed by U.S. Ambassador Maxwell Taylor, was a means of securing critical areas within South Vietnam while limiting U.S. casualties and reinforcing the determination of the Allies to oppose the North Vietnamese. Westmoreland did not believe in the enclave strategy as a viable alternative for U.S. military policy:

> I disagreed with the enclave strategy. As my staff study put it at the time, it represented "an inglorious, static use of U.S. forces in overpopulated areas with little chance of direct or immediate impact on the outcome of events." It would release few ARVN units for operations elsewhere and would have no effect on the critical situation in the Central Highlands. Most important of all, it would position American troops in what would be in effect a series of unconnected beachheads, their backs to the sea, essentially in a defensive posture. That would leave the decision of when and where to strike to the enemy, invite defeat of each in turn, virtually foreordain combat in densely populated locales, and limit the manpower base available for recruiting to expand the ARVN.[42]

---

[41] Department of State, memorandum to the Secretary, 4 January 1978, www.ddrs.psmedia.com, p. 2.
[42] Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 166.

It would soon become clear to U.S. commanders that policies of neutrality and non-combativeness would not increase security in the South. Pacification became the policy of choice and one that would combine elements from many proposed strategies throughout the war. The ultimate failure of pacification and military offensive operations may have resulted from the lack of establishment of a secure rear base of operations:

> The United States has no rear in South Vietnam except the sea and a few widely separated cities. Wherever U.S. forces go they are surrounded by total hostility. Man and nature are against them. There is no line behind which friendly territory exists, where bases and supply depots with an orderly communications network can be installed. Bases are isolated, encircled by hostile troops; communications are non-existent, cut or controlled by the enemy. The enemy is everywhere because it is the entire people of Vietnam, including the cities nominally controlled by the quisling government.[43]

U.S. military commanders often sacrificed such security by concentrating the majority of their forces in offensive operations. Sir Robert Thompson criticized U.S. military strategy because it focused on search and destroy and large offensive operations that failed to affect the rear base of the VC. In an essay entitled, "Rear Bases and Sanctuaries," Thompson stated:

> I was very critical of United States strategy during the period 1965-68 because it concentrated primarily on the defeat of the North Vietnamese Army's main forces in the field, that is, those that were inside South Vietnam, and on the disruption of North Vietnam by bombing. Neither of those tactics—and I am doubtful whether they ever could have succeeded at that stage of the war—got anywhere near breaking the North Vietnamese will to resist. They also had another effect. They did not threaten the rear base of the Viet Cong inside South Vietnam at all. The Viet Cong, therefore, through that period, to all intents and purposes had almost a free run and were in a position where *they* were threatening the rear base of the South Vietnamese.[44]

---

[43] Wilfred G. Burchett, *Vietnam: Inside Story of the Guerilla War*, v.
[44] Sir Robert Thompson, "Rear Bases and Sanctuaries," p. 99. Italics added.

Contrary to this strategy, the indirect approach allowed for the success of offensive operations by establishing a zone of security first. This strategy offered round-the-clock security without jeopardizing the inhabitants of secure areas. In Malaya, the British and Malayan forces were successful in counterinsurgency because they avoided large battles, and concentrated on indirect clear-and-hold strategies. Similarly, the Filipino Army achieved success against the Huk Rebels largely due to focusing strategy on small-unit actions rather than large-scale warfare.[45] The Americans attempted to win an unconventional war using conventional methods of warfare, and so failed to concentrate efforts on winning the war with pacification as the top priority. "So, whether or not a primarily counterinsurgency-oriented strategy was sound, *the fact is that it was never given a full-scale try*—before 1967 at least. Instead, it was swamped almost from the outset by more conventional approaches to the highly unconventional situation . . . "[46]

1968 witnessed dramatic changes to pacification in Southeast Asia. On January 31, 1968, a massive NVA offensive began on the last day of the Tet holiday. The Tet Offensive produced dramatic results on both sides, and it resulted in changes to the policies of each opposing army. "The country-wide NVA/VC Tet-68 Offensive achieved a positive psychological effect and worldwide publicity, but only transient success on the ground. The VC had performed most of the assaults and took such heavy losses that they were largely destroyed as an effective military menace to the South Vietnamese government."[47] The Tet Offensive dealt a massive military blow to the VCI in terms of the heavy casualty rates incurred. "During the offensive an estimated 32,000 insurgents were killed and 5,800 captured, out of a total force of 84,000.

---

[45] McMahon, "Indirect Approach," p. 62.
[46] Robert W. Komer, *Bureaucracy at War: U.S. Performance in the Vietnam Conflict*, p. 148. Italics added.
[47] Shelby L. Stanton, *The Rise and Fall of an American Army: U.S. Ground Forces in Vietnam, 1965-1973*, p. 245

American losses in two months were 4,114 dead, 19,285 wounded and 604 missing. South Vietnamese regular forces counted 2,300 dead and 12,000 captured."[48] Despite such positive figures that favored the Allies, never before had an offensive by the VC affected so many vital areas of ARVN and American held positions. The Tet Offensive invaded every major city and village in South Vietnam. Although the Allied forces quashed the offensive, the negative effect on morale and the physical security of Allied positions was undeniable. The North Vietnamese believed the offensive was a tremendous victory and they used the event as a propaganda tool against the Allies: "These victories prove that the strength of our armed forces and people is invincible. This is the strength of ardent patriotism and deep hatred for the enemy, the strength of indomitable struggle of an heroic people who have a glorious history of thousands of years of resistance against foreign aggressions and who have already defeated many cruel aggressors."[49] Or as another VC member put it, "The tremendous victory won by the South Vietnamese armed forces and people in their general offensive and widespread uprising this Spring has compelled the U.S. aggressors to shelve their 'search-and-destroy' strategy and shrink back to defend the cities and important bases with a defensive and passive 'hold-and-clear' strategy."[50] The VC viewed the Tet Offensive as a victory because they saw it as the final collapse of the corrupt South Vietnamese government:

> Among the U.S. big failures in South Viet Nam since early Spring 1968, the one that haunts the U.S. most is the irremediable collapse of the Saigon puppet administration. The powerful offensive and simultaneous uprising of the South Vietnamese armed forces and people have broken its backbone: most of the puppet administration at village level and many puppet administrative organs at district level have been swept clean. The structure of the puppet administration

---

[48] Alexander Kendrick, *The Wound Within*, p. 249.
[49] "Storm of Fire on U.S. – Puppets," p. 1.
[50] Tran Hien, "'Defence in Depth' Plan, A New U.S. Failure," p. 21.

> has been disorganized from top to bottom and this administration has lost its effectiveness.[51]

Tet produced two notable results. It proved that the VCI was very much intact and still a threat. Tet destroyed all the progress of pacification efforts during the previous year, and key South Vietnamese government leaders such as then President Nguyen Van Thieu realized that current efforts were not sufficient to dismantle the enemy infrastructure. In response to the Tet Offensive, President Thieu, at the urging of American leaders instituted in the summer of 1968 a new General Mobilization Law. The mobilization law stated that all Vietnamese men between the ages of 18 and 38 years of age were eligible for military service. In addition, William Colby introduced to South Vietnam a new People's Self-Defense Corps and reduced draft deferments, and extended current terms of military service.[52] In 1968, the pacification program took on a new commitment to establishing a presence in the rural community, and from November 1, 1968, until the end of January 1969 the Allies began an Accelerated Pacification Campaign (APC) to produce these results.[53] The APC aimed to give back control of the countryside to President Thieu's government and to maintain an effective administration in contested regions. This control, supported by American efforts, remained under the GVN command as part of the new goal of Vietnamization of the war (returning responsibility for security over to the South Vietnamese). Returning to its previous policies, the APC hoped to strengthen existing programs of Phung Huong, Chieu Hoi, and village hamlet security, and to accelerate these efforts by coordinating them as one GVN organizational effort.

---

[51] Hoang Hung, "The Saigon Puppet Administration: A Moribund Body," pp. 7-8.
[52] Spector, *After Tet*, p. 283.
[53] Ibid., p. 285.

APC focused on areas deemed "contested" to limit the effort to regions not under GVN control. Officials assigned a number of tasks as APC goals:

> The primary tasks of the Accelerated Pacification Campaign were to: improve the Regional and Popular Forces; promote the anti-Viet Cong Infrastructure plan (Phoenix); reform local government; organize the people into self-defense forces; enforce economic revival measures; improve information and propaganda; implement the Chieu Hoi or "Open Arms" program; and assist in the accelerated rehabilitation and resettlement of refugees.[54]

Following Tet, the APC was successful in limiting the number of offensive attacks by the VC, but the overall success of the program fell under scrutiny in Washington for claiming to be more successful than it actually was. Although it limited the number of enemy attacks and restored some security to the countryside, the Accelerated Pacification Campaign achieved little more than its predecessors with regards to eliminating the enemy infrastructure. In addition, the APC served as yet another focal point for VC propaganda. The VC described APC as a method of mass destruction by U.S. forces:

> Under the impact of the South Vietnamese armed forces and people's powerful attacks and uprisings, the U.S. aggressors and their agents have been driven into an ever more dangerous predicament. Like cornered wild beasts, they have resorted to terror, massacre, concentration of the people . . . . which they have called "accelerated pacification." Many savage "sweeps" have been launched and air and naval forces mustered for increased bombings and shellings of the populated areas next door to South Viet Nam cities.[55]

The Accelerated Pacification Campaign represented a temporary answer to a permanent problem that resulted from the NVA success during the Tet Offensive. After Tet, security in the countryside diminished. The VC overran and destroyed RF/PF outposts and attacked and disabled RD cadre teams. They captured and destroyed records, vehicles, and supplies intended to aid the pacification effort. Allied forces left village hamlets unprotected and diverted soldiers,

---

[54] Smith, *U.S. Marines In Vietnam*, p. 281.
[55] "Realities on the so-called 'Accelerated Pacification,'" *Vietnam* 137 (February 1969), p. 27.

cadres, and police units to aid in the national defense of urban areas. The fledgling Phoenix program was also negatively affected. Allied forces also used intelligence centers meant for operations in support of Phoenix as centers for the analysis of NVA troop movements and intelligence reports. At this point, the issue was whether or not successful pacification programs would even allow Allied forces to maintain village security and still be able to mobilize to meet the external VC threat:

> Perhaps the most difficult problem in South Vietnam is to pacify and provide adequate security for large populated areas of the countryside. Although we can now successfully secure and pacify almost any area in South Vietnam if we are willing to put enough troops into it, we have not yet succeeded in creating a sufficiently secure environment so that it is possible to withdraw a substantial number of troops from a pacified area without a corresponding drop in security . . . . Thus, if present troop levels are maintained, it is imperative that we are able to pacify an area so that troops can be withdrawn for use in contested or VC-controlled districts.[56]

The Tet Offensive marked a change in strategy for the Allied forces. No longer were "search and destroy" missions used by the U.S. military. Tet proved that the VC were capable of mounting offensive operations. The Allies now placed the emphasis on improving the capabilities of the GVN forces to protect and defend their own territory. This was exactly what the APC attempted to improve upon. The Allies could not afford the luxury of invading enemy areas in hopes of securing more geographic regions. Held positions must remain under Allied control, and must be successfully defended.

The VC suffered irreparable losses in the 1968 Tet Offensive. In the years following, the VC concentrated its efforts on small-unit military operations instead of large nationwide offenses. These operations targeted the RF/PF forces in the countryside. Villages and rural outposts

---

[56] Frank E. Armbruster, Raymond D. Gastil, Herman Kahn, William Pfaff, and Edmund Stillman, *Can We Win in Vietnam?,* p. 57.

received the brunt of NVA aggression in rural Vietnam. In spite of this fact the RF/PF forces and South Vietnamese police forces continued to grow as VC losses accumulated.

Small-unit actions by the NVA continued and no major offenses were launched until March 1972. On Good Friday, 1972, thirteen NVA divisions along with heavily armed VC units invaded South Vietnam.[57] The 1972 Easter Offensive marked the beginning of the end of pacification for the Allied forces. The offensive included a four-pronged attack across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that drove the GVN forces back. At this time only a few U.S. Army units remained in Vietnam after the U.S. removed most of its ground forces from the country. The 1972 offensive was an attempt by the NVA to thwart pacification and concentrated the enemy's efforts on regaining lost ground. The goal was to divert GVN forces away from pacified areas to help defend areas under attack by the NVA offensive. This left previously secured hamlets vulnerable for the enemy to regain access to manpower and supplies to aid in the revolutionary movement.[58]

During the Easter Offensive, the VC successfully captured many RF/PF outposts, but began to lose momentum after extensive bombing by the U.S. Air Force. Many leaders of CORDS viewed the offensive as a victory for pacification because the offensive failed to secure more than a quarter of previously pacified areas, but the offensive, much like Tet, demonstrated NVA resolve in winning the war. Once superior American air support was removed from Vietnam there was little to stop the NVA from overtaking all that was gained in the previous years. The offensive again demonstrated a difference in military values between the NVA and the Allied forces. The Allies viewed success in terms of how much enemy territory could be occupied and

---

[57] Hunt, *Pacification*, p. 255.
[58] Ibid., p. 256.

controlled, and the NVA viewed success in terms of achieving a moral and psychological victory in spite of large casualty rates. For the NVA this victory came as the U.S. military commitment to the Vietnam War ended.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

Prior to the fall of Saigon, the U.S. military and the South Vietnamese government battled an insurgency for over a decade in the rural communities of Vietnam. The war placed great emphasis on the success of pacification in defeating Communist insurgency. Never before in the history of the U.S. has the military sought such a goal with the help of a civilian and military management structure working together to realize victory. The Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) and the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) represented a merging of opposite sides of society towards a common goal. Often this structure operated smoothly by attacking the enemy infrastructure in tandem. Many times, however, the structure acted as a "two-headed monster" competing for power and control with neither completely knowing what the other was doing. A similar division of power also existed between the U.S. military and the GVN forces of South Vietnam. Separated by cultural differences, as well as military practices, the combination of western and eastern powers created a disparity between Allied forces. Such divisions made cooperation difficult, and the pacification effort never fully realized its potential. In addition, the U.S. had to deal with a corrupt government under Diem and corruption within the ARVN forces and amongst the village, district, and provincial chiefs.

In the end, pacification fell victim to a reliance on massive military operations to subdue a guerrilla insurgency. The Americans never chose one specific policy or plan of attack. Rather, the approach included impatiently discarding one program as a failure, and immediately beginning a new program with the blind hope that things would be different:

> For the United States winning meant doing as much as possible to master physically the NLF while blowing up millions of tons of munitions and

> supporting an increasingly corrupt but presumably stable RVN. But it never explicitly chose between pacification in place and population displacement or between terror and material blandishments. Rather, in typical American fashion, it sought to apply many diverse programs in tandem. Ideologically incapable of defining a theory that condoned its consistent practice, it preferred justifying its enormous terror from the skies and its uprooting of a rural nation with liberal jargon . . . . [1]

Winning the Vietnam War to the Allied forces meant permanently eliminating Communism from Indochina. From the beginning of the war until the end, the NVA proved that Communism would remain, and that Western "foreign" elements would not be able to secure a small country in Southeast Asia. In the face of such an enemy, the U.S. could never successfully merge the gap between military practice and theory:

> And while the problem of the enormous gap between practice and theory was a lesser cause of America's failure, it does explain how it suffused and obscured its own decision maker's actions and goals and led them to make repeated errors at great cost in time and money. In brief, American-style liberalism encumbered itself again with the dilemmas of being an international policeman, of subsidizing repressive and hated Third World societies, yet of being unwilling because of ideological legacies of past centuries to perceive itself candidly in terms of its real functions and roles.[2]

The U.S. immersed itself in a conflict that damaged its reputation, and called into question the values of the U.S. military. Intervention in Vietnam resulted from the policy of the containment of Communism. What the U.S. failed to realize or, more importantly, would not admit, was that the struggle in Vietnam was a nationalistic struggle first, and a communist movement second. "Despite its communist overtones, the struggle in Vietnam was essentially nationalistic. It was a part of the same process of nationalist protest, decolonisation, and nation-building that marks the other lands in the region. The Vietnamese struggle for independence in a way pre-dates the

---

[1] Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, p. 239.
[2] Ibid

Christian era, and since World War I Communism in Vietnam has essentially been its instrument and not the other way round."[3]

A misperception of the consequences of the fall of South Vietnam into Communist hands compelled the U.S. into a costly war for nearly a decade. An underestimation of the enemy and a miscalculation of the Allied capability to fight a guerrilla war conventionally forced the Americans into the unenviable position of a full-scale guerilla war.

Why did pacification fail to succeed in subduing the VC infrastructure (VCI)? The answer lies in a combination of factors. The strategy the U.S. military pursued did not allow for a proper pacification strategy to survive:

> The combination of ideology and unquestioning acceptance of the Clausewitzian priority upon destruction combined to preclude developing more penetrating and accurate appreciations of the insurgent challenge and profitable responses to that challenge. This combination represented a central, systematic failure. A failure which obviated the most noble of intents and rendered impotent the most powerful of military forces: A failure which gave each marine and paratrooper who landed in South Vietnam in the spring of 1965 an invisible white flag. A failure which would be transmitted by the training components of the "Vietnamization" program to the South Vietnamese Army and, ultimately, help to bring about the defeat of that army. A failure which almost inevitably assured that the next eight years would simply constitute a prolonged, agonizing and bloody anticlimax. A failure which continues to influence in an erosive way American national security affairs to the present day.[4]

Add to these factors the corruption of the South Vietnamese government and military. Corrupt hamlet officials accepted VC bribes, and illicit tortures and executions of VC suspects by South Vietnamese forces lent strength to the VC cause. A lack of sharing of information between intelligence agencies did not lead to a significant destruction of the VCI, and a lack of coordination between the squabbling commands of the U.S. and South Vietnamese all

---

[3] R.L. Walli, *Vietnam: Long Road To Freedom*, p. 77.
[4] Cable, *Conflict of Myths*, p. 285.

contributed to the demise of pacification. The Allies underestimated the ability of the VC to realize their goals after engaging American forces on a daily basis for over a decade. The goal of turning the struggle with the Americans into a lengthy and costly war was the primary mission of Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap. The United States failed to learn from the experiences of the French, and had seemingly forgotten to remember the lessons of its own Revolutionary War against the British. The Vietnam War continues to represent an embarrassing chapter in American military history, and it will forever influence future military policy and strategy.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PUBLISHED BOOKS

Andrade, Dale. *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War—Cover for Assassination or Effective Counterinsurgency?* MA: Lexington, 1990.

Andrews, William R. *The Village War: Vietnamese Communist Revolutionary Activities in Dinh Tuong Province, 1960-1964* MO: University of Missouri Press, 1973.

Armbruster, Frank E. and Raymond D. Gastil, Herman Kahn, William Pfaff, Edmund Stillman. *Can We Win in Vietnam?* NY: Praeger, 1968.

Baritz, Loren. *Backfire: A History Of How American Culture Led Us Into Vietnam And Made Us Fight The Way We Did*. NY: William Morrow, 1985.

Berman, Larry. *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam*. NY: Norton, 1982.

Berman, Paul. *Revolutionary Organization: Institution-Building Within The People's Liberation Armed Forces*. MA: Lexington, 1974.

Bilton, Michael and Kevin Sim. *Four Hours in My Lai*. NY: Viking, 1992.

Brandon, Henry. *Anatomy of Error: The Inside Story of the Asian War on the Potomac, 1954-1969*. MA: Gambit, 1969.

Browne, Malcolm W. *The New Face of War*. NY: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965.

Burchett, Wilfred G. *Vietnam: Inside Story of the Guerilla War*. NY: International, 1965.

Cable, Larry E. *Conflict of Myths: The Development of American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and the Vietnam War*. NY: New York University Press, 1986.

_____. *Unholy Grail: The US and the wars in Vietnam, 1965-8*. NY: Routledge, 1991.

Carland, John M. *Combat Operations: Stemming The Tide, May 1965 to October 1966*. Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2000.

Chi, Hoang Van. *From Colonialism to Communism*. NY: Allied, 1964.

Clarke, Jeffrey J. *Advice and Support: The Final Years—The U.S. Army in Vietnam*. Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1988.

Colby, William. *Lost Victory*. ILL: Contemporary, 1989.

Cosmas, Graham A., and Terrence P. Murray, LTC, USMC. *U.S. Marines In Vietnam: Vietnamization and Redeployment, 1970-1971*. Washington D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1986.

Currey, Cecil B. *Self-Destruction: The Disintegration and Decay of the United States Army During the Vietnam Era.* NY: Norton, 1981.

Draper, Theodore. *Abuse of Power*. NY: Viking, 1966.

Dunn, Peter M. "*On Strategy* Revisited: Clausewitz and Revolutionary War." In *Contributions in Military Studies, 67—The American War in Vietnam: Lessons, Legacies, and Implications for Future Conflicts*. New York: Greenwood, 1987, pp. 95-109.

Fall, Bernard B. *Street Without Joy*. NY: Schocken, 1961.

_____. *Viet-Nam Witness, 1953-66*. NY: Praeger, 1966.

Farwell, Byron. *The Great Anglo-Boer War*. NY: Norton, 1976.

FitzGerald, Frances. *Fire In The Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam*. MA: Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1972.

Gettleman, Marvin E. and Jane Franklin, Marilyn Young, H. Bruce Franklin. *Vietnam and America: A Documented History*. NY: Grove, 1985.

Giap, Vo Nguyen. *People's War People's Army.* Hanoi: Foreign Languages, 1961.

_____. *Banner of People's War, the Party's Military Line*, NY: Praeger, 1970.

Gibson, James W. *The Perfect War: The War We Couldn't Lose and How We Did Lose.* NY: Vintage, 1986.

Grant, Zalin. *Facing The Phoenix*. NY: Norton, 1991.

Griffith, Samuel B., USMC (Ret.). *Mao Tse-tung on Guerrilla Warfare*. NY: Praeger, 1961.

Griffiths, Philip Jones. *Vietnam Inc.* NY: MacMillan, 1971.

Halberstam, David. *The Making of a Quagmire*. NY: Random House, 1964.

Hartke, Vance. *The American Crisis in Vietnam*. NY: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968.

Hay, John H., Jr. (Lt. Gen.). *Tactical and Materiel Innovations*. Washington D.C.: United States Department of the Army, 1974.

Hennessy, Michael A. *Strategy in Vietnam: The Marines and Revolutionary Warfare in I Corps, 1965-1972*. CT: Praeger, 1997.

Herring, George C. *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam 1950-1975*. NY: Knopf, 1979.

Hunt, Richard A. *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds*. CO: Westview, 1995.

Hutchins, Joel M. *Swimmers Among The Trees: SEAL Operations in the Vietnam War*. CA: Presidio, 1996.

Kahin, George McTurnan and John W. Lewis. *The United States in Vietnam: An Analysis In Depth of the History of America's Involvement in Vietnam*. NY: Dell, 1967.

_____. *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam*. NY: Doubleday, 1986.

Karnow, Stanley. *Vietnam: A History*. NY: Viking, 1983.

Kendrick, Alexander. *The Wound Within*. MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1974.

Kolko, Gabriel. *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience*. NY: Pantheon, 1985.

Komer, Robert W. *Bureaucracy at War: U.S. Performance in the Vietnam Conflict*. CO: Westview, 1986.

Krepinevich, Andrew F., Jr. *The Army and Vietnam*. MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

Lansdale, Edward G. *In The Midst of Wars*. NY: Harper & Row, 1972.

Logevall, Fredrik. *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam*. CA: The University of California Press, 1999.

MacGarrigle, George L. *Combat Operations: Taking the Offensive, October 1966 to October 1967*. Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1998.

Maclear, Michael. *The Ten Thousand Day War, Vietnam: 1945-1975*. NY: Avon, 1981.

McMaster, H. R. *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, The Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the lies that led to Vietnam.* NY: Harper, 1997.

McNamara, Robert S. *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*. NY: Random House, 1995.

Metzner, Edward P. *More Than A Soldier's War: Pacification in Vietnam*. TX: Texas A&M University, 1995.

Minh, Ho Chi. *On Revolution: Selected Writings, 1920-66*. NY: Praeger, 1967.

Moyar, Mark. *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: The CIA's Secret Campaign to Destroy the Viet Cong*. MD: United States Naval Institute, 1997.

O'Ballance, Edgar. *The Wars in Vietnam: 1954-1973*. NY: Hippocrene, 1975.

Olson, James S. and Roberts, Randy. *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam, 1945 to 1990*. NY: St. Martin's, 1991.

Pakenham, Thomas. *The Boer War*. NY: Avon, 1979.

Pike, Douglas. *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam*. MA: M.I.T. Press, 1966.

_____. *War, Peace, and the Viet Cong*. MA: M.I.T. Press, 1969.

Sager, Peter. *Report from Vietnam*. Berne: Swiss Eastern Institute Ltd., 1968.

Scoville, Thomas W. *Reorganizing for Pacification Support*. Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1982.

Shaplen, Robert. *The Lost Revolution: The U.S. in Vietnam, 1946-1966*. NY: Harper & Row, 1966.

Sheehan, Neil, Smith, Hedrick, E. W. Kenworthy and Butterfield, Fox. *The Pentagon Papers*. NY: Quadrangle, 1971.

Smith, Charles R. *U.S. Marines In Vietnam: High Mobility and Standdown, 1969*. Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1988.

Spector, Ronald H. *Advice and Support: The Early Years 1941-1960*. Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1985.

_____. *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam*. NY: Free Press, 1993.

Stanton, Shelby L. *The Rise and Fall of an American Army: U.S. Ground Forces in Vietnam, 1965-1973*. CA: Presidio, 1985.

Stone, Gerald L. *War Without Honour*. Melbourne: Jacaranda, 1966.

Sullivan, Michael P. *The Vietnam War: A Study in the Making of American Policy*. KY: The University of Kentucky Press, 1985.

Summers, Harry G., Jr. *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*. CA: Presidio, 1982.

Thayer, Thomas C. *War Without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam*. CO: Westview, 1985.

_____. "On Pacification." In *The Lessons of Vietnam*, edited by W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell, pp. 231-240. NY: Crane, Russak & Company, 1977.

Tho, Tran Dinh. *Pacification*. Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1980.

Thompson, Sir Robert. *No Exit From Vietnam*. NY: David McKay, 1970.

_____. "Rear Bases and Sanctuaries." In *The Lessons of Vietnam*, edited by W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell, pp. 97-105. NY: Crane, Russak & Company, 1977.

Trager, Frank N. *Why Viet Nam?* NY: Praeger, 1966.

Tuchman, Barbara W. *The Guns of August*. NY: Ballantine, 1962.

Valentine, Douglas. *The Phoenix Program*. NY: William Morrow, 1990.

Van Dyke, Jon M. *North Vietnam's Strategy for Survival*. CA: Pacific, 1972.

Walli, R.L. *Vietnam: Long Road To Freedom*. New Delhi: Allied, 1976.

Westmoreland, William C., *A Soldier Reports*. NY: Dell, 1976.

Wexler, Sanford. *The Vietnam War: An Eyewitness History*. NY: Facts On File, 1992.

Young, Marilyn B. *The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990*. NY: Harper Collins, 1991.

ELECTRONIC SOURCES

Ambassador Lodge, Henry Cabot, letter for the President, 19 August 1966, World Government Documents Archive, www.ddrs.psmedia.com.

Central Intelligence Agency, report, 16 July 1962, World Government Documents Archive, www.ddrs.psmedia.com.

Central Intelligence Agency, memorandum, 11 January 1963, World Government Documents Archive, www.ddrs.psmedia.com.

Central Intelligence Agency, memorandum for the Director, 29 November 1963, World Government Documents Archive, www.ddrs.psmedia.com.

Central Intelligence Agency, report, 17 January 1964, World Government Documents Archive, www.ddrs.psmedia.com.

Central Intelligence Agency, report, 20 March 1964, World Government Documents Archive, www.ddrs.psmedia.com.

Central Intelligence Agency, memorandum, 15 May 1964, World Government Documents Archive, www.ddrs.psmedia.com.

United States. Department of Defense, secret memorandum, 17 August 1964, World Government Documents Archive, www.ddrs.psmedia.com

United States. Department of Defense, letter, 1 January 1965, World Government Documents Archive, www.ddrs.psmedia.com

United States. Department of Defense, top secret memorandum, 26 August 1966, World Government Documents Archive, www.ddrs.psmedia.com

United States. Department of Defense, report, 2 May 1978, World Government Documents Archive, www.ddrs.psmedia.com

United States. Department of State, memorandum, 20 May 1965, World Government Documents Archive, www.ddrs.psmedia.com

United States. Department of State, memorandum, 4 January 1978, World Government Documents Archive, www.ddrs.psmedia.com

United States. Department of State, intelligence report, 10 March 1961, World Government Documents Archive, www.ddrs.psmedia.com

United States. Department of State. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Vol. I: Vietnam, 1961. Washington, D.C.: U.S. G.P.O., 1988. www.state.gov.

United States. Department of State. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Vol. II: Vietnam, 1962. Washington, D.C.: U.S. G.P.O., 1988. www.state.gov.

White House, memorandum, 22 March 1965, World Government Documents Archive, www.ddrs.psmedia.com.

White House, memorandum for the President, 28 June 1965, World Government Documents Archive, www.ddrs.psmedia.com.

PERIODICALS

Chau, Tra. "U.S. Failure is Obvious." Vietnam 130 (July 1968): pp. 4-5.

Cushman, John H. (COL). "Pacification: Concepts developed in the Field by The RVN 21st Infantry Division." Army 16 (March 1966): pp. 21-29.

Hien, Tran. "'Defence in Depth' Plan, A New U.S. Failure." Vietnam 134 (November 1968): pp. 21-22.

Hung, Hoang. "The Saigon Puppet Administration: A Moribund Body." Vietnam 138 (March 1969): pp. 6-11.

Kiem, Tran Buu. "Principles and Main Content of the Overall Solution to the South Viet Nam Problem to Help Restore Peace in Viet Nam." Vietnam 128 (May 1969): pp. 1-2.

Komer, Robert W. "Pacification: A Look Back and Ahead." Army 20 (June 1970): pp. 20-29.

McMahon, Richard A. (LTC). "Indirect Approach." Army 19 (August 1969): pp. 56-63.

Minh, Ho Chi. "Appeal to Compatriots and fighters throughout the country." Vietnam 135 (December 1968): pp. 2-3.

Nagl, John A. "Learning to eat soup with a knife: British and American army counterinsurgency learning during the Malayan emergency and the Vietnam War." World Affairs 161 (Spring 1999): pp. 193-199.

Pribbenow, Merle L. "North Vietnam's Master Plan." Vietnam 12 (August 1999): pp. 1-6.

Vietnam. "Realities on the so-called 'Accelerated Pacification'." Vol. 137 (February 1969): pp. 26-29.

_____. "The Puppet Army is Disintegrating." Vol. 133 (October 1968): pp. 15-16.

_____. “Security Comes to Hamlet.” Vol. 4 (September 1971), pp. 9-14.

_____. “Storm of Fire on U.S. – Puppets.” Vol. 127 (March 1968): pp. 1-9.

VITA

Matthew D. Pinard was born on February 26, 1974, in Ann Arbor, Michigan. After attending Catholic Central High School in Detroit, Michigan, he began studying for a bachelor's degree in psychology at The University of Michigan. Upon graduating in 1996 from The University of Michigan, he entered the United States Army as an enlisted legal specialist. He served in the U.S. Army at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and Fort Polk, Louisiana. He will receive the degree of Master of Arts in Liberal Arts in the spring of 2002.