

Kennedy swearing in Taylor as Chairman.



Courtesy Special Collections, NDU Library (Cecil W. Stoughton)

# The Great Divide

## Strategy and Covert Action in Vietnam

By RICHARD H. SHULTZ, JR.

**D**espite significant resistance from the Joint Chiefs, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) was established in June 1942. The chiefs didn't believe an OSS-type organization could contribute much to the war. They were also wary of its director, William ("Wild Bill") Donovan, who was seen as a loose cannon who just might convince President Franklin Roosevelt to assign a high priority to covert action.

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OSS carried out the entire bag of tricks during the war: subversion, sabotage, commando raids, psychological warfare, and aid to partisans. It made important contributions to the allied victory. Donovan's approach seems unimpeachable in hindsight. Covert action must be integrated into the overall strategy. Donovan saw this as a bedrock principle.

U.S. military leaders in Vietnam never gave Donovan's approach a moment's notice and probably had not heard of it. The Pentagon did not consider paramilitary operations by the Studies and Observation Group (SOG) of U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) integral



B-52 releasing  
750 pound bombs.

Naval Historical Center

to strategy. Donovan's concept of covert action was unknown to General William Westmoreland, Commander of U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (COMUSMACV), and to other senior officers who were fighting the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army (NVA).

### Kennedy and Special Warfare

The unwillingness of the Pentagon to accept the value of SOG was part of its opposition to Kennedy's demand for special warfare capabilities.

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The Armed Forces had been victorious in two world wars and had successfully prosecuted a limited war in Korea, where conventional strategy and forces had been the answer. The military developed a conventional mindset, and technological advances in mobility and firepower only reaffirmed that approach.

For Kennedy, however, the nature of war was changing. If the Armed Forces continued to follow a conventional course they would end up being most prepared to fight the least likely war and would be least ready for the most likely war. Although the Pentagon still had to be prepared to defeat the Soviets, the real action was fighting guerrillas in the Third World.

Opposition to special warfare was formidable. It began with General Maxwell Taylor, who came out of retirement to become Kennedy's special military representative. In 1962 he returned to active duty as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He was a strong proponent of

firepower and maneuver by well armed conventional forces. The Army closed ranks against special warfare and did all it could to neutralize what the President had in mind: conventionally trained infantrymen could accomplish the counterinsurgency mission. It was not what Kennedy wanted to hear.

The Pentagon was equally opposed to special warfare. Even though Kennedy directed the military to take over and expand action against North Vietnam, it demonstrated no eagerness for the assignment. As in the case of OSS operations, if there was no way of avoiding the matter, the Joint Chiefs at least wanted some control, particularly after the Bay of Pigs.

The chiefs were missing in action because they had been cut out of the planning process on Cuba by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which used military resources, including soldiers, but had not asked for military advice. To prevent a recurrence, the chiefs wanted control over all military involvement in future covert action. But wanting control did not mean aggressively taking on a covert action agenda.

The decision to transfer the covert war to the military can be traced to a meeting convened by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in 1962 on the takeover of CIA paramilitary programs. It was attended by representatives of the Departments of Defense and State, the Central Intelligence Agency, U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM), and MACV. In light of the Bay of Pigs and National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 57 entitled "Responsibility for Paramilitary Operations," it was clear that policymakers intended to assign a much larger role in black arts to DOD.

Playing to the White House preoccupation with covert action, Taylor recommended to the 303 Committee of the National Security Council, which had policy oversight of covert action, that added emphasis be given to CIA action against North Vietnam. But he did not propose that it be carried out by the military and the White House did not buy Taylor's recommendation.

In January 1963 Taylor sent a team of senior officers, headed by the Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, General Earl Wheeler, to Saigon to assess military and paramilitary requirements for Vietnam. On February 1, Wheeler submitted his findings to Taylor, who directed him to brief the President. The report called for expanded raids and sabotage missions against North Vietnam, which was just what the White House wanted to hear. However, it did not propose that DOD run this expanded effort. It was ambiguous on who should be in charge and stated that unconventional efforts would be coordinated with secret CIA activities.

**National Security Action Memorandum 57,**  
**“Responsibility for Paramilitary Operations”**

(June 28, 1961)

*... a paramilitary operation is considered to be one which by its tactics and its requirements in military type personnel, equipment, and training approximates a conventional operation. It may be undertaken in support of an existing government friendly to the U.S. or in support of a rebel group seeking to overthrow a government hostile to us. The U.S. may render assistance to such operations overtly, covertly or by a combination of both methods. In size these operations may vary from the infiltration of a squad of guerrillas to a military operation such as the Cuban Invasion. The small operations will often fall completely within the normal capability of one agency; the large ones may affect State, Defense, CIA, USIA, and possibly other departments and agencies.*

*... the Department of Defense will normally receive responsibility for overt paramilitary operations. Where such an operation is to be wholly covert or disavowable, it may be assigned to CIA, provided that it is within the normal capabilities of that agency. Any large paramilitary operation wholly or partially covert which requires significant numbers of militarily trained personnel, amounts of military equipment which exceed normal CIA controlled stocks, and/or military experience of a kind and level particular to the Armed Services is properly the primary responsibility of the Department of Defense with the CIA in a supporting role.*

Taylor and the Joint Chiefs were still trying to pass the buck. Foot dragging continued for most of 1963. The chiefs finally directed PACOM to develop a plan. Because Admiral Harry Felt, Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command (CINCPAC), had pushed for hit-and-run operations against the coast of North Vietnam, the command responded quickly and submitted OPLAN 34A to Taylor on June 17.

The draft plan remained in Taylor’s office for three months. Why the delay? Felt wanted to implement the maritime component but could not get approval. The summer passed without any action. Taylor approved OPLAN 34A on September 9 but again stalled the authorization process. He deliberated two and a half months before giving the plan to McNamara. Again, why the delay? The answer is twofold. First, Taylor was convinced that the special warfare was not necessary. He came out of the mainstream and believed in conventional warfare. Second, the foot-dragging revealed a desire to avoid the risk of failure. If the military did not take on special warfare, it could

not be blamed if anything went wrong like the Bay of Pigs.

Even after the White House authorized OPLAN 34A in January 1964, the military showed little enthusiasm for it. This crippled SOG as it was being formed. For example, the Joint Chiefs were unwilling to assign a general officer as commander. According to a declassified document on its origins, OPLAN 34A planners saw the organization as a supporting command—equivalent to a field force—under the control of COMUSMACV. Westmoreland had four supporting commands or field forces in Vietnam under his authority. They were designated I, II, III, and IV Corps, each commanded by a lieutenant general who assisted unit commanders in fighting the war.

If SOG was going to play the role of a supporting command, its chief had to be accepted by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and COMUSMACV. That never happened. The Pentagon leadership had no intention of assigning a general officer—not even of one-star rank—to such an organization. As a result, its chief was often in an impossible position in trying to act imaginatively and propose new covert initiatives.

Laos was not the only mission that lacked support in the Pentagon. SOG frequently lost in interagency confrontations with the Department of State and Central Intelligence Agency because neither Taylor nor Wheeler were prepared to fight a battle over requests which they thought were unimportant. For the Joint Chiefs, the matter was peripheral to the main effort in Vietnam. The White House had foisted it on the Pentagon. Grudgingly, they knew they had to put up with it, but that was all they would do. And at MACV, Westmoreland saw little value in SOG.

### **Westmoreland and SOG**

In terms of experience and professional outlook, Westmoreland epitomized the mainstream Army. He entered West Point in 1932 and was graduated as first captain. During World War II he served in North Africa and Sicily before becoming chief of staff of the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and taking part in the invasion of Europe in 1944.

When Westmoreland became COMUSMACV in 1964 and began planning how to fight the war, it was not surprising that firepower and maneuver became the core elements of his strategy of attrition. He sent American soldiers on search-and-destroy missions throughout South Vietnam to kill, wound, or capture enemy troops faster than they could be replaced.

Westmoreland was aware of Washington’s fixation on escalating covert action, but he saw little benefit in it and didn’t confine his criticism



observe the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and they would count the number of coolies they saw marching down the trail but . . . they didn't know what the coolies were carrying. . . . What I'm really saying is it was a well intended effort and it did provide us with some intelligence. But the intelligence was not great; it wasn't going to win or lose the war.

He had the same opinion of SOG recon teams operating against the trail. The main mission was to infiltrate small teams into Laos and identify enemy troops, convoys, base camps, supply depots, truck parks, weapon caches, command bunkers, and related targets for tactical air bombardment. Westmoreland characterized these as an annoyance. SOG, he stated, blew up bridges, "but the enemy just went downstream, say maybe one or two miles, and they'd use another bridge."

Regarding actions up North, Westmoreland was blunt: "It was basically a waste of effort." He believed putting agents into North Vietnam was useless and played into enemy hands. Asked why this effort was not refocused to organize a resistance movement, the former COMUSMACV exclaimed: "That was a decision from Washington. . . . Lyndon Johnson would not be a party to broadening the war. And that was considered broadening the war."

Policymakers were alarmed that fostering instability in North Vietnam might cause China to intervene. They did not want a second Korea. In Westmoreland's mind SOG had no contribution to make: "It was a sideshow as far as the military was concerned. . . . The contribution was a kind of pinprick." Was there any role for SOG? He did not think so: "Not if you're thinking in terms of winning the war."

He conceded that Washington's many restrictions inhibited SOG. If things were different, if he had complete authority to use SOG, would its contribution have been more significant? After contemplating, Westmoreland answered: "Conceivably, but on the scale of maybe ten percent." He added that SOG activities took place in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, outside his area of responsibility. In the chain of command, these areas were under PACOM. "I never particularly made an issue of it—saying it should be my authority, not theirs, because in the final analysis SOG didn't amount to a damn. The impact of it was totally incidental."

### A Theater Strategy

Westmoreland's remark about geographical limitations on his area points to another reason SOG was not integrated strategically. The way combat responsibilities were assigned in Southeast Asia thwarted a unified approach. There was no strategy for fighting the war. If there had been it

to those who planned and executed covert action. He also thought that the best and the brightest in the White House had an overblown and misplaced faith in what covert action could accomplish, in particular McNamara.

### Westmoreland thought that the White House had misplaced faith in what covert actions could accomplish

What about SOG? Didn't it at least provide valuable intelligence on enemy activities on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, information that could not be obtained either through overhead photography or electronically breaking into North Vietnamese communication systems? Westmoreland offered his perspective in an interview with the author conducted in October 1997:

*Well, it was helpful in that they were able to get a team of Special Forces people and put them on a hill where they could*

would have consisted of several coordinated operational campaigns aimed at parts of the theater in which Hanoi carried out its own military efforts.

Campaigns focus on strategic objectives, and there must be a symbiotic connection between campaigns and military strategy. Strategy sets the focus for campaigns, and in turn all campaigns support the aims of strategy. This implies an interrelationship between policy, which is devised by the civilian decisionmakers, and military strategy and operational campaigns. Policy sets the goals that strategy seeks to attain. Campaigns are meaningful when consolidated into strategy.

The strategy for fighting in Vietnam was bereft of any such approach. Instead, disharmony was at play. Coordination and integration never occurred. In part, this resulted because there was

**SOG was an orphan in the chain of command because of the indifference of senior officers**

no unity of effort within the theater. The way that missions were divided offers a telling example. Westmoreland commanded forces in South Vietnam but exercised no authority outside its borders. Within his area of responsibility, he devised a strategy for fighting the communists. Although his concept of operations had to be cleared in Washington and supervised by PACOM, he determined how to fight the ground war. This approach found a receptive audience in the Joint Chiefs because it was quintessentially mainstream. There was little interference from PACOM.

CINCPAC technically exercised responsibility for the entire Southeast Asian theater of war from Honolulu. In reality, however, his primary role was command of both Navy and Air Force air assets conducting combat missions over Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

Taylor in Vietnam with Harkins.



Courtesy, Special Collections, NDU Library

The two officers who served as CINCPAC between 1964 and 1972, Admirals U.S. Grant Sharp and John McCain, cleared all bombing operations with Washington. While Westmoreland did the same, he had more latitude in shaping his concept of operations, at least until the war turned sour in 1968. The bombing campaigns executed by PACOM received much closer scrutiny from Washington than the ground war. Part of the reason was that air operations were easier to depict. Most mornings there were easels in the offices of the Secretary and Deputy Secretary of Defense with a large schematic showing which targets had been struck in North Vietnam the previous night or which ones were proposed. There was no way to depict small unit engagements taking place in the South at the same time. The most intensely supervised aspects of the war were scrutinized so closely because the bombing campaign could be reduced to comic book terms.

Sharp and McCain had to contend with powerful ambassadors in both Laos and Cambodia. To harness the military as well as CIA, Kennedy had taken steps to empower his representatives to ensure that they were in charge of their assigned countries. Consequently, while Laos was critical to the North Vietnamese strategy, it was off limits to both MACV and PACOM.

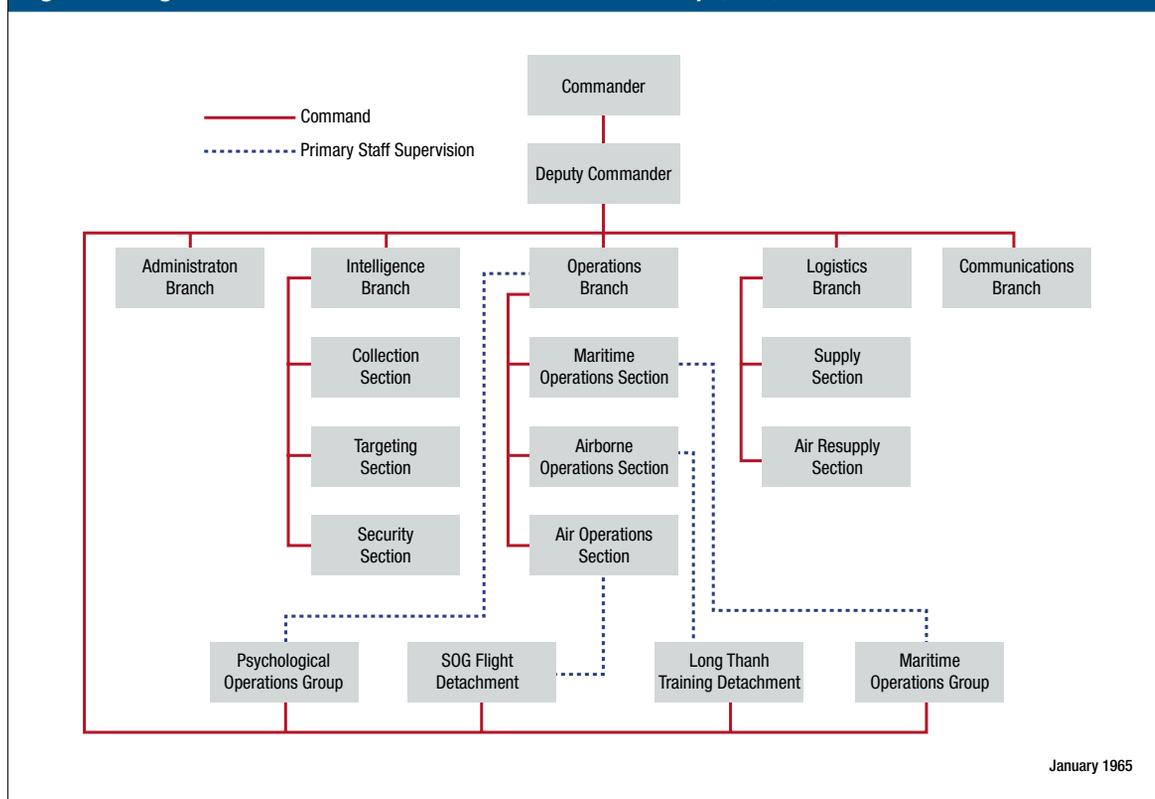
Equally important was the lack of interest in covert action on the part of PACOM. With the exception of Admiral Felt, who was CINCPAC during the first six months of SOG activity, there is no evidence that senior leaders in Honolulu paid much attention. Even in Felt's case, the interest was confined to covert maritime actions along the coast of North Vietnam. At the time, it was one of the few options available to the theater commander. When military involvement burgeoned in 1965, Sharp paid little attention to SOG. The war would now be fought the American way, with large conventional forces and strategy.

SOG was not just *persona non grata* with mainstream leadership in MACV and PACOM; it was an orphan in the chain of command because of the indifference of senior officers. None of the top generals or admirals in theater wanted it because they saw little value. SOG operations were not integrated into the U.S. military strategy for conducting the war.

### Micromanagement

As it was being drafted in 1963, the Joint Chiefs assigned oversight of OPLAN 34A to the Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities (SACSA), who reported directly to

Figure 1. Organization of the Studies and Observation Group (SOG).



the Chairman. It managed the authorization and execution process for all SOG mission requests. However, the position was created to slow the administration's special warfare policy, not advance it. After SOG was established SACSA supervised all its activities from 1964 to 1972. Personnel from SACSA literally walked operational requests from SOG through a chain of command that ran all the way to the White House (see accompanying diagram). These authorization procedures were highly stovepiped. Normal bureaucratic intermediaries were bypassed in order to keep SOG covert activities secret and under tight control.

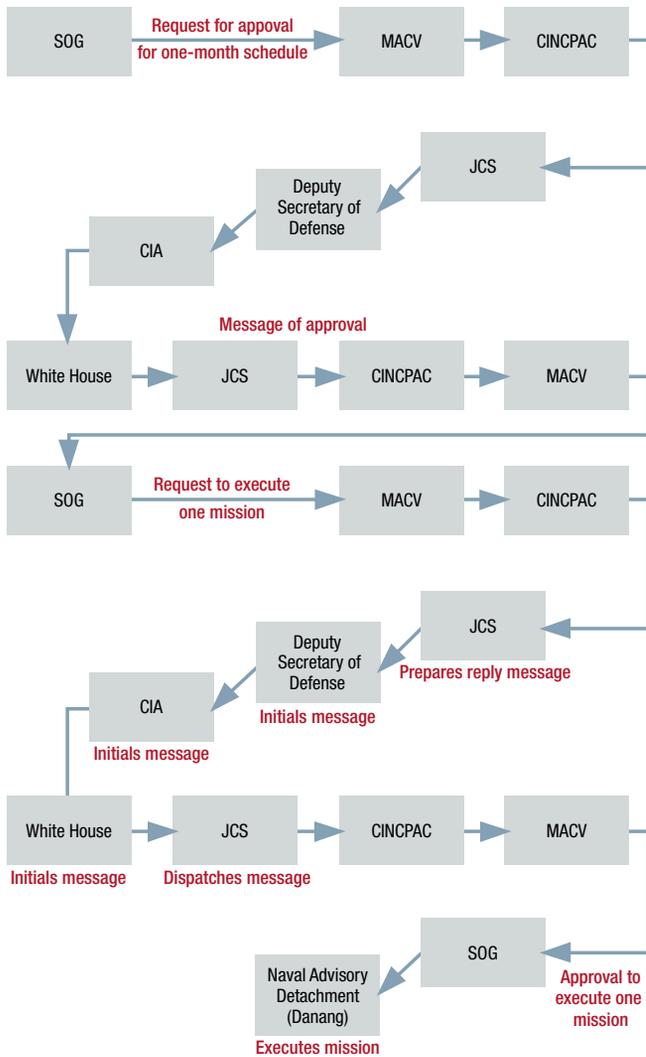
In 1964-65 only three officers in the Special Operations Division of SACSA were cleared to handle SOG matters. One of them was Commander William Murray. His assignment put them in direct contact with the Chairman, the Secretaries of Defense and State, and the National Security Adviser to the President.

The approval process for OPLAN 34A maritime operations was set forth by Cyrus Vance, Deputy Secretary of Defense, in a memorandum dated September 30, 1964. It reflects the general authorization procedures that were eventually applied to all SOG operational divisions. However, it

is not completely accurate. For example, the Central Intelligence Agency only became part of the oversight process in late 1965, when SOG initiated operations on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. The agency was not part of the authorization procedures for other SOG operational divisions.

How this process worked cannot be gleaned from a diagram. It must be seen through the eyes of SACSA action officers. Murray recalled during an interview in October 1997 that requests for authorization to execute missions "usually arrived through a very restricted crypto system with distribution only to SACSA." The request would be turned into a Joint Staff "paper with limited distribution to only certain officials. . . . All of this was accomplished in an incredibly short time when compared to other routine Joint Chiefs of Staff papers." When approved by SACSA, the request was sent directly to Wheeler. Having reviewed it, the Chairman might initial the request on the spot or take it to the chiefs for review before signing off. Once initialed the request was walked to either McNamara or Vance for review. Murray recalled that, far from being a restraint, McNamara was very enthusiastic about SOG. However by the end of 1964 he appeared to have lost some of his zeal for covert action, and Vance replaced him in the

Figure 2. OPLAN 34A (Maritime Operations) Approval Procedures.



September 1964

authorization chain. As DOD representative to the 303 Committee, which had oversight responsibility for covert action, Vance had dealt with SOG.

After McNamara or Vance initialed the request, Murray would go to Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Once Rusk signed it, Murray went to the National Security Adviser to the President, McGeorge Bundy, who usually asked a few questions and initialed the request. But the process did not always end there. On several occasions Bundy told Murray to return to the Pentagon while he got approval from the President. In light of what is known about Johnson's micromanagement of the war, it is no surprise that he involved himself in SOG.

The fact that SOG had no patron higher than SACS within the Pentagon was a serious obstacle. All too frequently SACS was the loser in the interagency fights with the Department of State and the Central Intelligence Agency. SACS may have become an advocate for SOG, but it was a weak player in Washington politics. In those clashes it could not call on the real power brokers to back it up. The Chairman and Joint Chiefs knew how to do battle in the policy arena, but they were not about to do it for SOG. Its operations were just not important enough. **JFQ**

**This article is an edited and abridged version of chapter 7, "The Great Divide: SOG and U.S. Military Strategy," in *The Secret War Against Hanoi: Kennedy's and Johnson's Use of Spies, Saboteurs, and Covert Warriors in North Vietnam* by Richard H. Shultz, Jr., (HarperCollins, 1999) and is printed with permission of the author and publisher.**