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**NO MORE VIETNAMS:  
CORDS as a Model for  
Counterinsurgency Campaign Design**

**A Monograph  
by  
Major Gordon M. Wells  
Corps of Engineers**

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## ABSTRACT

NO MORE VIETNAMS: CORDS AS A MODEL FOR COUNTERINSURGENCY CAMPAIGN DESIGN. by Major Gordon M. Wells, USA, 50 pages.

This monograph examines the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program in Vietnam as a potential model for the design of modern campaigns targeted against revolutionary guerrilla insurgencies. The Vietnam War ended in failure; yet it represents America's most recent major effort against a guerrilla insurgency. Because U.S. vital strategic interests are likely to be threatened by insurgent movements in the future, an analysis of our record in countering the Vietcong insurgency demands attention.

Although the U.S. failed to develop a viable counterstrategy to the Maoist revolutionary guerrilla strategy of North Vietnam (*dau tranh*), CORDS was a step in the right direction, albeit too late. CORDS effectively tied together the myriad of existing political, informational, economic, and military pacification programs into a synergistic whole. Based on a high degree of bureaucratic and organizational flexibility, CORDS enjoyed a respectable degree of success in countering the Vietcong insurgency.

In this regard, CORDS provides us with a good model for the design of counterinsurgency campaigns. It also demonstrates that counterinsurgency efforts are more than just a military undertaking. Therefore, this paper recommends that the United States develop a national counterinsurgency policy on the CORDS model. DOD would be the lead agent in its development, with DOS being a primary contributor, along with other key agencies (CIA, USAID, USAIS, DEA, etc.).

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## NO MORE VIETNAMS

Among the more popular American themes in the last 20 years is this one: NO MORE VIETNAMS. At the start of Operation DESERT STORM, President Bush declared that the Gulf War would not be "another Vietnam." To him, this meant that the U.S. military would not be unduly restrained from prosecuting the war. Massive doses of American and coalition military power would be unleashed to bring about a swift and decisive end to hostilities with minimum loss of allied lives. So it happened.

Many in the press are now declaring that the demons of Vietnam have been exorcised from the American conscience. If DESERT STORM was the salve needed to heal our collective self-image of the scars of Vietnam, so be it; a good thing has happened. Yet, as professional military people, we have a responsibility to ensure that we do not take the wrong lessons from previous wars.

If we are truly to ensure that America endures NO MORE VIETNAMS, then we must understand the nature of the enemy we fought there and the essence of our response to him. A major distinction between the North Vietnamese and the Iraqis lay in their respective strategies. In the Gulf War, Iraq relied on conventional forces to seize Kuwait and defend against the coalition. The North Vietnamese, on the other hand, employed both conventional forces and a guerrilla insurgency. In fact, the U.S. response to this dual strategy is the focus of much of the current debate on Vietnam.

COL Harry Summers has suggested that the U.S. failed to focus on what the armed forces do best: conventional warfighting.

"The quintessential 'strategic lesson learned' from the Vietnam war is that we must once again become masters of the profession of arms."<sup>1</sup> COL Summers further suggests that the "U.S. Army should never have become heavily engaged in 'nation building,' pacification, and, thus, local politics as it did in South Vietnam."<sup>2</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum, LTC Andrew Krepinevich believes that the Vietnam conflict was first and foremost a war against a Maoist-style revolutionary insurgency. He further suggests that the Army in Vietnam was doctrinally and structurally incapable of waging a counterinsurgency effort.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to Summers, he concludes that, "winning the big battles is not decisive unless you can proceed to defeat the enemy at the lower levels of insurgency operations as well."<sup>4</sup>

It is not my intention to enter the Summers-Krepinevich debate. The diversity of expert opinion simply illustrates the problem of drawing bona fide lessons from an unpopular war which we did not win. Nevertheless, if we are to ensure NO MORE VIETNAM, we must be prepared to examine both our successes and failures in Southeast Asia. This is particularly true since Vietnam represents America's most recent major effort against a guerrilla insurgency, a type of threat we are likely to face again.

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<sup>1</sup>Harry G. Summers, Jr., On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1981), p. 121.

<sup>2</sup>Harry G. Summers, Jr., "Lessons: A Soldier's View," in Vietnam as History: Ten Years After the Paris Peace Accords, edited by Peter Braestrup (Washington, D.C.: Wilson Center/University Press of America, 1984), p. 113.

<sup>3</sup>Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., The Army and Vietnam (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 268.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine the program which represented the zenith of U.S. efforts at countering the Vietcong insurgency: the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) Program. Specifically, if CORDS enjoyed any success in Vietnam, is it still a useful model for the development of modern counterinsurgency campaign plans? The criteria I will use to make this evaluation find their roots in the evolution of warfare over the last 200 years.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Napoleon catapulted not only Europe, but eventually the world into a new era of what we would call today, "people's warfare." The French Revolution ushered in the concept of the "nation-state" which Napoleon was able to capitalize on with his national armies who fought not as professional forces, but as citizen soldiers. One hundred years later, Douhet suggested that because modern armies are supported by a nation's population and industry, such supporting entities had become valid targets.<sup>5</sup> The strategic bombing campaigns of WWII were, in fact, directed against targets such as these.

Warfare had entered an era in which the entire citizenry and infrastructure of a nation were more accepted as both instruments and targets of war. Moreover, other elements of a nation's power besides its military were beginning to assume greater importance in warfare. With the population and economic/political infrastructure taking on major roles in modern war, the political,

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<sup>5</sup>"Aerial offensives will be directed against such targets as peacetime industrial and commercial establishments; important buildings, private and public; transportation arteries and centers; and certain designated areas of civilian population as well." Giulio Douhet, The Command of the Air, translated by Dino Ferrari and edited by Richard H. Kohn and Joseph P. Haranan (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1983), p. 20.

informational, and economic elements of national power became almost as important as the military element of power.

In this regard, modern revolutionary guerrilla insurgencies share a linkage with Napoleon and Douhet. In fact, to the guerrilla strategist, political, informational, and economic considerations actually tend to be dominant over the military effort. Therefore, in evaluating the efficacy of CORDS as a potential model for the design of modern counterinsurgency campaigns, I will use these four elements of national power as criteria.<sup>6</sup>

The procedure I will use will be to initially analyze the nature of revolutionary guerrilla warfare theory, with specific emphasis on the North Vietnamese guerrilla strategy of *dau tranh*. In contrast, I will then provide an overview of the general strategic approach the U.S. took in Vietnam from 1950-1975. The purpose of these first two sections is to gain a broad understanding of how each side envisioned employing military forces to attain their respective strategic goals.<sup>7</sup>

With a theoretical perspective on the Vietcong insurgency and a historical background on how we actually challenged that insurgency over a 25-year period, I will then examine the evolution and general effectiveness of CORDS. Finally, I will examine

<sup>6</sup>The Department of Joint and Combined Operations (DJCO) at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College describes five basic elements of national power as part of their curriculum: military, political, economic, national will and geographic. I have chosen these four elements based partly on the DJCO definitions and partly on the Internal Defense and Development (IDAD) model in the new Army/Air Force doctrine on low intensity conflict. U.S. Army, Field Manual 100-20, Military Operations in Low Intensity Conflict, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 5 December 1990), p. 2-8.

<sup>7</sup>This is important since FM 100-5 defines operational art as "the employment of military forces to attain strategic goals in a theater of war or theater of operations through the design, organization, and conduct of campaigns and major operations." U.S. Army, Field Manual 100-5, Operations, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, May 1986), p. 11.

the nature of current insurgencies and discuss whether CORDS is still a useful model for the design of counterinsurgency campaigns.

In each case, I will use my criteria to evaluate both theory and history and to answer the following questions. As a guerrilla strategy, how did *dao tranh* employ military, political, economic, and informational elements of power? More important, did the U.S. response, both strategically and at the operational level through the CORDS program, effectively incorporate these four elements of national power? By answering these questions, we can develop an understanding of how successful we were at countering the Vietcong insurgency. More important, we can determine if CORDS does, in fact, provide us a viable model for the design of modern counterinsurgency campaigns.

## REVOLUTIONARY GUERRILLA WARFARE THEORY

Now an army may be likened to water, for just as flowing water avoids the heights and hastens to the lowlands, so an army avoids strengths and strikes weakness. And as water shapes its flow in accordance with the ground, so an army manages its victory in accordance with the situation of the enemy. And as water has no constant form, there are in war no constant conditions.<sup>8</sup>

When Sun Tzu wrote these words, he probably did not conceive that his short work, The Art of War, would contribute to the shaping of significant theories of revolutionary and guerrilla war over two thousand years later. Nor could he imagine that the application of these theories would prove so successful against overwhelming conventional forces, first in China from 1935-1949 and later in Indochina from 1950-1975.

### MAO TSETUNG

One of the seminal works on modern revolutionary guerrilla warfare which finds its roots in Sun Tzu are the writings of Mao Tsetung. Further, Mao employed all four elements of national power in his theory of guerrilla warfare. In so doing, he saw the general populace (in China this was the large peasantry population of the rural areas) as essentially being the center of gravity in his theory of guerrilla warfare.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, Mao envisioned

<sup>8</sup>Sun Tzu, The Art of War, translated by Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 101.

<sup>9</sup>For those, like myself, who see the center of gravity as the mass of the enemy's actual military force, another way of approaching this is by viewing the supporting populace as a means of access to the center of gravity. Therefore, in Dominican terms, the insurgents remain the actual center of gravity, while the people become an objective point "enroute" to the center of gravity. (In this regard, I admit to holding a different view than FM 100-5 which allows for a much broader definition of the center of gravity. See FM 100-5, pp. 179-180.)

a symbiotic relationship between revolutionary soldiers and the citizenry: "The (people) may be likened to water and the (guerrillas) to the fish who inhabit it. How may it be said that these two cannot exist together?"<sup>10</sup>

The guerrillas not only operated among the people, they were dependent on them for logistical (economic) and intelligence (informational) support. Therefore, it was absolutely key to have the people in allegiance with the political aims of the guerrilla forces. As one author describes the importance Mao placed on political allegiance over military success: "Territory is not terribly important. The main battleground is in men's minds."<sup>11</sup>

To win on this battlefield, Mao stressed the importance of political education. "It is necessary for every soldier and civilian to see why the war must be fought and how it concerns him."<sup>12</sup> This education process was to be multifaceted and well developed: "by word of mouth, by leaflets and bulletins, by newspapers, books and pamphlets, through plays and films, through schools, through the mass organizations and through our cadres."<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Mao viewed political mobilization as dynamic and as the most important element in fighting a revolutionary war. "We must link the political mobilization for the war with developments

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<sup>10</sup> Mao Tsetung, Mao Tsetung On Guerrilla Warfare, translated by Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1961), p. 93.

<sup>11</sup> John Collins, Grand Strategy: Principles and Practices (Annapolis, Maryland: U.S. Naval Institute, 1973), p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> Mao Tse Tung, Selected Military Writings of Mao Tsetung (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1972), p. 229.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

in the war and with the life of the soldiers and the people . . . this 's a matter of immense importance on which our victory in the war primarily depends."<sup>14</sup>

This political mobilization described by Mao was key to his basic strategy which involved a continuous buildup of friendly strength with a concurrent erosion of enemy strength. At the tactical level, Mao's guerrillas followed Sun Tzu's dictum of avoiding the enemy's strengths and attacking his weaknesses. At the strategic level, Mao managed "victory in accordance with the situation of the enemy" through a three-stage process: strategic defensive, strategic stalemate, strategic offensive.

During the first stage, friendly forces are on the strategic defensive, focused primarily on mobile, irregular warfare to erode the strength of the enemy and build one's own strength, both militarily and politically. The second stage is marked by strategic stalemate. The enemy has ceased his offensive while friendly forces have control of certain base areas and continue to employ guerrilla tactics as well as some conventional operations when and where appropriate. In the third and final stage, friendly forces assume the strategic offensive with the primary emphasis on conventional warfare to thoroughly defeat the conventional forces of the enemy. Guerrilla forces only "provide strategic support by supplementing mobile and positional warfare, but (are) not the primary form as in the second stage."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>ibid.

<sup>15</sup>ibid, pp. 210-214.

## DAU TRANH

Mao's theory of revolutionary warfare found a receptive audience among nationalist leaders in China's southern neighbor, Vietnam. Seeking a means of throwing off the mantle of French colonialism, the Vietnamese adopted Mao's three stage strategy. At the same time, they heeded its author's advice that there are "different laws for directing different wars (which) are determined by the different circumstances of those wars--differences in their time, place and nature."<sup>16</sup> Therefore, over time Vietnamese communist leaders developed *dau tranh*, their own derivation of Mao's theory.

Directly translated, *dau tranh* means "struggle." To fully understand the concept of *dau tranh*, however, it is useful to understand that Vietnam has long been a society steeped in military tradition. "In vast and rhythmic cycles the Vietnamese experience for two thousand years has been invasion, siege, occupation, rebellion--interspersed with lesser moments of dissidence, covert militant opposition, and other forms of social sabotage. Mentally the Vietnamese have lived in an armed camp."<sup>17</sup>

*Dau tranh* incorporates political, military, informational, and economic considerations. As with Mao's theory, its primary emphasis is on political power, with military power as a secondary effort. *Dau tranh* theory views the military and political components not as disparate activities aimed generally toward the same

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<sup>16</sup>ibid, p. 79.

<sup>17</sup>Douglas E. Pike, PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1986), p. 9.

target, but as two elements intrinsically woven together. They are "the jaws of the pincers used to attack the enemy."<sup>18</sup> Separated, they are of some value; but held together by a common hinge, the military and political components become a single tool which has a net synergistic effect on its enemies.

The authors of *dau tranh* (Vo Nguyen Giap, Ho Chi Minh, and other members of the Politburo in Hanoi) viewed the military element of their theory, or *armed dau tranh* (*dau tranh vu trang*) in Maoist terms, with both guerrilla and conventional elements. In fact, Mao's three-stage strategy "remained a prism through which PAVN (People's Army of Vietnam) generals viewed the war."<sup>19</sup>

Until 1968, General Giap employed both small unit guerrilla tactics as well as conventional, large unit tactics. After the 1968 Tet Offensive and U.S./GVN pacification efforts decimated the Vietcong infrastructure in South Vietnam, Giap adopted what he called "neo-revolutionary guerrilla warfare." Also called the "superguerrilla concept," highly trained commando teams were infiltrated into the south to conduct a wide variety of limited operations. Although not meant to be decisive, this strategy allowed Giap to conserve his fighting power while wearing down that of the enemy until the opportune moment when massive conventional forces could be used to full effect.<sup>20</sup>

In 1972, the North Vietnamese launched the "Easter Offensive" with Soviet weapons in an attempt to match the high technol-

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, p. 216.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, p. 223.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*, p. 228.

ogy weaponry employed by ARVN (Army of Vietnam) forces. Nearly successful, northern forces were turned back by American air power and an unexpected tenacity on the part of the ARVN.<sup>21</sup> Three years later, Giap again applied his "high technology warfare" form of armed *dau tranh*, but as "limited offensive warfare."<sup>22</sup> Initiating a planned two-year campaign in January 1975, Giap intended to systematically defeat ARVN forces in the south. As it turned out, the collapse of South Vietnam was total and catastrophic, taking only four months.<sup>23</sup>

Why the fall of South Vietnam was so rapid probably can be partially attributed to the impact of *political dau tranh* (*dau tranh chinh tri*). Certainly, if we consider the allocation of manpower resources, *political dau tranh* was far and above the main effort of the Politburo in Hanoi. By one author's calculations, the ratio between political and armed *dau tranh* ranged from 10:1 in the early 1960s to 2:1 in the late 1960s.<sup>24</sup>

Not only did *political dau tranh* receive the bulk of the resources in terms of manpower, it also actively wielded two elements of national power: the political and informational elements. Moreover, *political dau tranh* also affected the economic

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<sup>21</sup>Unlike his predecessor, Richard Nixon was not entirely inhibited in what he would allow air power to do in the north. The LINEBACKER air campaign (which included the mining of Haiphong Harbor) was clearly more effective than Johnson's constrained ROLLING THUNDER air campaign of 1965-68. From David R. Palmer, Summons of the Trumpet: U.S.-Vietnam in Perspective (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), p. 252.

<sup>22</sup>Pike, p. 229.

<sup>23</sup>George C. Herring, America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam 1950-1975 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), pp. 264-267.

<sup>24</sup>Pike, pp. 233-234.

element of power through the mobilization of resources, both human and economic. To achieve the "systematic coercive activity that involves motivation, social organization, communication of ideas, and mobilization of manpower and support," *political dau tranh* was divided among three "action programs," or *van*.<sup>25</sup>

*Dich van*, or "action among the enemy" was an action program aimed at both the South Vietnamese and American peoples. Among the southerners, a wide variety of mediums were used: meetings, leaflets, lectures, rumor campaigns, rallies, protests, stage dramas, etc. All were directed at enhancing the legitimacy of the government in the north, while denigrating the "puppet government" of South Vietnam. Against America, *dich van* worked within diplomatic channels to limit American use of military power in the war and against the American public, primarily through the media, to convince us that victory was impossible.<sup>26</sup>

*Binh van* ("action among the military") was the second action program and was aimed at persuading South Vietnamese civil servants and military personnel to defect or desert. Promised rewards, undercover agents to spread dissension, intimidation, influence through friends and family, etc. are typical of the tactics used within this program. The actual impact of *binh van* is unknown, but with 12,000 dedicated cadre, doubtless it made some contribution to the final collapse of the South Vietnamese government and army in 1975.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 217.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 236-244.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 244-245.

Finally, *dan van* ("action among the people") operated within communist controlled areas and primarily involved administrative measures (recruitment, tax collection, organization). In this regard, *dan van* provided safe haven base areas for NVA and Vietcong forces, raised revenues, and portrayed the image of societal stability under communist rule.<sup>28</sup> At the local level, this was a major means by which the Vietcong wielded economic power.

In conclusion, *dau tranh* was a multi-faceted strategy which evolved both politically and militarily with the changing nature of the war. Most important, *dau tranh* was more than a pure military strategy; it clearly incorporated three other elements of national power: political, informational, and economic. Most important, *dau tranh* worked. It was a functional strategy which accomplished its authors' desired end state: the expulsion of foreign powers and the unification of North and South Vietnam.

Having traced the development of *dau tranh* from its theoretical beginnings to its basic elements as applied by Hanoi, it is now useful to consider the U.S. response. Did the U.S. effectively incorporate the military, political, economic, and informational elements of national power into a viable counterstrategy? Since *dau tranh* was Hanoi's overarching strategy, we must consider the U.S. response at the macro-level to answer this question.

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<sup>28</sup>*Ibid*, pp. 245-246.

## ATTACKING CITIES: AMERICA'S DEFAULT STRATEGY IN VIETNAM

To win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill. Thus, what is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy's strategy; next best is to disrupt his alliances. The next best is to attack his army. The worst policy is to attack cities. Attack cities only when there is no alternative.<sup>29</sup>

Not only do Sun Tzu's teachings find application in modern theories of revolutionary and guerrilla warfare, they also offer insight into the American experience in Vietnam. Did we attack the North Vietnamese strategy of *dau tranh* with a comprehensive counterstrategy involving military, political, economic, and informational elements or did we attack the "enemy's cities?" In other words, did we pursue by default a modern day version of siege warfare by pouring untold military resources into Vietnam in the hope that the enemy would eventually quit? Unfortunately, history reveals that our approach was more the latter.

To understand the "Vietnam Experience" it is useful to review the geopolitical climate of the world in the years following WWII. Following the detonation of a fission device by the Soviet Union and the victory of Mao Tse Tung's Communist forces in China, National Security Council Document 68 was published in April 1950. NSC-68 described a bipolar world in which the free world had to "contain" the Kremlin-led forces of world communism which were, "utterly amoral and opportunistic, . . . developing the military capacity to support (their) design for world domina-

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<sup>29</sup>Sun Tzu, pp. 77-78.

tion."<sup>30</sup> As a result, we viewed communism as a monolithic force as opposed to a political ideology which could vary in application, depending on "nationalistic admixtures."

Given our world-view, as evidenced by the language in NSC-68, and our stated policy of containment, some form of involvement in Indochina was inevitable. President Kennedy called on Americans to "bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty."<sup>31</sup> Driven by a desire to prevent the successive loss of small states to communism like so many dominoes, from Berlin to Indochina, preservation of liberty and containment of Communism were clearly the required end states.

In large measure, however, the American legacy for achieving these end states was largely military. Having mobilized the "arsenal of democracy" to defeat global despotism in WWII and halt communist expansion in Korea, the employment of similar ways and means in Vietnam seemed logical. In the process we learned that a purely military response is inadequate and that in fighting a revolutionary war, it is often the political, informational, and economic elements of national power which are dominant. Unfortunately, it appears we learned this lesson too late.

From 1946 to 1954, the First Indochina War was fought between France and the Vietminh. For the most part, the French army fought a conventional war against Giap's largely guerrilla forces

<sup>30</sup>National Security Council, NSC-68, "A Report to the National Security Council by the Executive Secretary on United States Objectives and Programs for National Security," April 14, 1950. Note: the primary author was Paul Nitze.

<sup>31</sup>Inaugural address, January 20, 1961.

who would only stand and fight when they had a reasonable chance for success. Arguably, the most effective tactics used by the French were the counterinsurgency tactics employed by French paratroopers under Lt. Col. Roger Trinquier.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, the French effort was primarily centered on the constant search for a decisive, conventional set-piece battle which, ironically, finally occurred at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.<sup>33</sup>

The French failed to hold on to their colonial possessions in Indochina because they underestimated their enemy and his strategy. They were not alone in this failure. The containment policy and a desire to guarantee French loyalty to allied security arrangements in Western Europe prompted the United States to provide over \$2.6 billion in military aid to France from 1950 to 1954.<sup>34</sup> Presumably, this level of investment and the catastrophic failure of French forces at Dien Bien Phu should have caused U.S. policy makers to reevaluate their course in Vietnam. It appears that their failure to do so launched us into the next abortive stage of this tragic war.

From 1954 to 1964, three different administrations supported the fractured government of the Republic of South Vietnam, primarily under the presidency of Ngo Dinh Diem. Through the Mili-

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<sup>32</sup>Although one could certainly argue that Trinquier's strategy was morally flawed, it is evident that he understood the nature of the Vietminh insurgency better than most. See Roger Trinquier, Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency translated by Daniel Lee (London: Pali Mall Press, Ltd., 1964).

<sup>33</sup>Bernard B. Fall, "Indochina: 1946-1954," in The Experience in Asia, Vol. 1 of Challenge and Response in Internal Conflict, ed. D. M. Condit, Bert H. Cooper, Jr., and Others (Washington, D.C.: Center for Research in Social Systems, The American University, 1968), pp. 239-269.

<sup>34</sup>Herring, pp. 10 & 42.

tary Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG), the U.S. proceeded to build a South Vietnamese army "in the image" of the American army. At a cost of about \$85 million per year, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was organized, equipped, and trained as a conventional fighting force.<sup>35</sup> On the political side, despite the millions of dollars in foreign aid proffered, the U.S. exercised little influence over the Diem government which systematically isolated itself from the nation by centralizing its power and suppressing dissent.<sup>36</sup>

By 1965, the South Vietnamese political situation was in shambles and the ARVN was on the brink of being defeated by the Vietcong insurgency. The second phase of U.S. involvement in Vietnam was drawing to a close. The cumulative, indirect strategy of Giap had succeeded in overcoming the direct, conventional French strategy in 1954 and now history appeared to be repeating itself. The Diem government had completely failed to consolidate the support of the South Vietnamese people and the conventionally-designed ARVN was impotent against Giap's forces. *Dau tranh* was still proving to be a powerful recipe for success. The worst thing the U.S. could do was to continue along the same path.

Unfortunately, at the strategic level, our policies continued to reflect little introspection. The period 1965 to 1969 can be described as the "Americanization" period when the U.S. took direct control of the war effort to rescue South Vietnam from certain defeat. Through a gradual escalation of the U.S. commit-

<sup>35</sup>:bid, pp. 57-59.

<sup>36</sup>:bid, pp. 60-66.

ment, President Johnson sought to bludgeon the North Vietnamese into submission with American military might. By 1967, the U.S. had approximately 500,000 combat troops in country and we were spending \$2 billion per month to sustain the war effort.<sup>37</sup>

In fighting what amounted to a war of attrition, U.S. units employed "search and destroy" tactics, to destroy enemy regular units while the ARVN attempted to stabilize and pacify the rural countryside. As one author points out, this approach was by no means the result of a new U.S. policy in Vietnam: "Attrition is not a strategy. It is, in fact, irrefutable proof of the absence of any strategy."<sup>38</sup> In large measure, the "Americanization" period was simply a "raising of the stakes" of our commitment.

Distracted by his "Great Society" programs and unwilling to focus attention on Southeast Asia by mobilizing for war, President Johnson seemed all too willing to commit additional significant resources without making a serious assessment of how those resources should be spent. In the aftermath of the 1968 Tet Offensive, our national will was depleted, despite the fact that it was an overwhelming military victory for the U.S. and South Vietnam.<sup>39</sup>

The time period after 1968 set the stage for the final phase of the war, "Vietnamization." Ostensibly, we were turning the war over to our South Vietnamese comrades under the notion that with continued U.S. support, ARVN forces could "hold their own." In

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 145.

<sup>38</sup> Palmer, Summons the Trumpet, p. 117.

<sup>39</sup> Douglas S. Blaufarb, The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance--1950 to the Present (New York: The Free Press, 1977), p. 251.

reality, under the leadership of President Nixon, it seems our primary goal as a nation was to extract ourselves from a disastrous situation through "peace with honor."<sup>40</sup>

Watching their dispirited "big brother" leave with such haste, no doubt had a significant impact on the confidence of the South Vietnamese.<sup>41</sup> Unfortunately, the post-Watergate era only intensified the distaste of both Congress and the American public for further moral and material support to South Vietnam as Congress reduced military aid from \$2.3 billion in 1973 to \$700 million in 1974.<sup>42</sup> Despite Richard Nixon's "absolute assurances" of "swift and severe retaliatory action" in the event of North Vietnamese aggression, the United States chose to simply stand by and watch as South Vietnam fell to NVA regular forces in 1975.<sup>43</sup>

The picture of an American helicopter making its final trip from the roof of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon will forever punctuate our final failure. To the military man, this failure is even more frustrating when we consider that, in fact, American units won well over "one hundred victories in one hundred battles." Howev-  
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<sup>40</sup>This was particularly evident by the fact that the Paris Accords were fatally flawed in at least three regards. They allowed NVA troops to remain in the South, failed to establish a recognized DMZ, and failed to absolutely recognize the political sovereignty of the government of South Vietnam while recognizing the legitimacy of the Provisional Revolutionary Government (Vietcong). From Herring, pp. 244-256.

<sup>41</sup>As one ARVN major told his American advisor in 1972, "You must remember, Dai Uy, that we are fighting not only for our own freedom, but for yours also. Our people feel strongly that Vietnam is the unlucky pawn in a chess game between the world's two great power blocs. Our sacrifices have been difficult to endure, but we have managed to cope by constantly reminding ourselves that our cause is also America's cause. Every time we see the tall American in jungle fatigues, we are reminded of your country's stake in our success." From Stuart A. Herrington, Silence Was a Weapon: The Vietnam War in the Villages (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982), p. 200.

<sup>42</sup>Herring, pp. 262-263.

<sup>43</sup>ibid, p. 253.

er, as one author points out, this was agonizingly irrelevant.<sup>44</sup> The disparity between tactical success and strategic failure will prompt debate for decades. Nevertheless, I believe our fundamental failure was at the strategic level. Simply, we suffered from a breakdown of strategic comprehension.

The U.S. failed to fully understand until too late the preeminent political nature of *dau tranh* and the need to implement a comprehensive counter strategy involving well-integrated political, economic, informational, and military elements. Instead we pursued a strategy of default: for 25 years we poured an enormous quantity of resources into South Vietnam in the hope that each additional increment of effort would be what was required to win the war. Thus, in a very real sense, in lieu of attacking the enemy's strategy, we followed Sun Tzu's "worst policy" of attacking cities through a modern version of siege warfare.

In 1967, however, a program was established under MACV which seemed to be a step in the right direction, albeit, perhaps, too late. The Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) Program was a serious attempt to give political pacification priority as a coordinated effort for the first time. In so doing, CORDS sought to horizontally integrate a series of political, military, economic, and informational programs to maximize the pacification effort.

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<sup>44</sup>In the introduction to his book, On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context, COL Harry G. Summers quotes the following conversation: "You know you never defeated us on the battlefield," said the American colonel. The North Vietnamese colonel pondered this remark a moment. "That may be so," he replied, "but it is also irrelevant." From Summers, p. 1.

## THE "OTHER WAR" AND CORDS

From 1950 to 1975, the primary U.S. focus in Vietnam was along conventional military lines. Yet, while U.S. and ARVN troops fought main-force NVA and VC units in Vietnam, the "other war" of pacification was being waged as well. It was against this "other war" that the CORDS program was eventually targeted in 1967. However, before examining CORDS itself, an understanding of the history of pacification leading up to CORDS is useful.

### PACIFICATION BEFORE CORDS

The battleground was the "hearts and minds of the people" living in the many thousands of villages and hamlets of South Vietnam's 44 provinces and 234 districts. It was in these villages and hamlets where the vast majority of the primarily agrarian Vietnamese population lived.<sup>45</sup> More important, because of the peasantry's traditional ties to their ancestral lands, it was at the hamlet/village level that political power was centered. The "emperor's power stops at the village gates" was an age-old maxim of Vietnamese politics.<sup>46</sup>

The influx of nearly a million refugees from the North following the end of First Indochina War in 1954 further complicated "the other war." Because the mostly Catholic refugees tended to be favored by President Ngo Dinh Diem, himself a Catho-

<sup>45</sup>James K. McCollum, "The CORDS Pacification Organization in Vietnam: A Civilian-Military Effort." Armed Forces and Society, vol. 10, no. 1 (Fall 1983), p. 113.

<sup>46</sup>Gary L. Paxton, "U Minh Pacification Withstands Current NVA Offensive." Infantry, vol. 62, no. 6 (November/December 1972), p. 46.

lic and a northerner, a degree of animosity developed between the peasantry and Diem's government.<sup>47</sup> Further, Diem's incompetent attempts to centralize power and counter the Vietcong insurgency only served to intensify the rural population's animosity toward the central government.<sup>48</sup>

As an example, the Agroville Program was an early attempt at pacification in which rural peasants were relocated to areas where the ARVN could protect them. Inept GVN management and the resulting outrage of the peasantry at being moved "from their homes and from the lands which contained the sacred tombs of their ancestors," only served to enhance VC propaganda efforts.<sup>49</sup> The Strategic Hamlet Program, a similar joint U.S.-GVN effort in 1962, failed for many of the same reasons.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, attempts on the part of the U.S. and the GVN to establish a strong, *legitimate* central government in South Vietnam more often than not were met with failure. Caught between two factions vying for their support, the rural peasantry soon adopted an attitude of ambivalence. One former Vietcong described his village as being 80 percent apolitical in which "the vast majority of the people . . . were quite capable of supporting whichever side

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<sup>47</sup>Herring, pp. 51-52.

<sup>48</sup>ibid, pp. 68-72.

<sup>49</sup>ibid, pp. 68-69.

<sup>50</sup>ibid, pp. 85-86. For an in-depth analysis of the Strategic Hamlet Program, please see Gregory B. Conover, The Impact of an Operational Void: The Strategic Hamlet Program, 1961-1963. Fort Leavenworth, KS: SAMS Monograph, 1989.

seemed to be winning the political-military struggle."<sup>51</sup> Thus, the socio-political battleground on which the U.S. and GVN would fight "the other war" was highly complex and burdened with a growing legacy of failure.

By the early 1960s, there was a vast array of programs being undertaken by a number of U.S. Government agencies in South Vietnam aimed at countering the insurgency. These efforts tended to fall into any one of the four major elements of national power: military, informational, political, and economic. For the purposes of categorization, I will use these four elements of national power to classify and refer to "type" pacification programs; i.e., "military pacification," "informational pacification," etc.

Besides fighting the conventional ground war, the Department of Defense (DOD) had several military pacification programs in place. The most common were the teams at the province and district levels providing advice to local forces. Also, under the U.S. Army Special Forces, the Citizens Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG) were established. CIDG soldiers were primarily members of the Montagnard tribes of the Central Highlands who worked out of special base camps and operated against local Vietcong forces.<sup>52</sup>

Where the CIDG Program generally met with success, other military pacification programs under DOD enjoyed mixed results.

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<sup>51</sup>Herrington, p. 38.

<sup>52</sup>Originally a CIA program (until 1963) one of the reasons for the relative success of the CIDG program was due to a cultural animosity between the Montagnards and all ethnic Vietnamese. Also, as Douglas Blaufarb points out, "Their families usually lived in the camps with them, but in other respects the CIDG were full-time professionals fighting under the command of the Vietnamese. Fighting was an occupation to which the tribal populations took with more ease than the Vietnamese, especially in the mountains which were their homeland." From Blaufarb, pp. 258-261.

The Marine Combined Action Platoons (CAP) are a case in point. Operating in the northern I Corps area, the Marine Corps eventually employed 114 CAPs between 1965 and the end of the war.<sup>53</sup> Because the Marines were required to live and work closely with Vietnamese Popular Force platoon for an extended period, their success was often a function of training and personality. Some CAPs enjoyed success.<sup>54</sup> However the words of one former CAP member are telling: "We were naive to think 13 Marines and a Navy corpsman could make much difference in such a setting. The cultural gulf was just unbridgeable out in the countryside . . . the fact remains, we simply do not recruit and train Marines to be diplomats."<sup>55</sup>

Whereas the CAP program was primarily a military pacification effort with some civic action, DOD also had a variety of pure Civic Action Programs (CIVAC). CIVAC programs furnished humanitarian and nation building assistance such as medical and engineering support. In this regard, they sought to improve the nation's infrastructure and demonstrate a sincere concern for the welfare of the individual peasant farmer.<sup>56</sup> As such, CIVAC programs were means by which the economic and political elements of national power were wielded.

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<sup>53</sup>Each platoon consisted of about 14 marines led by a sergeant. The platoon worked with a platoon of Popular Force Vietnamese. Their limited preparation consisted of several weeks of small-unit tactics and some civic action training. Ibid, pp. 256-258.

<sup>54</sup>See Richard T. Schaden, "Regional Conflicts in the Third World," Amphibious Warfare Review, vol. 6, no. 3 (Summer 1988), pp. 50-58.

<sup>55</sup>Edward F. Paim, "Tiger Pape Three: A Memoir of the Combined Action Program," Marine Corps Gazette, vol. 72 (February 1988), p. 76.

<sup>56</sup>James K. McCollum, "CORDS: Matrix for Peace in Vietnam," Army, vol. 32, no. 7 (July 1982), p. 50.

Nevertheless, the primary agency in South Vietnam concerned with economic and political infrastructure programs was the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). USAID programs included the provision of care for war victims (orphans and refugees), training of public administrators, and efforts at improving the civil police.<sup>57</sup> Outside of USAID, there was a plethora of independent U.S. programs aimed at solving seemingly every problem in the South Vietnamese government, infrastructure, and economy.<sup>58</sup>

Information pacification efforts were likewise in full force in South Vietnam. The U.S. Information Service (USIS) helped establish the Vietnamese Information Service (VIS). Working in concert with USAID, USIS also helped establish a government radio network, published Vietnamese-language magazines, supported provincial newspapers and "mobile information units to show films and present dramas teams which were a kind of native cabaret."<sup>59</sup> Finally, in 1965, the Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO) was established to coordinate the information efforts of the various agencies.<sup>60</sup>

Of course, a major component of information management is ..

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> "American money and technology helped to repair the vast damages resulting from more than a decade of war, rebuilding highways, railroads, and canals, and spurring a modest increase in agricultural productivity. Specialists from American land-grant colleges promoted the development of new crops and established credit facilities for small farmers. Educators supervised the founding of schools and furnished textbooks. Public health experts provided drugs and medical supplies, and assisted in the training of nurses and paramedics. A group of public administration specialists from Michigan State University trained Vietnamese civil servants in skills ranging from typing to personnel management and even established a school of police administration to train what one brochure described as 'Vietnam's finest.'" From Herring, p. 61.

<sup>59</sup> Blaufarb, p. 220.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

the gathering of intelligence on the enemy guerrilla infrastructure. The MACV J2 coordinated the intelligence collection efforts of the military. At the same time, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) established the Office of the Special Assistant to the Ambassador (OSA) which collected intelligence on the insurgency.<sup>61</sup>

Given the abundance of programs and agencies operating in South Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s, there was a tendency for inter-agency coordination to falter. "It was no rarity for several American agencies to present conflicting advice to South Vietnamese officials at various administrative levels."<sup>62</sup> However, until 1967, there were two fundamental institutional obstacles which impeded a more synchronized effort.

The first of these was "a fundamental cleavage over priorities that plagued American efforts at pacification in South Vietnam . . . security versus development or, put another way, military versus civil."<sup>63</sup> Each agency tended to view pacification from its own parochial vantage point. Generally, the civilian agencies saw economic, social, and political development as a precursor to political stability, which would then naturally foster security. DOD saw military security as the first requirement to establishing effective economic, social and political

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<sup>61</sup> McCollum, p. 50.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas W. Scoville, Reorganizing for Pacification Support (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1982), p. 7.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

development programs.<sup>64</sup>

The second institutional impediment to a coordinated pacification effort lay in the fact that the ambassador was reluctant to directly oversee the activities of the many U.S. agencies operating in South Vietnam.<sup>65</sup> Even though the ambassador had the authority to do so, interagency bureaucratic politics usually made it difficult for him to exercise this authority. Although efforts were made by successive ambassadors to South Vietnam to coordinate interagency activities, all eventually failed due to the fact that they each had their own budgets and "chains-of-command" which stretched back to Washington.<sup>66</sup>

In 1965, Henry Kissinger made an appraisal of the pacification effort and concluded that "there was little integration of the various American programs, that AID management lines were hopelessly tangled, and that the entire management structure needed to be overhauled."<sup>67</sup> Finally, in 1966, President Johnson appointed Robert W. Komer as his special assistant to coordinate pacification.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>ibid, p. 4.

<sup>65</sup>In 1954, President Eisenhower formalized through executive order the "country team" concept whereby each country ambassador has "countrywide authority to manage and coordinate the U.S. mission in all matters involving more than merely internal agency affairs." Ibid, pp. 4-5.

<sup>66</sup>ibid, pp. 4-30.

<sup>67</sup>ibid, p. 17.

<sup>68</sup>ibid, p. 24.

## CORDS

Working from the White House, Komer quickly faced the two institutional road blocks to pacification head on. First, after reviewing the disjointed history of pacification to date, he concluded that "as pacification is a multifaceted civil/military problem, it demands a multifaceted civil/military response" on a country-wide, "massive" scale.<sup>69</sup> Further, Komer was convinced that this multifaceted civil/military response required a single managing agency and that the military should assume this role because of two dominant factors: security and resources.

Pacification is as much a military as a civilian process, because there can be no civil progress without constant real security . . . And let's face another fact: the military are far better able to organize, manage and execute major field programs under chaotic wartime conditions than are civilian agencies, by and large.<sup>70</sup>

Finally, in early 1967, President Johnson agreed with Komer's findings and appointed him to be the first civilian deputy within MACV for pacification.<sup>71</sup> Working with the MACV commander, General William Westmoreland, the two men developed three key guidelines which would direct pacification in Vietnam for the rest of the war:

- Pacification was first and foremost a Vietnamese problem.
- The American advisory program to support Vietnamese pacification efforts would have a *single* manager at each level,

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<sup>69</sup>Ibid, pp. 31-32.

<sup>70</sup>Robert W. Komer, "Clear, Hold and Rebuild," Army, vol. 20, no. 5 (May 1970), p. 19.

<sup>71</sup>Scoville, p. 49.

representing a single official voice, and that each level would be responsible for integrated military/civil planning, programming, and operations.

- The deputy for pacification was not "a political advisor or mere coordinator; he was instead to operate as a component commander" and his staff (MACCORDS) would function as more than just a staff section, but as an operating agency.<sup>72</sup>

With the activation of CORDS and with Westmoreland's strong support, Komer proceeded to move quickly. The breadth of CORDS was all-encompassing. "With few exceptions, all American programs outside of Saigon, excluding American and South Vietnamese regular military forces and clandestine CIA operations, came under the operational control of CORDS."<sup>73</sup> Komer's Saigon staff, MACCORDS, assumed responsibility for coordinating these programs as an actual operating agency. Also, with the exception of IV Corps, Corps-level CORDS staffs mirrored MACCORDS in structure and function.<sup>74</sup>

At corps level, the deputy for CORDS reported directly to the corps commander as his component commander for pacification. In turn, each province advisor reported directly to the Corps deputy for CORDS about pacification matters occurring in each of

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<sup>72</sup>ibid, p. 51.

<sup>73</sup>in addition to most of the programs already discussed, a listing of CORDS programs is instructive: New Life Development (AID), Chieu Hoi (AID), Revolutionary Development Cadre (CIA), Montagnard Cadre (CIA), Census Grievance (CIA), Regional and Popular Forces (MACV), Refugees (AID), Field Psychological Operations (JUSPAO), Public Safety (AID), U.S. Forces Civic Action and Civil Affairs (MACV), Revolutionary Development Reports and Evaluations (all agencies), and Revolutionary Development Field Inspection (all agencies). Ibid, p. 67.

<sup>74</sup>IV Corps, in the southern Mekong Delta, was initially treated differently because of its unique situation. Few U.S. forces operated in the area and it already had a large civilian advisory force. Ibid, pp. 68-73.

his districts. The makeup of province advisors was an even mix of civilian and military; however, in each case, a civilian province advisor would have a military deputy and visa versa. Because security was always questionable at the district level, all district advisors were military. Thus, within months, Komer established a well-defined, integrated, and cohesive command and control structure within MACV to synchronize and execute all U.S. pacification efforts in South Vietnam.<sup>75</sup>

Among the programs created or modified under CORDS, several are worth mentioning. By far, the most successful occurred when CORDS took over the advisory function to the Regional Forces and Popular Forces (RF/PF).<sup>76</sup> Convinced that these local forces were the key to the problem of security at the local level, Komer upgraded the quality of firearms available to them and established Mobile Advisory Teams (MAT) to provide training and advice in small unit tactics.<sup>77</sup>

Similarly, after the Tet Offensive of 1968, CORDS helped the Vietnamese establish the People's Self Defense Force (PSDF), a local organization of part-time soldiers directly responsible to the village chiefs. Assisted by the MAT teams already working with RF/PF units, the PSDF proved to be an important addition to

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, pp. 68-70.

<sup>76</sup> Regional Forces operated in company-sized units under the control of province and district chiefs, generally for offensive actions against the Vietcong. Popular Forces were platoon-sized units who generally worked for the village chief and functioned in a defensive role. Both Regional and Popular Forces were full-time soldiers. From Robert D. Heintz, Jr., "On Basis of Pacification, Vietnam War Has Been Won," Armed Forces Journal, vol. 109, no. 6 (February 1972), p. 50.

<sup>77</sup> McColium, "The CORDS Pacification Organization in Vietnam," pp. 116-117.

the local security problem.<sup>78</sup>

The most controversial program created under CORDS was the Phung Hoang or Phoenix Program. The purpose of Phoenix was to coordinate and focus intelligence and police efforts directed against the Vietcong infrastructure in South Vietnam. In the words of William E. Colby, Komer's successor, Phoenix brought "better systems of intelligence, better systems of treatment of the people we did capture, as well as better systems of behavior on the part of the forces of the government of Vietnam fighting the secret enemy apparatus."<sup>79</sup>

In truth, Phoenix was a highly effective program in many areas, as testified to by the Vietcong themselves.<sup>80</sup> Unfortunately, sloppy execution by the National Police, as well as periodic abuses (which resulted in Phoenix being wrongly labeled as an "assassination program") overshadowed the Phoenix successes.<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, its noteworthy successes in synchronizing both U.S. and Vietnamese intelligence efforts demand that it not be written off too hastily.<sup>82</sup>

Despite the notoriety of programs like Phoenix, overall CORDS proved to be an effective system for managing the multitude

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<sup>78</sup>Blaufarb, pp. 263-264.

<sup>79</sup>Paul Seidenman, "Pacification: A Winning Combination That Came Too Late?" Armed Forces Journal International, January 1977, p. 25.

<sup>80</sup>Daie Andrade, Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1990) pp. 270-271.

<sup>81</sup>Blaufarb, pp. 245-248.

<sup>82</sup>See Ralph W. Johnson, Phoenix/Phung Hoang: A Study of Wartime Intelligence Management, (Washington, D.C.: Published PhD dissertation, the American University, 1982) pp. 381-385.

of already-existing pacification programs in Vietnam. In accordance with Westmoreland and Komer's first guideline, CORDS was successful in encouraging the South Vietnamese government to assume more responsibility for pacification. Probably the greatest single result of this effort was that it induced the South Vietnamese to appoint a vice chief of staff for pacification and later, the Central Pacification and Development Council, headed by the President of Vietnam himself.<sup>83</sup>

According to data provided by the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES), the number of people living in "relatively secure" areas rose from 60 percent in 1968, to 79 percent in 1969, to higher than 90 percent in 1970.<sup>84</sup> Further, in 1969, the number of Vietcong defectors under the Chieu Hoi ("open arms") amnesty program hit a record 40,000 people.<sup>85</sup> Of course, statistical indicators are often subject to Mark Twain's famous axiom that there only three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.

Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that "by 1970 a considerable measure of security had been restored and the ability of the insurgency to affect events, to mobilize the population, to

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<sup>83</sup>Scoville, p. 80.

<sup>84</sup>HES was a system to attempt to evaluate the progress of pacification in each hamlet, village, district and province in terms of local security. Originally based on 18 subjective factors, the HES eventually evolved into a fairly sophisticated, more objective system based on 149 indicators of security. HES rated each hamlet in one of six categories as follows:

- A and B: Security fully established, effective local government.
- C: Government has military and administrative control, VC harass citizens outside the hamlet.
- D and E: Hamlet insecure, VC political cadre are active, government maintains some presence.
- V: Hamlet under VC control.

Although not a perfect system, HES did provide at least an indicator of progress. From Biaufarò, pp. 248-249 and Heintz, p. 50.

<sup>85</sup>Komer, "Clear, Hold and Rebuild," p. 22.

fight, tax, and recruit had been eroded to the point where it was a manageable threat."<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, as previously discussed, a severely weakened insurgency in the South had, in part, forced Giap to resort to the conventional offensives of 1972 and 1975. However, despite the apparent successes of CORDS in countering the VC insurgency, it appears that the program was simply instituted too late.

In 1975, Giap rightly judged that American will to assist South Vietnam in countering his conventional offensive was simply nonexistent. Like the French in 1954, we finally got the conventional fight we had long been looking for. Ironically, the decimation of the VC infrastructure facilitated by CORDS helped bring this about. Unfortunately, political *dau tranh* had succeeded in eroding our national will to meet this final challenge, and so we lost our first war by simply opting not to win it in the end.

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<sup>86</sup> Blaufaro, p. 270.

## **CORDS: RELEVANT MODEL OR ANACHRONISM?**

Some readers probably believe that the era of revolutionary guerrilla warfare is dead and that the relevancy of CORDS is questionable. Others, would agree with writers like Harry Summers that, dead or not, the U.S. military should only be used to wage the purely conventional wars, the wars we know we can win. They might argue that Operation DESERT STORM should be the only valid model for future commitment of U.S. combat forces.<sup>87</sup>

Certainly, there is logic to this argument. Anytime a nation unequivocally loses a war, either politically or militarily, the impact on the nation's sense of self-worth is profound. Conversely, as so clearly demonstrated by the recent Allied victory in the Gulf, military triumph can be significant in a positive way as well. Thus, we do not want to, and politically cannot afford to lose anymore wars--NO MORE VIETNAMS.

## **INSURGENCIES: STILL A THREAT?**

The logic of only fighting conventional conflicts which fit the DESERT STORM paradigm, begins to break down in light of two troublesome factors. First, there is no guarantee that vital U.S. strategic interests will only be threatened in the future by purely conventional forces, like the (former) Iraqi army of Saddam

<sup>87</sup> Operation DESERT STORM would probably meet former Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger's six tests which define the potential use of U.S. military forces: (1) U.S. vital interests should be at stake; (2) Military should only be committed in sufficient numbers and with sufficient support to guarantee success; (3) There must be clearly defined political and military objectives; (4) After commitment of military force there should be a continual reassessment and adjustment of forces, vis-a-vis the political and military objectives; (5) Popular support of the American people and the Congress is mandatory; and (6) Military forces should only be used as a last resort.

Hussein. Second, a cursory review of the current world situation indicates that revolutionary guerrilla insurgencies flourish around many parts of the globe. Southwest Asia and Europe, two traditional areas of U.S. strategic interest, are cases in point.

The Middle East has its own share of potential and real insurgencies. The insurgency which Oman fought against the Dhofar Liberation Front (DLF) in the 1970's is a good example.<sup>88</sup> Its proximity to other major oil producing nations of the Persian Gulf should give pause to anyone suggesting that insurgent movements are unlikely to affect this area of U.S. vital interest.

In addition, despite recent U.S. rapprochement with Iran, we should not forget that the former Persian state is still ruled by a fundamentalist Islamic government bent on exporting its own form of revolution. As one author points out: "The export of Iran's revolution is not a matter for debate; it is a fundamental tenet of the ideology of the Islamic Republic. The preamble to the 1980 constitution states as one of the missions of the Islamic republic, 'to extend the sovereignty of God's law throughout the world.'"<sup>89</sup>

With a major Middle Eastern power like Iran espousing such belligerent views as official policy, it should be clear that regional problems are not all simple derivatives of the Arab-Israeli conflict. More important, the potential for insurgent

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<sup>88</sup>Bard E. O'Neill, "Revolutionary War in Oman," in Insurgency in the Modern World, edited by Bard E. O'Neill, William R. Heaton, and Donald J. Alberts (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1980), pp. 212-233.

<sup>89</sup>Michael Dunn, "Until the Imam Comes: Iran Exports its Revolution," in Defense and Foreign Affairs (Alexandria, VA: International Media Corporation, 1987), pp. 1-6.

movements to spring up in the Middle East based on either nationalism (consider the Kurdish movement, for example) or religion is not unlikely.<sup>90</sup>

Looking to another region long considered to be vital to the U.S., Europe, we are currently faced with a quasi-1914 scenario in the Balkans. Yugoslavia is literally being ripped apart by ethnic tension and nationalism. Although it is unlikely that another assassination in Sarajevo will start WWII, local conflicts based on ethnic dissent are highly likely. According to one writer: "Hungary might be tempted to annex Vojvodina (as it did in 1941), a Yugoslav province of Hungarian-speakers, while Bulgaria again snatched Macedonia; Albania would no doubt have its eye on next-door Kosovo, a troubled province 90% populated by ethnic Albanians."<sup>91</sup>

Yet, in a very real sense, Yugoslavia is only a microcosm of the current situation in the Soviet Union. As two Soviet writers recently stated, "according to official figures, the country now has no fewer than 30 'trouble spots' which, under certain circum-

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<sup>90</sup>For those who might question the possibility of Arab Nationalist or Palestinian insurgent movements, a cursory review of Middle Eastern history is in order. For example, in a very real sense, Israel introduced the concept of a modern-day insurgency (as well as terrorism) to the Middle East. Under the approving eyes of the West, following WWI, European Zionists flooded Palestine with Jewish immigrants in the hopes of establishing a national Jewish state. This deluge of immigrants eventually forced native Arab Palestinians, first by sheer weight of numbers, later by official policy, to move elsewhere. By 1946, a force of 65,000 Jewish underground guerrilla forces were engaged in an active campaign in Palestine to "encourage" Palestinian Arabs to leave. Their activities included pure acts of terror, such as the complete massacre of the Palestinian village of Deir Yasin by the Irgun. From Peter Mansfield, The Arab World (New York: Thomas Crowell Co., 1976), pp. 209-227, 277-279.

<sup>91</sup>"Bust-up in the Balkans," The Economist, vol. 3:7, no. 7676 (October 13, 1990), p. 17.

stances, may set off serious inter-ethnic conflicts."<sup>92</sup> Recent attempts by several Soviet republics to declare their sovereignty are largely fueled by ethnic and nationalist dissent, particularly in the Baltics and the southern, Islamic states. The potential for spill-over into bordering nations cannot be overlooked.

Thus, a very real issue which NATO must soon address is the possibility of confronting nationalist and ethnic unrest within or on the periphery of the NATO area. Potential areas of contention might include East Prussia, the Sudetenland, the Baltic states, or the Balkans. One senior officer has suggested that multi-national NATO forces could possibly be used to lend stability in NATO area nations where national forces used in a peacekeeping role might prove to be too volatile.<sup>93</sup> If so used, this could place NATO military forces in the unique position of having to deal with local insurgency movements.

Insurgencies are also currently affecting other areas of U.S. interest in addition to Europe and the Middle East. In the Philippines, the New People's Army (NPA) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) form two different insurgencies with different political aims, but commonly opposed to Mrs. Aquino's government.<sup>94</sup> In Central and South America, both Marxist and Liberation Theology movements have contributed to a plethora of

<sup>92</sup>Dimitry Tolstukhin and Anatoly Kotov, "Researchers at the Soviet Academy of Sciences Institute of Sociology, Analyze Social and Political Conflicts in Relations Between Soviet Nationalities and Look for Ways of Settling Them," Military Bulletin, no. 4 (82), February 1990, translation by the Novosti Press Agency (Moscow), p. 2.

<sup>93</sup>Comments made by MG (ret) Nicholas S. H. Krawciw, former deputy to the Secretary of Defense for NATO matters, during a lecture on 25 February 1991 at the School of Advanced Military Studies, Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas.

<sup>94</sup>Edgar O'Ballance, "The Communist New People's Army," Military Review, vol. 68, no. 2 (February 1988), pp. 11-21.

insurgencies which threaten governments friendly to the United States.<sup>95</sup> Currently, the Central American insurgency of greatest notoriety is the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador.

In addition, Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Peru, and most of Africa are just a few places which have insurgent movements active enough to make the news with regularity. Also, the recent union of various insurgent movements with the world-wide illegal narcotics industry should be of particular concern. In both the "golden triangle" (Thailand, Burma and Laos) and South America, local insurgencies and narcotics producers have joined in marriages of convenience. The result has been an upsurge in "narcoterrorism" which has made attempts to stem the drug trade dangerous at best.<sup>96</sup>

Clearly, the evidence demonstrates overwhelmingly that the era of revolutionary guerrilla warfare is far from over. Moreover, the likelihood of insurgent forces operating in the vicinity of or against U.S. vital strategic interests is high. Therefore, to simply adopt a policy of choosing not to deal with these types of threats simply because we want NO MORE VIETNAMS is tantamount to sticking our strategic heads in the sand. Does the CORDS model offer a solution?

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<sup>95</sup>Liberation Theology is defined as "a theology originating in Latin America which advocates a radical restructuring of society to redress conditions of poverty and exploitation." From David Dean, "Liberation Theology: Christian Movement or Marxist Creation?" (unpublished paper, USAF Special Operations School, 1988), p. 1.

<sup>96</sup>Although this is generally common knowledge, much of this was derived from two courses I took while a student at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College in 1990, "insurgency and Counterinsurgency" and "Drugs and National Security."

## THE RELEVANCY OF THE CORDS MODEL

Robert Komer himself suggested that CORDS might not be entirely transferable to all insurgency situations. However, he did believe that the CORDS experience demonstrated the requirement for organizational flexibility in counterinsurgency operations:

Perhaps the chief organizational lesson that can be learned from Vietnam is the limited capacity of conventional government machinery . . . for coping flexibly with unconventional insurgency problems. *Unified management of political, military, and economic conflict will produce the best results, both where policy is made and in the field* (emphasis added).<sup>97</sup>

In highlighting the lesson of organizational flexibility, Komer has put his finger on the essence of the counterinsurgency challenge. Current Army and Air Force doctrine provides an excellent guideline for understanding insurgencies and for designing counterinsurgency campaigns.<sup>98</sup> However, as demonstrated by CORDS, an effective counterinsurgency campaign demands the coordinated involvement of other agencies besides the Department of Defense. Currently, no integrated national policy for counterinsurgency operations exists.

This being the case, I recommend that steps be taken at the national level to develop an integrated national policy for counterinsurgency patterned on the CORDS model. As demonstrated by the key role it played in Vietnam vis-a-vis CORDS, the Department of Defense should be the lead agency for developing this inter-

<sup>97</sup>Komer, "Pacification: A Look Back and Ahead," p. 29.

<sup>98</sup>Very recently, FM 100-20/AFM 3-20 was published jointly by the Army and Air Force. Chapter 2 and Appendices C, D, and E provide a useful overview of the nature of insurgencies, counterinsurgency operations, a model for analysis of insurgencies, and guidelines for developing counterinsurgency plans. From FM 100-20, pp. 2-0 to 2-25 and C-1 to E-22.

agency policy. At the same time, the Department of State would function as a key supporting agency. Other agencies would provide input in accordance with their respective functional areas (USAID, CIA, USAIS, DEA, etc.)

It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe such a policy in detail. Further, its application would vary from situation to situation, highlighting the requirement for organizational and inter-agency flexibility described by Komer. Nevertheless, to flesh out this concept, the Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) area of responsibility (AOR) provides an example for how a national counterinsurgency policy might be applied. This is a particularly pertinent area, since it is to our south where we presently face potential and real threats from both insurgencies and the wholesale production and sale of illegal narcotics.

Currently in Latin America, approximately 25 Marxist insurgencies operate.<sup>99</sup> Although it seems that Soviet and Cuban efforts to export Marxist revolution have diminished recently, many of these insurgencies continue to exhibit stamina, such as the FMLN in El Salvador. Their proximity to the continental United States and their continued existence dictates that, at a minimum, we should plan for their containment, should they threaten U.S. interests in the future.

With regard to the U.S. counternarcotics effort, we are presently facing a bureaucratic situation analogous to the pre-CORDS era in Vietnam. Today there are hundreds of federal, state,  
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<sup>99</sup>Fred F. Woerner, "The strategic imperatives for the United States in Latin America," Military Review, vol. 69, no. 2 (February 1989), pp. 18-28.

and local agencies fighting the "drug war" on the basis of a national strategy of centralized planning and decentralized execution.<sup>100</sup> In essence, coordination between the different agencies is almost purely a matter of voluntary inter-agency cooperation.

As discussed earlier, the illicit narcotics trade has taken on many characteristics of insurgent movements. More important, the marriage of guerrilla movements with narcotics producers has created a dangerous situation. In Columbia, for example, the drug lords underwrite two insurgencies, M19 and FARC (Columbian Revolutionary Armed Forces) in exchange for the liberty to operate in guerrilla-held regions. Likewise, "guerrillas may provide advance warning of government raids, and in a few instances, they may even defend the capos' plantations, laboratories and airstrips against government forces."<sup>101</sup>

In the face of these threats, there is a diffusion of U.S. diplomatic and military authority in Latin America which far exceeds the Vietnam era situation. Although there is a single Commander-in-Chief of SOUTHCOM, he must deal with 16 different ambassadors and country teams. Coordination between these various entities, especially when many other agencies are also operating within the region (such as DEA), is undoubtedly complicated and

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<sup>100</sup> 1990 National Drug Control Strategy, (Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office, 1990), pp. 1-9. A partial listing of the major agencies with a legitimate stake in the counternarcotics effort follows: Federal Bureau of Investigation; Drug Enforcement Administration; Immigration and Naturalization Service; U.S. Customs Service; Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms; U.S. Coast Guard; Federal Aviation Administration; Interior Department; Department of Defense; National Guard Bureau; Civil Air Patrol; and a myriad of state and local law enforcement agencies.

<sup>101</sup> Ron Chespiuk, "The Colombian Drug Connection: Its Source, Distribution and Impact," Journal of Defense and Diplomacy, April 1988, p. 28.

personality-dependent at best. Should it be determined that the multifarious insurgent movements and/or the illegal narcotics industry must be targeted in a unified manner, the current organization would most likely be dysfunctional.

CORDS offers us a useful model for organizational and operational efficiency in this case. An application of my recommended national counterinsurgency policy would likely include the creation of a SOUTHCOM deputy for pacification or counternarcotics or both. Similar to CORDS under MACV, the deputy would be a State Department (or Drug Enforcement Agency) executive with ambassadorial rank. In this role, I envision him functioning as an "area ambassador," with authority over all of the individual country ambassadors in Latin America. In addition, he would be responsible for pulling together all existing counterinsurgency and/or counternarcotics programs in SOUTHCOM into a synergistic whole.

His organization would closely mirror CORDS in terms of mixing military and civilian agency staff at various levels (region, country, district). As with CORDS, each organizational layer would have commensurate authority to execute programs in its respective area. Thus, this organization would essentially function as a component command, rather than as a staff section.

Most important, this arrangement would focus both authority and priority of resources against whichever problem (insurgency or counternarcotics) it is targeted against. The result would be a unified effort with various U.S. agency representatives working together under the aegis of a single program manager. In essence, it would provide the ways and means by which an integrated campaign could be waged against the various insurgent movements, the

Latin American narcotics industry or both.

This is but one example of how the CORDS model and a national counterinsurgency policy might be applied. As discussed previously, there are many other areas around the world where U.S. vital interests could be threatened by revolutionary guerrilla movements. Our ability to confront the complex military/political nature of an insurgency was demonstrated in Vietnam. It simply is a matter of our willingness to remember the lessons we learned there and apply them as necessary in the future.

## CONCLUSION

Both theory and history demonstrate that, unlike conventional warfare, guerrilla warfare involves more than the military element of national power. In fact, as with *dau tranh*, the political, economic, and informational elements tend to be dominant. Thus if you counter a revolutionary guerrilla strategy with a conventional military strategy, as we generally did in Vietnam, you will fail. Only a counterinsurgency campaign plan which integrates all four elements of national power would seem to have any hope of achieving success.

The CORDS Program was one such application of a strategy which effectively integrated all four elements of national power. In essence, CORDS was an integrated campaign with the strategic aim of defeating the Vietcong insurgency in South Vietnam. Although it was introduced late in the war, it seems to have enjoyed measurable success. Therefore, CORDS is clearly a useful model for campaign design in future counterinsurgency environments.

Further, the potential exists for insurgent movements to threaten our interests around the world. The current civil unrest in post-war Iraq instigated by Kurdish and Shiite revolutionaries is a case in point. Should these movements spill over onto the Arabian Peninsula, like the Dhofar insurgency affected Oman in the 1970's, we could find ourselves in the counterinsurgency business again.

Therefore, it is critical that we develop a national counterinsurgency policy which provides for the synchronized application of multiple agency assets, not just the military. Although

recently published Army and Air Force doctrine provides useful guidance on the analysis of insurgencies and the conduct of counterinsurgency operations, it is not enough. All four elements of national power discussed here (military, economic, political, informational) must be applied in concert to achieve a net synergistic effect.

As a management technique, CORDS provides us the best example we have for the synchronization of military, political, economic, and informational elements of national power into a comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign. Moreover, since it is obvious that U.S. vital strategic interests are likely to be threatened in the future by revolutionary guerrilla insurgencies, we cannot afford to forget the lessons of our CORDS experience. Otherwise, our desire for NO MORE VIETNAMS could prove to be little more than a hollow, unfulfilled slogan.

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