

MILITARY ASSISTANCE ADVISORY GROUP-VIETNAM (1954-1963):
THE BATTLE OF AP BAC

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Military History

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ABSTRACT

MILITARY ASSISTANCE ADVISORY GROUP–VIETNAM (1954-1963): THE BATTLE OF AP BAC, by Major Kevin R. Kilbride, 136 pages.

The performance of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) at the Battle of Ap Bac, January 2, 1963, established a narrative that the South Vietnamese were unwilling to fight or lacked aggressiveness. At the time of the Battle of Ap Bac, the South Vietnamese had been receiving direct military aid from the US and under the tutelage of American advisors for over eight years. Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann was the senior US Army advisor present and remarked after the battle, "It was a miserable damn performance, just like it always is. These people won't listen. They make the same mistake over and over again in the same way." In the context of those comments, ARVN did not show an appreciable increase in combat effectiveness with years of direct American support. The larger narrative surrounding the battle indicates that the performance of ARVN was a harbinger for future challenges and setbacks in South Vietnam. This battle and subsequent evaluation of the ARVN attribute the cause for combat ineffectiveness was the South Vietnamese lacking leadership and not possessing the necessary fighting spirit. Is the evaluation that the outcome of the Battle of Ap Bac hinged on the ARVN's lack of aggressiveness still valid when put in the broader cultural, social, and political context that existed at its birth?

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ACRONYMS

APC	Armored Personnel Carrier
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
CG	Civil Guard
GVN	Republic of Vietnam
KMAG	Korean Military Assistance Group
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
MAAGV	Military Assistance Advisory Group Vietnam
PLAF	People's Liberation Armed Forces
ROK	Republic of Korea
ROKA	Republic of Korea Army
US	United States
VC	Viet Cong
VNA	Vietnamese National Army

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It was a miserable damn performance, just like it always is. These people won't listen. They make the same mistake over and over again in the same way
—Lieutenant Colonel Vann, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*.¹

The assessment made by Lieutenant Colonel Vann regarding the performance of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) following the Battle of Ap Bac, January 2, 1963, established the narrative that the South Vietnamese were unwilling to fight and lacked aggressiveness. At the time of the Battle of Ap Bac, the South Vietnamese Army had been receiving direct military aid from the United States (US) and under the tutelage of American advisors for over eight years. In the context of Vann's comment, ARVN did not show an appreciable increase in combat effectiveness with years of direct American support. The larger narrative surrounding the battle indicates that the performance of ARVN was a harbinger for future challenges and setbacks in Vietnam. This battle and subsequent evaluations illustrated that the cause for combat ineffectiveness among ARVN leaders was the lack of necessary fighting spirit. Is the argument that the outcome of the Battle of Ap Bac was a result of passive ARVN officers still valid when put in the broader cultural, social, and political context that existed in Vietnam from 1954 to 1963?

The conditions of political, economic, social, and military chaos that dominated Vietnam during the birth of ARVN, 1950 to 1954, shaped a unique military cultural that

¹David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House, 1965), 154; Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 277.

hindered the transition of ARVN into a modern apolitical army. The factors that affected the ARVN at its most vulnerable stage of development were the impact of French colonization and withdrawal, political instability, and cultural differences between US advisors and their Vietnamese counterparts. The transition from colonialism to an independent state wielding a modern army confronting internal and external security threats over a period of several years exceeded the capacity and capability of the Republic of Vietnam (GVN). The argument that ARVN officers lacked aggressiveness, as demonstrated at the Battle of Ap Bac, leading to their defeat requires further scrutiny in the context of the conditions that dominated the GVN. The ARVN officers at the Battle of Ap Bac did not perform in the idealized image of the US Army officers, but their performance was not one of complete ineptitude or cowardice. Placing the development of ARVN in a larger context illustrates the challenges of building an Army versus equipping an Army. The role and characteristics of an army from an American perspective cannot be transferred to the building of a foreign army. Therefore, the characterization the ARVN officers as ineffective based on the expectations of a US Army officer's performance is an expression of cultural prejudice and ignorance of the environment.

The US' interest in Vietnam changed over time to meet emerging challenges, but consistently aimed towards containing communism and respecting the sovereignty of the Vietnamese.² The path to sovereignty for the Vietnamese required the withdrawal of

²Dorothy Jeanne Carlson Donnelly, "American Policy in Vietnam, 1949-1965: A Perceptual Analysis of the Domino Theory and Enemy Based on the Pentagon Papers" (University of Pittsburgh, 1982), 81. The loss of China to communist Mao Tse-tung

French colonial power, while simultaneously the nascent government of Vietnam provided internal security and resisted external aggression. The Vietnamese were unable to fill the power vacuum created by the rapid French withdrawal. The period of French colonialism retarded the development of key Vietnamese military and civil leaders and denied them the opportunity to be self-sustaining and realize sovereignty.³ The rapid withdrawal of French civil and military leaders required Vietnamese civil and military to assume positions beyond their experience or training. This gap between leadership requirements was never fully closed because 90 years of colonial rule systematically removed generations of potential leaders; there was consistently a shortfall of qualified officers and leaders.⁴ This shortfall was acute with the transition from the Vietnamese National Army (VNA) to ARVN, specifically with ARVN senior leaders coming from positions at battalion and below or as non-commissioned officers.⁵

The political stability remained elusive in South Vietnam as President Diem assumed power and took steps to consolidate power. President Diem battled criminal gangs and armed politico-religious sects to gain power. This process required the utmost

shifted the perceived balance of power in the region. The Franco-Viet Minh conflict was viewed through prism of a larger campaign toward worldwide communist domination.

³Corporation BDM, *South Vietnam*, Vol. 2 of *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam* (McLean, VA, 1979), 5-19.

⁴U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, *The Far East*. vol. 4 of *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947* (Washington: GPO, 1976), 136.

⁵Cao Van Vien, *U.S. Adviser*, Indochina Monographs (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), 156-57. The transition from a NCO in the VNA to a battalion commander occurred rapidly and sometimes without an additional training. The notion of a U.S. Army sergeant becoming a Major battalion commander in a period of three years does provide the depth of experience and training required at higher levels.

loyalty of the army. President Diem's rise to power and influence over the military impeded the development of the nascent ARVN officer corps. President Diem's authoritarian rule and control over officer selection and promotion blurred political-military relations from an American perspective. The more successful ARVN officers were politically astute, but not necessarily the most skilled tacticians or leaders. President Diem demanded loyalty and political reliability from his officers to such an extent that military acumen was not a prerequisite for senior leadership positions.⁶

The transition towards sovereignty coupled with the introduction of American support and advice was sometimes incongruent with Vietnamese cultural norms and behaviors. The introduction of the American advisors, following closely at the heels of French withdrawal, led to cultural misunderstandings. The language barrier became increasingly problematic in developing relationships with counterparts. Very few US advisors spoke French and even less were willing to learn Vietnamese. The US advisors participated in training to overcome some of the cultural differences, but these differences presented a legitimate obstacle to the development of ARVN. Cultural dissonance between US advisors and their Vietnamese counterparts exacerbated the challenge of organizing, equipping, and training an army in the midst of a war.

The Military Assistance Advisory Group–Vietnam (MAAGV) was charged with building ARVN from scratch and navigating these obstacles to progress. The challenges facing MAAGV included its shift from a technical or administrative headquarters oriented solely on equipping an army, into a headquarters capable of advising and

⁶Gerald Cannon Hickey et al., *The American Military Advisor and His Foreign Counterpart: The Case of Vietnam* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1965), 17.

building an army. MAAGV had limited personnel available to manage all the activities associated with manning, training, and equipping an army. The manning and equipping mission suffered because it was done while attempting to recover from French withdrawal and the instability of the GVN. The Vietnamese had to determine what they wanted their army to do and how they would wield it in a short amount of time. The ability of MAAGV to train ARVN suffered from a lack of prioritization from senior ARVN leaders, non-existent training infrastructure, and continuous operational assignments. MAAGV built a force equipped with American weapons and doctrine, capable of providing internal security and deterring external aggressive.⁷

This paper follows the development of ARVN through the prism of French withdrawal, Vietnamese political instability, and US-Vietnamese cultural differences to show that the performance at Ap Bac was not indicative of the force lacking the willingness to fight. The performance of ARVN up to the battle had been largely uneven and the Battle of Ap Bac represented no greater or lesser a setback for the ARVN to that point. The ARVN's performance was reflective of the chaos from which they were born. The assertion that soldiers in the ARVN lacked a willingness to fight or were incompetent, lacks validity when viewed through the prism of their unique experiences. It is when ARVN is compared to an idealized version of the US Army that the assessment

⁷This thesis does not address the debate involved with MAAGV efforts to build a conventional force in the mirror image of the U.S. Army versus building a counterinsurgency force. For the scope of this paper the debate offers little to the development of ARVN in the context of French withdrawal, political instability, and U.S.-Vietnamese cultural differences. For information on the conventional versus the counterinsurgency force see, Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); David M. Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam: They Did Everything but Learn from It* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001).

of advisors becomes less valid. The expectation that the ARVN would perform and behave like the US Army or somehow transcend the chaos and uncertainty that surrounded them is naïve and shortsighted. Placing the performance of ARVN officers in the larger context of the challenges confronting their development, highlights their true origin and allows for a more thorough analysis of their performance at the Battle of Ap Bac.

CHAPTER 2

THE BIRTH OF THE REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM

Determining the origins of the Vietnam War predates the US intervention and has its roots in the unique history and culture of the Vietnamese people. The US intervention in Vietnam was not the proximate cause of the war, but the motivations, beliefs, and attitudes that led to the intervention shaped the conduct of the war. The area known as Indochina, which included the countries of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam were a French colonial possession dating from the 1850s. Prior to the outbreak of World War II the view of Indochina was primarily through the prism of it being a French colony, which did not represent any significance in the foreign policy of the US. Without a clear national interest in the region, the US regarded the people of Indochina, and specially the Vietnamese through late 19th and early 20th century, as being backwards and deserving of French efforts to better their lot in life. This caricature of Indochina and its inhabitants became persuasive in shaping the attitude of American policy makers toward the region following World War II. Informed largely by the impact of French colonialism and oppression this narrative is not a historically consistent portrayal of the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese people have a history of militarism and resistance to external forces dating back to the Mongol and Chinese attempts to rule the area. This history of Vietnam is illustrative of a people capable of coalescing to overcome external conquest, a culture resilient in the face of oppression and privation, and trend toward self-determinism.⁸

⁸Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years 1941-1960* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1985), 5-14. For further background on the Vietnamese historical resistance to external aggression see, David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981), 9-17.

The American intervention in Indochina as described in the post-World War II narrative of containing communism on a political, economic, military, and ideological level evolved over time. The proximate cause for American intervention prior to the Geneva Accords 1954 becomes elusive in the context of a post-World War II world. The efforts of the Truman Administration to rebuild and free formerly oppressed peoples were slowly overcome by the communist and-or imperialist tendencies of its former allies.⁹ The question of American intervention into Indochina began in earnest with the initiation of hostilities between the French and Viet Minh in the First Indochina War, 1946 to 1954. The scope and purpose of the US intervention in Vietnam did not fully crystallize until the Geneva Accords in 1954 when it was clear that France did not create the conditions necessary to prevent the spread of communism.

The government of the State of Vietnam and the VNA were not capable of self-sufficiency without French augmentation with civil servants and military officers. Following the partition of the North and South, the US first helped establish and then buttressed the government of South Vietnam and ensured the election of Ngo Dinh Diem as leader. Supported by the US, South Vietnam did not hold reunification elections as stipulated in the agreements for fear that the communist Viet Minh would assume power

The author demonstrates continuity of a Vietnamese self-identification that crossed ethno-linguistic barriers in opposition to external aggression.

⁹Harry S. Truman Administration, *Recommending Assistance to Greece and Turkey*, 80th Cong. 1st Sess., March 12, 1947. The address conceptualized the attitude of the Truman Administration and the aim of US foreign policy to create conditions for self-determination. The address conveyed the United States commitment to an anti-communist and anti-imperialist stance in the post-War recovery period. The question of Vietnam represented a collision between anti-communism and anti-imperialism with a former ally as the key perpetrator. These factors complicated US policy toward Indochina; whether to provide support to anti-communists that were also imperialists.

over a unified nation of Vietnam. The US response to the Geneva Accords is more closely attuned to the proximate cause of escalation in Vietnam.¹⁰ US attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs shaped the intervention and subsequent foreign policy initiatives and military operations.

French colonial reoccupation and emerging nationalism in Vietnam foreshadows a contentious Franco-American relationship in regards to a developing coherent policy towards Indochina following World War II. The primary US focus in the face of communist expansion was rebuilding Western Europe and it required the support of its allies, therefore the anti-colonial attitude began to abate in former European colonies in Southeast Asia. The Americans recognized that stability within the region, whether it was through independence or restructured colonial regimes, better served the new foreign policy imperative: containment of communism.¹¹ This period of transition took a different course in Vietnam and further soured Franco-American relations. The surrender

¹⁰Kathryn C. Statler, *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2007). The author presents incongruence between French and US designs in Indochina juxtaposed against European defense commitments that fractured the relationship. France's rejection of European Defense Community in 1954 created the conditions for the US to fill the void in Vietnam. The author argues that US endeavored to transform South Vietnam, neo-colonialism into a state that would subsume the communist Viet Minh.

¹¹Nicholas Tarling, *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 343, 67-68. The Americans acquiesced to the demands of British, French, and Dutch interests; in order to not further antagonize their allies with a long colonial history. This approach intended to provide stability and establish influence in the region through various reconstruction efforts. Furthermore, these post-War colonial regimes were under the scrutiny of the United Nations and pressure from the United States. This is evident with the Dutch granting independence to Indonesian in 1948. Whereas the French were more successful in resisting American pressures in Indochina by framing the fight against the Viet Minh as anti-communist versus a purely French colonial war.

and disarmament of the Japanese in Indochina, followed by the French attempts to reassume authority, was not simply the dichotomy between French designs on re-colonizing Vietnam and the Americans distaste for reestablishment of French imperialism. French efforts in Indochina were incongruent with America anti-imperialism and the belief that nationalism provided the best bulwark against communist expansion. Within Vietnam, this notion was further confused because the Americans believed that any nationalist movement would trend toward anti-communism. Furthermore, US policy reflected the belief that French imperialist aggression was only solidifying the Vietnamese nationalist movement. The aggressive French attempts to reassert colonial power emboldened Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh, making Vietnam more vulnerable to communism dominion.¹² The Vietnamese nationalists that emerged from World War II were unwilling to accept colonial rule and the French return to power fomented nationalist ideas and created the conditions that allowed the Viet Minh to solidify political power.

The American approach toward Southeast Asia following the surrender of the Japanese was a period of transition where US policy attempted to reconcile its role as a global leader and the promotion of a universal anti-communist ideology and narrative. This emerging leadership position and ideology provided additional impetus for the

¹²Secretary of State, "Report to the National Security Council," in *US Policy Toward Southeast Asia* (July 1, 1949), 14. The report framed the issue of the Southeast Asia falling to communism as being an ideological struggle and that the anti-communist fight in Indochina was a false struggle. Meaning, true Vietnamese nationalists coalesced with the Viet Minh only in opposition to the French, thus if they were given sovereignty then it would create the conditions for the true nationalists to separate from the Viet Minh and assume power. The assumption that Vietnamese nationalism was separate from the Viet Minh movement and resonated with the people would plague initial US intervention.

Truman Administration's view toward self-determination and civil liberties. In the case of Vietnam, the policy of containment contradicted the notion of self-determination as outlined in the Truman Doctrine.¹³ US foreign policy had to reconcile the differences between anti-colonialism and anti-communism, its role as a global leader aimed at combating and containing communism, and a further polarization of the relations with the USSR.¹⁴ The US viewed the French opposition of Ho Chi Minh as a lynchpin to preventing communist expansion.¹⁵

US intervention in Indochina demanded a reconciliation of emerging foreign policy requirements and American attitudes and beliefs. The harbingers for a contentious Franco-American resolution in Vietnam began with the return of Ho Chi Minh in 1941 and the establishment of the League for the Independence of Vietnam in Pac Bo.¹⁶

¹³Corporation BDM, *US Foreign Policy and Vietnam 1945-1975*, vol. 3 of *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam* (McLean, VA, 1980), 3, 20.

¹⁴Donnelly, "American Policy in Vietnam, 1949-1965: A Perceptual Analysis of the Domino Theory and Enemy Based on the Pentagon Papers," 81. By 1949, the Soviet Union was viewed as an adversarial state and the U.S. foreign policy was moving towards containment and later the domino image to counter the global expansion of communism.

¹⁵Mike Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of the United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam: The Senator Gravel Edition* (Boston 1971). American policy decisions viewed communist expansion as monolithic entity oriented toward communist domination. Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh were viewed as an extension of Soviets designs and French resistance was an anti-communist endeavor.

¹⁶William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 239. Provides a biography of Ho Chi Minh and links the resolve and discipline of the Viet Minh to acumen and leadership of Ho Chi Minh as it emerged from the League for the Independence of Vietnam. The author portrays Ho Chi Minh as a nationalist intent securing the independence of Vietnam from Japanese occupation and French imperialism. The person and leadership of Ho Chi Minh is representative of the tension in early US policy towards Vietnam when confronting an anti-imperialist and anti-communist identity.

During World War II, the US-through the Office of Strategic Services-maintained a complimentary and reinforcing relationship with Ho Chi Minh and his Viet Minh forces as a means to gain intelligence, disrupt the Japanese occupation forces, and provide as required, the capability to rescue downed Allied pilots in Indochina.¹⁷ Ho Chi Minh and the French designs on reoccupation highlighted an initial gap in post-World War II foreign policy towards Vietnam. Following the surrender of the Japanese the Truman Administration allowed the French to reincorporate Vietnam into the French Union with certain caveats the US hoped would move Vietnam toward self-determination.

Before the arrival of French forces in mass, Ho Chi Minh was able to consolidate his power and foment nationalist ideals in opposition to French colonial designs. On September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh declared the independence of Vietnam. With this declaration, Ho Chi Minh hoped that the US would support provisions included in the Atlantic Charter (1941) and Charter of the United Nations (1945) that outlined conditions for self-government and equality among nations.¹⁸ These overtures from Ho Chi Minh to the US went unanswered in any substantive manner in the form of policy, materiel, or ideological support for his cause.

The US recognized the vulnerability of former European colonials assuming their sovereignty because the associated political upheaval created an opportunity for

¹⁷Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years 1941-1960*, 37-39; George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-75* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 10.

¹⁸Franklin D. Roosevelt et al., *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt* (New York: Random House, 1938); Nations United and International Court of Justice, *Charter of the United Nations and Statute of the International Court of Justice* (New York: Office of Public Information, United Nations, 1968).

communist interference. In the case of Vietnam, US interests became intrinsically linked to France's military and political success in the region in defeat the communist threat.¹⁹ Military success depended on the defeat of Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh.²⁰ Political success in Vietnam was based on the transition to an independent state that was able to deter communist aggression.²¹ The US supported the French military and political efforts financially until cessation of Franco-Viet Minh hostilities signaled their withdrawal. In 1954, Ngo Nhu Diem was appointed Prime Minister of the State of Vietnam by Emperor Bao Dai. This appointment allowed the US to align with Diem as an anti-communist ally and shift support from the French to achieve American objectives in the region.

¹⁹Donnelly, "American Policy in Vietnam, 1949-1965: A Perceptual Analysis of the Domino Theory and Enemy Based on the Pentagon Papers," 85. The escalation of the Franco-Viet Minh conflict would serve to rally Vietnamese nationalists and foment anti-Western and anti-democratic ideologies, i.e. communism. The French were the cause of increased Vietnamese nationalism and the solution to combat Viet Minh communist nationalism in Vietnam.

²⁰U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947*, 136. Though Ho Chi Minh's brand of Vietnamese nationalism was based on communist ideologies, there was no clear link to the monolithic designs emanating from the Soviet Union. Ho Chi Minh's defeat was viewed as a defeat of communist and not a blow to Vietnamese nationalism.

²¹*Ibid.* The French were reluctant to support the political resolution of Vietnamese independence because of its loss of prestige. Additionally, the French proposed a more gradual transition, argued that the Vietnamese were unprepared for liberty, and needed time before they would be able to properly wield that liberty.

The Rise of President Ngo Dinh Diem and the Birth of South Vietnam

Ngo Dinh Diem was not a political neophyte when appointed the first President of South Vietnam by the Emperor Bao Dai following the Geneva Accords in 1954.²² Diem was an experienced administrator with ardent anti-colonialist and anti-communist beliefs. The factors regarding Diem's background, rise to power, and the shortcomings of the nascent State of Vietnam influenced the development of the Army of Vietnam. Diem's approach to consolidating power was authoritarian and severe in many facets, but the circumstances that existed in the State of Vietnam left few options for the leader to bring stability to a war-torn region. Upon his appointment to political office, Diem did not possess the loyalty of, or control over, the VNA or the National Police. The control over the entire security apparatus was critical for Diem to consolidate power through co-opting, coercing, or defeating rivals. The impact of Diem serving as both the President and Secretary of National Defense is discussed in a later chapter. The operational requirements of the national defense forces to provide internal and external security and Diem's fractured political base led to his authoritarian control over the security forces and the establishment of an ad hoc patronage system for officer appointments.²³ Diem's

²²David L. Anderson, *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 127. Following the Geneva Accords and Emperor Bao Dai's invitation to Diem to reassume an active political role in the government of Vietnam, so officials from the Eisenhower Administration were concerned that he did not possess the political and administrative acumen to manage the complex problems facing Vietnam. The belief was that his staunch anti-communist, anti-French, and pro-Catholic attitudes were a liability.

²³Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam, a History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 293. Diem's autocratic policies allowed for his rapid employment of ARVN to quell the armed opposition against his regime in South Vietnam, as well as, repel increasing pressure from communist infiltration. The author argues that Diem attempted to manage both

leadership style and drive to establish a nationalist state in South Vietnam free of the vestiges of colonial rule and without communist influence were paramount to his vision.²⁴ Devolving power to subordinates at the early stages following the Geneva Accords does not appear feasible if Diem were to maintain power.²⁵ An understanding of the political tumult that existed under President Diem's regime and his efforts to bring political stability influenced the development of ARVN and the led to the politicalizing of ARVN officers. This interwoven nature of political-military relationships under President Diem had profound effect on the ARVN officer corps.

Ngo Dinh Diem was born into an influential and powerful Catholic family that served in various government positions under French colonial rule. Diem demonstrated an administrative acumen and through familial connection assumed a position as Provincial Governor in his late-twenties.²⁶ Though Diem worked as an administrator in

discrete threats through the appointment of the politically reliable officers and eventually those officers on the outside the Diem system chafed under his autocratic policies.

²⁴Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 36-37. Diem felt that Western style democracy was too restrictive and limited his ability to implement drastic reforms to stabilize the state. For Diem's perspective, the authoritarian approach to consolidating power was paramount to protecting the rural population from subversives and congruent with traditional Vietnamese values.

²⁵Philip E. Catton, "Ngo Dinh Diem and South Vietnam Reconsidered," in *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War*, ed. Andrew Wiest and Doidge Michael (Taylor & Francis e-library, 2010). Diem confronted the challenge of emerging from colonial subjugation and unifying a fractured political base in South Vietnam. Diem envisioned a progressive Vietnam that could confront the challenges of the modern world, as well as, rectify the traditional political practices that allowed its previous colonial subjugation.

²⁶Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-75*, 59. Diem graduated top of his school from the school of public administration in Hanoi and appointed to a bureaucratic position in the protectorate of Annam. His upbringing in a

the French colonial regime, he never strayed from his nationalist ideals.²⁷ The French appointed Diem as the Interior Minister in an effort to isolate Nguyễn Huệ, ²⁸ in 1933, but Diem stepped down in protest. Nguyễn Huệ was Diem's mentor and an advocate of Vietnamese sovereignty. Nguyễn Huệ was removed because he directly opposed the colonial regime's continued delays in implementing political reforms aimed at increasing Vietnamese sovereignty.²⁹ Through this political act, Diem

family with ties to the royal court at Hue and education prepared Diem to become an effective administrator.

²⁷Edward Miller, "Vision, Power and Agency: The Ascent of Ngo Dinh Diem, 1945-54," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35, no. 3 (October 2004): 436. Diem was expected to uphold family traditions with service as an administrator in the colonial regime. His family's ties to the royal court and service in the colonial regime do label them as collaborators with the French. The social status of his family and working within the French system make them no less Vietnamese nationalists. with the His father Ngô Đình Kha was Grand Chamberlain of the Vietnamese imperial Court, but was Vietnamese nationalist working under the political system established by the French.

²⁸Ronald J. Cima, ed., "Vietnam a Country Study" (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1987), 33. The council of ministers was established by French colonial leaders in the late 1890s as a means to administer the growing bureaucracy of Indochina. The council of ministers managed all bureaucratic functions of the colony to include taxes, agriculture, and education The council of ministers was French dominated and essentially usurped any vestige of Vietnamese power. Service on the council of ministers provided the only means for the elite Vietnamese class to influence the French administration of Vietnam. Arthur J. Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 22, 36-37. In the late 1890s an effort began to integrate existing Vietnamese political structures into French colonial system as a means to exert greater economic and political control. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, a generation of educated Vietnamese civil servants began to oppose French rule and the loss of Vietnamese representation in government affairs. In an effort to quell unrest, the French authorized greater representative of Vietnamese in the decision making councils. The reestablishment of Vietnamese authority was through integrating former royal authorities and their supports into councils.

²⁹Miller, "Vision, Power and Agency: The Ascent of Ngo Dinh Diem, 1945-54," 436.

established himself as a legitimate anti-colonial leader and an ardent nationalist. Diem maintained an active role in Vietnamese politics and increased his stature as a potential nationalist leader of Vietnam.³⁰

During the partial Japanese occupation of Vietnam during WW II, Diem attempted to position himself as a candidate to lead Vietnam following the end of colonial rule, by aligning with the Japanese occupation forces.³¹ When the Japanese executed a coup in March 1945 to remove the French colonial government and completely occupy Vietnam, Diem hoped to assume a leadership role, but did not possess the solid political base or compelling narrative.³² To replace the French colonial

³⁰Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam*, 46-47. Diem gained some influence and notoriety among French colonial administrators for his role in suppressing Vietnamese communist unrest in the 1930s and when asked to assume a more active role in carrying out French rules he resisted. As the French delayed in enacting reforms intended to empower Vietnamese representatives, Diem confronted the prospect of being categorized as a French puppet for attempting to enact change from within the French dominated system or resigning. Diem leaked reports of the council's meetings in protest and was forced to resign. Diem established himself as neither an ally of Vietnamese communist subversives or French colonial rule. This act charted a path toward a third option to achieve Vietnamese nationalism.

³¹Nguyen The Anh, "The Formulation of the National Discourse in 1940-45 Vietnam," *Journal of International and Area Studies* 9, no. 1 (2002). Upon occupying Vietnam the Japanese announced that Indochina would fall under the Greater Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and in effect rallied Vietnamese nationalists under the banner of Asia for Asians. The Japanese political motivations for an independent Indochina did not supersede the necessity of maintaining French administration and control in support of the larger war effort.

³²Miller, "Vision, Power and Agency: The Ascent of Ngo Dinh Diem, 1945-54," 436. Diem viewed the Japanese occupation as an opportunity to assert himself as a viable leader and take advantage of discord among Japanese leaders regarding the status of Indochina. Some believed that adhering to the ideal of Asia for the Asians was most important and maintaining a status quo relationship with the French colonial government was disingenuous.

government, the Japanese retained the Emperor, Bao Dai.³³ Diem's continuous political maneuvering left him positioned to assume a leadership role, but refused Bao Dai's appointment.³⁴ Bao Dai's rule was short-lived with rise of Ho Chi Minh³⁵ and the Viet Minh.³⁶ The political landscape changed rapidly following the Japanese coup in March 1945 and their subsequent surrender in August 1945. Ho Chi Minh and his Viet Minh party assumed power in August of 1945.³⁷

Under the auspices of the Potsdam Conference, the disarmament of Japanese occupation forces occurred with the Chinese operating north of the 16th parallel and the British-Indian forces south of the 16th parallel. This disarmament of the Japanese

³³Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam*, 77. The Japanese plan retained Emperor Bai Dai on the grounds that he denounced Vietnam's status as a protectorate of France. No further preparations were outlined to facilitate the transition to an independent state of Vietnam.

³⁴Miller, "Vision, Power and Agency: The Ascent of Ngo Dinh Diem, 1945-54," 437. The reasons for Diem's refusal are unclear, but it is commonly believed the Diem was attempting to gain greater leverage an influence in the new government.

³⁵Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, 239. Provides a biography of Ho Chi Minh and links the resolve and discipline of the Viet Minh to acumen and leadership of Ho Chi Minh as it emerged from the League for the Independence of Vietnam. The author portrays Ho Chi Minh as a nationalist intent securing the independence of Vietnam from Japanese occupation and French imperialism. The person and leadership of Ho Chi Minh is representative of the tension in early US policy towards Vietnam when confronting an anti-imperialist and anti-communist identity.

³⁶Anderson, *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War*, 93, 102. On August 19, 1945, Ho Chi Minh directed Viet Minh forces to assume control of key cities and infrastructure across Vietnam. By August 30, Emperor Bao Dai abdicated his position as the nominal leader of Vietnam in deference to Ho Chi Minh. On September 2, 1945 Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnamese independence and an end to French colonial rule.

³⁷Miller, "Vision, Power and Agency: The Ascent of Ngo Dinh Diem, 1945-54," 435-38.

occupation forces paved the way for the French to resume the subjugation of Vietnam. In the south, the French were able to reassume power quickly based on the complicity of the British and the lack of a viable nationalist political movement able to withstand the reintroduction of French forces. In the north, Tonkin region, the Viet Minh under Ho Chi Minh was far better organized and prepared to resist French attempts to resume power and demand negotiations. The negotiations with the Viet Minh and the Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic Vietnam stalled and conflict became more likely.³⁸ As the French and Viet Minh moved closer to armed conflict, Diem maintained a neutral political stance. Diem maintained a dialogue with the Viet Minh leaders in the north as he attempted to consolidate power.³⁹ Diem was unable to bring together those groups who represented Vietnamese people that were both anti-colonial and anti-communist. Diem was never able to achieve a sustainable political group that offered a nationalist ideology that was both anti-colonial and anti-communist. Unable to mediate between the various Vietnamese nationalists, Diem began negotiations with former Emperor Bao Dai who was courted by the French to bring political stability to Vietnam, as a military solution with the Viet Minh dragged on.⁴⁰ Diem lobbied both Bao Dai and the French for greater concessions toward Vietnamese sovereignty. The Elysee Accords signed in March 1949

³⁸Anderson, *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War*, 105-06.

³⁹Karnow, *Vietnam, a History*, 232-33. Diem was captured by the Viet Minh in September 1945 and after speaking with Ho Chi Minh was offered a position in the government. Diem refused to cooperate with Ho Chi Minh and was released. Following his detention by the Viet Minh and murder of his brother at their hands, Diem left Vietnam and ended up making influential connections with sympathetic American leaders.

⁴⁰Miller, "Vision, Power and Agency: The Ascent of Ngo Dinh Diem, 1945-54," 439.

that established the independent State of Vietnam with Bao Dai as its leader.⁴¹ With the political landscape shifting, some anti-communist nationalist leaders aligned with Bao Dai, as the best means toward eventual Vietnamese sovereignty.⁴²

The signing of the Elysee Accords and Diem's unwillingness to support Bao Dai solidified his position as anti-French and anti-communist, and signaled a significant political risk to work in direct opposition to those supporting the Elysee Accords and the Viet Minh. Diem envisaged a Vietnamese nationalist sovereignty that was free of colonial oversight and communist dominion. Diem decided to establish a viable third Vietnamese nationalist party that was neither beholden to the French nor under the influence of the Viet Minh communists. In an attempt to rally supporters toward this third option, Diem issued the following statement,

It should be known that the present struggle is not only a battle for the political independence of the Fatherland, but also a social revolution [cách maDng xã hÔD i] to restore independence to the peasants and workers of Vietnam. In order that each and every person in Vietnam can have sufficient means to live in a matter befitting the dignity of a man who is truly free, I advocate social reforms that are sweeping and bold, with the condition that the dignity of man will always be respected and will be free to flourish.⁴³

⁴¹Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years 1941-1960*, 94-95. The Elysee Agreements established an autonomous state of Vietnam within the French Union under the leadership of Emperor Bao Dai. The French retained control over the military and foreign policy. The agreements sanctioned the establishment of a Vietnamese National Army and police forces, but their development was under the control of the French. The transfer of complete sovereignty and military control to the Vietnamese was left to future negotiations.

⁴²Miller, "Vision, Power and Agency: The Ascent of Ngo Dinh Diem, 1945-54," 440.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 221-2.

This proclamation did not rally supporters and raise Diem's stature as a viable third political option or undermine the legitimacy of Bao Dai's government. Additionally, this proclamation severed all dialogue with the Viet Minh. Without political allies, and the Elysee Accords gaining support with the recognition of Bao Dai's government by the US, Diem went into a self-imposed exile in 1950.⁴⁴

Emperor Bao Dai's leadership was ineffective and his position as the leader of the State of Vietnam became vulnerable because he gained minimal concessions towards Vietnamese sovereignty and began to lose popular support. Diem positioned himself as the leader capable of joining the anti-communist nationalists groups dissatisfied with Bao Dai's government and assume power. Diem used personal connections made abroad with extended visits to Japan, France, and the US, as well as, inroads with fractured Vietnamese political groups made by his brother. In June 1954, the Emperor Bao Dai asked Diem to serve the State of Vietnam as his Prime Minister and this time he accepted with the stipulation that he have sufficient authority concerning the affairs of Vietnam.⁴⁵ The State of Vietnam exercised minimal authority outside of the cities of the future South Vietnam, criminal gangs and politico-religious sects maintained private armies and control over entire regions. Diem initially lacked the support of the VNA to deal with these internal security threats. Additionally, after assuming his position as Prime Minister as the Geneva Accords were signed and partitioned Vietnam until unifying elections could be held in 1956. Diem assumed power as the Prime Minister with a distinctive view of Vietnamese nationalism, but lacked unified political or popular support. Diem

⁴⁴Ibid., 441.

⁴⁵Ibid., 456.

maintained a nominal grip on power as he confronted a fractured and violent political base. The US assessment of Diem's leadership of South Vietnam was pessimistic in the *National Intelligence Estimates*, dated August 3, 1954, “On the basis of the evidence we have at this early date, however, we believe that a favorable development of the situation in South Vietnam is unlikely. . . . at the present time, it appears more likely that the situation will deteriorate in South Vietnam.”⁴⁶ Diem confronted the challenges posed by armed politico-religious sects, criminal gangs, and lack of loyalty from the Army. Diem overcame these obstacles through a combination of conciliation and intimidation to gain the support of the Army, consolidate political power, depose Emperor Bao Dai, and establish the GVN.

Without a unifying political movement and rival sects and criminal gangs, threatening the stability of the nascent government Diem took measures to consolidate power. Diem first sought to break the influence of the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects⁴⁷ in the rural areas and bring them under his authority through either integration into the government or coercion of its leaders. Diem brought the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects under the auspices of the government and next addressed the criminal gangs. The most

⁴⁶Central Intelligence Agency, ed. “National Intelligence Estimate 63-5-54,” (1954), 69.

⁴⁷Anderson, *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War*, 100. Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao were both politico-religious sects that held vast influence over the rural population in the south and maintained private armies to provide local security. These groups addressed immediate local grievances that resulted from French colonialism. These sects administered local economic, welfare, and judicial programs. Their influence was limited to the rural areas and their blending of religious and political messages did not resonate with urban population.

notorious criminal gang was the Binh Xuyen⁴⁸ which controlled Saigon's illicit activities and held key leadership positions in the police force. The Binh Xuyen possessed the capability to undermine Diem's rule through any combination of threats, intimidation, control over the police force, and armed violence. Diem established a holistic approach to consolidate power that targeted popular support through concentrated propaganda efforts and used force to kill or capture rivals as required.⁴⁹

Though in exile in France, Bao Dai was the nominally, ruler of Vietnam and Diem believed an election would legitimize his rule. The elections appeared rigged from outset with Bao Dai, in absentia, being unable to campaign and overall voter turnout indicated anomalies that provided credence to the belief that the election was indeed fraudulent.⁵⁰ Diem then moved to establish the legitimacy of his government through a plebiscite to depose Emperor Bao Dai. Diem mobilized support among the rural population through threats, coercion, and an extensive propaganda campaign that vilified Bao Dai. The State of Vietnam referendum administered by Diem on October 23, 1955 resulted in his overwhelming victory through popular vote, established the GVN,

⁴⁸Anthony James Joes, *The War for South Viet Nam, 1954-1975* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 44. The Binh Xuyen criminal gang controlled all of Saigon and the police force when Diem assumed power. This police force was trained and equipped to maintain power and not enforce the laws they were enriched by breaking. This group posed an armed threat to Diem's regime and could not be co-opted into the government like the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects. Diem required Army troops to destroy the Binh Xuyen and secure the streets of Saigon.

⁴⁹Matthew Masur, "Exhibiting Signs of Resistance: South Vietnam's Struggle for Legitimacy, 1954-1960," *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 2 (April 2009): 295.

⁵⁰Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*, 54-55.

and removed remaining vestiges of French rule with the dissolution of the State of Vietnam and removal of Bao Dai.⁵¹

Within 18 months of the pessimistic outlook from the *National Intelligence Estimates*, it appeared that under President Diem's leadership the GVN was on firm ground.⁵² President Diem's persistence and determination to keep Vietnam from tearing itself apart or being subjected to communist domination earned him the moniker, the miracle-man of Asia.⁵³ These efforts from President Diem required the support of the military to enforce his policies and he gained this support through personal loyalty. President Diem valued loyalty above military acumen and to ensure loyalty Diem maintained a portfolio that include all national defense matters, to include the officer promotions. The linkage between politics and military shaped the development of ARVN officers and confounded US advisors.

⁵¹Jessica M Chapman, "Staging Democracy: South Vietnam's 1955 Referendum to Depose Bao Dai," *Diplomatic History* 30, no. 4 (September 2006).

⁵²Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*. For a more detailed discussion on the rise and fall President Ngo Nhu Diem see, Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1957* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁵³Karnow, *Vietnam, a History*, 245-46.

CHAPTER 3
THE BIRTH OF THE ARMY OF THE
REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM

The US' involvement in Indochina evolved over time to meet emerging policy objectives in the region.⁵⁴ The efforts of the Truman Administration to respect the sovereignty of the Vietnamese and confront the emerging Soviet threat raised the importance of Franco-American relations in Indochina.⁵⁵ The dilemma for US policy makers in Indochina was the choice of supporting imperialist France or risk supporting Indochinese independence that could lead to the rise of the communist state.⁵⁶ This dilemma was resolved from the US perspective with the signing of the Elysee Accords between the French and former Emperor Bao Dai.⁵⁷ These agreements removed the

⁵⁴Donnelly, "American Policy in Vietnam, 1949-1965: A Perceptual Analysis of the Domino Theory and Enemy Based on the Pentagon Papers," 81. The loss of China to communist Mao Tse-tung shifted the perceived balance of power in the region. The Franco-Viet Minh conflict was viewed through prism of a larger campaign toward worldwide communist domination.

⁵⁵*Recommending Assistance to Greece and Turkey*. The address conceptualized the attitude of the Truman Administration and the aim of US foreign policy to create conditions for self-determination. The address conveyed the United States commitment to an anti-communist and anti-imperialist stance in the post-War recovery period. The question of Vietnam represented a collision between anti-communism and anti-imperialism with a former ally as the key perpetrator. These factors complicated US policy toward Indochina; whether to provide support to anti-communists that were also imperialists.

⁵⁶Charles Brown MacDonald and Center of Military History, *An Outline History of U.S. Policy toward Vietnam* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army. Center of Military History, 1978), 3.

⁵⁷Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years 1941-1960*, 94-95. The Elysee Agreements established an autonomous state of Vietnam within the French Union under the leadership of Emperor Bao Dai. The French retained control over the military and

imperialist question and paved the way toward Vietnamese independence. This allowed the US to directly support the French in the fight against Ho Chi Minh and the communists while not turning its back on Vietnamese independence.⁵⁸ The Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG)–Indochina, approved in September 1950, provided the oversight of military aid activities. This initial team focused on assisting the French in requesting and processing US equipment and technical inspections of the equipment and its usage.⁵⁹ The scope of the training was limited to French officers, on the technical aspects of equipment.

The period following the Geneva Accords was one of transition from French colonial rule to that of an independent government of Vietnam. The transition is not a seamless one and occurred under the unique historical, cultural, and political circumstances of the region. This period of transition in Vietnam was influenced by the withdrawal of the French, political instability, and armed threats internally and externally to the nascent government. The ARVN was a product of these intervening circumstances

foreign policy. The agreements sanctioned the establishment of a Vietnamese National Army and police forces, but their development was under the control of the French. The transfer of complete sovereignty and military control to the Vietnamese was left to future negotiations.

⁵⁸United States. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign, *Background Information Relating to Southeast Asia and Vietnam* 4th rev ed. (Washington, DC: GPO, 1968), 60-61. The U.S. recognized the state of Vietnam in February 1950 and by May 1950, agreements were in place to provide military and economic aid to the French fighting the Viet Minh in Indochina. French victory in Vietnam prevented communist expansion and would lead toward democratic development.

⁵⁹Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years 1941-1960*, 115.

and MAAGV was charged with shepherding them through the transitions and developing them into a capable force in the midst of a war.⁶⁰

With the end of Franco-Viet Minh hostilities, a framework for French withdrawal leading to Vietnamese independence was established. The partitioning of Vietnam at the 17th parallel created time and space for the stabilization of South Vietnam, but did not address what Vietnamese sovereignty would look like. A government under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh since September 2, 1945 represented the Democratic Republic Vietnam with its base of power north of the 17th parallel. In the south, a government was emerging with American support under the leadership of Ngo Nhu Diem. The 17th parallel represented a physical, political, and ideological divergence in the development of the Democratic Republic Vietnam and the Republic of Vietnam.⁶¹

⁶⁰John J. Johnson and RAND Corporation, *The Role of the Military in Underdeveloped Countries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962), 71. There was doctrine or plan for aiding the transition of Vietnam from a colonial to independent state. MAAGV was not equipped to offer more than the notion that with the removal of the colonial power democratic institutions and practices would develop. This transition to self-rule is critical because it came shaped the development of ARVN in unexpected ways. Democratic ideals and professional military culture in the image of the U.S. Army did not easily emerge from the wreckage of the French colonial rule.

⁶¹Vietnam or GVN is used in reference to the Republic of Vietnam or South Vietnam and the Democratic Republican Vietnam is referred to as DRV or North Vietnam for the remainder of the paper.

Development of the Vietnamese National Army
(1950 to 1954)

During their period of colonial rule, the French recruited Vietnamese to serve in militia or paramilitary forces in support of the French Colonial forces.⁶² The French used only the most disenfranchised members of Vietnamese society to fill static security roles and did not place emphasis on training these forces. In World War II, the French began to allow Vietnamese college graduates with French citizenship to serve as junior officers and non-commissioned officers in the French Colonial Army.⁶³ The Japanese overthrow of the French in 1945 caused Vietnamese officers and non-commissioned officers serving in the colonial army to return to civilian life. As the conflict with the Viet Minh escalated in 1946, the French moved to reestablish pro-French locally recruited militia and reintegrate former Vietnamese soldiers back into the colonial army. The signing of the Elysee Accords established the framework for the birth of the Vietnamese National Army. Emperor Bao Dai established the VNA by decree in December 1950 as part of military agreements made with the French.⁶⁴ The VNA operated as part of the French Union Forces and its leadership was primarily French officers and non-commissioned officers.⁶⁵ The VNA developed slowly because the requirements to train, man, and equip

⁶²BDM, *South Vietnam*, 5-3. These Vietnamese forces called “Garde Indigene” (Indigenous forces), were led by French officers and NCOs and did not participate in combat operations.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years 1941-1960*, 136.

⁶⁵Ibid., 136. This Vietnamese National Army was subject to the orders of the Emperor, to include French officers and non-commissioned officers, but the VNA was subordinated to the French Expeditionary Corps. This allowed Emperor Bao Dai to serve as the titular head the Vietnamese Army, but have command authority.

the force exceeded the capacity of the French Expeditionary Corps and the State of Vietnam.⁶⁶ The establishment of the VNA instilled a sense of pride among some officers and a desire to assume positions of greater responsibility. The French Expeditionary Command delayed this transfer of authority through 1954, believing that most Vietnamese officers lacked the training or experience to execute such duties.⁶⁷ Within a year, the French prepared to transfer complete autonomy and security responsibility to Vietnamese officers. This included the manning, training, equipping, and employment of an army.⁶⁸

According to reports dated 1953, there were 4,568 French officers serving as cadre for French Union Forces most commonly assigned as battalion commanders, primary staff officers, and instructors at the training centers.⁶⁹ The French command routinely reported that the Vietnamese officered battalions⁷⁰ demonstrated competence

⁶⁶Ibid., 131, 53. In 1950, the VNA consisted of 16,000 soldiers without any headquarters or staffs beyond battalion level. Within a year, the VNA had expanded to 40,000 men, but only 24 of the 34 planned battalions were created. The leadership burden fell predominately on the French with only seven battalions officered by Vietnamese.

⁶⁷Military Assistance Advisory Group-IndoChina, "Field Estimate of Effectiveness of French Union Forces," in *Records of the Military Assistance and Advisory Group Vietnam, 1950-1964* (Saigon, 1953), 12.

⁶⁸Military Assistance Advisory Group-IndoChina, "Faure-Ely-La Chambre Talks, Elac Memo," in *Records of the Military Assistance and Advisory Group Vietnam, 1950-1964* (Washington, 1954), 4.

⁶⁹Military Assistance Advisory Group-IndoChina, "Report to National Security Council on the Effectiveness of French Union Forces," in *Records of the Military Assistance and Advisory Group Vietnam, 1950-1964* (Saigon, 1954).

⁷⁰The Vietnamese officered battalions refers to Vietnamese holding leadership positions at company and below. All key command, staff, and training duties were executed by French officers and non-commissioned officers.

on the battlefield. Officers from the MAAGV concurred with the assessment of the performance of the battalions, but were concerned about the lack of trained field grade staff officers and commanders.⁷¹ The lack of trained field grade officers and commanders was a concern to MAAGV because the VNA needed to prepare for the withdrawal of French forces and assume leadership, operational, and administrative control.

When the French and Emperor Bao Dai established the VNA in 1950, it was subordinated to French operational command and administration. The French authorities rapidly expanded the VNA to meet operational requirements and most of the units that were formed in this ad hoc manner, lacked a standard Table of Organization and Equipment.⁷² An evaluation from MAAGV found that 18 different Tables of Organization and Equipment covered 19 non-infantry units established by the French command. This lack of prescribed manning, training, and equipping contributed to an uneven performance of units and increased the complexity of sustaining such units.⁷³

By 1953, the rapid expansion of the Army and the increasing operational demands required an increased number of company grade officers. The French command condensed existing military schools to produce a sufficient number of junior officers to fill company and below slots with Vietnamese. This process did little to remedy the

⁷¹Military Assistance Advisory Group-IndoChina, “Report to National Security Council on the Effectiveness of French Union Forces.”

⁷²Table of Organization and Equipment prescribes the organization, staffing, and equipping of units. The TOE is the foundational document that standardizes the manning, training, and equipping of like units to ensure it receives the necessary resources to provide a required capability on the battlefield.

⁷³Military Assistance Advisory Group-IndoChina, “Report to National Security Council on the Effectiveness of French Union Forces.”

shortfalls among field grade officers and required the French to maintain those positions.⁷⁴ The lack of trained and experienced field grade officers coupled with operational demands affected the quality of early recruit training. The French command published training objectives and standards for recruits to meet before their assignment to a unit. The recruit training centers suffered from the same insufficient number and quality of field grade officers experienced by field units. Local training center commanders had wide latitude to meet the published training objectives.⁷⁵ Most Vietnamese officers assigned to the training centers were there because they did not demonstrate the technical and tactical competence required of a combat leader.⁷⁶ The uneven level of training produced from the regional training centers was exacerbated because there was not a centralized authority to monitor and administer the quality of training. Most recruits arriving to units required additional on the job training to raise them to an adequate level of proficiency.⁷⁷

The French Expeditionary Command's prioritization of training delayed early MAAGV efforts to establish a comprehensive and robust training program for the ARVN. The US was pushing the French toward the Korean Military Assistance Group (KMAG) solution to build the VNA, but the French were reluctant to commit manpower to the training effort and certainly not in an American manner. The foundation of the

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶James Lawton Collins, *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950-1972* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1975), 123-24.

⁷⁷Military Assistance Advisory Group-IndoChina, "Report to National Security Council on the Effectiveness of French Union Forces."

ARVN was the need for well-trained and disciplined soldiers and officers. The success of KMAG being able to rotate units through training was because they were subordinated to US command and had the flexibility to bring units through training. The experience in South Vietnam was different because the MAAGV were just advisors without command authority of the ARVN who was actively engaged in combat.⁷⁸

The withdrawal of French forces during the period of 1954 to 1956 effectively removed what limited combat effectiveness of the VNA and subsequently the ARVN possessed.⁷⁹ The French directly hindered the development by excluding Vietnamese military and civilian leaders from key positions. The French left the Vietnamese unprepared to assume leadership in both military and civilian activities.⁸⁰ The impact of the French denying generations of Vietnamese the opportunity to excel in leadership positions placed the ARVN at a disadvantage and experiencing a dearth of qualified leaders.⁸¹

⁷⁸Military Assistance Advisory Group-Vietnam, "Memorandum for Record: Relationships," in *Records of the Military Assistance and Advisory Group Vietnam, 1950-1964* (Saigon, September 5, 1956).

⁷⁹Collins, *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950-1972*, 8-9; William H. Mott, *Military Assistance: An Operational Perspective* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 185. Because the French maintained all key command, staff, administrative, and logistics positions their withdrawal effectively disintegrated command and control of the Vietnamese National Army until trained and capable Vietnamese could fill that void.

⁸⁰BDM, *South Vietnam*, 5-19.

⁸¹U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947*, 136.

Development of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam
(1954 to 1959)

MAAGV, formally established in October 1955, began the mission of increasing the military capabilities of the Vietnamese. The MAAGV led two major activities in the face of French withdrawal, first was the recovery of US equipment, and second was the training of the Vietnamese. First, the equipment recovery mission was executed as part of the Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission established in 1956.⁸² Second, the joint Franco-US, Training and Instructions Mission focused on developing a plan to reorganize and retrain the Vietnamese under US Army organizations and doctrine.⁸³ The transfer of responsibility for the training and equipping of the Vietnamese army outlined in the Collins-Ely agreement and signed in December 1954 granting the US influence over training efforts and employment of US issued equipment.⁸⁴

The primary efforts of MAAGV from 1954 to 1959 were focused on building a force capable of responding to a full range of military contingencies, but always with an

⁸²Collins, *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950-1972*, 7-8. The TERM group exceeded the personnel authorizations included in the Geneva Accords and therefore focused primarily on the technical aspects of equipment recovery and accountability. The TERM group also fulfilled an advisory role and reorganized the ARVN logistics systems. Vien, *U.S. Adviser*, 96. TERM was created in response to the withdrawal of the French Expeditionary Command. TERM provided direct support to the Vietnamese Army logistic system.

⁸³Vien, *U.S. Adviser*, 158.

⁸⁴Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years 1941-1960*, 239. The Collins-Ely agreement was a bilateral agreement between the French and U.S. to conduct combined training and development of the Vietnamese forces. The U.S. assumption was that the French would retain sufficient number of personnel in South Vietnam to execute this mission, but that was disproven with the French withdrawal in 1956.

orientation toward repelling a Viet Minh invasion from the north.⁸⁵ The building of a professional force in the likeness of the US Army appears a valid course of action given the circumstances present in Vietnam. The MAAGV approach to building a mirror-image ARVN best addressed the challenges associated with the French withdrawal, available equipment, enemy situation, and MAAGV personnel shortages.⁸⁶ Building a force in the likeness of the French army to maintain continuity from the VNA was not feasible because of the French withdrawal.

The main effort of MAAGV during the period of 1950 to 1954 was issuing and providing technical training on requested equipment to the French Expeditionary Command in support of combat operations against the Viet Minh. The scope of the MAAGV mission precluded involvement in operational level planning, training, or execution.⁸⁷ MAAGV provided limited technical training to French soldiers on the use and maintenance of issued US equipment under the auspices of the Mutual Defense Assistance Program.⁸⁸

⁸⁵Collins, *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950-1972*, 127.

⁸⁶The Geneva Accords signed in 1954 placed a cap on U.S. military personnel of 342. The number of personnel available in MAAGV limited the scope of the mission it could conduct. The effort to build an army in the likeness of the U.S. Army was based on the available equipment in Vietnam, the perceived enemy threat, the withdrawal of the French, and it allowed the U.S. advisors to more easily apply their professional expertise in a foreign culture.

⁸⁷Military Assistance Advisory Group-IndoChina, *Introduction to Briefing on Maag-Indochina*, Records of the Military Assistance and Advisory Group Vietnam, 1950-1964 (Saigon, 1954), 1.

⁸⁸Collins, *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950-1972*, 1. President Truman authorized the Mutual Defense Assistance Program in May

During the period of heaviest fighting between the French Union Forces and the Viet Minh, the Chief of MAAGV observed that the French possessed a sufficient amount of materiel to execute a wide range of operational missions.⁸⁹ The observation is reflective of the focus of the MAAGV during this period, that its mission was to provide the necessary combat power to the French Union Forces to defeat the Viet Minh. The perspective of MAAGV senior leaders in 1954 was that the French Union Forces were sufficiently equipped to defeat the Viet Minh, but the final obstacle to victory was not the enemy but the ability to field a capable indigenous force. The Chief of MAAGV reported that the delays in fielding the VNA were because the French lacked sufficient manpower to train an army and fight a war.⁹⁰ The recognition that fighting a war and raising an army regardless of the equipment on-hand, is a harbinger of future challenges the MAAGV would confront following the Geneva Accords and assuming training oversight of ARVN.

The early leaders from MAAGV determined it could rapidly build and train an army using US doctrine, organization, and equipment. The initial training activity of MAAGV was oriented on building a force in the likeness of the US Army because it was the most viable option to reorganize a force that was already equipped with US equipment and exposed to combined arms maneuver and firepower while in the tutelage

1950 to provide military aid to Indochina in the fight against communist expansion. MAAGV administered this program.

⁸⁹Ibid., 3. As of May 1954, MAAGV had issued 250 million rounds of small arms; 1,500 combat vehicles, 383 combat aircraft; 15,000 radio sets; 150,000 small arms and automatic weapons, and vast amounts of associated equipment.

⁹⁰Ibid., 8.

of the French.⁹¹ The foundation of the army would be technically and tactically competent leaders. The advisory function of the MAAGV mission recognized the unique problem set in South Vietnam required a professional army with officers capable of addressing military adversaries and the associated social, economic, and political challenges.⁹² The advisory effort aimed at creating professional forces, “. . . that could cope with the social, economic, and political turmoil in which it operated and from which it was derived.”⁹³ The early stages of development for ARVN were uneven and its survival appeared tenuous as it attempted to overcome its own sordid creation and shortcomings while fighting a tough and determined enemy. MAAGV focused heavily on the technical aspects of reorganizing the force into a conventional army, building training infrastructure, and developing a professional military education system.⁹⁴

These more administrative efforts resulted in an approved force structure, which went through multiple iterations of testing and evaluation because it needed to be a force that could provide internal security, deter external aggression, and its administration and employment absorbed by the GVN. The period of testing and evaluation extended from 1956 to 1958 and followed the MAAGV recommendation that the most likely threat was

⁹¹BDM, *South Vietnam*, 5-5. In 1950 elements of the VNA operated as part of the mobile French Union forces in a combat role. The Territorial Defense Force, that was not provided U.S. equipment conducted local security.

⁹²Collins, *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950-1972*, 75.

⁹³*Ibid.*

⁹⁴Vien, *U.S. Adviser*, 186.

an invasion of conventional forces from North Vietnam.⁹⁵ The results from testing and evaluation culminated in 1959 with an agreed upon organized seven standard division and three Corps level headquarters.⁹⁶ MAAGV placed a primary effort on rebuilding the ARVN organizationally and institutionally, but put little effort into addressing leadership deficiencies. The US advisory inhibited its own efforts with an overriding concern about being viewed as new colonialists in Vietnam.⁹⁷

The core of ARVN senior leaders came from the VNA and served primarily in infantry formations at battalion and below, with many battalion commanders starting as non-commissioned officers.⁹⁸ A minority of the VNA officers had graduated from the Reserve Officers Candidate School established in 1951.⁹⁹ The first cohort of ARVN officers originated from service in the French Expeditionary Corps and were grounded in their tactics and doctrine.¹⁰⁰ The application of US Army organization, tactics, and doctrine on the existing structure of ARVN required the transition from French military

⁹⁵Ibid., 28.

⁹⁶Ibid., 28-29.

⁹⁷Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 439. The unwillingness of the U.S. to assert its will in some situations allowed the leadership maintain and develop bad habits. At this crucial stage of development the U.S. advisors accomplished an important function of forming an Army, but did little to rebuild the leadership in the likeness of U.S. Army officers.

⁹⁸Vien, *U.S. Adviser*, 156-57. The transition from a NCO in the VNA to a battalion commander occurred rapidly and sometimes without an additional training. The notion of a U.S. Army sergeant becoming a Major battalion commander in a period of three years does provide the depth of experience and training required at higher levels.

⁹⁹Ibid., 156-57.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 157.

attitudes to American military attitudes.¹⁰¹ This transition was not seamless and met with resistance or just tolerance from some ARVN leaders. The appearance of US advisors bothered some commanders anxious to be independent and reluctant to take advice.¹⁰² With MAAGV focused on building and equipping an army, ARVN officers were free to engage in political-military machinations and maneuvering.¹⁰³

Development of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam from 1960 to 1963

The next transition in development of the ARVN occurred with the increased Viet Communists activity and the completion of the Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission.¹⁰⁴ The increased activity required a reevaluation of the ARVN training and organization and completion of the Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission allowed MAAGV to reorient resources toward the training mission. The Viet Cong (VC) began a

¹⁰¹U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, *Study on Army Aspects on the Military Assistance Program in Vietnam* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Defense Technical Information Center, 1960), C-19-C-20. The French more relaxed attitude towards training and supervising subordinates was foreign to U.S. advisors and incompatible with U.S. Army training methodologies that placed direct leadership and supervision as the centerpiece.

¹⁰²Vien, *U.S. Adviser*, 190. The early advisors assigned to Vietnam were junior in grade to their ARVN counterparts and lacked combat experience. They were handicapped walking through the door; given tactical advice when they have not seen combat.

¹⁰³Mott, *Military Assistance: An Operational Perspective*, 217. During 1954-1959, ARVN began to look like an army, but it did not act like an army because control of the army meant control of the government. These political-military relationships could not be broken by MAAGV. The mirror-image of the U.S. Army found in ARVN only reflected the organization and doctrine, but its culture was not based on service and sacrifice to the state. Those ideas take more than a five years to take root.

¹⁰⁴U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, *Study on Army Aspects on the Military Assistance Program in Vietnam*, D-19.

more intensive subversion campaign that combined political activities, as well as, violence in the form of threats, intimidation, abduction, and murder.¹⁰⁵

Enemy activity increased in South Vietnam in the late 1950's and recognizing the emerging threat posed by the insurgent VC, ARVN requested an expansion of the force to a 15-division, 278,000-man regular army in 1961.¹⁰⁶ The US Army agreed to support a 200,000-man force structure and began to integrate additional advisors and combat support platforms.¹⁰⁷ The integration of additional advisors, helicopters, and armored personnel carriers (APCs), were intended to increase the mobility and firepower of the ARVN without increasing its end strength. The challenges with rapid expansion eroded the combat effectiveness of ARVN because of the dearth of qualified officers to lead the new formations. The role and importance of the advisor increased with the arrival of US combat support assets and advisors familiar with their employed, gained greater access to planning, preparation, and execution of tactical missions.¹⁰⁸

The rapid reorganization of ARVN and increased numbers of advisors assigned to the battalion level by 1961, created a span of control issues for MAAGV that was mitigated with the establishment of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam in 1962.

¹⁰⁵Dong Van Khuyen and History Center of Military, *The RVNAF* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), 10. These increased attacks culminated in January 1960 with a Vietnamese Regimental command post being raid successfully by VC forces.

¹⁰⁶Vien, *U.S. Adviser*, 28-29.

¹⁰⁷*Ibid.*, 28-29.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, 190. Lack familiarity with modern weapons pushed some ARVN commanders into a more passive role for fear of losing face by not understanding the employment of U.S. combat support assets.

The MAAGV core mission remained and the headquarters was subordinated to the Military Assistance Command Vietnam.¹⁰⁹ The establishment of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam unburdened MAAGV and allowed the headquarters to focus on the training, manning, and equipping of ARVN by fully integrating the additional advisors and specialized training on the employment of helicopters and APCs.¹¹⁰ The period of 1961 and 1962 focused on multi echelon training from basic individual soldier training, to division level headquarters field exercises. In addition, during this period ARVN reorganized with the establishment of an additional Corps headquarters and establishing division level boundaries.¹¹¹ ARVN was now being trained, manned, and equipped using approved Tables of Organization and Equipment and deployed operationally in Corps Tactical Zones and Division Tactical Zones.

As ARVN was emerging from this period of transition into a mirror image of the US Army, lingering concerns about the sustained combat effectiveness of the force was questioned because of the demonstrated lack of leadership. The characterization of the ARVN soldier was that he was easily trained and enthusiastic, but suffered from chronic lack of leadership.¹¹² It is more telling to link the performance of a unit to the competence and direction of its leaders, rather than the individual capabilities of his

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 28-29.

¹¹⁰Ibid., 186. During this period, the Civil Guard Forces and Self-Defense Forces coming under the auspices of the U.S. military assistance program. Integration of CG and SDF made uneven progress under the MAP and their integration into ARVN operations often proved problematic.

¹¹¹Ibid., 28-29.

¹¹²Ibid., 74.

subordinates when evaluating ARVN. General Vien, Chief of the Joint General Staff felt that the linkage between the leader and the led was essential to developing an effective unit and that MAAGV would have been better to focus on command, control, and leadership before equipping the force.¹¹³ The assessment from US advisors was that ARVN leadership was substandard across all echelons; though structured like the US Army, ARVN could not function within the organization inserted over top of them.¹¹⁴

¹¹³Ibid., 76. This focus on command, control, and leadership would have required MAAGV advisors the ability to remove incompetent officers and promote qualified officers. I believe General Vien's observation is accurate that the selection and promotion of qualified officers under the purview of MAAGV would have removed political appointees and less qualified officers based on military performance and strengthened ARVN's command, control, and leadership structure from top to bottom, but perhaps to the detriment of the GVN-U.S. relations and political stability.

¹¹⁴U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, *Study on Army Aspects on the Military Assistance Program in Vietnam*, C-19. The U.S. Army attributed this breakdown in leadership to an inherent character flaw within the Vietnamese people. This weakness stems from the long-standing nature of the Vietnamese people: passive, submissive, fatalistic, accustomed to being led rather than leading, pastoral and non mechanical, and living at little more than a bare existence level.

CHAPTER 4
LESSONS FROM THE KOREAN MILITARY ASSISTANCE GROUP
AND TRAINING PLAN REDLAND

The liberation of Korea from Japanese occupation was conducted under the auspices of a combined US–Russian effort following WW II and the Japanese surrender on the USS Missouri, September 2, 1945. Russian troops supervised the demilitarization of the Japanese and reestablishment of civil government north of the 38th Parallel and the US garrisoned the south to supervise similar activities. The peninsula of Korea had been an important chip in the balance of power in Asia through the 1800s with advances and interference from the Chinese, Russians, and Japanese to assume hegemony over the area. The Japanese annexed Korea in 1910 and brought the peninsula under its control.¹¹⁵ Russian and US forces maintained a temporary trusteeship over Korea to allow an orderly transition to independence.

The four decades of Japanese subjugation stoked a fractured Korean political base through the competition for resources and favoring of minority groups.¹¹⁶ The Japanese colonial government strictly controlled access to key positions in civil service and the military leaving the a small cohort capable of establishing a functioning government.

¹¹⁵Bonnie B. C. Oh, *Korea under the American Military Government, 1945-1948* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002). For more detailed account of the US interest in Korea as part of the larger Asian sphere.

¹¹⁶George McAfee McCune, *Korea Today*, Institute of Pacific Relations (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), 23-25. The Japanese colonization was based on complete control of the population and economy. The minority of Koreans that interacted with the Japanese were from the former aristocratic class and the emerging middle class. These minority groups provided augmentation to the Japanese civil and security apparatus, but had no voice in the affairs of government.

This small cohort favoring civil administrators were seen as collaborators by the Korean people and unable to maintain their support. The repercussion of Japanese occupation was a population that did not possess the expertise or training to immediately establish and maintain a government. Additionally, there was violence and civil unrest as groups attempted to fill the power vacuum left by the Japanese withdrawal.¹¹⁷ The Soviets occupied the north several weeks before the US landed in force, in the south. The Soviets moved quickly to remove all vestiges of Japanese occupation and transferred nominal power to the more revolutionary Koreans.¹¹⁸ Korean leadership, with Soviet support, immediately quelled civil unrest and political instability in the north. In the south, the US attempted to manage the transition of power to the Koreans through the incumbent Japanese civil authorities.¹¹⁹ This act fomented existing tensions and unrest among the disparate political groups vying for power in the south and forced the US to assume the unwanted role of a military government. Officials from the US Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK)¹²⁰ determined that a critical factor in establishing a functioning government within the Republic of Korea (ROK), was the capability to

¹¹⁷Allan R. Millett, "Captain James H. Hausman and the Formation of the Korean Army, 1945-1950," *Armed Forces & Society* 23, no. 4 (Summer 1997): 508-09. Korea lacked a trained indigenous security force and plagued by civil unrest, scarcity of resources, and violence. These conditions made assignment in Korea less desirable for US soldiers and shaped the initial impressions between Koreans and Americans that would influence subsequent recruiting for KMAG cadre.

¹¹⁸McCune, *Korea Today*, 51.

¹¹⁹Oh, *Korea under the American Military Government, 1945-1948*.

¹²⁰*Peace and War* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, Dept. of the Army, 1962), 8. The USAMGIK provided command and control over US occupation forces and administered government services south of the 38th parallel from 1945 to 1948 until the Koreans were prepared to assume sovereignty.

provide security.¹²¹ Initial attempts by the US military government to retain existing Japanese civil servants as a means to provide stability were met with repudiation from the South Korean population. The development of governance and security differed in the south following the surrender of the Japanese. Nationalism, long-standing internal disputes, a fractured political base, and a dearth of qualified civil and military leaders characterized the transition to sovereignty.

The transition from the trauma of colonial occupation was accelerated because the desire of the Koreans to be independent and removing any remaining vestiges of Japanese occupation.¹²² The US military government and the Korean Provisional Government were not able to keep pace with the peoples' desire for independence and fully establish sustainable systems of governance and security. The Japanese monopoly on all manner of governance over four decades created a cohort of Korean civil servants that were untrained and unable to provide basic services to the people.¹²³ The momentum from the Korean people, growing polarization of the relations with Russia, and the rapid drawdown of forces contributed to the US military government's decision to transfer authority to a provisional government in South Korea without a fully established means

¹²¹Robert K. Sawyer and Walter G. Hermes, *Military Advisors in Korea: K MAG in Peace and War* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1962), 9-10.

¹²²James F. Schnabel, *Policy and Direction: The First Year* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1972), 18. The conditions the US occupation force was nation plagued by the breakdown of basic civil services and lack of qualified individuals to provide the necessary stability to form a government. These conditions required US Army occupation forces to provide security to reestablish basic services and quell increasing unrest among the Korean population.

¹²³McCune, *Korea Today*, 26.

of governance and security.¹²⁴ The rapid preparation from the establishment of a unifying government in South Korea were met with resistance from the Russian's administering north of the 38th parallel and no agreement was reached for unification elections. This development was a harbinger of future conflict between a communist backed North Korea and US backed South Korea. Failure to reach a unification agreement set the trajectory for conflict and introduced a sense of urgency in the development of a force capable of defeating external aggression.

The deteriorating security situation in Korea required an immediate law enforcement capability to address the criminal gangs, looting, sabotage, and riots. The Korean National Police proved to be unreliable and lacked sufficient training and professionalism.¹²⁵ Due to shortcomings in the Korean National Police, the US began to build the capability to provide internal security through a reserve constabulary initially under the control of the Korean National Police.¹²⁶ Recruitment for the constabulary

¹²⁴Sawyer and Hermes, *Military Advisors in Korea: KMAG in Peace and War*, 21. The US military government had yet to establish the processes to recruit, train, and equip security forces capable of providing internal security. Conflict between existing armed groups not under the control of the Provisional Government of Korea, as well as, woefully inadequate training facilities and equipment delayed these efforts.

¹²⁵Millett, "Captain James H. Hausman and the Formation of the Korean Army, 1945-1950," 509. The US military government and soldiers viewed the Korean National Police as corrupt, brutal, and inept. In an effort to remove any vestige of Japanese occupation the US military replaced all Japanese colonial policemen and integrated 8,000 senior policemen into the Korean National Police. This cohort group assumed over 83% of the leadership positions. Without viable candidates to assume key positions in the Korean National Police the transition required extensive retraining of existing policemen.

¹²⁶Schnabel, *Policy and Direction: The First Year*, 29. The impasse with the Russians to finalize the unification plan of Korea left South Korea holding elections under the auspices of the United Nations along with the withdrawal of US occupation forces. The nascent South Korean government, Republic of Korea, requested US occupation troops remain until the national defense forces reached a level able to deter

primarily drew from a newly arrived pool of unemployed soldiers that served in various formations, during WW II. The available recruits possessed a wide spectrum of the military training and experience. This first officer group was primarily graduates of officer training in Japan, subsequent recruiting efforts stalled because of the inability to recruit representatives from the various armed groups, not yet under the fold of the Korean Provisional Government. The pressures of political instability, deteriorating economy, and civil unrest required a rapid expansion of the internal security forces in the ROK. The rapid expansion of the Korean Constabulary allowed highly politicized and less qualified personnel to enter the constabulary as officers. The US military government did not grant authority to senior Constabulary leaders to deny admittance to suspect officer candidates. This allowed ineffective officers to permeate the force and left Constabulary leaders without a clear mechanism to evaluate and remove them.¹²⁷

In October 1947, when asked about the viability of an independent Korean Army to deter external aggression, General John R. Hodge, XXIV Corps Commander, heading the US military government supported the notion and proposed that with sufficient equipping and training such a force could be fielded within a year.¹²⁸ General Douglas MacArthur submitted an updated report to Washington policy makers within four months

external aggression. Establishing a reserve constabulary with minimal heavy weapons was in recognition of a shifting relationship with Russia and an attempt to avoid the perception of escalation.

¹²⁷Millett, "Captain James H. Hausman and the Formation of the Korean Army, 1945-1950," 513-14. This shortcoming in the screening process was identified at the lower levels, but the requirement to relieve U.S. troops of static security missions outweighed the effort to build a representative and politically balanced police force.

¹²⁸Schnabel, *Policy and Direction: The First Year*, 32.

of Hodge's recommendation. MacArthur instead recommended the continued expansion of the Korean Constabulary with the integration of some heavy weapons and equipment as required because it was feasible, in advance of the scheduled elections in South Korea.¹²⁹ Prior to elections, the US military government established standardized organizations, headquarters, and training programs for the burgeoning Korean Constabulary.¹³⁰ The Korean Constabulary did not represent a conventional force in being, rather provided the framework under which KMAG advisors would operate to generate the future Republic of Korea Army (ROKA).

The founding of the ROK in 1948 signaled the end of the US military government and the beginning of withdrawal. Overtures from North Korea and the establishment of the People's Democratic Republic of Korea caused some uneasiness in the new ROK government and a request for the continued presence of occupation troops to support the development of the ROKA was made.¹³¹ This request was not met and withdrawal of occupation soldiers occurred as planned. The authorization of the KMAG was finalized in the summer of 1949 with a personnel ceiling of approximately 500 to advise their

¹²⁹Sawyer and Hermes, *Military Advisors in Korea: KMAG in Peace and War*, 28-29. The reasons GEN MacArthur provided for delaying the establishment of a Korea Army were inadequate training facilities, unqualified or unreliable officers, and the lack of US manpower to supervise such a large scale endeavor while withdrawal plans were already underway.

¹³⁰*Ibid.*, 30. The US military government assisted the Koreans in establishing three brigade headquarters at Seoul, Taejon, and Pusan. Each headquarters maintained operational control over three regiments. The process of building combat support services was just beginning and this systemic lack of lack of logistical capability would plague the ROKA through the Korean War.

¹³¹Schnabel, *Policy and Direction: The First Year*, 34. The transition from the Korean Constabulary to the ROKA began with Armed Forces Organization Act and the establishment of a department of national defense.

Korean counterparts in the ROKA and National Police. The focus of the KMAG mission with the ROKA was to increase the effectiveness of and ensure its efficient use of American equipment.¹³² KMAG leaders recognized that the success of the advisory mission required selection of the most qualified advisors and partnership to the battalion level.

A local board selected the KMAG advisors based on availability in theater or pending assignment to the theater. The scope of the board was to identify candidates based on rank, experience, time remaining in theater based on the points system, and finally overall potential.¹³³ The board relaxed all qualifications to meet mission requirements. This first cohort group of advisors was younger and less experienced than planned by senior KMAG leaders and would make initial advisory efforts with senior ROKA leaders problematic. The cadre of inexperienced officers advising ROKA leaders several echelons above their grade was compounded with the rapid expansion of the Army. The expansion of the ROKA was in response to the increasing North Korean military threat along the 38th parallel and subversive elements operating inside the ROK. With promise of support from the US government for an Army of 65,000, the ROK pressed ahead and recruited 100,000 through 1949.¹³⁴ This rapid expansion exceeded the capacity of the KMAG advisors to partner at all levels, to equip the force, and overwhelmed the austere military training and education system. The challenges facing KMAG advisors in the early years ranged from inadequate training facilities to the

¹³²Ibid.

¹³³Sawyer and Hermes, *Military Advisors in Korea: KMAG in Peace and War*, 44.

¹³⁴Schnabel, *Policy and Direction: The First Year*, 34.

language barrier that required creative solutions and bottom-up refinement. Leaders and soldiers within the ROKA had such limited exposure to military training under the Japanese that numerous military words did not yet exist in the Korean language.¹³⁵ The lack of training doctrine was overcome through ingenuity of US advisors and their willingness to learn from ROKA counterparts. One such example was involving applying a US Army Mobilization Training Program 7-1, dated September 1943, to build a phased training program that addressed individual soldier skills and weapons training.¹³⁶ The creativity of advisors in identifying a methodology that was relevant to developing the combat skills required and palatable to the ROKA leaders, is a testament to the importance of building relationships and mutual trust between the advisors and his counterparts.

The ROKA published Army Training Directive No. 1 in 1950 that provided for all ROKA units to complete various training events and multiple echelons in a series of phased training events.¹³⁷ This approach was entirely consistent with the KMAG desires for training the force. The increased activity along the 38th parallel coupled with the effectiveness of the subversive elements in the ROK, to destabilize the ROK government, presented an obstacle to KMAG training efforts. The KMAG attempted to develop a combined counter-guerilla plan in early 1950 between the ROKA and National Police that would relieve some pressure from ROKA, to allow units to enter prescribed

¹³⁵Sawyer and Hermes, *Military Advisors in Korea: Kmag in Peace and War*, 63.

¹³⁶*Ibid.*, 70.

¹³⁷*Ibid.*, 76.

training.¹³⁸ The expansion and retraining of the National Police never came to fruition and the ROKA modified the training directives to meet mission requirements while sacrificing training. The response of the ROK to these threats was to generate formations and use them in operational security missions without adequate training. Increased enemy contact along the 38th parallel and the uneven performance of ROKA exposed shortfalls in basic military training.¹³⁹

The KMAC attributed the shortcomings in the ROK security force to the lack of leadership and professional expertise. The reasons for uneven performance can also be attributed to the rapid growth of the force without sufficient institutional training programs and facilities. An effort to rotate ROKA units into a training status and allowing qualified officers to attend necessary military schools was met with resistance from ROKA leaders. The unwillingness to release officers for school from units engaged with internal and external threats, required considerable pressure from KMAC advisors.¹⁴⁰ The difference in priorities became an obstacle to progress in the training of the ROKA and delayed the full development of the force. The senior ROK civilian and military leaders' initial reluctance to commit forces away from operational assignments

¹³⁸Ibid.

¹³⁹Ibid. The ROKA consisted of 67 battalions and through 1949, the training readiness across the force was uneven with only 30 completing company level training and none completed battalion level training. Across the ROKA, formations lacked officers adequately trained and validated to conduct combined arms maneuver at echelons above company.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., 80. The lack of attendance from ROKA officers in military schools affected the effectiveness of the force in the field, but also weakened the education system because it lacked qualified ROKA instructors to sustain, improve, and validate the importance of professional military education.

for training, when taken in the context of deciding which presents the greatest threat to the government, does not appear to this author as a reckless or a shortsighted choice. The ROKA recognized the importance of professional military education and began to support the effort in earnest and by 1949 thirteen schools were reorganized and-or opened to fill this gap.¹⁴¹

On June 25, 1950 North Korean forces invaded the ROK and the uneven performance witnessed in training was evident during these first battles. During the initial contact, the ROKA forces disintegrated under the North Korean combined arms forces and left ROKA formations unable to respond to the artillery, tanks, and fixed-winged aircraft. As entire ROKA divisions withdrew, critical weapons and equipment were left behind.¹⁴² The remnants of the ROKA consolidated and reorganized in and around Pusan, far to the southeast of Seoul. The ROKA performance demonstrated a technical inferiority to the Russian supplied North Korean forces, but shortcomings in training, equipping, and manning also contributed to the initial setbacks. The challenges that KMAG observed were, “The South Korean lack of military know-how, the inadequate training of their leaders and men, the shortages in heavy weapons and other items such as

¹⁴¹Ibid., 87.

¹⁴²For detailed accounts of the initial stages of the invasion and ROKA responses see. Schnabel, *Policy and Direction: The First Year*; Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981); History Center of Military, *American Military History*, vol. 2, *The United States Army in a Global Era, 1917-2008, 2010*, * (S.I: s.n, 2010).

signal equipment were residual problems that the KMAG advisors had wrestled with before the war.”¹⁴³

The pre-war period for the KMAG introduced several obstacles that delayed the development of an effective ROKA capable of providing internal security and deterring external aggression. The ROK was an infant state that did not possess the institutional expertise, capacity, or capability to man, train, and equip a large-scale modern army capable of defeating North Korean forces. The scope of the KMAG mission and its limited capacity affected the training, equipping, and manning of the ROKA. The selection of advisors was haphazard and plagued by unwillingness of many officers to serve in a role that offered limited professional rewards. The KMAG force structure was inadequate to provide counterpart advisory relationships to the battalion level. The rapid expansion of the ROK security forces exacerbated conditions created by the dearth of qualified officers and non-commissioned officers, substandard equipment, minimal training facilities, and cultural differences between Americans and Koreans. Additionally, progress with training the ROKA was hindered by requirements to provide internal security against criminal threats, civil unrest, and subversive infiltrators. These factors placed demands that nascent government and ROKA were unable to rapidly absorb and overcome.

The election of Dr. Syngmann Rhee as President of the ROK in late summer 1948, left precious little time before the North Koreans invaded in June 1950.¹⁴⁴ This

¹⁴³Sawyer and Hermes, *Military Advisors in Korea: KMAG in Peace and War*, 152.

¹⁴⁴McCune, *Korea Today*, 244-45. Dr. Rhee was a well-known advocate of Korean independence and had a long-standing relationship with the United States. The

critically short window of time was insufficient to build a cadre of military officers capable of fighting effectively at echelons above battalion. Additionally, the evolution of the ROKA from a reserve constabulary placed a further burden on the KMAC to transition the force into a professional military. The rapid expansion at the ROKA exposed the critical weakness in combat of sacrificing basic individual soldier training.¹⁴⁵ The factors of time and the importance of basic individual training was also reinforced by General Maxwell Taylor while serving as the Department of the Army, G-3 during a fact finding mission.¹⁴⁶ Taylor attributed the breakdown of leadership in combat experienced by some ROKA units to a lack of training and inadequate support that led to a loss of confidence. As commander of forces fighting in Korea, General Matthew Ridgway also attributed the breakdown of combat effectiveness in ROKA units to a lack of leadership training and substandard equipment.¹⁴⁷ Ridgway gained additional resources for KMAC and provided persistent pressure on ROKA leaders to support fully the professional military education system established in the ROK. The challenges confronting the

significance of Dr. Rhee's election to President is that he wanted centralized control of the government and personal leadership. His dedication to Korean independence was unyielding. Additionally, he was favored by some because of the strong anti-Soviet beliefs.

¹⁴⁵Paik Sun Yup, *From Pusan to Panmunjom* (New York: Brassey's, 1992). General Paik rose through the ranks of the ROKA during the Korea War and served as ROK, Army Chief of Staff. General Paik recognized the importance of recruit training from his experiences command units through Corps. As Chief of Staff, General Paik reinforced and improved ROK recruit training programs.

¹⁴⁶Center of Military History, United States Army, *United States Army in the Korean War: Truce Tent and Fighting Front* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2005), 62.

¹⁴⁷*Ibid.*

KMAG and inherent in the ROKA were overcome through persistence and the establishment of mutual trust and respect overtime.

Training Plan REDLAND

In advance of the Geneva Agreements signed in July 1954, bringing cessation to the Franco-Viet Minh War MAAGV published OPLAN REDLAND in March 1954. The plan envisioned a period of consolidation, reorganization, and retraining prior to resuming a combined Franco-Vietnamese offensive against the Viet Minh.¹⁴⁸ This OPLAN met with a lukewarm response from the French Expeditionary Commander, General Ely, but by June 1954, he requested US assistance to train the Vietnamese Army. Included in the OPLAN was a Training Plan that outlined a robust training program to retrain existing VNA cadre and integrate new recruits, units, and equipment.¹⁴⁹ The training plan relied on continued partnership with the French Expeditionary Command to train and develop the remaining VNA. This training plan was directly informed by our experiences with KMAG and the perceived effectiveness of current US training methodology.¹⁵⁰ The program was optimistic and projected training one 15,000-man

¹⁴⁸Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years 1941-1960*, 222. A majority of this plan was copied from the KMAG training efforts with the ROKA. The U.S. Army intended to transfer lessons from theater and apply them to another on the basis that they were both training missions.

¹⁴⁹Military Assistance Advisory Group-IndoChina, "Training Plan Redland," in *Records of the Military Assistance and Advisory Group Vietnam, 1950-1964* (Saigon 1954).

¹⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 18. Specifically addressed was the development of Infantry, Armor, Signal, Artillery, Engineer centers to consolidate available resources and expertise to standardize training.

division every six months, with the entire VNA organized into an operational division within 22 months.

The largest problem in developing the VNA into a modern army was the dearth of trained leaders and most critically field grade officers and non-commissioned officers. Following the partition of Vietnam, the region that would become South Vietnam possessed sufficient numbers of eligible candidates, but the French Expeditionary Command had not developed a complete officer training program until 1951.¹⁵¹

The lack of emphasis on building a cadre of trained Vietnamese officers to form the core of the leadership of the army is reflected by the fact that during the period of 1948 to 1951 fewer than 100 Second Lieutenants were produced.¹⁵² These junior officers filled positions within the 12 existing Vietnamese battalions. As the VNA expanded, the gap increased between authorized slots and qualified officers capable of filling them.¹⁵³ The French Expeditionary Command mitigated this risk by maintaining key command and staff positions within the Vietnamese battalions.

The continual shortfall of qualified officers stimulated the development of programs to identify officer candidates earlier and provide preliminary training. The two-year compulsory military training program, Advanced Military Preparations, targeted

¹⁵¹Ibid., 12. The officer training efforts of the French involved condensed classes, less than 8 months, to rapidly graduate candidates for operational assignment. French Expeditionary Command and the VNA lacked the capacity to fully support an intensive officer training program.

¹⁵²Ibid.

¹⁵³Ibid., 11. The VNA expanded from 58,000 men and 60 battalions in 1953 to 125,000 men and 126 battalions by 1954.

students enrolled in public and private post-secondary schools.¹⁵⁴ The program was equivalent to a mandatory ROTC program at US Universities. The Officer Training School opened in 1948 and accepted direct enrollment from civilian applicants following competitive entrance exams. This training program graduated Second Lieutenants following an eight-month course.¹⁵⁵ The course was shortened from one year to produce enough officers to fill the required slots. The selection process at all commissioning sources placed an emphasis on higher education and therefore targeted only the urban elite population.

The officer production system emerged when demand for officers exceeded supply because of the rapid expansion of the VNA. It was projected that by 1954, more than 75 percent of all commissioned officers will have no more than one year of military service.¹⁵⁶ To put that in perspective, 75 percent of the key command and staff positions within a US Army battalion would be held by graduates from the same class, all with less than one year of military experience. The most senior officers available would be graduates from the officer training school in 1950.

There were four recruit training centers, a non-commissioned officer academy, and two officer training schools operational in 1953 run by French cadre.¹⁵⁷ The French administered military education system did not include specialized training for staff

¹⁵⁴Ibid., 15.

¹⁵⁵Ibid., 12.

¹⁵⁶Ibid., 17-18.

¹⁵⁷Military Assistance Advisory Group-IndoChina, "Field Estimate of Effectiveness of French Union Forces," 10.

officers and senior leaders until 1952 with the establishment of the Tactical Training Center.¹⁵⁸ The observations from a MAAGV representative concluded that the training lacked rigor and ultimately most of the training occurred once a soldier was assigned to a unit. The results of French tutelage of the VNA to achieve the ability to operate independently were inclusive when the US assumed primary training responsibility.

¹⁵⁸Military Assistance Advisory Group-IndoChina, "Training Plan Redland," 16.

CHAPTER 5
IMPACT OF CULTURE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF
THE ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM

In the eyes of the Vietnamese servicemen, there were three things about US advisers and the advisory effort that were most important: the adviser's personality, his procedures and techniques, and his professional competence.”¹⁵⁹

—General Cao Van Vien, *Indochina Monographs: The U.S. Adviser*

The observation by Chief of the Joint General Staff, General Cao Van Vien, that an ARVN soldiers’ most important criteria for evaluating an advisor is personality, highlights the differences in military cultures.¹⁶⁰ Even a cursory list of criteria for identifying the key attributes for a US Army advisor responsible for training and developing an army, would place professional competence ahead of personality. Advisory duty in support of ARVN represented a unique cultural and military environment that advisors had to navigate to execute their mission effectively. The core function of MAAGV was advising and assisting ARVN to build a force capable of

¹⁵⁹Vien, *U.S. Adviser*, 194.

¹⁶⁰A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture; a Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (Cambridge, MA: The Museum, 1952). The authors define culture as, “Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other hand as conditioning elements of further action.” For further explanation of how this definitions shapes the U.S. Army definition of organizational culture see Combined Army Center, TR ADOC, “The Profession of Arms Campaign Information Paper,” December 8, 2010).

providing internal security and deterring external aggression.¹⁶¹ The advisory effort hinged on the ability of an advisor to establish and maintain personal relationships. Several cultural obstacles existed, which effected the advisor's ability establish a relationship and still accomplish the mission. The administrative constraints, intrinsic cultural differences, and the language barrier complicated establishing a professional working partnership between the advisor and his ARVN counterpart. These cultural differences and resultant behaviors and attitudes provide greater context in the assessment of the ARVN officers' performance at the Battle of Ap Bac.

Administrative Constraints

The ARVN Chief of General Staff, Major General Le Van Ty stated that the advisors were to assist and advise ARVN commanders on technical aspects and that advisors did not command or have supervisory authority, laid out the initial relationship and role of MAAGV advisors in a memorandum.¹⁶² In a speech given by Brigadier

¹⁶¹Military Assistance Advisory Group-Vietnam, *Operational Instructions and Information for Field Personnel*, Records of the Military Assistance and Advisory Group Vietnam, 1950-1964 (Saigon June 7, 1956).

¹⁶²Vien, *U.S. Adviser*, 33. The memorandum of the laid out terms of reference for both advisors and ARVN commanders for the early advisory efforts and subsequent terms of reference did not change priority of efforts. The three enduring points from the memorandum in order of precedence were (1) the general advisory mission which was to assist and advise ARVN commanders on "strictly technical aspects"; (2) the advisers' had no command nor supervisory authority, and (3) the ARVN commanders' responsibilities which included providing security and support, inviting necessary counsel and exercising their own judgment in making use of the advice offered. These terms of reference effectively limited the purview of the advisors authority and more importantly empowered the ARVN commanders to determine how to best utilize the available support. The memorandum closed with stressing the importance of the advisor and ARVN commander's relationship based on "courteous, inter-allied cooperative spirit." ARVN commanders were unwilling to be subordinated or bullied by U.S. advisors.

General Don, ARVN Chief of Staff, on August 13, 1956 to US Army advisors at the invitation of Lieutenant General Samuel T. Williams, Chief, MAAG, outlined cultural differences that could affect the effectiveness of the US advisory effort.¹⁶³ MAAGV reproduced this speech and disseminated to all US advisors on September 5, 1956 in a Memorandum for Record entitled Relationships. The significance of the speech is that it was from the perspective of a senior ARVN officer on the cultural nuances that US advisors should consider when advising and training Vietnamese officers. Senior leaders in both ARVN and MAAGV felt it necessary to address the reality that cultural misunderstandings may hinder the development of the force as the US assumed the primary training and advisory role. Furthermore, the ARVN general staff published these remarks in memorandum for dissemination to all ARVN officers. This frank dialogue and attempt to educate subordinates represents an army that is cognizant of its own cultural norms and the requirements incumbent on US advisors to act within those norms.¹⁶⁴

The speech describes acceptable behaviors for US advisors to undertake within the cultural norms familiar to ARVN officers and which approaches may prove counter-productive. In his speech Don described the development of the ARVN officer corps emerging from French oversight and command. French Expeditionary Force leaders

¹⁶³Military Assistance Advisory Group-Vietnam, “Memorandum for Record: Relationships.”

¹⁶⁴Harold J. Meyer, *Hanging Sam a Military Biography of General Samuel T. Williams: From Pancho Villa to Vietnam* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 1990), 128-31. General Williams, 25th Infantry Division Commander, had the opportunity to develop a personal relationship with President and Madame Rhee. This relationship was sustained following the Korean War. In June of 1953, General Williams was assigned to serve as the II ROK Corps Deputy Commander. General Williams demonstrated the ability to recognize and overcome and cultural differences in the accomplishment of the mission as part of II ROK Corps command team.

subordinated and treated Vietnamese officers as inferiors; with their departure ARVN officers were reinvigorated with pride and a sense of independence. Don put the development of ARVN in a unique context in the speech, “Remember that we Vietnamese have just become independent. We are jealous of our new freedom—and proud of it!”¹⁶⁵ The birth of ARVN occurred simultaneously with the independence of a country and these factors combined, created a steep learning curve for an army to develop in the midst of independence and fighting a war. The observations of senior leaders set the tone for MAAGV–ARVN relations, once they were codified in associated memoranda and terms of reference, it placed administrative constraints on US advisors.

US–Vietnamese Cultural Differences

The republic is too young to have a military tradition of its own—as distinguished from that common to the whole Vietnamese people—and the excitement of having a national armed force is still fresh.¹⁶⁶

The birth of ARVN was directly representative of the cultural values of the people and it takes time to build a military tradition or culture that integrates or minimizes intrinsic cultural traits that may hinder the development of an effective modern army.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵Military Assistance Advisory Group-Vietnam, “Memorandum for Record: Relationships,” 2.

¹⁶⁶American University, DA PAM No. 550-40, *U.S. Army Area Handbook for Vietnam* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1962), 482. The Vietnamese were confronting the birth of sovereignty and the development of a military at the same time. The Vietnamese people were not fully prepared or educated to realize the challenges associated with building a government and military force simultaneously.

¹⁶⁷Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*, 199. A military culture is unique, but must be formed in such a manner that its structure is congruent with one’s intrinsic cultural values and this process takes time. In reflection on the American Revolution the authors quotes General von Steuben, “I shall always regret that

The early efforts of MAAGV and US advisors focused on the structure of an army and with absence of an existing template attempted to transpose the US Army organization, doctrine, and culture on ARVN.¹⁶⁸

Vietnamese officers desired greater independence and respect, but in some cases lacked the training and experience to achieve them rapidly on the battlefield. Unique cultural traits and political realities shaped the development of ARVN that at times confounded advisors. Common observations by US advisors of ARVN officers, included descriptors like passive, deference to authority, and uncommitted, but through the prism of traditional Vietnamese values these terms take a less pejorative tone.¹⁶⁹ These early ARVN officer cohorts were products of their culture and the chaos that surrounded them.

The unique military culture of the ARVN emerged from a conglomeration of Vietnamese cultural norms and the remnants of French military thinking. The ARVN command structure system was strictly regimented and placed a greater emphasis on one's rank as reflecting one's competence and status. If an advisor is of lesser rank than his ARVN counterpart, then it is assumed that Americans' think less of the officer's skills and status.¹⁷⁰ Ensuring co-equal rank between US advisor and counterpart created an

circumstances induced me to undertake the defense of a country...where every farmer is a general, but where nobody wishes to be a soldier.”

¹⁶⁸BDM, *South Vietnam*, 2-23. The early advisory effort focused on organizing ARVN versus building an army that absorbed intrinsic cultural norms or political realities. It makes sense for U.S. advisors to build an army that was familiar, but that was not an army representative of Vietnamese culture.

¹⁶⁹Ibid., 1-27. Those terms tend to have a negative connotation when describing an Army officer, but well regarded attributes and behaviors in Vietnamese society.

¹⁷⁰Hickey et al., *The American Military Advisor and His Foreign Counterpart: The Case of Vietnam*, 46.

additional obstacle for junior advisors to form productive professional relationships to senior ARVN leaders. The US advisory rotational plan of 12 months in field duty left little time to develop situational understanding, personal relationships, and influence one's counterpart.¹⁷¹ The rapid turnover of advisory personnel affected the durability of personal relationships critical to increasing the combat effectiveness of ARVN.¹⁷² This rotational assignment of US Advisors meant that ARVN officers would have multiple iterations of advisors and the strengths or weakness of that previous relationship would carry over. The performance and attitude of previous advisors shaped both the command climate and how ARVN officers treated them.¹⁷³ An additional challenge associated with the ARVN being highly structured, was that the decision-making authority was not commensurate with US Army standards. Decisions ordinarily made by a Captain in the US Army is reserved at a much higher level in ARVN and the process of gaining approval from the appropriate level delayed decision-making.¹⁷⁴ Advisors encountered unexpected challenges with the transferability of US Army tactical and administrative concepts that extended beyond the language barrier. Many ARVN officers were comfortable with French tactical concepts that tended to be less prescriptive and

¹⁷¹Military Assistance Advisory Group-Vietnam, *Operational Instructions and Information for Field Personnel*.

¹⁷²Vien, *U.S. Adviser*, 138.

¹⁷³Hickey et al., *The American Military Advisor and His Foreign Counterpart: The Case of Vietnam*, 50.

¹⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 14.

deliberate.¹⁷⁵ The early attempts of advisors to introduce new US Army tactical concepts met with resistance or disinterest from ARVN leaders.¹⁷⁶

The training for US Army personnel assigned to duty with MAAGV focused on providing a foundation to understand the history and culture of Vietnam, as well as, develop the skills and attributes that would allow the advisor to best understand and overcome cultural differences once in theater.¹⁷⁷ Cultural differences provide context to explain the observation that ARVN officers were passive or uncommitted. Some US advisors observed that ARVN officers tended to solve problems through an inefficient or cumbersome methodology and labeled them passive or unwilling to make a decision.¹⁷⁸ The cultural gap between US advisors and ARVN counterparts was an obstacle to effective partnership and each relationship required a unique approach and understanding.¹⁷⁹ Below the surface local customs or cultural norms may have prevented the most efficient solution from an American's perspective. The willingness to remain uncommitted in periods of turmoil and unrest is culturally acceptable among the Vietnamese. Most Vietnamese feel it is prudent to remain undecided until a clear

¹⁷⁵Ibid., ix.

¹⁷⁶Vien, *U.S. Adviser*, 74. Some ARVN officers felt that U.S. Army tactical concepts were too slow and academic to be of use in the current conflict against the Viet Minh.

¹⁷⁷Hickey et al., *The American Military Advisor and His Foreign Counterpart: The Case of Vietnam*, 31.

¹⁷⁸Martin J. Dockery, *Lost in Translation: Vietnam, a Combat Advisor's Story* (New York: Presidio Press: Ballantine Books, 2003), 240.

¹⁷⁹Hickey et al., *The American Military Advisor and His Foreign Counterpart: The Case of Vietnam*, 27.

outcome is evident.¹⁸⁰ As part of the trend toward being noncommittal was the willingness to negotiate and bargain for an equitable political solution, this is a manifestation of the Vietnamese cultural traits of adaptability and saving face.¹⁸¹ Conflict resolution tended to include a shifting of principles that suited the current environment through negotiation.

The vulnerability of the ARVN officer corps to political instability limited the overall effectiveness of the army. The political instability in Saigon led to a series of officer rotations, reassignments, or promotions based on reliability versus military competence. With officer assignments weighted on political favoritism it was in the best interest of an ARVN officer to not expose himself until there was stability at the higher levels of command.¹⁸² These factors also contributed to the passivity or reluctance to conduct combat operations by some ARVN officers.¹⁸³ The political instability was more

¹⁸⁰U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, *Study on Army Aspects on the Military Assistance Program in Vietnam*, B-40. The Vietnamese saying *trum-chanh*, “under the blanket” is used to describe the willingness for people to remain uncommitted or passive until a clear outcome becomes apparent. This notion is problematic for some U.S. advisors in evaluating the performance of ARVN officers. As described above some officers fell out of favor politically and chose to remain passive until a clear outcome or opportunity presented itself.

¹⁸¹*Ibid.*, B-39. In 1955, as Diem was in armed struggle against the Cao-Dai, Hoa-Hao, and Binh Xuyen sects for control of Saigon and the existence of his government he maintained open negotiations. Elements of Cao Dai and Hoa Hao agreeing to support his government based on some political concessions.

¹⁸²Hickey et al., *The American Military Advisor and His Foreign Counterpart: The Case of Vietnam*, 17.

¹⁸³*Ibid.*, 25. The authors relates an interview with an advisor that reports giving up on advising his ARVN counterpart because the ARVN officer’s complete lack of discipline. Following a political shake-up in high level positions the ARVN officers conducted themselves in a professional and efficient manner. The officer confided to his

problematic for advisors with the assignment of incompetent officers into command positions based on political favoritism.¹⁸⁴

In addition to the centralized promotion system under President Diem, advisors had to understand and assist their counterpart in navigating the unique rewards and punishment that evolved in ARVN. The reward system did not counterbalance the punishment system. Punishment was meted out on commanders for suffering casualties or losing equipment and the likelihood of both of those occurring as part of offensive operations led some officers to become timid or reluctant to pursue offensive operations.¹⁸⁵ The reward system did not recognize and promote officers with distinguished combat records, careful and politically reliable officers operating in rear areas tended to be promoted more rapidly. The unpredictable promotion system in ARVN had a time in service requirement for promotion from Lieutenant to Captain ranging from two to ten years based on political reasons.¹⁸⁶ This left some officers with little incentive to exceed the minimum requirements because political landscape influenced their promotion more than performance. The unique military culture that developed in the

advisor that he had fallen out of political favor, but now saw the opportunity to get promoted.

¹⁸⁴BDM, *South Vietnam*, 6-16. The three commonly used criteria for promotion under President Diem were that the candidate had to be a native of the central region, Roman Catholic, and a member of the Can Lao Party (Diem's party). These screening criteria promoted incompetent ARVN officers and isolated competent officers that did meet those criteria.

¹⁸⁵Hickey et al., *The American Military Advisor and His Foreign Counterpart: The Case of Vietnam*, 15-16.

¹⁸⁶BDM, *South Vietnam*, 6-17.

ARVN left little incentive for field commander to press the attack because the risk far outweighed the reward.¹⁸⁷

US soldiers assigned to MAAGV confronted a host of cultural obstacles. These obstacles hindered the advisory mission by creating distrust and frustration between the US advisors and ARVN counterparts. Taken in context of raising a foreign army in the midst of war and political instability these cultural differences were amplified. Then starting in 1961 an increased number of advisors assigned to MAAGV partnered with ARVN battalions in more remote locations. This geographic and cultural isolation led some advisors to feel disconnected from his chain of command.¹⁸⁸ The headquarters held advisors accountable for the ARVN's performance, but did not empower the advisor with authority over the partnered ARVN unit to affect such change.¹⁸⁹ These factors combined widened the cultural gap between the US advisor and ARVN counterpart.

Early US Advisory Training

The advisory strength grew steadily from 1960 to 1964 as part of an overall increase in support to Vietnam starting under the Kennedy Administration.¹⁹⁰ In 1960,

¹⁸⁷Hickey et al., *The American Military Advisor and His Foreign Counterpart: The Case of Vietnam*, 16.

¹⁸⁸Vien, *U.S. Adviser*, 197. The inability of some advisors to adjust to his environment led to the construction of familiar institutions like a Post Exchange, mess facilities, and recreation facilities that allowed the advisor to further separate himself from his counterpart.

¹⁸⁹Hickey et al., *The American Military Advisor and His Foreign Counterpart: The Case of Vietnam*, vii.

¹⁹⁰Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1988), 12. The Kennedy Administration provided an open-ended statement of increased assistance to

the influx of advisors into Vietnam began incrementally to fulfill advisory roles at the battalion level. In addition to extending the advisory effort to lower levels, the US Army began to deploy additional combat support elements to Vietnam.¹⁹¹ The increased numbers of advisors presented opportunities and risks to increasing the combat effectiveness of ARVN units. With advisors at lower levels, the opportunity existed to build rapport and affect a grass-roots shift in the effectiveness of ARVN. Additionally, advisors could access combat support assets, such as helicopters and air support, to increase the confidence and offensive spirit of ARVN officers. However, some felt that the risk was, with more advisors at lower levels, it would only exacerbate existing cultural differences and become detrimental to the development of ARVN. The selection and training of advisors largely determined effectiveness of the rapid increase in advisory efforts with the ARVN.

The criteria for selecting advisors were the same as selection for continued service in the US Army. Meaning, selection to be an advisor is based on completion of military schools, success at key duty positions for one's rank, potential for continued service, and availability for an overseas tour.¹⁹² The ability to translate one's professional military competence into being a successful advisor produced uneven results. Some highly

President Diem for protecting the liberty of GVN on December 16, 1962. The response to this letter, Vietnam saw an increase in advisors from 2,600 to 11,500 through 1962. Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*, 155.

¹⁹¹Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*, 154. The U.S. deployed additional helicopters, armored vehicles, communications equipment, fixed wing assets, and artillery that required U.S. advisors at lower levels to synchronize and employ.

¹⁹²Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973*, 61.

competent officers were unable to transition and adapt to a foreign culture.¹⁹³ The broad selection criteria did not create a screening process that identified officers lacking the attributes to build relationships with foreign counterparts and navigate an unfamiliar culture. Prior to 1965, and introduction of US combat forces, most advisors were volunteers seeking an operational assignment that they viewed as career enhancing.¹⁹⁴ This attitude shifted with the introduction of US Army combat forces, when command of a US Army formation in combat was better than combat experience advising an ARVN unit.¹⁹⁵

The officers volunteering for advisory duty tended to be less experienced junior field grade or company grade officers.¹⁹⁶ What these officers lacked in experience they made up for it with an aggressive attitude and attempted to make their mark on the war and ARVN counterparts during the one-year tour.¹⁹⁷ The training to overcome these

¹⁹³Hickey et al., *The American Military Advisor and His Foreign Counterpart: The Case of Vietnam*, 29.

¹⁹⁴Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973*, 61.

¹⁹⁵Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 208. A survey of advisors attitudes from 1962-1965 over 54 percent viewed advisory duty as career enhancing, but following the introduction of U.S. Army combat forces that number dropped to 36 percent.

¹⁹⁶Hickey et al., *The American Military Advisor and His Foreign Counterpart: The Case of Vietnam*, 29. Most officers within those grades did not see service in the Korean War. In interviews conducted by the author, he found that combat veterans from World War II or Korea serving in Vietnam were nearing retirement and the challenge of being immersed in foreign culture led them to talk more about returning home than the mission.

¹⁹⁷Andrew A. Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the Arvn* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 87. These U.S. advisors chafed under ARVN's lack of aggressiveness and became frustrated. The advisors failed to recognize that during a one year tour it was incumbent on them to build a relationship,

challenges and maximize the effectiveness of the advisor was uneven and incomplete. Through 1960, personnel assigned to MAAGV received a four-hour block of instruction in Vietnam and began their advisory duties.¹⁹⁸ To mitigate this training shortfall, an extended Military Assistance Training Advisor program began in 1961 under the auspices of the US Army Special Operations Warfare School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.¹⁹⁹

The Military Assistance Training Advisor course was five weeks long and consisted primarily of classroom training with some field exercises. The course covered a broad array of topics ranging from tactics, counterinsurgency, weapons training, and communications. The density of the materiel precluded any depth of study and analysis to better prepare advisors to succeed. The course provided a cursory background on the history, culture, and current situation in Vietnam.²⁰⁰ The course included a two-hour block of instruction on the impact of Confucianism and Buddhism as it relates to the political religious sects of Cao Dai and Hoa Hao in Vietnam. The course also provided a

that their lack of combat experience lessened their credibility, and ARVN was a different from the U.S. Army.

¹⁹⁸Military Assistance Advisory Group-IndoChina, *Introduction to Briefing on Maag-Indochina*. This briefing provided a general overview of the situation in Vietnam, terms of reference for advisor duty, do's and don'ts, and general administrative data relating to the assignment.

¹⁹⁹The establishment of MATA did not absorb all advisors initially because of the rapid increase in the advisory force in 1962, from 2,600 to 11,600. Some advisors began their tour with minimal country or mission specific training.

²⁰⁰Hickey et al., *The American Military Advisor and His Foreign Counterpart: The Case of Vietnam*, 32.

two-hour block of instruction on sanitation and tropical hygiene.²⁰¹ Perhaps providing equal emphasis on field hygiene and the impact of religion on Vietnam indicates a program of instruction that may tend to over generalize complex topics and leave advisors unprepared. Graduates from the Military Assistance Training Advisor program felt that the program of instruction was too broad and did not provide the information in width, depth, and in context of the advisory mission.²⁰²

The first groups of advisors were eager volunteers that sought out an advisory assignment for career enhancement, but were unprepared to confront the challenges associated with the advisory mission. The lack of combat experience lessened their credibility with ARVN counterparts and the lack of training made it difficult to overcome the cultural isolation. US advisors required access and personal relationships to influence their ARVN counterparts and it took more than military acumen to accomplish. The challenge for advisors was that while on this career-enhancing assignment their evaluation was based on their counterpart's performance.²⁰³ If the advisor lacked the skills to build rapport with his counterpart or had a positive relationship then a poor evaluation of his ARVN counterpart served two different purposes. First, it allowed the advisor to show progress over time and second," showed an incorrigible ARVN officer

²⁰¹United States Army Special Warfare School, "Program of Instruction for Military Assistance Training Advisor Course" (Fort Bragg, North Carolina 1962).

²⁰²Hickey et al., *The American Military Advisor and His Foreign Counterpart: The Case of Vietnam*, 32. Advisors observed that MATA lacked sufficient detail in some aspects to carry out his duties effectively. Specifically noted was the gap in instruction on the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects. Ironically, it does not appear that the advisors had similar concerns regarding sanitation or field hygiene.

²⁰³Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973*, 64.

that was beyond the scope of an advisory mission. The low-balling of ARVN officers allowed advisors to protect their military credibility when confronted with the challenges of operating in a foreign culture. The observations from the US advisors at the Battle of Ap Bac tend to reflect a low-ball assessment that obfuscates any personal shortcomings for frustrations.²⁰⁴

Origins of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam Officer Corps

The prevailing demographics of the ARVN officer corps tended to over represent urban and middle-class families. The officer corps was not representative of the larger rural and peasant population in South Vietnam.²⁰⁵ The ARVN officer corps was primarily class-based with leaders coming from similar circles within the urban middle-class or families with ties to the former Vietnamese royalty.²⁰⁶ These groups tended not to be divided along religious lines, but under President Diem's promotion system a disproportionate number of Catholic officers were promoted to positions of authority.²⁰⁷ The officer class became synonymous with the urban elite class, officer selection highly valued formal education which in turn excluded talented non-commissioned officers and

²⁰⁴Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*, 196. The author argues the LTC Vann purposefully low-balled ARVN officers at Ap Bac to cover up his own tactical mistakes at the battle.

²⁰⁵Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the Arvn*, 13. The strict educational requirements excluded rural candidates from becoming candidates. Additionally, familial ties to the village and labor intensive farming practices made seeking a commission in the army away from the village undesirable.

²⁰⁶*Ibid.*, 14.

²⁰⁷Van Vien Cao, *Leadership* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1981), 37.

enlisted members from competing.²⁰⁸ The selection and promotion of officers in the ARVN was highly volatile because military and political power was subject to changing alliances. Some senior ARVN leaders were unwilling to risk that power by inducting officers that did not meet political screening criteria and could pose a threat to the status quo. The impact of selecting and promoting officers based on political reliability is addressed in chapter 6.

The officer corps produced in support of the VNA tended to be true Francophile that brought them in conflict with Diem who was staunchly anti-French. This older cadre raised under the French in the VNA recognized quickly that Diem needed the Army's loyalty to provide the necessary security for the regime to consolidate power. A symbiotic relationship developed between the Diem regime and the entrenched VNA officers with ties to the former French regime. Diem realized that the military was the key to allowing him to consolidate power and he came to value loyalty over combat effectiveness.²⁰⁹

The willingness of the senior ARVN leaders to insert themselves directly into the political process of the state was a unique characteristic of the ARVN and its relationship

²⁰⁸Collins, *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950-1972*, 78. The author provides the observation that the class of officer coming from the urban elite tended to lack a genuine aggressiveness and appeared more concerned with negative political outcomes from his military decisions. The unique political landscape and cultural tendencies of the Vietnamese made officers hyper-political. The notion that officers recruited from the urban elite lacked aggressiveness is better attributed to the fact that these hyper-political officers were keenly aware that their future success depended equally on political reliability versus military acumen.

²⁰⁹Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the Arvn*, 22.

to the government.²¹⁰ The intertwining of government and the ARVN would plague the development of a professional officer corps through promotion of less qualified leaders based on political orientation, placing additional burdens of civil governance on inexperienced leaders, and most importantly creating a tuning fork from Saigon to units on the ground. Meaning, military leaders in the ARVN needed to remain attuned to the political trends, whispers, and rumors from Saigon to ensure they were postured to remain in power. The cadre of ARVN officers deeply entrenched in Saigon politics was not representative of all the officer corps. There were those ARVN officers executing their mission in a professional and military manner. Those officers connected to or owing their position to Saigon were more concerned with politics that bred a culture constantly maneuvering to gain and maintain influence to the detriment of developing a competent professional army.²¹¹

Language Barrier

The officers and enlisted members of the VNA that became the core of ARVN were trained by a French cadre, thus the official language of the army was French.²¹² The

²¹⁰Thomas R. Cantwell, "The Army of South Vietnam: A Military and Political History" (Sydney: University of New South Wales, 1989), 23. ARVN became the base of power to maintain the Diem regime by securing Saigon and urban areas and it also became the governing body in the rural areas as the extension of government influence. Politically motivated military leaders introduce an inherent fragility of force by weighing military risk and reward the same or less than political risk and reward. Maintenance of the ones' military position came more from political acumen than military prowess.

²¹¹Joes, *The War for South Viet Nam, 1954-1975*, 23. The author describes an atmosphere where favoritism with Diem among senior ARVN leaders became such a sought after commodity that officers would undercut peers, subordinates, and superiors. This environment damaged morale and hurt the professionalization of the force.

²¹²BDM, *South Vietnam*, 5-22.

language barrier proved one obstacle for advisors to train the ARVN and any interaction relied on interpreters, which could be problematic based on complexity or urgency of what was communicated. Additionally, the ARVN officers with experience in service of the French Union Forces or under the French Expeditionary Command were unfamiliar with US Army tactics and doctrine.²¹³ Language barriers and different military backgrounds compounded the complexity involved in reorganizing the ARVN and seemingly simple changes required exhaustive deliberation.²¹⁴

The language barrier exacerbated the cultural difference between US advisors and the ARVN officers. The effectiveness of US advisors may have been increased with a basic knowledge of the Vietnamese by building trust and being able to leverage the interpreter better to avoid cultural misunderstandings.²¹⁵ It was impractical for a large-scale advisory effort to possess a sufficient number of advisors with basic language proficiency, therefore advisors relied on interpreters and over time ARVN officers learned English. The lack of sufficient numbers of skilled interpreters plagued the MAAGV mission both in the field advising units and training centers. Highly technical

²¹³Vien, *U.S. Adviser*, 31.

²¹⁴*Ibid.*, 31. The author provides an example that took days to resolve in determining the table of organization for ARVN. In determining the personal weapon for company commanders, ARVN felt .45 caliber pistol was sufficient, whereas the advisors felt that the commander required a .30 cal carbine rifle as well. The friction came from the assumption by the advisors that company commanders were in front fighting alongside their men and ARVN had a different perspective on the roles and responsibilities of company commanders in combat. The simplest transactions over the table of organization required exhaustive conversation and correspondence through interpreters and introduced the difference between ARVN and the advisors in basic tactical concepts and the role of junior level leaders in combat.

²¹⁵Hickey et al., *The American Military Advisor and His Foreign Counterpart: The Case of Vietnam*.

instruction on specific military equipment became difficult because the Vietnamese language had not developed a vocabulary to incorporate emerging technologies.²¹⁶ An unskilled interpreter attempting to translate complex military concepts led to misunderstandings and limited the effectiveness of training for ARVN officers.²¹⁷

Personal Relationships

Upon assuming the position as the Chief of the Joint General Staff, General Cao Van Vien reflected on the importance of relationships based on mutual respect between US advisors and their ARVN counterparts. Vien felt that the maintenance of relationships between senior Joint General Staff and Military Assistance Command Vietnam leaders was critical to continued success of the partnership.²¹⁸ Even at highest level the importance of personal relationships and mutual understanding cannot be understated.

As part of an official visit at the request of the President, General Wheeler, Army Chief of Staff, highlighted the relationship and rapport that the Chief of MAAGV, General Harkins, had established with Minister of Defense Thuan and President Diem. During several meetings, Wheeler observed Harkins' open, cordial, and direct interaction

²¹⁶Sawyer and Hermes, *Military Advisors in Korea: KMAG in Peace and War*, 63. Leaders and soldiers within the ROKA had such limited exposure to military training under the Japanese that numerous military words did not yet exist in the Korean language; Vien, *U.S. Adviser*, 196.

²¹⁷Hickey et al., *The American Military Advisor and His Foreign Counterpart: The Case of Vietnam*.

²¹⁸Vien, *U.S. Adviser*, 24; Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*, 276. General Vien commanded some of the most effective combat units in ARVN as Colonel and was well liked and trusted by U.S. advisors for his military competence.

with both Vietnamese leaders.²¹⁹ The importance of achieving national policy objectives relied on not only supplying men and materiel to ARVN, but also the ability to build and maintain mutual trust and respect. The unwillingness of Vietnamese officers to seek assistance may contradict the desire for independence and respect. It is shameful for Vietnamese officers to request assistance in front of subordinates, therefore it is important to respect the individual and treat them with patience and tact based on a the foundation of personal trust and friendship.²²⁰

Prior to 1965, the US did not fight the war against communist expansion directly and required the support of the South Vietnamese to ensure that their best interests coincided with ours. The mission of US Army senior leaders to navigate cultural differences and political instability required a nuanced approach to ensure the capability of the ARVN was increased, but not to the detriment of the sitting government. The importance of the trust and personal relationships were critical in building the ARVN and supporting President Diem.

Success in the advisory mission largely depended on the ability of the advisor to establish a personal relationship with their counterpart. This relationship based on mutual trust and respect led to frank and open discussions and increased the advisor's ability to affect positive change within the ARVN commander or across the formation. The foundation for such relationships are found with General Thomas J.H. Trapnell when he

²¹⁹U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963*, vol. 3 *Vietnam, January-August 1963*, ed. John P. Glennon (Washington, DC: GPO, 1991), 26.

²²⁰Military Assistance Advisory Group-Vietnam, "Memorandum for Record: Relationships," 1.

led the MAAG-Indochina mission in 1952 and because of these personal relationships was able to gain access to VNA units without French interference.²²¹ These relationships were critical for senior leaders to maintain situation awareness and influence at the highest levels of Vietnamese leadership. When General Williams assumed leadership of MAAG in Vietnam, he also developed a relationship with President Diem and senior military leaders that enhanced the capability and influence the MAAG in development of the government and the ARVN.²²² President Diem and General Williams' personal relationship solidified the MAAG-ARVN partnership for subsequent MAAG senior leaders.

Many advisors felt that the focus on relationships was an obstacle, to develop rapidly the ARVN into a capable and credible force was misguided. The burden of maintaining relationships tended to fall on US advisors, to include responsibility for deteriorating relationships or poor ARVN performance. The assessment of an advisor's effectiveness based on the ARVN's performance was unfair because of the administrative and cultural limitations placed on advisors. The focus on relationships as the only tool to affect positive change in the ARVN limited even the most competent advisors. This

²²¹Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years 1941-1960*, 157. General Trapnell developed a relationship with General Nguyen Van Hinh, nominal commander of the Vietnamese National Army, to gain and maintain situational awareness of the situation without being filtered by liaison officers or the French Expeditionary Command.

²²²Meyer, *Hanging Sam a Military Biography of General Samuel T. Williams: From Pancho Villa to Vietnam*, 138, 40; Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years 1941-1960*, 257.

observation was captured by General James Lawton Collins,²²³ “The rapport approach is dangerous because it lends itself to the acceptance of substandard performance by the adviser. In any future situation where advisers are deployed under hostile conditions, the emphasis should be on getting the job done, not on merely getting along with the individual being advised.”²²⁴ The advisor’s influence over his ARVN counterpart was indirect; therefore, the advisor’s performance was linked to the leadership capabilities of the ARVN commander and his ability to deftly apply what leverage he could over his counterpart.²²⁵

Impact of Cultural Differences at the Battle of Ap Bac

The failure to achieve military objectives in South Vietnam is commonly attributed to the documented shortcomings of ARVN officers and less attention is paid to the inability of US advisors to overcome cultural differences. The senior advisor for 7th ARVN division stated in his final report that the burden was only on the US advisor to acquiesce to the ways and norms of the Vietnamese officers and that little was expected from the ARVN officers to adapt to the US Army training, doctrine, and culture.²²⁶ This

²²³Brigadier General James Lawton Collins was serving as the Chief of Military History when he authored, *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950-1972*.

²²⁴Collins, *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950-1972*, 129. General Collins argued that the authority to remove incompetent officers and replace them with skilled officers would have provided the advisor the necessary leverage to “get things done.”

²²⁵BDM, *South Vietnam*, 2-30.

²²⁶Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam: They Did Everything but Learn from It*, 132.

observation is not applicable to all situations and relationships, but overall the idea that the ARVN commanders would remain commanders regardless of their professional competence did not change over time. The burden remained on US advisors to use all means necessary to improve the capability of the ARVN without the luxury of having direct command authority.

President Diem provided an insightful assessment regarding the increasing cultural misunderstanding that occurred among ARVN commanders and US advisors in a meeting with senior US leaders. He stated that junior officers did not understand the Vietnamese culture and people and that they lacked the experience and knowledge to push their ideas.²²⁷

The strengths and weaknesses of the advisory program are not fully developed as a contributing factor influencing the performance of 7th ARVN, at the Battle of Ap Bac in 1963.²²⁸ The After Action Reports from the US Army advisors participating in the battle place responsibility for the outcome of the battle at the feet of the Vietnamese officers. The self-assessment of the advisory effort is limited to stating that the ARVN officers dismissed, ignored, or contradicted the advice from the advisors. Meaning the failure of the advisory mission was that they did not have authority over ARVN officers

²²⁷U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963*, vol. 3, *Vietnam, January-August 1963*, 81. President Diem's frustration is in response to the media's portrayal of the battle of Ap Bac based on the observations of "junior officers" who misunderstood the larger picture. He believed that the uninformed statements made to the press led to an increase in unfavorable publicity. President Diem was correct in noting that negative comments made from cultural ignorance and insensitivity were a detriment to the overall combined U.S.-GVN effort.

²²⁸Cao, *Leadership*, 59. The commander of 7th ARVN at the battle of Ap Bac was promoted based on meeting President Diem criteria of origin, religion, and political reliability and not demonstrated potential.

to implement their recommendations as orders during battle. The observations of the advisors at the Battle of Ap Bac provided a snapshot of ARVN officers under extreme circumstances when executing tactical mistakes or failing to adhere to the advisor's recommendation.

The constant barrage of criticisms from military counterparts and the media reports strained relationships between ARVN officers and advisors.²²⁹ The questioning of the professional competence and personal courage of ARVN officers was a personal affront that hindered relationships critical to effecting change from and advisory capacity versus a position of command authority. The assessment of ARVN officers' by US advisors following the Battle of Ap Bac is symptomatic of extending ones' cultural biases to measure ARVN performance against an idealized US Army officer and unit. The notion that a foreign military equipped with US Army equipment and training would act similarly in times of combat is misguided and generates an unfair portrayal of ARVN officers. The common attitudes among advisors were that ARVN officers were lazy or acted without a sense of urgency.²³⁰ In some cases, such behaviors were consistent with cultural norms and the unique political-military pressure under which ARVN commanders operated in South Vietnam.²³¹ The influence of cultural differences on the

²²⁹U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963*, vol. 2, *Vietnam 1962*, ed. John P. Glennon (Washington, DC: GPO, 1990), 26.

²³⁰Hickey et al., *The American Military Advisor and His Foreign Counterpart: The Case of Vietnam*.

²³¹*Ibid.*

training and effectiveness of ARVN officers is difficult to pinpoint, but there is a greater danger in underestimating its influence.²³²

²³²BDM, *South Vietnam*, 1-26.

CHAPTER 6

THE BATTLE OF AP BAC

The Diem army's shortcomings became dramatically apparent in January 1963 near Ap Bac, a village in the Mekong Delta, forty miles southwest west of Saigon, where an inferior Vietcong contingent mauled a South Vietnamese division that could have scored a victory had it not been led by pusillanimous officers.²³³

—Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*

The above quote is emblematic of the assessment of ARVN officers following the Battle of Ap Bac. The Battle of Ap Bac came to signify all the shortcomings of the GVN, President Diem, and the ARVN. This compelling narrative minimizes the progress that the ARVN had made as they increased their offensive operations in pursuit of the VC. The year leading up to the Battle of Ap Bac, the ARVN conducted numerous successful operations against the VC as part of the larger pacification campaign. These successful operations supported the establishment of the strategic hamlets and demonstrated the ability of the ARVN to integrate new combat platforms and conduct combined arms operations.

The strategic hamlet program developed by Diem had become the centerpiece of the government's pacification efforts intended to curb increasing guerrilla activity in rural

²³³Karnow, *Vietnam, a History*, 276. This author's work provides the core materiel for several courses taught at the U.S. Army, Command and General Staff College and demonstrates the insidious nature of the narrative surrounding the battle of Ap Bac. The performance of the these particular ARVN units and leaders during the battle showed tactical errors and lack of training, but to categorize them all as faint-hearted neglects the complexity of combined arms maneuver and the resistance put up by the Vietcong.

areas.²³⁴ This program consisted of isolating the population from subversive elements and bringing the people under the fold of the GVN. The strategic hamlet program involved denying the enemy physical, psychological, and materiel influence over the population and once security was established the GVN provide essential services to the people.²³⁵ The strategic hamlet program began in earnest to clear the restive province north of Saigon in March of 1962 as part of Operation SUNRISE.²³⁶ The momentum behind the strategic hamlet program and emphasis by Diem outpaced the capacity and capability of the ARVN, civil servants, and local security forces to meet the goals of the program. The rapid expansion of the strategic hamlet program committed ARVN forces to provide security while local security forces were recruited and trained.²³⁷ These static security missions limited the ARVN's ability to conduct reconnaissance and security operations outside of the strategic hamlet to disrupt further VC operations.²³⁸ Representatives from the embassy were pleased with the GVN maturing to the point that it could apply civil and military resources to address the unrest in rural areas, though assessments of the

²³⁴Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*, 154-59.

²³⁵Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 25; Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*.

²³⁶Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 66-68.

²³⁷Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*, 157. The local security for the strategic hamlets was provided by elements from the Self-Defense Corps and Civil Guard. These forces were local recruited and trained to secure their own villages. With U.S. commitment and support, these forces expanded from 124,000 to 172,000 through 1962. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973*, 37. After 1963, the existing paramilitary and militia forces that made up Civil Guard and Self Defense Corps were reorganized in the more familiar Regional Forces and Popular Forces.

²³⁸Karnow, *Vietnam, a History*, 274.

program were far less optimistic.²³⁹ The static security missions increased the passivity and complacency of ARVN forces that were already overcommitted in rural areas.

As the GVN endeavored to expand influence and security into the rural areas through the strategic hamlet program, the ARVN experienced increased success with the pursuit and destruction of People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF). Starting in 1961, some ARVN units were equipped with helicopters and APCs, resulting in increased firepower and mobility.²⁴⁰ The initial success of the strategic hamlet program and the effectiveness of ARVN "sweep operations"²⁴¹ began to shift the tactical and operational initiative toward the ARVN from 1961 to 1963.²⁴² The demonstrated capability of the ARVN to integrate helicopters and APCs caused the PLAF several setbacks and required them to reorganize and retrain elements to combat the ARVN's technical advantage.²⁴³

A conference held in November 1962 among local PLAF leaders to analyze the outcomes from recent battles and develop new tactical concepts to forestall the ARVN's success in sweep operations and deny the GVN the ability to establish strategic

²³⁹U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963*, vol. 3, *Vietnam, January-August 1963*, 5.

²⁴⁰Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*, 169.

²⁴¹*Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954--1975: The Military History Institute of Vietnam* trans.by Merle L.Pribbenow (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 117. The concept of "sweep operations" is referenced in both ARVN and COSVN documents. In this context, "sweep operations" refer to ARVN forces isolating villages geographically, killing or capturing Viet Cong, and denying the Viet Cong future influence in the village physically or psychologically.

²⁴²U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963*, vol. 3, *Vietnam, January-August 1963*, 5.

²⁴³Donn A. Starry, *Mounted Combat in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1979).

hamlets.²⁴⁴ Guidance from this conference was published through the Central Office for South Vietnam directing that the PLAF and local guerillas coordinate efforts to disrupt ARVN operations, through established tactics of ambushing vulnerable points along the lines of communication and in addition, utilize prepared defensive positions.²⁴⁵ This reevaluation and reassessment of the tactics recognized two factors, the capability of the ARVN had increased and they were capable of destroying additional PLAF forces, and secondly strategic hamlet represented a legitimate threat to the PLAF's power base in rural South Vietnam. The PLAF and Central Office for South Vietnam set about to defeat the ARVN tactically as part of the larger strategic campaign, "In warfare the defeat of your enemy's military strategies begins by defeating his principal tactical measures."²⁴⁶ To defeat the increased effectiveness of the ARVN and the strategic hamlet program the PLAF applied available resources and training to defeating the tactical employment of the helicopters and APCs.

The Combatants

The 7th ARVN Division under the command of Colonel Huynh Van Cao demonstrated an aggressive spirit and destroyed VC forces during the early stages of the pacification campaign in support of the strategic hamlet program.²⁴⁷ However, the leadership of Cao came under the scrutiny of President Diem following a 7th ARVN

²⁴⁴*Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954--1975: The Military History Institute of Vietnam*, 118.

²⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 117.

²⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 120.

²⁴⁷Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*, 174.

operation that resulted in 20 casualties. Cao was summoned to Saigon for a meeting with Diem and it is believed that he was informed that a sustained high number of casualties did not bode well for his future.²⁴⁸ Following the meeting with Diem the combat operations of 7th ARVN led by Cao, over the next several months were less successful in killing or capturing VC, but reduced casualties to only three ARVN soldiers killed by friendly fire.²⁴⁹ The decline in combat effectiveness of 7th ARVN following President Diem's admonishment represents the interwoven nature of political and military activities. The US advisors working with 7th ARVN could not grasp why a military commander would ferret away tactical opportunities to destroy the enemy for purely political reasons. A perception developed among advisors working with 7th ARVN that the senior leadership was more concerned with political self-preservation versus accomplishing the military objective. The origins and challenges associated with the unique military-political relationship in Vietnam are discussed in chapter 4. This interdependent relationship between President Diem and the ARVN officers may limit the aggressiveness of some commanders on the battlefield. More specifically, the evidence available indicates that Colonel Cao appeared susceptible to these pressures, but is not sufficient to demonstrate an overall trend within the ARVN officer corps.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁸U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963*, vol. 2, *Vietnam 1962*, 776; U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963*, vol. 3, *Vietnam, January-August 1963*, 9.

²⁴⁹Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*, 120-21.

²⁵⁰Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam: They Did Everything but Learn from It; Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*.*

Following Cao's tenure as the 7th ARVN Division Commander, where a marked decrease in combat effectiveness was observed, he was promoted to commander of IV Corps Tactical Zone.²⁵¹ In this case, Cao recovered from Diem's rebuke and continued his military career on an upward trajectory.²⁵² Cao then recommended his former Chief of Staff, Colonel Bui Dinh Dam to assume command of the division. Colonel Dam is said to have held personal reservations about his ability to command. His reservations are consistent with the US advisors assessment that he was a diligent staff officer, but not suited for command.²⁵³ Dam was promoted from his role as Division Chief of Staff and appointed as the 7th ARVN Division Commander. Dam proved an effective staff officer, but his skill set did not translate into an effective field commander.²⁵⁴ It was believed among US advisors that General Cao recommended Colonel Dam to assume his former position as division commander because of political loyalty and would not present a threat to either General Cao or President Diem.²⁵⁵

Major Tho was a dual hatted commander, as commander at the Battle of Ap Bac. He served as both Province Chief of Ding Tuong and Commanded the 2nd Armored

²⁵¹IV Corps Tactical Zone included areas southwest of Saigon.

²⁵²Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*, 80.

²⁵³Ibid.

²⁵⁴For discussion on the reservations from U.S. advisors on the selection of LTC Dam to serve as the 7th ARVN division commander see. Ibid., 146; Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: U.S.-Vietnam in Perspective* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), 41; Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam: They Did Everything but Learn from It*, 71.

²⁵⁵Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*, 209.

Cavalry Squadron with Captain Ba as one of his subordinates.²⁵⁶ In his roles of Province Chief and 2nd Armored Cavalry Squadron Commander, Major Tho had command and control authority over the 17th Civil Guard (CG) Battalion and Captain Ba's 4th Mechanized Infantry Company.²⁵⁷ Interestingly, Major Tho was not in the 7th ARVN chain of command and from his position as Province Chief, he reported directly to the Ministry of the Interior. President Diem allowed these convoluted command and control structures because it prevented ARVN officers from consolidating complete political and military authority in the region. This arrangement introduced challenges to unity of command at the Battle of Ap Bac because Major Tho, in his position as Province Chief, received orders from Colonel Dam, as the commander of 7th ARVN, as suggestions. The challenge for Dam is that Tho commanded a bulk of the combat forces in the fight. For example, in terms of a US structure, this command would be if a member of the Department of State commanded US combat forces in support of a US Army Division Commander, but operated outside of the Division Commander's authority, while utilizing Department of Defense assets.

Captain Ly Tong Ba Commanded the 4th Squadron 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment during the Battle of Ap Bac. The squadron was equal to a Mechanized Infantry Company in manning and equipment and will be referred to as such throughout. This company had completed over two months of training on the employment of the newly

²⁵⁶Karnow, *Vietnam, a History*, 276.

²⁵⁷Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam: They Did Everything but Learn from It*, 73.

deployed M113, APC, and basic techniques and tactics of mechanized infantry.²⁵⁸ Under the command of Captain Ba this company conducted numerous combat operations over the preceding six months before Ap Bac and earned the trust and respect of the US advisors. An example of his aggressive command style that earned him respect of the advisors was during an operation in September 1962 in the Plain of Reeds. Captain Ba aggressively maneuvered his company in pursuit of the enemy with the result of the battle being an estimated 150 VC killed.²⁵⁹

Captain Ba's performance in combat demonstrated the effectiveness US training and equipment. The battle demonstrated the potential of using APCs to close with and destroy the enemy. However, the US noted some tactical mistakes in the coordination of dismounted infantry and APCs. One critical observation from the engagement in September 1962 on the Plain of Reeds was, that dismounting of the infantry to assault the position was ineffective when the terrain did not allow the infantry to rapidly close the gap or if the APC cannot suppress the position.²⁶⁰

Enemy Forces at Ap Bac

Hai Haong Commanded the 1st Company 514th Provincial Battalion and the 1st Company 261st Regional Battalion, VC, at the Battle of Ap Bac, numbering a total force of 300 to 400 men.²⁶¹ Haong arrayed his forces in, dug in defensive positions oriented

²⁵⁸Ibid., 72-73.

²⁵⁹Starry, *Mounted Combat in Vietnam*, 23.

²⁶⁰Ibid., 24.

²⁶¹Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam: They Did Everything but Learn from It*, 48.

southwest-west oriented along likely ARVN avenues of approach. The 1st Company 514th Battalion was locally recruited and approximately one-third of the formation were replacement soldiers because of casualties suffered in previous engagements. The 1st Company 261st Battalion was made up of veteran soldiers, whose commander fought for the Viet Minh against the French. Within both formations a number of soldiers had completed training on combatting helicopters and APCs, but by in large the readiness of the unit was uneven.²⁶²

US Senior Advisor

Lieutenant Colonel John P. Vann was the senior US advisor to the 7th ARVN division during the Battle of Ap Bac. During his tour, Vann had both General Cao and Colonel Dam. Vann was a combat veteran from the Korea War and volunteered for advisory duty in South Vietnam. Lieutenant Colonel Vann later gained prominence for his vocal assessment of the ARVN's performance in the Battle of Ap Bac and harsh criticism of the direction of Military Assistance Command-Vietnam.²⁶³ Vann was by all estimates a competent military commander, but is also described as abrasive, arrogant, stubborn,

²⁶²Ibid., 49.

²⁶³Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*. Sheehan provides an exhaustive account of Lieutenant Colonel Vann's life and views on the conduct of the war in Vietnam. The Sheehan narrative of the battle of Ap Bac provides a compelling argument for the shortcomings of ARVN officers, but it is not in context of the larger challenges facing the development of ARVN officers. The willingness to place responsibility for the outcome of the battle on ARVN and flawed MACV directives fits too nicely into the author's larger narrative about the failures of Vietnam. The gap in the retelling of the battle of Ap Bac is that the advisors present bear no responsibility in the outcome and were victims of cowardly ARVN officers and a disconnected higher headquarters. Though well written using the story of LTC Vann and the battle of Ap Bac as a literary vehicle to carry a narrative about the Vietnam War leaves little room to acknowledge and incorporate the complexity of the situation.

and emotional. His tendency toward emotional outbursts and demanding command style may have soured his relationship with some ARVN officers.²⁶⁴ However, his willingness to confront danger and fight side by side with his ARVN counterparts is unquestioned. Vann was an opponent of using indiscriminate artillery and air support with little regard to the innocent villagers.²⁶⁵ Vann was a combination of impatience, arrogance, and boundless personal courage; coupled with his believe that engaging in what he viewed as indiscriminate bombing was losing the war, colored his assessment of the Battle of Ap Bac.

Prelude to the Fight

A US airborne signals intelligence platform located a VC radio transmitter near the village of Tan Thoi and estimated a VC Company with approximately 120 men guarding it.²⁶⁶ This information was provided to ARVN senior command who then directed the 7th ARVN Division to destroy the radio transmitter. The 7th ARVN Division planned the attack for January 2, 1963. In reality, the VC defended the position with elements of 261st and 514th Battalions that numbered between 300 and 400 men equipped with machine guns, 60mm mortars, and rifle grenades.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁴Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*, 163-65.

²⁶⁵Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*, 106-07.

²⁶⁶Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*, 186.

²⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 187.

The plan of attack was formulated through combined effort of US advisors, the 7th ARVN Division Commander, Colonel Dam, and key staff officers.²⁶⁸ The plan was relatively straightforward with three elements from the ARVN attacking the position from multiple approaches with infantry and armor, with artillery and helicopters in support.²⁶⁹ The plan estimated 120 defenders and anticipated that the VC would attempt to withdraw along the eastern routes away from the village where they would become vulnerable to artillery and close air support.²⁷⁰

The combined planning team of US advisors and key staff members of the 7th ARVN worked over several days. The final plan briefed at 1900 on January 1, 1963 with the attack scheduled to commence at 0630 on January 2, 1963. The plan was called Operation DUC THANG 1 that translated into English as, Operation VICTORY 1 and was executed by over 1,200 ARVN soldiers, 13 APCs, 10 CH-21 transport helicopters, five UH-1 tactical helicopters, and a number of artillery tubes.²⁷¹ The battle soon became known as the Battle of Ap Bac and had a lasting impact on the narrative of Vietnam, as well as, the quality of the ARVN officers.

The Commander of 1st Company 514th Provincial Battalion and 1st Company 261st Regional Battalion learned of the pending ARVN operation and established

²⁶⁸Toczec, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam: They Did Everything but Learn from It*, 71.

²⁶⁹The assessment that the tactical plan was straightforward neglects the inherent complexity of executing combined arms maneuver and minimizes the fact that perfection in combat is always illusive.

²⁷⁰Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*, 187.

²⁷¹Toczec, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam: They Did Everything but Learn from It*, 73.

defensive positions using the canals, dikes, and dense vegetation that surrounded the villages of Ap Tan Thoi and Ap Bac.²⁷² These prepared defensive positions provided the defenders both cover and concealment. The VC held a position of advantage with clear fields of fire orientated along likely ARVN avenues of approach. A survey of the battlefield afterwards described the VC positions as having observation and fields of fire that were comparable to firing across a football field from the third or fourth row of bleachers.²⁷³ This was the first battle where ARVN forces equipped with helicopters and APCs engaged VC forces and the VC did not break contact and withdraw from the battlefield.

It is unclear from the literature available why the VC chose to stand and fight a pitched battle at Ap Bac because it represented a departure from previous encounters.²⁷⁴ The VC tended to attack along vulnerable lines of communications using small unit ambushes and raids. The introduction of APCs and helicopters in 1961 shifted the tactical balance from the VC toward the ARVN with the mobility and firepower these platforms provided.

In Toczek's, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam: They Did Everything but Learn from It*, he offers three possibilities for why the VC changed its tactical concepts and choose to fight the 7th ARVN equipped with helicopters and APCs. The first is that the VC commander, Hai Haong, believed his unit was prepared for the fight because it fully

²⁷²Karnow, *Vietnam, a History*, 277.

²⁷³Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*, 209.

²⁷⁴Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam: They Did Everything but Learn from It*, 48.

integrated lessons from previous setbacks when encountering ARVN combined arms formations. Second, the VC needed a victory to reinvigorate the local political base and increase recruiting. The final possibility is that of luck and chance, whereas the VC commander miscalculated the 7th ARVN's disposition but was unable to withdraw without being attrited by artillery and close air support.²⁷⁵ The significance of the battle is that the 7th ARVN was unprepared for the VC deviating from templated behavior when they stayed to fight a technologically and numerically superior force.

The Fight

The 7th ARVN Division order of battle included an infantry regiment maneuvering from the north, a civil guard battalion from the south, and Mechanized Infantry Company from the west.²⁷⁶ These three forces were intended to converge and envelope the objective to destroy the radio transmitter and any remaining VC. The US provided air support with CH-21 helicopters for troop movement and UH-1 helicopters for close air support. The 7th ARVN had an extensive array of indirect fire assets available to fire in support of the mission at Ap Bac.²⁷⁷ In reserve, the 7th ARVN maintained three infantry companies. This array of forces provided 7th ARVN Division a

²⁷⁵Ibid., 48.

²⁷⁶Karnow, *Vietnam, a History*, 277.

²⁷⁷Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam: They Did Everything but Learn from It*, 73. The 7th ARVN six 4.2in mortars, four 105mm howitzers, and four 155mm howitzers in support.

near 10 to 1 numerical superiority and clear technological advantage over the defending VC.²⁷⁸

2nd Battalion 11th Infantry Regiment who was moved by CH-21 transport helicopters in three separate serials established the northern assault force.²⁷⁹ The three companies of the 2nd, of the 11th Infantry were the only organic units from the 7th ARVN Division, planned to participate in the fight. The southern and western assault forces were under the command of Major Lam Quang Tho and consisted of the 17th CG Battalion from the Dinh Tuong Regiment (Provincial) and 4th Squadron 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment under the command of Captain Ba.²⁸⁰ The 17th CG Battalion was oriented toward the southern end of the objective, with the 4th Mechanized Infantry Company maneuvering along the western approach. The 17th CG had eight total companies and divided into three task force elements. Task force A and B each consisted of three infantry companies and Task Force C had two infantry companies. Captain Tri commanded Task Force A and Lieutenant Thi commanded Task Force B. These two task forces planned to attack abreast and penetrate the VC's southern positions. The remaining task force, nominally Task Force C, established blocking positions and did not contribute largely to the fight.

²⁷⁸Karnow, *Vietnam, a History*, 277.

²⁷⁹Toczec, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam: They Did Everything but Learn from It*, 73.

²⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 73.

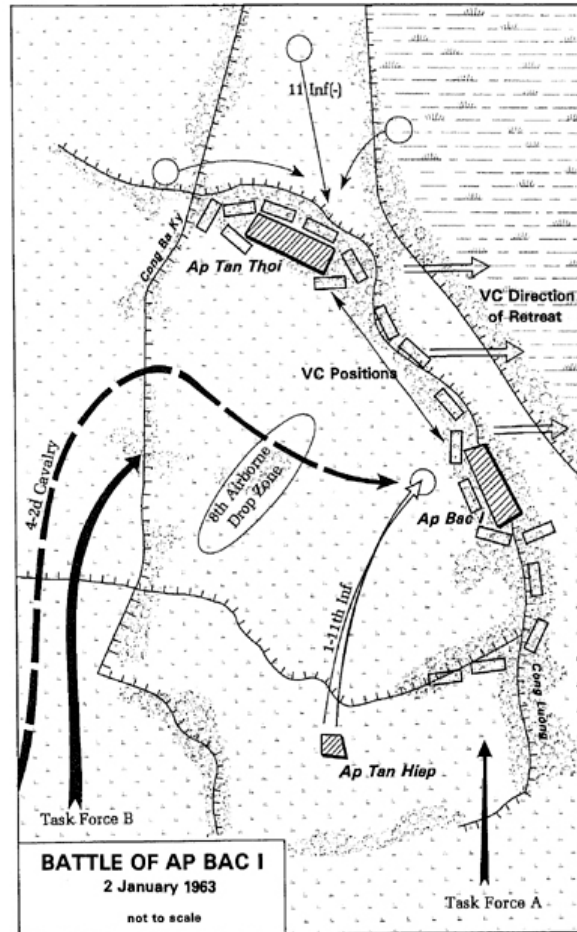


Figure 1. Battle of Ap Bac

Source: Donn A. Starry, *Mounted Combat in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1979).

Initial delays and confusion ensued early on January 2, 1963 as elements of the 7th ARVN moved towards attack positions near the village of Tan Thoi and Bac.²⁸¹ All elements reached their planned attack positions, Operation VICTORY 1, appeared to be unfolding as 7th ARVN leaders and US advisors had anticipated. Weather delays and restrictive terrain de-synched the 7th ARVN's planned three-pronged assault on the VC

²⁸¹Ibid., 75-76.

defensive positions. These delays allowed the VC defenders to reallocate forces within the defensive perimeter to maintain the initiative and not confront assaults from multiple directions.²⁸²

Approaching from the south on foot, elements of the CG battalion were first to come into contact and their attack culminated because the rate and accuracy of the VC small arms fire. The CG battalions attempted two assaults to penetrate the VC defenses, but sustained heavy casualties to include its most experienced officers.²⁸³ Captain Tri's Task Force A was in heavy contact and attempted to overrun and envelope the defenders with no success. Tri's Task Force was effectively fixed, unable to sustain and assault or disengage because of limited cover and concealment coupled with sustained enemy fire.²⁸⁴ Lacking sufficient firepower and leadership to mount a sustained attack capable of dislocating the VC from their positions the Civil Guardsmen held their position under the orders of the Provincial Chief, Major Lam Quang Tho.

The southern thrust of the ARVN attack that had come into contact at 0635 was effectively culminated by mid-morning. The CGs unit sustained a majority of the defenders' fire because of weather delayed the air insertion of an infantry battalion to the north.²⁸⁵ The first serial with 2nd Company, the 2nd of the 11th Infantry, secured the landing zone north of the objective without enemy contact, but the remaining companies

²⁸²Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*, 212-14.

²⁸³Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*, 187.

²⁸⁴Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam: They Did Everything but Learn from It*, 78.

²⁸⁵Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*, 188.

were delayed because of fog.²⁸⁶ Though 2nd Company was not in contact, they were vulnerable waiting on their sister companies.²⁸⁷ Elements from the 21st River Assault Group moved along a canal far north of the objective with the 325th Ranger Company on board with the mission to establish blocking positions along likely VC exfiltration routes north from the objective.²⁸⁸ The 325th Ranger Company was ordered to move from its blocking positions to link-up with the 2nd Company until its sister companies arrived. The dense fog hindered the dismounted movement of the 325th Ranger Company and after losing a soldier to a land mine the 325th halted movement until visibility improved.²⁸⁹ From that point, forward the 325th did not contribute to the fight at Ap Bac. Once the fog cleared the remaining companies from the 2nd of the 11th Infantry were brought to the northern landing zone without incident. As the elements of the 2nd of the 11th Infantry consolidated on the landing zone they received sporadic small arms fire and were able to suppress it without incident and capture two enemy personnel.²⁹⁰

Upon receiving reports of the precarious situation of Task Force A, Major Tho requested that Colonel Dam commit the division reserve of 1st Company, 1st of the 11th Infantry to reinforce the Task Force. Additionally, Tho gave orders to Task Force B to

²⁸⁶Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam: They Did Everything but Learn from It*, 71. During the planning process, the Joint General Staff reprioritized helicopters and 7th ARVN was provided fewer CH-21 transport helicopters than planned to insert an infantry battalion. With fewer helicopter available it required additional serials to insert the 2/11th Infantry making those forces more vulnerable to enemy fire.

²⁸⁷Ibid., 78.

²⁸⁸Ibid., 74.

²⁸⁹Ibid., 78.

²⁹⁰Ibid., 79.

maneuver in support of Task Force A with the intent of relieving the pressure and enveloping the enemy's southern positions.²⁹¹ Dam received reports that his southern element stalled under enemy fire, his northern element was not yet organized on the landing zone, and the mechanized infantry company was slowed by restrictive terrain. Based on these facts Dam authorized the commitment of an Infantry Company from 7th ARVN Reserve to support the southern CG Battalion. The reserve company was transported to the fight via helicopters. Senior US advisor to the 7th ARVN Division, Lieutenant Colonel John P. Vann, was airborne in an L-19 spotter aircraft observing the fight unfolding below and conducted aerial reconnaissance to determine a suitable landing zone for the reserve.²⁹² Based on his recommendations the landing zone chosen was a rice paddy west of the villages.²⁹³ This flat open landing zone was directly in range of prepared VC strongpoints. The decision to commit the division reserve in support of Task Force A holding the southern position of the objective via CH-21 transport helicopters began a sequence of events that turned the tide of the battle.

During this engagement, three CH-21 and one UH-1 were forced down due to enemy fire. The downing of US helicopters changed the entire tenor of the battle. Task

²⁹¹Ibid., 80.

²⁹²Ibid., 81.

²⁹³Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*. The author goes into detail that miscommunication occurred with the selection of the landing zone and effectively absolved LTC Vann of responsibility for such poor tactical decision. Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam: They Did Everything but Learn from It*. The author assessment of the After Action Reports indicate that LTC Vann recommended a landing zone on the western side of the objective, but well outside of small arms range. The debate surrounding the commitment of the reserve is important because it changed the tempo of the battle and led to breakdown of trust and communication between the advisory team and ARVN commanders.

Force A was unable to break through from the south and now to the west the reserve company from the 1st of the 11th Infantry and several downed helicopters were raked by enemy fire.²⁹⁴ The first serial of CH-21 transport helicopter with an infantry company from the reserve came under sustained fire from the VC positions and resulted in three CH-21 and one UH-1 helicopters grounded. The reserve from 7th ARVN landed under fire and was immediately pinned down. The rice paddies limited dismounted mobility and the reserve company was unable to mount an assault of the VC positions or disengage because of the accurate and sustained fire.²⁹⁵ Further to the west, the mechanized infantry company with APC was still bogged down attempting to find trafficable routes toward the objective. All efforts now reoriented on relieving the stricken elements trapped in the open on a rice paddy, west of the VC defensive positions.²⁹⁶

Following the downing of several helicopters and the reserve being pinned down LTC Vann urged Colonel Dam to commit the mechanized infantry company to support the stricken elements on the landing zone. The company of APCs delayed their movement to the landing zone. The company commander was subjected to increased emotional rebukes from the US advisors for not responding to the order immediately. It is unclear the specifics for why Captain Ba delayed his movement, reasons cited are communication breakdown, convoluted chain of command, or the fact that the landing zone was a killing field. Ba may have been responding to the US advisors verbal

²⁹⁴Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam: They Did Everything but Learn from It*, 81.

²⁹⁵Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*, 189.

²⁹⁶Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam: They Did Everything but Learn from It*, 84.

bullying.²⁹⁷ Lieutenant Colonel Vann requested, demanded, and berated any ARVN officer on the radio to commit Ba's mechanized infantry company to support the downed aircraft and reserve forces west of the objective.²⁹⁸ Ba maintained his position and did not reach the western landing zone for approximately three hours. The delay was most likely a combination of restrictive terrain, communication problems, and Ba's unwillingness to capitulate to the US advisors emotional rebukes.

Meanwhile, Captain Tri established blocking positions with the remnants of Task Force A under the orders of Major Tho. He did not attempt another attack to envelope the enemy even though sustained fire had stopped. The US advisors with Tho attempted to get him to give orders to seize this opportunity to reinitiate the attack in the south as it appeared that the VC had reoriented their forces toward the west. Tho resisted the idea of continuing the attack because Tri had been wounded and he would not give the order without a, "seasoned, experienced and capable commander" present to lead the attack.²⁹⁹ It appeared to the US advisors present that an opportunity to seize the initiative was thwarted by Tho's unwillingness to press the attack. With elements of the 17th CG battalion set in static positions and not threatening to envelope the southern position and

²⁹⁷Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*. The senior advisor on the ground with the mechanized infantry company was CPT Scanlon and in interviews given years following the battle did not know the exact reason for CPT Ba's refusal to execute the advisors urgent requests and subsequent orders for the 7th ARVN headquarters. In his previous training and combat operations demonstrated an aggressive nature and willingness to engage the enemy. Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*, 191. The author assumes the reasons for CPT Ba's delay, but acknowledges it appears out of character from past performance.

²⁹⁸Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*, 234.

²⁹⁹Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam: They Did Everything but Learn from It*, 88.

observing Ba's deliberate movement, the defenders were free to reposition forces toward the north and the 2nd of the 11th Infantry. Along the northern approach, elements of 2nd Company the 2nd of the 11th Infantry were the first to come into direct fire contact with the VC, initiating from as close as 20 yards.³⁰⁰ The 2nd of the 11th Infantry Commander attempted to regain the initiative and repositioned his machine guns and 60mm mortars, but was unsuccessful in dislocating the enemy from their northern strong point.

Captain Ba continued his deliberate movement toward the western landing zone without a sense of urgency that equaled his US advisors. The planned link up with the 17th CG battalion never fully materialized and Ba's mechanized infantry company conducted a series of piecemeal assaults with no success.³⁰¹ The defenders held their positions and targeted the exposed APC drivers and gunners. The vehicle commanders ordered the embarked infantry to dismount and assault the enemy positions, but were unsuccessful because the APC gunners were unable to identify and suppress the VC positions.³⁰² The APC gunners did not remain exposed to enemy fire and could not effectively suppress the enemy positions causing the dismounted infantry to break contact and move back toward the downed helicopter for cover.³⁰³ The company consolidated and reorganized and staged multiple assaults on the VC defensive and closed within 15

³⁰⁰Ibid., 89.

³⁰¹Ibid., 91.

³⁰²Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*, 191.

³⁰³Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam: They Did Everything but Learn from It*, 93.

yards at one point, but could not achieve a decisive breakthrough. The company suffered extensive casualties during the failed assaults and took up defensive positions to the west of the objective through much of the afternoon.³⁰⁴ Elements from Task Force B, under the command of Lieutenant Thi attempted to reinforce the efforts of Captain Ba's company and envelope the enemy, but Major Tho ordered them to stop for fear of fratricide.³⁰⁵ The mechanized infantry company was unable to mass sufficient combat power to overrun the VC defenders.

By mid-afternoon, the Battle of Ap Bac had stabilized with the VC holding their positions and all the elements from the three pronged assault forces fixed. Opportunities may have existed to regain the initiative with the elements on the ground, but General Cao had arrived at the 7th ARVN Division Command Post and directed a new course of action. Based on his assessment of the situation, Cao decided on a course of action that would use artillery and close air support to reduce the VC defensive before the 7th ARVN attempted another assault. Cao requested the commitment of the 8th Airborne Brigade³⁰⁶ from the strategic reserve and received authorization from the Joint General

³⁰⁴Starry, *Mounted Combat in Vietnam*, 38. The mechanized infantry company lost an estimated 14 APC gunners during the battle of Ap Bac. The main weapon system of the M113 was a turret mounted .50 cal machine gun that required the track commander to expose himself above the waist to accurately fire the weapon. During the assault on Ap Bac gunners were exposed to the murderous fire from Viet Cong positions.

³⁰⁵Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam: They Did Everything but Learn from It*, 94.

³⁰⁶Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*, 193. The 8th Airborne Brigade in Saigon was a remnant of the former French Parachute Regiments and were highly trained, motivated, and capable formation.

Staff in Saigon.³⁰⁷ The employment of the 8th Airborne Brigade resulted in another heated debate between Lieutenant Colonel Vann and General Cao. The General planned for the brigade to be dropped on the western edge of the battlefield to consolidate with the remnants of the 7th ARVN to conduct the final assault on the positions. LTC Vann argued for the 8th Airborne to be dropped on the eastern side of the objective to effectively envelope the enemy position.

With dusk approaching the US aircraft transporting the 8th Airborne Brigade came under fire and jumped directly into the teeth of VC defensives. They landed under fire and attempted to break through the VC defensives, but suffered over 52 casualties and were unable to rally the remnants of the 7th ARVN.³⁰⁸ The ARVN forces involved in the Battle of Ap Bac had been unsuccessful in their attempts to envelope or overrun and enemy's defensive strongpoints and moved in static defensive positions to consolidate and reorganize under the cover of darkness. As darkness fell on January 2, 1963 at the Battle of Ap Bac the VC, also consolidated their forces and conducted a withdrawal along the eastern routes outside of the village. The VC initiated the battle with first shots fired on the CG battalions approaching from the south at approximately 0635 and disengaged that night around 2200. Throughout the Battle of Ap Bac, the VC maintained tactical surprise and initiative and were never dislodged from their position of advantage. The enemy first achieved tactical surprise by fixing elements from the 17th CG battalion in the south and now maintained the initiative with the downing of several helicopters

³⁰⁷Ibid., 192.

³⁰⁸Ibid., 193.

and pinning down the reserve. The fight stabilized with all forces from the ARVN's three-pronged assault fixed and no VC positions were under threat of being overrun.

Analysis of the Battle of Ap Bac

It was a miserable damn performance, just like it always is. These people won't listen. They make the same mistake over and over again in the same way.³⁰⁹

Thorough analysis of the Battle of Ap Bac is difficult because the compelling and inflammatory narrative created by Lieutenant Colonel Vann and the equally disingenuous response from General Harkins, Commander, Military Assistance Command Vietnam, and Commander and Chief of Pacific Forces, Admiral Felt. Harkins portrayed the battle as an ARVN success, which did little to detract from the assessment in the press that the battle was a disaster. Vann portrayed the entire battle as a debacle and laid the failure at the feet of the ARVN officers.³¹⁰ This narrative gained momentum because it was compelling and did not highlight any of the successes of ARVN or demonstrated personal bravery of some ARVN officers. For example, analysis of the battle and General Cao's change to cease frontal attacks is reasonable, "those cautious tactics were, in spite of the very sincere exhortations of the U.S. advisors, precisely the same that any American would have used after U.S. troops were committed in 1965. Moreover, the American's fate for accepting human losses in lieu of calling for firepower to do the job would have

³⁰⁹Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*, 154; Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*, 277.

³¹⁰Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*. The author crafted this narrative based on LTC Vann's belief that the failure at Ap Bac rested solely on the ineptitude and cowardice of the ARVN officers and applied this caricature of the officers involved in Ap Bac to all ARVN officers.

been the same as that of the South Vietnamese commander— removal from command.”³¹¹

This analysis does not excuse or explain the performance or decisions of the 7th ARVN, but puts it in better context than abject failure.

In the broader context, the Battle of Ap Bac was a setback in the perceived development and proficiency of the 7th ARVN Division and realization that the PLAF represented a clear threat to conventional forces. The factors not explored in the performance of the 7th ARVN Division during that battle, in addition to tactical mistakes, was the influence of politics and Diem’s centralized control and recurring training issues.

The tactical mistakes were the commitment of 1st Company, the 1st of the 11th Infantry on a landing zone directly in range of VC fighting positions, the inability of Task Force A and B to reinitiate the attack when provided the opportunity, the unsuccessful assaults with mechanized infantry, and overall ineffective use of artillery and close air support. The integration of infantry, armor, artillery, and aviation is a daunting task even for US commanders and the expectation of perfection within the ARVN is somewhat misplaced.

The first issue that created undue friction on the battlefield was the selection of commanding officers based on political reliability versus military skill.³¹² The selection and promotion of ARVN officers appeared to be linked to political reliability and loyalty versus military acumen. The fundamental misunderstanding of advisors attempting to transition the ARVN into an apolitical professional force plagued MAAGV’s efforts to

³¹¹Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: U.S.-Vietnam in Perspective*, 37.

³¹²Karnow, *Vietnam, a History*, 274. A feeling among advisors developed that viewed the interdependent relationship between politics and the military officers paralyzed the ARVN and hindered development.

train and develop officers. The development of the ARVN linked directly to the political developments of the Government of South Vietnam through either political instability or President Diem's centralized control. The birth of the government of South Vietnam and ARVN was from the same social, economic, and political chaos. As these entities evolved, they could not be separated because the existence of South Vietnam depended on ARVN just as the ARVN required the GVN for its existence. Diem required the loyalty of ARVN officers to consolidate and maintain his power and took steps to delimit the power of those officers through centralized control over both administrative and operational activities within ARVN.³¹³

Another factor that contributed to the outcome of the battle was a convoluted chain of command. President Diem created overlapping of command and control structures between military operations and government activities under the purview of the Province Chief to limit the authority of ARVN officers. Major Tho commanded a bulk of the combat power in the battle, but was not under the command authority of Colonel Dam. This fractured command structure led to a lack of synchronization of combat power and an incomplete common operating picture. The grade and experience of ARVN leaders on the battlefield was not commensurate with the level of complexity and span control common in the US Army. The senior leader on the ground attacking the southern VC position was a Captain and the next senior commander was a Lieutenant. Early in the battle the senior commander forward, Captain Tri commanding Task Force A suffered a leg wound and had a limited role in controlling the battle. Task Force A and B be had

³¹³Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam: They Did Everything but Learn from It*, 44-48.

limited depth and experience among leaders available and were certainly not able to effectively maneuver six companies and integrate indirect fire to assault entrenched enemy positions. The limited experience, training, and availability of ARVN officers contributed to the deliberate and overly cautious decisions made on the battlefield. It would be unfair to expect a US Army Lieutenant with two years of service to maneuver six infantry companies in a combined arms frontal assault while under heavy fire.

The attributes of competence and courage of ARVN officers are often said to be lacking in the assessment of the US advisors, but what is missing in this analysis is the linkage between training and proper equipment, which yields success on the battlefield and can enhance both the competence and courage of ARVN officers.³¹⁴ Competence is a training issue or a promotion and selection shortcoming, that can be overcome and courage, or lack thereof, is not an accurate qualifier for the performance of all ARVN officers. Consistent within the US advisors assessment of ARVN officer's performance at Ap Bac was that competence and success tend to be related to exhibiting courage, whereas demonstrated incompetence and failure tend to be associated with cowardice. The Battle of Ap Bac in 1963 is often used as evidence to illustrate that there was a

³¹⁴Center of Military History, *United States Army in the Korean War: Truce Tent and Fighting Front*, 62. The factors of time and the importance of basic individual training was identified by MG Maxwell Taylor while serving as the Department of the Army, G-3 during a fact finding mission in Korea and observing KMAG. MG Taylor attributed the breakdown of leadership in combat experienced by some ROKA units to a lack of training and inadequate support that led to a loss of confidence. As commander of forces fighting in Korea, GEN Ridgway also attributed the breakdown of combat effectiveness in ROKA units to a lack of leadership training and substandard equipment.

reflected cadre of ARVN officers that were faint-hearted in the face of combat and suffered a defeat at the hands of an inferior VC force.³¹⁵

The perception of the ARVN officer corps as incompetent or even worse, cowardly is often reinforced by incomplete analysis of actions such as Ap Bac. Most of the analysis on the Battle of Ap Bac overlooks other factors that affected the performance of the ARVN officers present. The first factor is that the officer cadre was selected and promoted based on the political calculations of both President Diem and the officers themselves. By basing selection and promotion on politics, one's military acumen and front-line command abilities are minimized. Second, the confusing and overly complex command structure laid out by President Diem also affected how both tactical and strategic decisions were made and carried out. Third, the contentious relationship between US advisors and the ARVN officers affected the outcome of the battle. This poor relationship often led to a breakdown in trust between the two and sometimes US advisors used the ARVN officers to cover their errors. In closing, the Battle of Ap Bac is not evidence of the ARVN officer as a coward, but of an array of factors that influenced both the make-up and performance of those officers.

³¹⁵Karnow, *Vietnam, a History*, 276.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

US advisory effort in South Vietnam indeed helped the RVNAF [Republic of South Vietnam Armed Forces] attain remarkable achievements in terms of combat effectiveness and technical and managerial skills. However, there was one thing that this effort seemed never able to achieve: the inculcation of motivation and effective leadership. This was, after all, neither the fault of US advisers nor a shortcoming of the advisory effort, but a basic weakness of our political regime.

—General Cao Van Vien, *Indochina Monographs: The U.S. Adviser*

The consistent theme in the analysis of the Battle of Ap Bac highlights the marked lack of aggressiveness of ARVN officers or an unwillingness to fight.³¹⁶ US advisors identified lack of aggressiveness in combat as a leadership failure among ARVN officers. However, when put in a broader context the linkage between aggressiveness and effectiveness becomes blurred. For example, if US students do poorly on standardized math tests, then do educators leap to the solution that the students are just stupid? Educators would analyze all the critical factors that would contribute to poor performance and attempt to mitigate them. We would not allow the narrative of US students' performance on math tests to be that they are just stupid. Would responsible educators argue that, we taught classes, gave them books, calculators, and the newest computers, but they do not understand math and are stupid? From this narrative, one could infer that all US students were predisposed to being stupid. A similar narrative came from the US assessment of the Battle of Ap Bac that ARVN officers were predisposed to cowardice

³¹⁶The unwillingness of ARVN to fight is central to the works of Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*; Karnow, *Vietnam, a History*; Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*. For a revisionist approach to those works, see, Moyer, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*.

and were wholly ineffective. Laying the outcome of the Battle of Ap Bac at the feet of ARVN officers based on lack of aggressiveness is a veiled cultural prejudice and demonstrates the failure of US advisors to recognize that it is a complex and time-consuming process to build an army and government in the midst of a war.

An analysis of the development of the ARVN through the prism of French colonialism, political instability, and cultural incongruence with US advisors, demonstrates that the ARVN performed well given the fact that it was born in the midst of a war. The narrative that places the ARVN officers and their poor performance as the central theme neglects the context of their development. The notion that the US Army undertaking a large-scale advisory effort to build a foreign army in the midst of a war, but somehow remain untouched by the complexity and uncertainty of war leads to an incomplete portrayal of the ARVN. Both the American advisory effort and the ARVN were affected by the conditions under which they operated. The expectation that the ARVN, or any army, could easily transition into an idealized version of the US Army is misguided.

The performance of the ARVN at the Battle of Ap Bac is representative of the instability and unpredictability of Vietnam in the midst of a war. Understanding the specific factors that shaped the ARVN provides a different perspective on their performance and highlights that no silver-bullet was readily available to transform this force into a US Army-like force, capable of providing internal security and defeating external threats. A review of the US experience with building the ROKA, from 1950 to 1953 provides techniques that proved successful, but further analysis demonstrates that such lessons were not transferrable to Vietnam.

Absent a silver-bullet, the impact of French colonialism, political instability, and Vietnamese cultural norms shaped a military culture and army that did not perform as the US envisioned. There were not clear mechanisms or levers available to US advisors short of assuming command authority over the ARVN to ensure compliance with US expectations.³¹⁷ The US envisioned an army that performed based on how it was organized and equipped, and was unable to understand that it was an army that reflected its own chaotic birth and unique cultural norms. War is inherently complex and uncertain and an important observation is that a US advisory effort undertaken during a war evolves in unexpected ways. Equipping an army follows a linear progression of developing a Table of Organization and Equipment and then assigning people and equipment to fill those requirements. The experience of MAAGV demonstrates that equipping an army does not equal the building of an army. To build an army means to build or change the society from which it comes in order to meet the demands of fielding a modern military. The requirements for a Vietnamese soldier in a modern army were sometimes incongruent to what it meant to be Vietnamese. To be a soldier in a modern army means to leave one's ancestral home, enter a profession that is not highly regarded in the society, and provide one's loyalty to a central government versus the family or village.³¹⁸ The challenge for MAAGV, 1954 to 1963, was in building an army that represented an agent for change in the society and the government. The simultaneous process of building a government and

³¹⁷Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 439. The unwillingness of the U.S. to assert its will in some situations allowed the leadership maintain and develop bad habits. At this crucial stage of development the U.S. advisors accomplished an important function of forming an Army, but did little to rebuild the leadership in the likeness of U.S. Army officers.

³¹⁸Johnson and RAND, *The Role of the Military in Underdeveloped Countries*, 80.

an army was beyond the scope of MAAGV and could not easily be addressed by just organizing and equipping an army.

APPENDIX A

Chronology of Key Events in Vietnam (1948-1963)³¹⁹

1948

June 5—Bao Dai, French High Commissioner Emile Bollert, and Gen. Nguyen Van Xuan sign the Baie d'Along Agreement to establish State of Vietnam with Bao Dai as Chief of State within the French Union.

1949

March 8—The Elysee Agreement, in the form of an exchange of letters between Bao Dai and President Auriol of France, outlines the general principles affecting French-Vietnam relations.

June 14—An exchange of letters between Bao Dai and French High Commissioner Leon Pignon puts into effect the Elysee Agreement. US sends message of welcome to Bao Dai.

July 1—Bao Dai decrees formally establishes State of Vietnam and provides a basis for its organization on a constitutional framework.

1950

February 7—Great Britain and the US extend de jure welcomes to Vietnam.

February 19—US consulate general in Saigon is raised to Legation and Minister accredited to Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

December 23—US signs Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement with France, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos for indirect US military aid to Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

1951

September 7—US signs agreement with Vietnam for direct economic assistance.

September 8—Delegates from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos participate in the signing of the Japanese Peace Treaty at San Francisco.

1952

July—US Legation in Saigon is raised to Embassy status. US Ambassador presents credentials to Bao Dai. Vietnamese Embassy is established in Washington, D.C.

1954

³¹⁹United States Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign, *Background Information Relating to Southeast Asia and Vietnam*. 4th rev. ed.

May 8-July 21—Geneva Conference on Indochina. The delegates are from Great Britain and the U.S.S.E. (joint chairmen), France, the US, Communist China, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, and the Vietminh regime. Agreements are signed on July 20 and 21 and the main provisions concerning Vietnam are that (1) Vietnam is to be partitioned along the 17th parallel into North and South Vietnam, (2) regulations are imposed on foreign military bases and personnel and on increased armaments, (3) countrywide elections, leading to the reunification of North and South Vietnam, are to be held by July 20, 1956, and (4) an International Control Commission (ICC) is to be established to supervise the implementation of the agreements. The United States and Vietnam are not signatories to the agreements.

July 7—Head of State and former Emperor Bao Dai appoints Ngo Dinh Diem Premier of Vietnam.

August—Flow of almost 1 million refugees from North to South Vietnam begins.

October 24—President Eisenhower sends a letter to Premier Diem of South Vietnam stating that American assistance will be given hereafter not through the French authorities, but directly to the Government of South Vietnam.

1955

January 1—US promises to render direct assistance to Vietnam, on the basis of the existing pentilateral agreement of December 1950, for support of the Vietnamese Armed Forces.

February 12—The US Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) takes over the training of the South Vietnamese Army, following the relinquishing of command authority by the French.

March 29—Armed revolt is precipitated in Saigon by the Binh Xuyen political-bandit group, spreading ultimately into large-scale dissidence in the southern provinces with the participation of elements of the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious sects.

May 10—Premier Diem forms a new Cabinet composed largely of his own followers.

August 16—Last French High Commissioner in Vietnam departs.

October—Binh Xuyen is defeated as an organized armed insurgent force.

October 23—A national referendum deposes Bao Dai, former Emperor and since March 7, 1949, head of State of Vietnam. Ninety eight percent of the votes express preference for Premier Diem.

October 26—A Republic is proclaimed by Ngo Dinh Diem who becomes the first President of South Vietnam.

October 31—President Diem issues his first order to the Vietnamese Armed Forces as their supreme commander.

1956

January—South Vietnamese Army units occupy Tay Ninh, principal Cao Dai political center, leading to breakup of the organized Cao Dai armed insurgency. Agreement with Cao Dai leaders on February 28 legalizes Cao Dai religious practices and forbids its political activities as a religious sect.

February 12—Tran Van Soai, leader of an important Hoa Hao faction, surrenders. Ba Cut, another principal Hoa Hao leader, is captured on April 13, leading to breakup of organized Hoa Hao armed insurgency.

March 4—General elections for South Vietnam's first National Constituent Assembly, which is to have 123 members, results in the victory of the National Revolutionary Movement and other political parties supporting President Diem.

July 4—Constituent Assembly in Vietnam approves unanimously a draft constitution providing for a strong executive with safeguards for individual citizens. The President, whose term of office is to be 5 years, has veto power over all legislation of the unicameral parliament and may rule by decree when the National Assembly (elected for 4 years) is not in session.

May 5-19—President Diem visits the US. He addresses on May 9 a joint session of Congress. In a joint communique (issued May 11), President Eisenhower and President Diem declare that both countries will work toward a "peaceful unification" of Vietnam. The US will continue helping South Vietnam to stand firm against communism.

June—French naval and air force training mission withdrawn.

January 4—Large Communist guerrilla band attacks plantation north of Saigon, reflecting steady increase in Communist armed activity in South Vietnam since mid-1957.

1959

October 30—Spokesman of the Vietnamese Army discloses that a campaign against Communist guerrillas in the country's southernmost region, the Camau Peninsula, resulted in heavy guerrilla losses.

1960

May 5—US announces that at the request of the Government of South Vietnam, the US Military Assistance and Advisory Group will be increased by the end of the year from 327 to 685 members.

June-October—Communist guerrilla activities in South Vietnam increase.

October 26—President Eisenhower assures President Ngo Dinh Diem, in a letter of good wishes on South Vietnam's fifth anniversary, that "for so long as our strength can be useful, the US will continue to assist Vietnam in the difficult yet hopeful struggle ahead.

November 11—Military coup attempt against President Diem's regime. Paratroop battalions led by Col. Nguyen Van Thi and Lt. Col. Vuong Van Dong besiege the presidential palace. An order of the day issued by Colonel Thi declares that struggle against the Communists will be intensified, that President Diem is guilty of autocratic rule and nepotism and has "shown himself incapable of saving the country from communism and protecting national unity."

November 12—Loyalist troops enter the capital and subdue the rebels.

November 13—US State Department expresses satisfaction at the failure of the coup against President Diem and also hopes that "his powers will be established on a wider basis with rapid implementation of radical reforms and energetic action against corruption-suspected elements."

1961

February 7—President Diem announces he will be a candidate for reelection in the presidential elections to be held on April 9.

March 10—The Communist-led newly formed National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam announces that a guerrilla offensive against the Government will be started to prevent the holding of the April 9 elections. The "National Front" also declares that it will fight with every means the "dictatorial regime set up by the Americans," that it stands for the "peaceful reunification."

April 4—President Diem appeals to the ICC to make an "immediate and energetic investigation" of growing Communist terrorism and subversion throughout South Vietnam."

April 9—President Diem and Vice President Tho are elected by an, overwhelming majority in Vietnam's presidential elections.

August 2—President Kennedy declares that the US will do all it can to save South Vietnam from communism.

September 1-4—Series of attacks by 1,000 Communist guerrillas in Kontum Province. Army Command communiqué states that during the month of August there were 41 engagements between Government forces and Communist rebels in South Vietnam.

October 18—State of emergency is proclaimed in South Vietnam by President Diem. On the same day the President also begins a series of consultations with Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor.

November 16—Following closely the recommendations in General Taylor's report, President Kennedy (with the approval of the National Security Council) decides to bolster South Vietnam's military strength, but not to commit US combat forces at this time.

December 14—US President Kennedy pledges increased aid to South Vietnam.

1962

February 7—Two US Army air support companies totaling 300 men arrive in Saigon, increasing the total of US military personnel in South Vietnam to 4,000.

February 8—US reorganizes its South Vietnam military command, establishes new "U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam" under four-star Gen. Paul D. Harkins.

February 27—Two fighter planes, piloted by members of the South Vietnamese Air Force, bomb and strafe Presidential palace in Saigon for 25 minutes. President Diem and his staff not injured.

March 22—"Operation Sunrise," a comprehensive plan to eliminate the Vietcong guerrillas in South Vietnam, begins with a mopping up operation of rebels in Binh Duong Province.

April 20—National Assembly pledges full support to President Diem's plan to establish thousands of 'strategic hamlets' in the Communist-infested Mekong Delta during the current year.

December 29—Government in Saigon announces that 4,077 strategic hamlets have been completed (of 11,182 to be built) and that 39 percent of South Vietnam's population is now living in these communities.

1963

January 2-4—The Battle of Ap Bac. The outcome of battle was generated scathing reports from US advisors on the performance of ARVN units against the Viet Cong defenders. Media reports that indicated that the ARVN forces lacked aggressiveness and were unwilling to fight.

January 9-11—Adm. Harry D. Felt, commander in chief of US forces in the Pacific confers with Gen. Paul D. Harkins and declares, before his departure, that the Vietcong guerrillas face "inevitable" defeat, and he says: "I am confident the Vietnamese are going to win the war."

April 22—US Secretary of State Dean Rusk calls the situation in South Vietnam "difficult and dangerous," and says that the US "cannot promise or expect a quick victory and that its role is "limited and supporting."

June 3—Buddhist demonstrations break out in Hue. Martial law is swiftly imposed.

- June 15—Tentative agreement is reached between Buddhist leaders and representatives of President Diem to end alleged religious discrimination and meet Buddhist demands.
- June 16—Government troops use tanks, tear gas, clubs, firearms, and barbed wire to suppress riots in Saigon which follow an agreement between Buddhist leaders and the Government.
- July 17—Armed policemen use clubs against 1,000 Buddhists protesting religious discrimination in front of a pagoda in Saigon. On the same day, President Kennedy says (at his news conference) that the religious crisis in South Vietnam is interfering with the war effort against the Vietcong guerrillas and expresses hope that President Diem and Buddhist leaders will 'reach an agreement on the civil disturbances and also in respect for the rights of others.'
- August 7—Martial law is proclaimed throughout South Vietnam by President Diem after hundreds of armed police and government troops raided the main Buddhist Xa Loi pagoda in Saigon.
- September 14—Presidential decree announces end of martial law on September 16.
- November 1—Military coup (organized by the key generals of the armed forces) against the Diem regime. Rebels lay siege to the presidential palace in Saigon which is captured by the following morning. President Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu escape from the palace, but a few hours later are taken by the rebels, and while being transported in an armored carrier to rebel headquarters they are assassinated. A proclamation broadcast by the leaders of the coup (a council of generals, headed by Maj. Gen. Duong Van Minh) declares that they have "no political ambitions" and that the fight against the Communists must be carried on to a successful conclusion.
- November 2—Military leaders in South Vietnam set up a provisional Government headed by former Vice President Nguyen Ngoc Tho (a Buddhist) as Premier. The Constitution is suspended and the National Assembly dissolved.
- November 4—Premier Nguyen Ngoc Tho of South Vietnam announces formation of a mixed military-civilian Cabinet which has been approved by the military leaders. US recognizes the new provisional Government of South Vietnam.
- December 14—U.S. military spokesman in Saigon reports on stepped up guerrilla attacks on hamlets, outposts, and patrols in November, estimating Government casualties at 2,800 and Vietcong losses at 2,900. He also reports that enough weapons were captured by the Vietcong to arm five 300-man battalions.

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