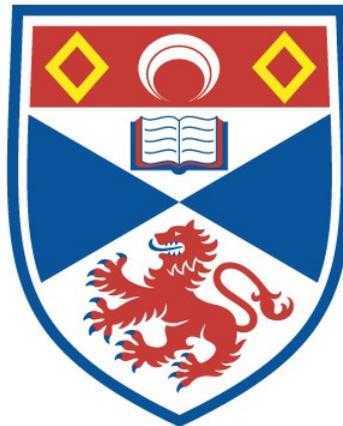


**'PAY ANY PRICE, BEAR ANY BURDEN':
THE U.S. ARMY'S COUNTER-INSURGENCY DOCTRINE
FROM KENNEDY TO THE VIETNAM WAR**

George Forman Michael Ritchie

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of MPhil
at the
University of St Andrews**



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‘Pay any price, bear any burden’: The U.S. Army’s
Counter-Insurgency Doctrine from Kennedy to the
Vietnam War

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University of
St Andrews

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of MPhil
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Date of Submission

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Kennedy to the Vietnam War**



MEDCAP team (US and South Vietnamese), Mekong Delta, mid-1966

VA000150, Douglas Pike Photograph Collection, The Vietnam Centre and Archive, Texas Tech

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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|------------|
| Abstract..... | i |
| Acknowledgements..... | iii |
| Abbreviations..... | iv |
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Chapter One: The U.S. Army before Kennedy..... | 20 |
| Chapter Two: Kennedy and Flexible Response..... | 34 |
| Chapter Three: The Vietnamese Revolution..... | 52 |
| Chapter Four: The U.S. Army and Counter-Insurgency, 1961-1965..... | 78 |
| Chapter Five: The U.S. Army and Counter-Insurgency, 1965-1968..... | 108 |
| Conclusion..... | 141 |
| Bibliography..... | 149 |

Abstract

This thesis is an analysis of the U.S. Army's counter-insurgency doctrine from its roots to its application in South Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Contrary to the arguments of a specific section of scholars, the Army did not fail to defeat the National Liberation Front (NLF) because it did not use counter-insurgency methods. This thesis explains that the Army developed a comprehensive, albeit flawed, counter-insurgency doctrine and applied it in South Vietnam. While the Army's counter-insurgency doctrine had serious deficiencies, it was the deeply unsound South Vietnamese government and the NLF's formidable political revolution that were the primary reasons for its failure to achieve its objectives.

This thesis utilises the body of literature produced by U.S. Army officers, officers of allied nations and academics during the creation of the Army's counter-insurgency doctrine, as well as the field manuals that resulted from this research. These sources reveal the self-interest of Army commanders in their pursuit of a counter-insurgency mission, the purpose of which was to reverse the reductions enforced upon the Army during the 1950s. Crucially, these sources also display the Army's perception of insurgencies in the developing world as the result of Communist-bloc attempts to expand communism. This perception, as well as the overconfidence of much of the Army's leadership, was influential in shaping counter-insurgency doctrine.

The Army's self-interest put it on a path of its own making that led to the Vietnam War. The Army's field manuals on counter-insurgency warfare show it expected to

face an insurgency that was born out of the Cold War struggle and its methods reflected this belief. Therefore, it did not grasp that the NLF's revolution had deep-seated historical roots. The Army's counter-insurgency programmes, which emphasised civic action and destruction of guerrillas, were wholly ineffective in eradicating the NLF's largely political revolution.

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Lastly, my greatest thanks go to my parents, Susan and George, for their encouragement, support and love.

Abbreviations

| | |
|---------|---|
| APC | Armoured Personnel Carrier |
| ARVN | Army of the Republic of Vietnam |
| ATFA | Atomic Field Army |
| BRIAM | British Advisory Mission |
| CAO | Civil Affairs Office |
| CAP | Combined Action Platoon |
| CGSC | Command and General Staff College |
| CIDG | Civilian Irregular Defence Group |
| CINCPAC | Commander-in-Chief United States Pacific Command |
| COSVN | Central Office for South Vietnam |
| CPM | Communist Party of Malaya |
| DRV | Democratic Republic of Vietnam |
| FM | Field Manual |
| H&I | Harassment and Interdiction Fire |
| HES | Hamlet Evaluation System |
| KKE | Communist Party of Greece |
| MAAG | Military Assistance and Advisory Group |
| MACV | Military Assistance Command Vietnam |
| MAT | Mobile Advisory Team |
| MEDCAP | Medical Civic Action Programme |

| | |
|--------|---|
| MIT | Massachusetts Institute of Technology |
| NATO | North Atlantic Treaty Organisation |
| NLF | National Liberation Front |
| NSAM | National Security Action Memorandum |
| PAVN | People's Army of Vietnam |
| PLAF | People's Liberation Armed Forces |
| PROVN | A Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam |
| RAND | Research and Development Corporation |
| ROAD | Reorganisation Objective Army Division |
| RVN | Republic of Vietnam |
| SACEUR | Supreme Allied Commander Europe |
| SAF | Special Action Force |
| SEATO | Southeast Asian Treat Organisation |
| SHAEF | Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force |
| U.S. | United States |
| USAAF | United States Army Air Forces |
| USAF | United States Air Force |
| USMA | United States Military Academy |
| USMC | United States Marine Corps |
| USN | United States Navy |

USSR

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

VWP

Vietnamese Workers' Party

Introduction

The Vietnam War was a long and costly quagmire which quashed the optimism and confidence that defined the United States in the early 1960s. The war affected the U.S. Army in a similar manner. Its failure to achieve victory over the National Liberation Front (NLF), an opponent that appeared significantly outmatched on paper, after years of deadly and frustrating combat, was severely damaging to its morale and confidence. The Army was a different force at the beginning of the American phase of the war in 1965. It had spent the early 1960s confidently preparing to fight wars like the one it encountered in South Vietnam. The Army had sided with John F. Kennedy's Cold War strategy of halting the expansion of communism in developing states, believing it could 'pay any price' and 'bear any burden'. Instead, it helped create a disastrous path filled with self-assured hubris, unjustified confidence in its abilities and no concrete understanding of the NLF and its insurgency in South Vietnam.

The aim of this thesis is to demonstrate the following points. The first is that the U.S. Army did make a serious attempt to prepare for counter-insurgency warfare, rather than dismiss it out of hand. The introduction of President Dwight D. Eisenhower's New Look strategy in 1953 greatly reduced the resources and role of the Army. Unsurprisingly, Army commanders were unhappy with New Look and sought to reverse its changes. They exaggerated the potential threat of communist insurgent groups in the developing world, believing that the Army could defeat these insurgencies. The election of Kennedy to the Presidency in 1961 introduced a new Cold War strategy called Flexible Response which addressed the wishes of Army officers.

The second point is that the U.S. Army seriously underestimated the complexities of insurgencies. Army officers were supremely confident in their abilities, as well as the capability of the Army, to defeat communist insurgencies in the developing world. Many officers had experience of service during the Second World War, witnessing the rise of the Army from a small force to one which defeated the fascist powers. With the Army's technological superiority, victory against small and ill-equipped guerrillas appeared to be inevitable. In addition, Cold War fears led commanders to assume that communist insurgent groups were under the control of the Communist-bloc. They failed to recognise the deep-seated roots of the NLF and the unique historical and political context of the insurgency in South Vietnam.

The third point is that the NLF was a formidable force not susceptible to the simplistic and generic counter-insurgency programmes of the U.S. Army. The NLF was not a product of the Cold War contest between the United States and the Soviet Union. It had historical roots, integrated itself into the villages of rural South Vietnam and provided answers to crucial peasant concerns such as land. The NLF cadres were highly motivated and willing to endure significant hardships in pursuit of their goals. The organisation's use of violence proved to be extremely effective, eliminating and terrorising the government's rural political officials. Additionally, the use of violence created an aura of fear, helping the NLF maintain a tight grip on the villages of South Vietnam. The NLF was a powerful political organisation, which made it an insurmountable obstacle for the U.S. Army.

The fourth point is that the U.S. Army's counter-insurgency doctrine suffered from underlying flaws. The Cold War assumptions and overconfident attitudes of the Army shaped its counter-insurgency doctrine and the methods it would deploy. Since the Army assumed an insurgency existed because of Communist-bloc attempts at expansion, it focused efforts on making the local government more effective, providing military assistance and aid to alleviate the poor living standards of the people. The Army believed these efforts would reduce support for the insurgents and increase support for the local government. However, its doctrine misjudged the nature of the NLF's insurgency and the complexities inherent in fighting counter-insurgency warfare in a foreign land. Army programmes such as night classes and road improvements did not address the issues that laid the foundations of the NLF's insurgency.

The Vietnam War has generated a vast body of literature which continues to grow. The war was a painful experience for Americans, resulting in defeat, division and destruction of the post-Second World War confidence which had defined the years of Kennedy's administration. It is one of the most studied wars in American history, with journalists, politicians, soldiers and scholars spending much time and energy delving into the many aspects of such an emotional and complex event. A perennial question scholars have endeavoured to solve is why the American effort to preserve a non-communist South Vietnam failed. Despite the passage of time since the fall of South Vietnam in 1975, much of the historiography remains divided over key issues.

In *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War* (2009), Gary R. Hess provides an analysis of the historiography of the Vietnam War. Hess claims that a significant

portion of the historiography falls into either the orthodox or revisionist camps, a division which stems from wartime.¹ Historians of the orthodox school view the war as unwinnable and a serious mistake in American policy. They also tend to criticise the rationale for American involvement as well as the strategy used in the prosecution of the war. On the other hand, scholars of the revisionist school often see the American objective of maintaining a non-communist South Vietnam as a worthy one.

Phillip E. Catton shares a similar position with Hess, dividing much of the literature into two main groups. The first group discussed by Catton are those scholars who are critical of American intervention in South Vietnam. They consider the war to be a ‘bad war’ and are dubious America could have ever achieved its aim of preserving a strong anti-communist South Vietnam. The second group of scholars argue that there were valid reasons for American intervention and contend that a different strategy would have brought success.² Given the vast number of works on the war, there are differences within and between the two schools, and not all works fit into either category. However, for the area of the historiography with which this thesis is concerned, the division provides a useful way to examine it.

This thesis engages heavily with the revisionist school of the historiography. Scholars of the revisionist school emerged with vigour in the late 1970s, the result of an America that was in a political transition and the persecutions that took place in Vietnam following the fall of South Vietnam in 1975. President Ronald Reagan epitomised the emergence of the revisionist school when he described the American

¹ Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America’s Lost War* (Oxford, 2009), p. ix.

² Phillip E. Catton, ‘Refighting Vietnam in the History Books: The Historiography of the War’, *OAH Magazine of History*, Vol. 18., No. 5., Vietnam (October, 2004), pp. 7-8.

mission in South Vietnam as a 'noble cause' at a Memorial Day ceremony on 28 May 1984 for an unknown soldier killed during the war. For the revisionists, the Vietnam War was a worthy mission that was winnable. Norman Podhoretz, one of the revisionists of this period, made his position clear in casting the war as a black-and-white struggle against the 'evils of Communism'.³ Many revisionist scholars seek to establish why the American military failed to defeat peasant guerrillas and develop alternatives that would have overcome those problems and delivered victory.

Different views emerged that provided answers as to why the American military failed to achieve victory and how it could have triumphed. U.S. Grant Sharp, who held the post of Commander-in-Chief United States Pacific Command (CINCPAC) from 1964-1968, believed that the administration's restrictions on the use of military power and its policy of gradual escalation were detrimental to the outcome of the war.⁴ In other words, the military suffered defeat because of the administration's micromanagement rather than an inability to defeat the NLF's revolution.

During the 1980s, two opposing views emerged within the revisionist historiography on the American military's failure to defeat the NLF, referred to by Hess as the 'Clausewitz' and 'hearts and minds' strands. The first one to firmly establish itself was the Clausewitz strand, usually associated with Harry G. Summers. Summers had a long career in the U.S. Army and saw service during the war in South Vietnam. His book, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (1982) made a significant impact at the time, using the military theories of Carl von Clausewitz to

³ Norman Podhoretz, *Why we were in Vietnam* (New York, 1982), p. 197.

⁴ U. S. Grant Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect* (San Rafael, CA, 1978), p. 3.

analyse American actions during the Vietnam War. The central argument made by Summers is that the American government misjudged the conflict, failing to recognise that it was a conventional war. The insurgency in South Vietnam and the American fixation with counter-insurgency warfare obscured the ‘true nature of military force’ and ‘contributed to the subsequent failure of US national policy in Vietnam’.⁵

Summers’ argument became popular within the military because it proposed ‘a scenario in which the US could have won the war by doing what came naturally’.⁶ The strand was at its peak during the 1980s, but no longer carries the influence it once did, because it failed to grasp the political, economic and social factors at the root of the insurgency in the Republic of Vietnam⁷ (RVN).

The origins of the ‘hearts and minds’ strand stretch back to wartime critics of the U.S. Army’s methods. John Paul Vann and Edward G. Lansdale were two well-known critics and enthusiastic advocates of counter-insurgency programmes designed to win over the people of South Vietnam. Lansdale’s involvement with counter-insurgency warfare began in the Philippines in the 1950s, where he established himself as an expert in the subject following his success in suppressing a rebellion against the government. Lansdale was sent to South Vietnam by President Kennedy and became an adviser to Ngo Dinh Diem, although his influence diminished by the time the American phase of the war began in 1965. John Paul Vann served as a military adviser in the Mekong Delta in the early 1960s and then as a civilian pacification officer until his death in a helicopter crash in 1972. The outspoken and arrogant Vann’s experiences in South Vietnam were documented by Neil Sheehan in his book *A Bright Shining Lie* (1988).

⁵ Harry G. Summers, Jr., *American Strategy in Vietnam: A Critical Analysis* (Mineola, NY, 2007), p. 49.

⁶ Gerard J. DeGroot, *A Noble Cause? America and the Vietnam War* (Harlow, 2000), p. 259.

⁷ The official name of South Vietnam.

Soon after the fall of South Vietnam in 1975, scholars turned their attention to the war, advancing on some of the points made by wartime critics like Vann. One of the first scholars to do this was Guenter Lewy with his book *America in Vietnam* (1978). Lewy echoed the criticisms of Vann and Lansdale, namely that Army commanders never seriously embraced counter-insurgency. Lewy states that ‘the importance of attacking the social and political roots of the insurgency was never fully appreciated and accepted’.⁸ Instead, the Army fulfilled its bureaucratic purpose, which was to deploy significant forces and utilise large-scale conventional operations to destroy the main forces of the enemy.⁹

Andrew F. Krepinevich served in the U.S. Army as an officer for 25 years and is closely associated with the ‘hearts and minds’ strand. His book, *The Army and Vietnam* (1986), studied the Army’s approach to the war. He argued that it conducted a war of attrition at the expense of securing the rural population. Krepinevich states that ‘the United States Army was neither trained nor organized to fight effectively in an insurgency conflict environment’.¹⁰ The reason for this is what Krepinevich calls the ‘Army concept’, which he describes as the ‘product of an organizational character that has evolved over time’.¹¹ The Army’s experience of the major conflicts of the 20th Century, such as the First World War and the Second World War, shaped it to fight large-scale conventional wars. These experiences became the ‘Army concept’, which

⁸ Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York, 1978), p. 85.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 86.

¹⁰ Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD, 1986), p. 4.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 4.

formed the basis of the Army's belief that heavy firepower was a key part of warfare.¹² As a result, small-scale wars were pushed to the periphery, leaving the Army ill-prepared for the conflict in South Vietnam.

Both Lewy and Krepinevich argue that the war was winnable. They believe that if conventional warfare had not been a core part of the Army's identity and if it had fully embraced counter-insurgency warfare, then the NLF could have been defeated. The main problem with the arguments of Lewy and Krepinevich is that they fail to consider the wider context of the war. They approach the war from an American perspective and fail to fully understand the NLF, the dynamics of the South Vietnamese countryside, the fundamental problems with South Vietnam and the limits of American power. These were not insignificant problems. Despite these issues, the 'hearts and minds' portion of the revisionist historiography remains influential, partly stimulated by the recent insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The insurgencies that have erupted in Iraq and Afghanistan have inspired further scholarship on the Vietnam War. These complex insurgencies, which saw the investment of major American military efforts, had no obvious solutions for victory. Therefore, military professionals turned to the American experience in South Vietnam for insights. These scholars have dominated much of the recent additions to the historiography, many of them with first-hand experience of counter-insurgency warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan. John A. Nagl is one of the most well-known of these scholars and his book, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from*

¹² Ibid, p. 5.

Malaya and Vietnam (2004) made a significant impact as post-war Iraq descended into chaos.

Nagl and other authors like him continue to see counter-insurgency as the ‘silver bullet’ solution to the Vietnam War. In his book, Nagl compares the British Army’s counter-insurgency campaign in Malaya with the U.S. Army’s campaign in South Vietnam. He offers conclusions on why the British Army succeeded in Malaya and why the U.S. Army failed in South Vietnam. According to Nagl, the British Army succeeded because it was an organisation that asked questions and was open to innovation. He states that the British Army ‘demonstrated a remarkable openness to learning during the years from 1952-1957’.¹³ Regarding the Vietnam War, he argues that ‘The organizational culture of the United States Army precluded organizational learning on counter-insurgency.’¹⁴ However, there are some problems with Nagl’s arguments. He overlooks the fundamental differences between the conflicts in Malaya and South Vietnam. Malaya had been a colony and remained under British control until 1957, giving the British government significant control. In addition, the insurgent forces in Malaya were mostly made up of ethnic Chinese, making it easy to identify potential insurgents from the rest of the population. In South Vietnam, the Americans did not exercise the same degree of control as the British did over Malaya; nor were the insurgents composed of an ethnic minority of the population.

There are some exceptions to the resurgence of the ‘hearts and minds’ strand. For instance, Andrew J. Birtle, who has been a historian of the American military for a

¹³ John A. Nagl, Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam (Chicago, 2005), p. 105.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 180.

significant part of his career. He argues that the U.S. Army absorbed its experiences of small conflicts against insurgents rather than ignore them because of the major wars it fought. 'Historically', Birtle writes, 'U.S. soldiers have spent far more time performing a variety of constabulary, administrative, diplomatic, humanitarian, nation-building and irregular warfare functions than they have fighting on the conventional battlefield.'¹⁵

While the Second World War did indeed see the temporary elimination of counter-insurgency from official doctrine, the 'Wartime texts and manuals covered a wide range of topics that would be of utility in conducting counterinsurgency operations.'¹⁶

Regarding the Vietnam War, Birtle believes that the failure to defeat the NLF and save South Vietnam, 'lay in the realms of policy and strategy rather than military doctrine'.¹⁷ He does concede that the Army's doctrine had flaws, but that those flaws were not fundamental and therefore not detrimental to the outcome.¹⁸ Rather, the crucial factor lay in America's inability to 'bend North Vietnam to its will' and in its overestimation of its capacity to change 'South Vietnamese institutions'.¹⁹ The critical importance of the NLF and the attitudes of the peasantry do not feature in Birtle's explanation of the failure of the Army to overcome the insurgency.

Much of the literature on U.S. Army counter-insurgency doctrine and the Vietnam War has suffered from some weaknesses. Perhaps the most glaring problem is that it is American-centric. The 'hearts and minds' strand, which dominates much of the work

¹⁵ Andrew J. Birtle, U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1942-1976 (Washington D.C., 2006), p. 3.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 11.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 407.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 406.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 407.

on Army counter-insurgency doctrine, assume that the war was winnable. They consider American actions to have been decisive in directing the course of the war, relegating the Vietnamese to the background, rather than being treated as the decisive actors they were.

Much of the historiography also fails to appreciate the context of the Army's counter-insurgency doctrine. The Army's motives for pursuing a counter-insurgency mission and the Cold War both shaped counter-insurgency doctrine and these factors are important in explaining the American failure to defeat the NLF. The Army's motives reveal an over-confident leadership that failed to make a realistic assessment of the complexities inherent in counter-insurgency warfare. The Cold War dictated how the American government and military saw the insurgencies emerging in the developing world, seeing them as the result of Communist-bloc plans to expand influence rather than as responses to local conditions. Therefore, this basic belief became the foundation of the Army's counter-insurgency doctrine.

This thesis will attempt to rectify the shortcomings of the 'hearts and minds' strand. Only by understanding the flaws in the Army's counter-insurgency doctrine, the NLF's control of rural South Vietnam, and the Cold War's impact on doctrine, can we gain an appreciation for the insurmountable obstacles the Army faced and the limits of American military power in South Vietnam. The U.S. Army sowed the seeds of a path that would lead it to the quagmire that was the Vietnam War. Senior commanders, incensed at the reductions of the Army enforced by the nuclear strategy of the 1950s, emphasised the threat posed by communist insurgencies in the developing world and

argued that the Army could defeat them. Kennedy played upon this same threat in his successful bid for the White House, meaning the Army gained the key strategic role and resources it wanted. From 1961, the Army began to prepare and train for counter-insurgency warfare. Not only did their counter-insurgency doctrine have a flawed basis shaped by Cold War perceptions, but Army officers also underestimated the complexities inherent in fighting an insurgency and erroneously assumed victory would be inevitable.

Two factors negatively shaped the U.S Army's counter-insurgency doctrine. The first is that the confidence of the Kennedy administration influenced its creation. The United States was one of the chief architects of Allied victory in the Second World War and swiftly grew to become one of two superpowers in the post-war world. As part of this evolution from great power to superpower, American industry flourished to become a vast and technologically advanced producer of consumer goods and military technology. American political, economic and military power was impressive and relatively small insurgencies in the developing world appeared to be easy challenges.

The second factor which shaped counter-insurgency doctrine was the Cold War. Soviet statements regarding the support of 'national liberation' movements in the developing world rang alarm bells in the White House. Thereafter, American government and military officials viewed insurgencies in the developing world in the context of the Cold War, instead of seeing them as responses to internal conditions. Rather, insurgencies were the product of Communist-bloc plans for the expansion of communism. Internal problems such as corruption and poor economic prospects were

manipulated by the Communist-bloc to create and control insurgencies within developing states for their own ends. Consequently, this belief formed the basis of the Army's counter-insurgency doctrine.

Overconfidence and Cold War assumptions had a detrimental impact on the formulation and evolution of counter-insurgency doctrine. They caused the U.S. Army to underestimate the complex nature of insurgencies and the problems they posed. Additionally, the Army failed to see the difficulties in trying to build relationships with people who belonged to an alien culture and spoke a language few Americans knew. The Cold War's impact on doctrine meant the Army saw insurgencies as the result of Communist-bloc machinations, rather than recognising that each insurgency had distinctive causes and context.

When studying the Vietnam War, it is easy to slip into discussions on alternative courses of action that would have resulted in a different outcome for the United States and South Vietnam. There is no implication in the argument of this thesis that alterations to the U.S. Army's counter-insurgency doctrine would have changed the outcome of the war. Given the intractable problems facing South Vietnam and the strength and determination of the NLF, it is difficult to see how an alternate counter-insurgency strategy would have led to victory. The knowledge now available to us sheds significant light on the RVN's fundamental problems, which prevented it from building a significant base of support in the countryside, and on the methods of the NLF which made it a formidable force. It is important to bear in mind that the Army was

primarily a military organisation with the purpose of winning wars on the battlefield, which is why it struggled to combat the NLF's political revolution.

U.S. Army officers, disappointed with the reductions forced upon them during the 1950s, exaggerated the threat posed by insurgencies in the developing world and pushed for the Army to be given the resources to tackle them. Flexible Response answered the Army's wishes, and commanders made an effort to create a counter-insurgency doctrine and utilise it in South Vietnam when the American phase of the war began in 1965. The Army's doctrine was flawed and unsurprisingly fell short when applied against the unviable South Vietnamese government and powerful NLF. The main issue with the Army's counter-insurgency doctrine was its underlying belief that American power could easily overcome insurgencies and transform the fortunes of developing states. All that was required was the application of American resources and intellect in concert with the correct strategy to undermine the externally supported insurgency.

The Vietnam War shattered America's post-Second World War confidence and Cold War assumptions. For the U.S. Army, the quagmire of Vietnam destroyed its brief enthusiasm for counter-insurgency, leading to a purging of it from doctrine during the 1970s and a refocus on the Soviet threat in Europe. Counter-insurgency warfare was not the answer to South Vietnam's problems, and despite the painful experience of that war, it remains a favoured alternative for Vietnam. Of course, the U.S. Army did prepare for counter-insurgency warfare, but the doctrine was flawed. Even so, the complex nature of the war, the strength of the NLF and its political revolution as well as

the fundamentally unsound South Vietnamese government meant that victory was beyond the grasp of the Army.

Central to the arguments produced in this thesis are the texts, official and unofficial, written to develop the Army's counter-insurgency doctrine. These texts include books on Army affairs by high-ranking officers, articles on doctrine published in the Army's official journal, student essays from the Command and General Staff College (CGSC), Research and Development Corporation²⁰ (RAND) studies, doctrinal manuals and wartime reports. These sources are crucial to appreciate the reasons for the Army's pursuit of counter-insurgency warfare, its thoughts on the origins of insurgencies in the developing world, how it developed the fundamentals of its counter-insurgency doctrine, its counter-insurgency methods and its implementation of those methods in South Vietnam.

Monographs from senior military officers make clear their dislike of Eisenhower's cuts, arguing the Army should, among other responsibilities, fight the Cold War in the developing world. Their self-confidence and desire to reverse reductions to the Army overrode a realistic assessment of its role in Cold War strategy. When Kennedy introduced Flexible Response, construction of counter-insurgency doctrine began with officers exploring historical examples and presenting their findings in books or the *Military Review*, the Army's official journal. The process involved identifying elements of past counter-insurgency campaigns that had been successful and then promoting them for inclusion into doctrine.

²⁰ A civilian agency that researched defence matters

The final stage of doctrinal development was the inclusion of counter-insurgency theory and tactics into updated or new field manuals. Field manuals explained the Army's role in national strategy, how it approached different wartime scenarios and detailed tactical operations. While there was scope within the Army for innovation, field manuals established the mental framework in which Army personnel approached various situations. Given the fact that counter-insurgency was a new addition to Army doctrine, field manuals and literature from the likes of the *Military Review* are important sources of information on its development.

The *Military Review* articles, CGSC student papers and other works reveal the flaws in Army commanders' examination of historical instances of counter-insurgency, their unjustified confidence in American power and their lack of appreciation for the difficulties and nuances inherent in counter-insurgency warfare. They believed that the insurgencies in the developing world were externally directed by the Communist-bloc. They failed to recognise the unique context of past instances of counter-insurgency warfare, 'cherry-picking' successful methods and assuming that combining them with American resources and ingenuity would bring success in any event.

The counter-insurgency methods the Army 'cherry-picked', their Cold War assumptions, failure to understand that each insurgency had a unique context and the unjustified expectation that American forces would triumph regardless influenced doctrine significantly. These problems are evident in the field manuals, for instance, recommending complicated programmes which required skilled individuals that could

also speak the local language, despite the fact that such people were in short supply. The Vietnam War brought these problems to light, where personal accounts and official reports reveal the difficulties Americans had trying to work with and understand the Vietnamese people. The sources this thesis utilises reveals the critical weaknesses of the Army's counter-insurgency doctrine, its unsuitability for combating the NLF's political revolution and the results of its application in South Vietnam during the American phase of the war.

This thesis charts the U.S. Army's pursuit of counter-insurgency warfare, its application of counter-insurgency programmes in South Vietnam and the reasons for its failure in the following five chapters. The first chapter sets the scene for the Army's pursuit of a counter-insurgency mission, providing crucial historical context. It begins by looking at the negative impact Eisenhower's nuclear strategy had on the Army's resources and how this drove commanders to reverse its effects. Exaggerating the threat posed by communist insurgencies in the developing world, commanders argued the Army could develop the capability to wage counter-insurgency warfare to reverse communist advances. The main goal of this proposed counter-insurgency mission was securing resources and a key role in the Cold War. This chapter elaborates on this point, which establishes that the desire of commanders to restore their importance in national security meant a realistic assessment of the Army's Cold War role never took place.

The second chapter explores the Flexible Response strategy introduced by President Kennedy which reflected his interest in counter-insurgency warfare in the developing

world and granted the wishes of senior Army officers by increasing the importance of the Army and the resources available to it. This chapter details the insurgencies in the developing world, how the U.S. Army and government saw those insurgencies and how those views influenced their initial thoughts on counter-insurgency warfare. The chapter also covers other aspects of Flexible Response and the Army's initial reaction to counter-insurgency warfare as a key mission. This initial reaction was a result of the motivations and attitudes of commanders explained in the first chapter. A combination of wanting to increase the importance of the Army's Cold War role and hubris meant that officers did not appreciate the difficult nature of counter-insurgency. Rather, Army officers approached counter-insurgency as a problem where American resources and ingenuity would triumph if applied with the correct strategy. By understanding the influence of the Cold War on how the Army saw insurgencies in the developing world and how its hubris was an obstacle to a realistic assessment of counter-insurgency, it is possible to understand the counter-insurgency doctrine that emerged.

The third chapter examines the NLF and its revolution in South Vietnam. Any analysis of the shortcomings of the U.S. Army's counter-insurgency efforts in South Vietnam is incomplete without taking the NLF into consideration. Therefore, this chapter rectifies a weakness that has persisted in the historiography by detailing the NLF and its revolution. Understanding the NLF's organisation, how it maintained a hold over rural South Vietnam and the political nature of its revolution is crucial in explaining why the Army's counter-insurgency efforts failed to achieve their objectives.

With the third chapter providing crucial knowledge for a full assessment of U.S. Army counter-insurgency doctrine, the fourth chapter explores the development of counter-insurgency warfare. The fourth chapter details the way in which doctrine was built, with Army officers studying historical examples of counter-insurgency warfare to identify successful concepts. These concepts then became part of the Army's counter-insurgency doctrine. This chapters also explains the influence of the Cold War and how it shaped doctrine, as well as the overconfident mentality which did not consider failure. The strengths and the numerous weaknesses of the Army's approach to counter-insurgency warfare are detailed, and some of the failings that would become apparent during the war are brought to light in the section on the advisers sent to the RVN by Kennedy.

The final chapter of this thesis examines the Army's counter-insurgency doctrine in practice during the American phase of the war in South Vietnam, the problems it encountered and the reasons it ultimately failed. This chapter analyses the inability of the counter-insurgency programmes to change the tide of rural politics. This inability was partly due to issues such as the language barrier and cultural differences which made it difficult for the Americans to gain the trust of the Vietnamese and vice versa. Mainly, it was because the Army's counter-insurgency doctrine was irrelevant in the face of the NLF's political revolution. The conclusion then brings together the points made in each chapter and a final consideration of the Army's counter-insurgency doctrine is undertaken.

The U.S. Army before Kennedy

At a glance, President Eisenhower's national defence policy appears to be a contradiction. Despite having been a military man, he reduced defence spending to strengthen the economy. Reducing defence spending would appear to be uncharacteristic of a President who had had a successful military career. However, Eisenhower's various high-level military positions such as commander of Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) (1943-1945) and Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) (1951-1952) led him to take long-term strategic views. They also led him to develop a suspicion of the self-interest and growing influence of the military and defence industry over policy, which he famously called the 'military-industrial complex' in his farewell speech.

As President, Eisenhower wanted a strategy that was economically viable in the long-term, believing that his predecessor's high defence spending was unsustainable and detrimental to the economic health of the nation. Indeed, he believed that a powerful economy was vital if America was to win the protracted economic, political, social and military struggle that was the Cold War. His strategy, known as 'New Look', utilised America's vast and technologically advanced nuclear arsenal over its conventional forces. The intention behind New Look was to contain the Soviet Union with the threat of nuclear war while reducing the military budget to strengthen America's economy. Nuclear weapons provided the solution for the United States to reduce spending while continuing with its extensive Cold War responsibilities.

The purpose of the New Look strategy was to contain the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) with the threat posed by the nuclear deterrent and to avoid provocations that could initiate a conflict. Consequently, strategic nuclear weapons capable of mass destruction were safeguarded from cuts to the defence budget. The United States Navy (USN) and the United States Air Force (USAF), which were responsible for strategic nuclear arms, became the prominent forces in America's defence. For the U.S. Army, Eisenhower's former branch of service, New Look brought cuts in numbers and equipment and a reduced role in national security. The policy restructured the Army for combat in a nuclear war. To fulfil this purpose, new equipment and tactical nuclear weapons were made available.

A strategy that minimised the Army's mission and resources was never going to be popular with its leadership. Nevertheless, there were changes made that increased New Look's unpopularity. For instance, the 'pentomic' divisional structure was a contentious issue throughout Eisenhower's Presidency. New Look incensed Army commanders for the duration of Eisenhower's term. Consequently, the strategy created an atmosphere of discontent which rendered the Army eager for a change in policy that would increase their resources and provide a prominent role in national security.

The 'New Look' Army

In July 1953, after three years of conflict, a ceasefire was signed ending the Korean War. Finding a satisfactory solution to the war on the Korean Peninsula formed a part of Eisenhower's successful election campaign. Despite the war's significant cost in resources and lives, the peninsula remained divided almost as it had been in 1950.

Eisenhower lacked enthusiasm for such small conflicts on the periphery of America's sphere of influence because he considered them to be minor clashes in the Cold War, which were significant political and economic burdens with little to no gains.¹

Eisenhower's strategy sought to stop major incursions into America's sphere of influence by the Communist-bloc, without having to commit blood and treasure to protracted brushfire wars.

Cuts to the Army were therefore inevitable following the Korean War because Eisenhower did not envisage willingly committing the United States to numerous open-ended limited wars.² Instead, the nuclear arsenals of the USN and USAF would deter aggression that explicitly endangered the national interest.³ The demands of New Look reduced the Army's manpower and altered its structure and equipment.

The Army Adapts to New Look

President Eisenhower first outlined New Look to the public in his 7 January 1954 State of the Union address, where he referred to America's growing economy, the importance of nuclear arms and the necessity for the economical use of available defence resources. The 1955 budget, presented at the end of January, allocated \$31 billion for defence which was a significant decrease from the previous administration's

¹ Steven Metz, Eisenhower as Strategist: The Coherent Use of Military Power in War and Peace (Carlisle, PA, 1993), p. 56.

² Limited war encompasses wars which fell below total mobilisation and nuclear warfare where the goal was destruction of the enemy state. Limited wars had restriction in objectives, the level of political mobilisation, the level of economic mobilisation and in the use of weapons of mass destruction. Consequently, the Army categorised counter-insurgency as a form of limited war.

³ Richard W. Stewart, The United States Army in a Global Era, 1917-2008 (Washington D.C., 2009), pp. 255-256.

budget of \$41.5 billion.⁴ As a result of the 1955 budget, the Army was reduced from 1.5 million personnel and 20 combat divisions in 1953 to 900,000 personnel and 15 combat divisions - many of which were understrength.⁵

Matthew B. Ridgway rose to prominence in the Army during the Second World War as a result of his success in commanding the 82nd Airborne Division and XVIII Airborne Corps. After World War II, Ridgway commanded United Nations forces during the Korean War and succeeded Eisenhower as SACEUR. Ridgway's position as SACEUR ended when Eisenhower appointed him as the Army Chief of Staff in August 1953. During his time as Chief of Staff, Ridgway became a critic of Eisenhower's defence strategy and the impact it had on the Army. He believed that the Army, which bore 76 per cent of the cuts, would struggle to face the threats the USSR posed. Ridgway, remembering his personal experience in dealing with how unprepared the Army was for World War II and Korea, felt that New Look was not reflective of a realistic military assessment.⁶ He contested New Look throughout his time as the Army Chief of Staff, which alienated him from most administration officials. He retired in 1955 having been unable to influence President Eisenhower.⁷

With fewer resources at the Army's disposal, as well as a new purpose, the Army had to make changes to its composition, doctrine and materiel. General Maxwell D. Taylor succeeded Ridgway as the Army Chief of Staff and fought for a new role for the

⁴ Samuel F. Wells, Jr., 'The Origins of Massive Retaliation', Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 96, No. 1 (Spring, 1981), p. 33.

⁵ Stewart, The United States Army in a Global Era, pp. 261-262.

⁶ George Charles Mitchell, Matthew B. Ridgway: Soldier, Statesmen, Scholar, Citizen (Mechanicsburg, PA, 2002), p. 129.

⁷ Donald A. Carter, Forging the Shield: The U.S. Army in Europe, 1951-1962 (Washington D.C., 2015), pp. 208-209.

Army in New Look. The extent of the cuts made many of the Army's leaders feel that they were fighting for the survival of their service. For instance, a July 1956 plan proposed by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Arthur E. Radford, would have seen the Army's strength decreased further. The 'Radford Plan' proposed that the Army should become a force for maintaining order in the United States in the event of a nuclear war with NATO states providing the bulk of conventional forces in Europe.⁸ Radford's plan would have made the Army a shadow of the service that had fought and won the Second World War, and few Army officers welcomed the possibility of further reductions which would have changed the nature of their service. Many, such as Taylor, fought to protect the integrity of the Army.

Taylor walked a fine line between safeguarding the existence of the Army and adapting it to the defence requirements of the Eisenhower administration. As a result of the reduction in manpower, the Army had to restructure to ensure it could operate with fewer numbers. In the autumn of 1954, the Army published the 'Atomic Field Army' (ATFA) study, which tested alternative compositions for its divisions. The ATFA resulted in a new divisional structure known as the 'pentomic division'. Taylor's aims with the pentomic division were threefold. The first was to conserve as much combat power as possible with fewer people. The second was to allow the Army to wage nuclear warfare, and the third was to maintain an ability to engage in limited war within Eisenhower's budget constraints.⁹ The pentomic division discarded the previous triangular format with each division now containing five battle groups.

⁸ Ibid, p. 253.

⁹ John B. Wilson, Maneuver and Firepower: The Evolution of Divisions and Separate Brigades (Washington D.C., 1998), p. 279.

The changes to the divisions were primarily implemented to allow the U.S. Army to operate successfully on a nuclear battlefield. The infantry and airborne divisions were reduced from approximately 18,804 to 13,748 and 17,490 to 11,486 respectively.¹⁰ The smaller size of the divisions and the increase in subordinate units with the five battle groups allowed units to disperse over a wider area, which reduced vulnerability to nuclear strikes. New equipment, namely the M113 armoured personnel carrier (APC), would provide the divisions with excellent mobility. Taylor argued that this mobility would give divisions the ability to assemble rapidly and exploit gaps created by tactical nuclear strikes.¹¹

The Army continued to invest in its missile programmes as a way to guarantee research funds. However, its missile programmes clashed with those of the Navy and the Air Force, which created friction between the services. Despite protests from the Navy and Air Force, the Army was allowed to continue to develop and possess missiles after intervention by Secretary of Defence Charles Erwin Wilson. In a November 1956 memorandum, Wilson allowed the Army responsibility for surface-to-surface missiles with a maximum range of 200 miles. However, Wilson made one exception and let the Army continue with the intermediate range Jupiter missile. Also, Wilson's memorandum authorised the expansion of the Army's anti-aircraft defences by giving it responsibility for missiles with a maximum range of 100 miles.¹² Consequently, the Army gained a strategic role in the anti-aircraft defence of the United States. By investing in missile technology, the Army continued to receive research funding and helped secure its existence under New Look.

¹⁰ Carter, *Forging the Shield*, p. 258.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 258.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 255.

New Look's Unpopularity with the Army

Taylor had managed to safeguard the existence of the Army, but his reforms did not roll back New Look's changes. Commanders bemoaned issues such as the reliance on atomic firepower or the cumbersome pentomic divisions, which they felt impeded the Army's ability to defend the national interest. The pentomic division was a source of constant complaint by the Army's officer corps. For instance, during exercises, the division with its five groups and specialist attachments proved to be too difficult for commanders to control effectively.¹³ Another outcome of the bloated structure of the pentomic division was that tailoring them to specific situations became a difficult and time-consuming task.¹⁴ Despite Taylor's intentions, the New Look strategy and capability to fight in a nuclear war trumped flexibility for other purposes.

Officers, seeking the end of New Look, began exaggerating the threat posed by limited wars on the periphery of America's sphere of influence. One of these officers was James M. Gavin, who rose to fame with his exploits in the 82nd Airborne Division during the Second World War. In his book, *War and Peace in the Space Age* (1958), he argued that the Communist-bloc would never fight in ways favourable to American strengths. Gavin stated that the inflexibility of the Army had allowed the defeat of the French in Indochina because it did not possess the ability to intervene in such a conflict. He asserted that if the United States maintained New Look and refused to contemplate

¹³ A. J. Bacevich, The Pentomic Era: The US Army Between Korea and Vietnam (Washington D.C., 1986), p. 134.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 134-135.

plans for other contingencies then it would be ‘nibbled to death’.¹⁵ Ridgway also railed against the cuts introduced by New Look in his memoirs. He warned that the Communist-bloc would not cease in its efforts to expand its influence and that the best force to halt that expansion was a well-funded and flexible U.S. Army.¹⁶

Army officers also attacked New Look’s assumptions on nuclear warfare. Commanders were sceptical about the feasibility of nuclear warfare or that it was even possible to operate in a nuclear war environment. For example, Lieutenant Colonel Arthur W. Millberg wrote in a 1959 *Army* article that New Look left many questions about nuclear warfare with ‘vague or no answers’. Lieutenant General Arthur S. Collins Jr. agreed, stating that the Army failed to specify how tactical nuclear weapons would work on the battlefield. Indeed, Collins was shocked when nobody considered the damage tactical nuclear weapons would cause. He recalled a discussion about a hypothetical battle in an area between Munich and Stuttgart. Collins, remembering the damage at Hiroshima, asked what the destruction in the area would be like after firing more powerful tactical nuclear munitions. Nobody could answer his question.¹⁷

Taylor, like Ridgway, resented the reductions New Look brought upon the Army. He argued that it was inevitable that the United States would be forced to commit itself to a limited war and tried to influence the pentomic structure for non-nuclear contingencies.¹⁸ However, his efforts were in vain as nuclear war was the central factor

¹⁵ James M. Gavin, War and Peace in the Space Age (New York, 1958), pp. 126-128.

¹⁶ Matthew B. Ridgway, SOLDIER: The Memoirs of Matthew B. Ridgway (New York, 1956), pp. 290-292.

¹⁷ Bacevich, The Pentomic Era: The US Army Between Korea and Vietnam, p. 133.

¹⁸ Robert T. Davis, Challenge of Adaptation: The U.S. Army in the Aftermath of Conflict, 1953-2000 (Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2008), pp. 24-25.

in the design of the pentomic structure. By the late 1950s, following criticisms from people such as then Senator John F. Kennedy, others in government and the Army argued with increasing confidence that the United States should develop the capability to fight limited wars.

Kennedy and the Alternative to New Look

By the end of the 1950s, Kennedy had built his credentials as a contender for the Presidency. An essential aspect of this was his concern over the Cold War, which he claimed that the Eisenhower administration was losing. Indeed, one of Kennedy's most effective criticisms was his claim that the Soviet Union had gained an advantage in nuclear missile technology, as demonstrated by the launch of the Soviet Sputnik satellite in 1957. However, his claim did not reflect reality and the USSR possessed no such advantage. Nevertheless, as a result of these efforts, Kennedy built an image of himself as a 'Cold Warrior', promising a tougher stance against the USSR. He criticised Eisenhower's New Look strategy as having allowed the Soviet Union to gain the upper hand in the Cold War. As a young 'Cold Warrior', Kennedy put forward an alternative policy that tapped into an America that felt increasingly unsure about its role in the world as well as its abilities to prosecute that role successfully.

New Look came under scrutiny from some Democrats soon after its introduction. Kennedy was one of the first to attack New Look's impact on the Army, arguing that its reduction in strength would invite aggression in Indochina.¹⁹ As the 1950s drew to a

¹⁹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House (New York, 2002), p. 310.

close, a consensus had developed among Democrats that the successor to New Look would rebuild America's conventional forces for the purpose of opposing a wider range of threats.²⁰ Taylor, once he had retired from military service, published a book detailing his criticisms of New Look and outlining a successor strategy he called Flexible Response. Taylor described Flexible Response as 'a capability to react across the entire spectrum of challenge', which included everything from limited war to nuclear warfare.²¹ Taylor's Flexible Response provided the alternative to New Look that Kennedy sought.

The developing world, which largely comprised states that had been colonial possessions of European empires, became an increasingly important area of Cold War contention in the 1950s. Some Democrats and other interested people, recognising the minimal attention New Look gave to the developing world, attacked the administration over this alleged 'weakness'. Walt W. Rostow, a prominent economic theorist and later adviser to the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, saw post-colonial states as an important arena in the Cold War and argued for active American involvement.²² At the forefront of such thinking were situations in Laos and Latin America, which suffered from fragile economic, political and social structures that allowed Communist-bloc sponsored guerrillas to pose a significant threat to these states. Kennedy, and those who would form his close circle of advisers, were confident that under their leadership the

²⁰ Lawrence Freedman, Kennedy's Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos and Vietnam (New York, 2000), p. 19.

²¹ Maxwell D. Taylor, The Uncertain Trumpet (New York, 1960), p. 6.

²² David Milne, "'Our Equivalent of Guerrilla Warfare': Walt Rostow and the Bombing of North Vietnam, 1961-1968', The Journal of Military History, Vol. 71, No. 1, (Jan, 2007), p. 170.

United States and its considerable resources could reverse Communist-bloc advances in the developing world.²³

Rostow became an influential adviser in Kennedy's administration. Kennedy first met Rostow in 1958, when the latter was a professor of economic history at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). At this point, Kennedy was seriously considering running for the Presidency, and Rostow pledged his support. He provided Kennedy with intellectual backing on an array of topics along with popular campaign slogans.²⁴ Kennedy was intrigued by Rostow's economic development theories, as they aligned with his ambitions for the developing world and fit the technical 'problem-solution' style of his administration.²⁵

Formulating the Army's New Role

The Army would have a significant role to play in a Kennedy administration. The administration believed that, with the correct training and resources, the Army could successfully resolve limited conflicts. Taylor was not the only Army commander who argued for a new national security policy in which the service could play a broader role. Ridgway and Gavin also published similar arguments. Ridgway used his memoirs as an opportunity to elaborate on the role he felt the Army should play. He complained that the higher levels of government displayed a 'woeful lack of comprehension' of the

²³ The early 1960s were a peak of American confidence in their role in the world as defenders against communism. Government and military officials believed they could solve almost any problem. David Halberstam, in his book, The Best and the Brightest (1972), criticised these 'whiz kids' for their role in American escalation.

²⁴ Lloyd Gardener, 'Walt Whitman Rostow: Hawkeyed Optimist', in Anna Kasten Nelson, ed, The Policy Makers: Shaping American Foreign Policy from 1947 to the Present (Lanham, MD, 2009), p. 62.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 62.

purpose of the Army in national defence.²⁶ He argued that the Army should have the ability to oppose limited wars emerging from the periphery of the Communist-bloc, such as in Indochina.²⁷ Ridgway envisaged the Army using its airborne forces as rapidly deployable ‘fire brigades’ to combat limited wars.²⁸

Gavin, who had worked with Ridgway in the Airborne during World War II, put forth his views on the Army’s future in his book *War and Peace in the Space Age*, explaining his thoughts on the future of warfare, based on his personal experiences and events in Korea and Indochina. He concluded that only a military capable of responding to threats below the nuclear threshold provided a credible deterrent.²⁹ In other words, a military possessing a wider range of capabilities would force the Communist-bloc to think carefully before engaging in any act of aggression. He envisaged an Army using tactical nuclear weapons and air mobility to allow it to respond to different kinds of limited war, including counter-insurgency, almost anywhere in the world. He felt that abandoning limited war surrendered the initiative to the Soviets, and he argued that his proposals would return the initiative to the United States.³⁰

Conclusion

New Look had a significant impact on the U.S. Army, and at one point seemed poised to threaten its existence as a major part of the military. A small force on the eve

²⁶ Matthew B. Ridgway, *SOLDIER: The Memoirs of Matthew B. Ridgway* (New York, 1956), p. 311.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

²⁹ James M. Gavin, *War and Peace in the Space Age* (New York, 1958), pp. 206-211.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 288-289.

of the Second World War, the Army became a large, well-equipped and highly funded organisation which played a key role in the defeat of the fascist powers in 1945. The Army and its officers won great prestige for their role in defeating fascism, and the threat of the Soviet Union seemed to imply that this would continue. However, the rise of nuclear weapons, Eisenhower's desire to avoid costly entanglements like the Korean War and economic concerns resulted in the introduction of New Look. It in turn led to a reduction in the Army's size, its budget and its role. No longer was it the force it had been during the Second World War. The Army's importance, as well as the importance of its officers, had been greatly curtailed.

Army commanders, attempting to resist New Look, seized upon the spread of communism in the developing world and argued that their service could answer such a threat, thereby restoring its importance. Kennedy, with election to the White House as his goal, used the spectre of Soviet missiles and involvement in the developing world to claim Eisenhower was losing the Cold War. Kennedy's answer was Taylor's Flexible Response, which would bolster American defence and use the Army to halt Soviet incursions in the developing world. The Army was happy to oblige, given that it meant a prominent role in national security and increases in the resources at its disposal.

The Army's overall reaction to Flexible Response was positive for obvious reasons. Not only did the new strategy propose to restore the Army to a prominent position in national security, but it also expanded its numbers and resources. Flexible Response guaranteed the survival of the Army as a significant part of the defence establishment and a bigger force provided more opportunities for career advancement. However,

there was a significant problem with the idea of using the Army to defeat insurgencies in the developing world, since the Army was a military force designed to fight a major war against industrialised enemies. It lacked the organisation, resources and expertise to battle insurgencies, which often had deep political, economic and social roots.

The Army's commanders failed to grasp the complexities of counter-insurgency warfare and the burden brought by the increased responsibilities of Flexible Response. The overriding concern was to end the reduced role of the Army, and Flexible Response provided a solution, securing the support of senior officers. These senior officers, who had fought and won the Second World War, were confident in their abilities and in America's vast and technologically advanced resources. After all, a group of several thousand guerrillas seemed to pale in comparison to the might of Germany and Japan during the Second World War. The American 'can-do' attitude and technological edge would overcome inexperience in counter-insurgency warfare.

The reason for the Army's enthusiasm for Flexible Response was clear. The new strategy proposed to restore the Army to a prominent role in the Cold War and the increased funding that came with that, but senior commanders' lack of appreciation for the difficulty of counter-insurgency warfare was a grave oversight. The desire of Army officers for restoring the Army's pride, resources and role in defence trumped a serious analysis of national security concerns and the capabilities of their service. This set the Army on a path that would lead it to taking on the key role in the Vietnam War, but this would not be a moment of triumph. However, before that intervention, the Army had to adapt to the requirements of Flexible Response and its counter-insurgency component.

Kennedy and Flexible Response

Senator Kennedy, following a trip to French Indochina and a meeting with Jawaharlal Nehru in Delhi, concluded that U.S. policy towards emerging nations needed to change. Nehru, citing French efforts to suppress the Viet Minh, told Kennedy that communism offered the people a future worth struggling for, while what France presented differed little than what had existed before. The experience convinced Kennedy that the United States should foster positive relations with developing nations.¹ Throughout the 1950s, Kennedy criticised Eisenhower's reluctance to become involved in the anti-communist struggle in these emerging states. By the early 1960s, growing crises in places such as Laos fuelled the concerns of military and government officials over the stability of these non-communist states. Kennedy and others such as Maxwell Taylor were confident that with the correct ideas, training and equipment, the U.S. Army could roll back communist advances in these areas.

Maxwell Taylor's proposal, Flexible Response, which envisaged an adaptable military that could tackle problems across the spectrum of war, was selected as the answer to the spread of communism in the developing world. It made substantial alterations to American Cold War strategy and to the U.S. Army. The Army underwent fundamental changes to develop capabilities to conduct limited wars with the introduction of counter-insurgency programmes, new division types, and advanced technologies such as the helicopter. Flexible Response placed high demands upon the Army by giving it a range of responsibilities, like counter-insurgency, which were

¹ Fredrik Logevall, Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam (New York, 2012), pp. 286-287.

inherently complex. In addition, the adoption of the ROAD (Reorganisation Objective Army Division) structure meant the U.S. Army became a flexible organisation. The ROAD changes gave divisions a common base, to which commanders would assign a varying number of battalions as the circumstances dictated. ROAD gave the Army the ability to create forces suited to various scenarios with relative ease. With these changes and additions, it was believed that the U.S. Army would be able to successfully prosecute counter-insurgency missions in emerging states as well as other Cold War contingencies.

The arrival of Flexible Response was a relief to Army officers, returning their service to a central role in the Cold War and providing it with new technologies and increased resources. Acceptance of Flexible Response was based primarily on its benefits, which meant that there was little questioning of the ability of the Army to undertake its new responsibilities effectively. The Army's culture of self-confidence and problem solving meant that counter-insurgency was approached as another issue to remedy. As a new mission, counter-insurgency created debate within the Army, specifically on the counter-insurgency methods that should be included in doctrine. The general reaction evident from the discourse during the implementation of Flexible Response and counter-insurgency was one of self-confident hubris. Failure was not considered and success was assumed.

Laos and Latin America

By 1960, crises in the developing world were drawing serious attention from the U.S. government and driving calls from political and military figures that the Army should be ready for limited war. Eisenhower, following the Korean War, was hesitant about U.S. involvement in limited wars, believing they would be costly affairs, with questionable chances of success. Indeed, it was with this scepticism that Eisenhower rejected unilateral intervention to save the French from defeat at Dien Bien Phu.²

Thomas G. Paterson describes Kennedy and some of his key advisers, such as Maxwell Taylor, as members of the 'containment generation', a group that saw victory in the Second World War and the successes and failures of the early Cold War. The lessons the 'containment generation' learned from those events was that communism thrived in poverty-stricken states, that insurgencies were usually communist inspired, and that the United States had a duty to act as a global counter-force.³ Kennedy, citing events like the rise of Fidel Castro and war in Indochina, accused the Eisenhower administration of abandoning the fight in the developing world.⁴ Kennedy and his team claimed they would restore American prestige in what they saw as a vital theatre of the Cold War.

Laos

² Ibid, p. 508.

³ Thomas G. Paterson, 'Introduction: John F. Kennedy's Quest for Victory and Global Crisis', in Thomas G. Paterson, ed, Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961-1963 (New York, 1989), pp. 9-10.

⁴ Ibid, pp. 11-12.

Once part of the French Empire in Indochina, Laos gained independence alongside Cambodia and the two Vietnams at the 1954 Geneva Conference. Its post-colonial life proved challenging as the communist Pathet Lao guerrillas grew in strength, emerging as a significant obstacle to government authority. By the late 1950s, the situation in Laos had deteriorated, and the growing crisis began to dominate the foreign policy concerns of Eisenhower and then Kennedy. Before his inauguration, Kennedy met with Eisenhower, who described Laos ‘with considerable emotion’ as the key to Southeast Asia. Eisenhower feared that a Pathet Lao victory in Laos would expose the region and result in the collapse of the non-communist position. In contrast to his traditional scepticism, Eisenhower stated that the U.S. should intervene if Laos were to fall, unilaterally if necessary.⁵ The situation in Laos presented Kennedy with a challenging mix of social, economic, political and military problems.

Facing reluctance from members of the Southeast Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and a Laotian government that appeared unenthusiastic to fight, Kennedy’s administration prepared reports considering all possible measures to be taken to save Laos from collapse, including unilateral military intervention. Debates among Kennedy and his advisers, as well as reports on the declining situation in Laos, revealed the difficulty of a military solution.

Alongside the obvious logistical problems of sending forces to a rugged and landlocked country, a report by then Assistant Secretary of Defence for International Security Affairs Paul Nitze outlined the challenge U.S. forces would face. Nitze’s

⁵ Memorandum of Conference on January 19, 1961 between President Eisenhower and President-Elect Kennedy on the Subject of Laos, The Pentagon Papers, Gravel edition, Vol. II, (Boston, 1972), pp. 635-637.

report stated that the introduction of American units would be ‘highly disadvantageous’ given the ‘guerrilla type of warfare’ the Pathet Lao and Democratic Republic of Vietnam⁶ (DRV) would employ. Nitze then emphasised this point further by stating that ‘jungle guerrilla type war’ would be too difficult for the highly-structured U.S. military to undertake. Nitze concluded that the military’s inability to fight guerrillas in challenging terrain and the lack of international support made military intervention an unrealistic proposal.⁷

Kennedy opted for the neutralisation of Laos, instead of deploying military forces to destroy the Pathet Lao and bring the country firmly into the American camp. The political situation, climate, terrain and position of Laos made it one of the least favourable places for direct U.S. military intervention.⁸ The proximity of Laos to the DRV and China, as well as Soviet involvement, meant that these powers could always match additional American efforts. In addition, the presence of DRV forces and the concerns of the USSR and China, which shared a border with Laos, provided a real possibility of the situation escalating into a major war.⁹

Kennedy was aware of the problems posed by the complex situation in Laos. He preferred to approach international politics with a range of potential solutions at his disposal. Consequently, Flexible Response suited Kennedy because it provided options

⁶ The official name of North Vietnam.

⁷ Document 10. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (Nitze) to Secretary of Defense McNamara, Washington, January 23, 1961, FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XXIV, pp. 26-40.

⁸ Document 75. Memorandum From Secretary of Defense McNamara and the Deputy Secretary of Defense (Gilpatric) to President Kennedy, Washington, May 2, 1961, FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XXIV, pp. 166-169.

⁹ Freedman, Kennedy’s Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam, p. 298.

for any scenario across the spectrum of war. As Lawrence Freedman states, Kennedy's desire for military preparedness did not reflect a predisposition towards military action. Rather, he wanted the United States to be a credible deterrent for multiple military contingencies, which would provide a basis for negotiation.¹⁰ The U.S. Army's inability to conduct counter-insurgency operations denied Kennedy an option.

Latin America

The nations of Latin America, such as Venezuela and Cuba, became an important battleground in the Cold War. The poverty of these states and the oppressive regimes that governed many of them made these nations susceptible to communist subversion. Eisenhower's Latin American policy helped to stimulate pro-communist opposition in the area. Issued in 1953, the 'United States Objectives and Courses of Action with Respect to Latin America', stated that the overriding concern was to establish unity in opposing communism. This policy made it inevitable that American support would be given to dictators facing strong communist political parties or insurgencies, which helped to generate support for communist groups and created resentment towards the United States.¹¹ For instance, the Eisenhower administration, citing its 'non-intervention' policy in the domestic affairs of Latin American states, declined requests from U.S. citizens to take action on behalf of political prisoners in Venezuela.¹² The unpopularity of U.S. actions became apparent when Vice President Richard M. Nixon

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 33.

¹¹ Stephen G. Rabe, Eisenhower and Latin America: The Foreign Policy of Anticommunism (Chapel Hill, NC, 1988), p. 26.

¹² Ibid, p. 39.

toured Latin America in May 1958 and faced hostile crowds in many of his destinations.¹³

The policies of previous U.S. governments towards Cuba played a part in fuelling the revolution that ousted Fulgencio Batista. Situated close to Florida, Cuba had been under substantial American influence for much of the 20th Century. However, in January 1959, the U.S. position in Cuba began a swift decline as revolutionaries led by Fidel Castro seized power in the capital of Havana, having defeated Batista's forces. American companies had dominated Cuba's economy for a considerable number of years with sugar manufacturing being a vital industry. As William M. Leogrande and Julie M. Thomas note in their examination of Cuba's efforts at economic independence, that the overthrow of the American economic presence was one of the factors which motivated them.¹⁴ Rather than attempt to alter American support and relations with Cuba, the administration's policy resulted in the delivery of arms and advisers to Batista's forces.

In an article for the *Military Review*, the U.S. Army's professional journal, political scientist John B. McConaughy identified two factors behind Castro's success. McConaughy warned his readership of military and government officials that the replication of these two factors by communist groups throughout Latin America was highly probable. The first key factor was the successful use of guerrilla warfare. Castro's revolutionaries numbered no more than a few thousand guerrillas. However, this relatively small force evolved from a band of fighters into a movement that

¹³ Ibid, p. 102.

¹⁴ William M. Leogrande & Julie M. Thomas, 'Cuba's Quest for Economic Independence', Journal of Latin American Studies, Vol. 34, No. 2, (May, 2002), p. 326.

overcame a larger and better-equipped army. Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara, who trained the revolutionaries in guerrilla warfare based on the Chinese model, helped Castro defeat the forces of Batista. McConaughy commented that he expected the use of similar guerrilla tactics in other parts of Latin America.¹⁵

The second factor was the promise of Castro to improve the social and economic conditions of the Cuban people. In a speech at a Democratic Party dinner in Cincinnati, Ohio, on 6 October 1960, Kennedy spoke on the Cuban Revolution, highlighting the importance of the non-military dimensions of counter-insurgency. Kennedy’s speech criticised the actions of Eisenhower’s administration, arguing that its one-sided policies contributed to Castro’s victory. Kennedy used the speech as an opportunity to touch on what his approach would have been. ‘Nearly all of our aid’, he asserted, ‘was in the form of weapons assistance’ which ‘failed to advance the economic welfare of the Cuban people’.¹⁶ In other words, counter-insurgency programmes had to consist of aid aimed at improving people’s lives in concert with a military component to ensure the defeat of guerrilla forces.

Flexible Response

On 25 May 1961, President Kennedy addressed members of Congress with a speech on ‘urgent national needs’. He outlined the threats facing the United States and asked Congress to authorise the necessary funding for the programmes that would, among

¹⁵ John B. McConaughy, ‘Latin America: Soviet Target’, *Military Review*, Vol. XLI, No. 10, (October, 1961), p. 44.

¹⁶ John F. Kennedy Speeches, Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy at Democratic Dinner, Cincinnati, Ohio, October 6, 1960, JFKLM, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/JFK-Speeches/Cincinnati-OH_19601006-Democratic-Dinner.aspx>

other things, stop the ‘adversaries of freedom’ seeking to capture the nationalist tide sweeping the developing world and using guerrilla warfare to further their aggression.¹⁷ He made the case to Congress for what he called the ‘Military Assistance Program’, which would furnish American advisers and arms to emerging states battling pro-communist insurgencies. Equipment and advice had to be ‘tailored to local conditions’ and dependent on ‘social, political and military reforms essential to internal respect and stability’. Furthermore, only when local forces lacked the ability to win would military intervention be considered. Kennedy concluded his speech by stating that the programme could ‘in addition to its military purposes, make a contribution to economic progress, as do our own Army Engineers’.¹⁸

Flexible Response went beyond modifying the U.S. Army for counter-insurgency in the emerging world. The purpose of Flexible Response was to give Kennedy the possibility to respond with a force relative to the threat the United States faced. Therefore, the Army underwent a substantial doctrinal and technological transformation. The ‘urgent national needs’ listed by Kennedy in his address to Congress followed the logic of Flexible Response, listing programmes of military development that varied from the nuclear deterrent to limited war. Indeed, the speech included a strengthening of the NATO and SEATO alliances and the commitment of nuclear Polaris-armed submarines to NATO command. Moreover, the flexible ROAD structure which Kennedy authorised the U.S. Army to reorganise to, was to allow it to operate in a wide range of scenarios, not just counter-insurgency.

¹⁷ Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Papers, President’s Office Files, Speech Files, ‘Special message to Congress on urgent national needs’, 25 May 1961, JFKLM, <<https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKPOF-034-030.aspx>>

¹⁸ Ibid.

Following the introduction of Flexible Response, the U.S. Army updated its field manuals to reflect the changes. The field manual which explained the Army's overall doctrine was *FM 100-5 Field Service Regulations: Operations* (1962). The manual emphasised that the aim of American policy was deterrence, but warned that it should be prepared to act at any point on the 'spectrum of war'. The Army described the beginning of the spectrum of war as 'cold war' in which 'the application of national power short of military force is applied'. The centre of the spectrum was where limited war resided and represented the 'wide range of conflicts between cold war and general war'. At the end of the spectrum was general war, which the U.S. Army defined as 'the unrestricted application of military force'.¹⁹

While 'cold war' did not envisage the mass use of military power, the Army believed that the mobilisation and movement of divisions could influence an opposing state into a favourable course of action. The defining aspect of limited war was that the conflict was restricted in one or more ways, for instance, in location, intensity or scope. The Army described limited war as representing 'a wide range of armed conflicts among which are those commonly called local aggressions, conventional war, or limited nuclear war'. General war was the option of last resort when cold war or limited war were unable to achieve national objectives. General war was the unrestricted use of arms, including nuclear strikes on the national territory of the enemy state and its allies.²⁰

¹⁹ DAFM, *FM 100-5 Field Service Regulations Operations* (Washington D.C., 1962), pp. 4-5.

²⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 5-6.

FM 100-5 described the threats that the United States faced as ‘broad and diverse’. The Army had to be able to deter aggression ‘at any level’, in whatever form it occurred, wherever it took place and to support the military and non-military programmes of the government and its allies.²¹ Under Flexible Response, the U.S. Army underwent modernisation in materiel and gained a doctrine that allowed it to operate across the spectrum of war, expanding its responsibilities. Under New Look, the Army was focused on nuclear war. With Flexible Response, the Army was expected to undertake nuclear war, general war and the multitude of conflicts that defined limited war. The U.S. Army was to be more than a fighting force. It was to aid the social, economic and political defeat of communist insurgencies challenging the survival of friendly governments.

Counter-Insurgency

The basis of U.S. Army counter-insurgency strategy was to assist friendly states with materiel and advice directed by a civilian and military team based at the U.S. embassy. American efforts were to use local forces as much as possible. The Army was expected to provide material aid, soldiers and expertise that would help the local government to become effective, allowing it to eradicate the insurgency. However, the Army’s counter-insurgency doctrine assumed that the problems with the states that they would be assisting were superficial in nature. For instance, examples in doctrine focused on improvements to transport links or access to basic healthcare, neither of which drove revolutions with deep-rooted political, economic and social causes.

²¹ Ibid, pp. 6-7.

Kennedy established the Special Group (Counterinsurgency) by issuing NSAM (National Security Action Memorandum) 124 in January 1962. The Special Group was created to formulate counter-insurgency strategies and activities, representing interest at the highest levels of the American military and government, composed of officials such as the President's military representative, the Deputy Secretary of Defence, the Chairman of the JCS and the Administrator of AID (Agency for International Development). NSAM 124 stipulated that the Special Group was to 'assure unity of effort and the use of all available resources with maximum effectiveness in preventing and resisting subversive insurgency and related forms of indirect aggression in friendly countries'.²²

As part of its objectives, the Special Group was instructed to ensure that counter-insurgency was 'reflected in the organization, training, equipment and doctrine of the U.S. Armed Forces and other U.S. agencies abroad...particular attention will be paid the special training of personnel prior to assignment to MAAG's and Embassy staffs in countries where counter-insurgency problems exist or may arise'.²³ The U.S. Army formed a major part of the military response to counter-insurgency, which was a component of a joint programme with civilian agencies that aimed to combat social, political and economic issues that undermined the effectiveness of local governments. However, local governments were expected to take the lead in counter-insurgency efforts. Indeed, it was felt that American leadership could be detrimental to the counter-

²² Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Papers, National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda, NSAM 124, Jan-Feb 1962, JFKLM, <<https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKNSF-333-016.aspx>>

²³ Ibid.

insurgency effort.²⁴ However, the Special Group's concerns about the local governments did not extend to their viability or legitimacy. Even the stipulation that the local government should take the leading role in counter-insurgency efforts would be cast aside as American involvement in the RVN deepened.

By the time of the establishment of the Special Group, the U.S. Army had already embarked on the implementation of counter-insurgency into its doctrine and the training and creation of forces required for its execution. For instance, the Special Forces were expanded and given counter-insurgency instruction. In addition, counter-insurgency training was also provided to personnel serving in MAAGs and as military attachés.²⁵ The Special Group argued for broader preparation for counter-insurgency, creating a subcommittee to determine further initiatives. Subcommittee suggestions resulted in further civic action training and the creation of courses on the history and theory of counter-insurgency.²⁶

The Reaction to Flexible Response

The wide-ranging changes introduced by Flexible Response and the Army's adaptation to them generated a strong discourse within Army circles, largely on the nuances of the alterations the new security strategy was bringing. Counter-insurgency did not dominate discourse within the Army, which is not surprising as commanders had other military contingencies for which to prepare. These varied contingencies are

²⁴ Walt W. Rostow, *View from the 7th Floor* (New York, 1964), p. 117.

²⁵ Jeffrey H. Michaels, 'Managing Global Counterinsurgency: The Special Group (CI) 1962-1966', *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 1, (February, 2012), p. 47.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

evident in the articles in the U.S. Army's journal, the *Military Review*. What is also evident in these articles are the confident attitudes held by junior and senior officers towards their new responsibilities under Flexible Response, particularly with counter-insurgency. Articles dealing with counter-insurgency display certainty that the Army would succeed in any such action. Officers expected success, they did not consider failure or the idea that counter-insurgency was beyond the Army's capabilities.

U.S. Army culture bred a 'can-do' attitude among its soldiers and officers regarding problem solving. Indeed, a well-known quote within the American military community, alleged to have been said by a Soviet general, states that it is 'impossible to plan against the Americans because they don't follow their own doctrine'.²⁷ While this quote relates to a potential Cold War clash with the Soviets in Central Europe, given its popularity within the American military, it is indicative of how the Army viewed itself. The Army saw itself as a formidable and adaptable force able to forge solutions to difficult problems at short notice, in other words, a force with a 'cultural imperative that prizes solutions above all else'.²⁸ Therefore, Army officers approached counter-insurgency with this attitude.

Military Review

The May 1960 issue of the *Military Review* describes the journal as a 'forum for articles which stimulate military thinking'.²⁹ It is the professional journal of the U.S. Army and has served as its platform for discourse since 1922. The journal welcomes

²⁷ Thomas E. Hanson in Aaron P. Jackson, *The Roots of Military Doctrine: Change and Continuity in Understanding the Practice of Warfare* (Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2013), p. iii.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. iii.

²⁹ Kenneth E. Lay, 'Mission', *Military Review*, Vol. XL, No. 2, (May, 1960), p. 1.

articles on all types of warfare and issues connected to it. Furthermore, pieces from foreign contributors are included to provide views from an outside perspective. Therefore, as the main forum for debate for the Army, issues of the *Military Review* were an important stage where the specifics of Flexible Response and counter-insurgency were confidently formulated by junior and senior commanders.

There had been a handful of pieces dealing with counter-insurgency published in the *Military Review* during the 1950s. With the inclusion of counter-insurgency into doctrine in 1961, the number of articles discussing counter-insurgency and other parts of Flexible Response increased. In January 1960, the same month Kennedy began his campaign to secure the Democratic primary, then Lieutenant Colonel George B. Jordan of the Army's infantry forces wrote an article for the *Military Review* discussing counter-insurgency. The main thrust of Jordan's article agreed with Kennedy's position. Jordan's point was that, given the increasing possibility that the U.S. would be engaging guerrillas in the near future, the Army had to enact the necessary measures to face the threat.³⁰ Jordan's piece was written to educate fellow officers on guerrilla movements and, citing recent events such as Cuba, to 'acknowledge the serious threat' that they posed to America and its allies.³¹ Jordan's advice, Kennedy's election and the Army's involvement in the RVN increased the number of counter-insurgency articles as the Army attempted to develop a cohesive theory.

As part of its efforts to educate officers on guerrilla fighters and insurgencies, the Army made available resources listing accessible reading materials. For instance, the

³⁰ George B. Jordan, 'Objectives and Methods of Communist Guerrilla Warfare', *Military Review*, Vol. XXXIX, No. 10, (January, 1960), pp. 51-52.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 58.

November 1961 edition of the *Military Review* included an annotated bibliography on counter-insurgency and guerrillas. The listings in the bibliography were recommended by Virgil Ney, who had retired from the Army as a colonel in 1957. Ney joined the U.S. Army in 1926, and his experience included a period as a historian on Douglas MacArthur's staff during World War II as well as involvement in anti-guerrilla operations during the Korean War.

After retirement from the military, Ney remained active in the defence community as a civilian and published a study on guerrillas titled *Notes on Guerrilla Warfare: Principles and Practices* (1961). The reason for the inclusion of the bibliography was the 'continuing interest' of military officials, which required an annotated bibliography of readily available items on a now crucial topic. Indeed, the bibliography formed part of a wider effort to educate Army personnel on guerrilla warfare and counter-insurgency, with other organisations such as the U.S. Army Artillery and Missile School Library publishing its own annotated bibliography.³²

Albert L. Fisher, who in 1963 was an academic and an officer in the United States Naval Reserve, contributed an article to the *Military Review* evaluating the success of the NLF and possible methods to defeat them. In the opening sentence, Fisher directly articulates his ideas concerning the main problem with American and South Vietnamese efforts. He asserts that 'Traditional military tactics employing conventional weapons and large numbers of men who spend most of their time in fixed positions is unsuited

³² 'Guerrilla Warfare: Annotated Bibliography', *Military Review*, Vol. XLI, No. 11, (November, 1961), p. 97.

for counterinsurgency operations.³³ Fisher's answer to his perception of the problem was, in short, to use the tactics of the NLF. He argued that small units, highly motivated, operating in enemy territory employing guerrilla warfare and living in villages helping the peasants, would break the links between the NLF and the peasantry.³⁴

In the same issue of the *Military Review* in which Fisher's piece appeared, an article by then Major L. G. Clark of the Australian Army on seizing the initiative from guerrilla forces was included. One of the fundamental problems when facing guerrillas, according to Clark, was their ability to dictate attacks. Clark proposed greater use of airborne units, which he believed would take the initiative from guerrilla forces. Clark recognised the speed, range and ability of airborne formations to deploy almost anywhere without the use of roads, which would allow friendly forces to strike quickly and accurately.³⁵ The use of airborne forces would allow for faster detection of guerrillas and swift responses to their presence, possibly sealing their escape routes and resulting in their destruction.³⁶ Clark also noted that helicopters would become more prominent in South Vietnam due to the fact they could land anywhere and that the soldiers they carried did not require, unlike parachutists jumping from a fast moving plane, extensive training to embark and disembark.³⁷

³³ Albert L. Fisher, 'To Beat the Guerrillas at their Own Game', *Military Review*, Vol. XLIII, No. 12, (December, 1963), p. 81.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86.

³⁵ L. G. Clark, 'Seizing the Initiative in Counter-Guerrilla Operations', *Military Review*, Vol. XLIII, No. 12, (December, 1963), pp. 87-88.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

Conclusion

From 1961 until the arrival of USMC forces at Da Nang in 1965, the articles in the *Military Review* reflected the Army's self-assured hubris in its ability to undertake any challenge successfully. Having spent much of the 1950s advocating for more funding and a greater role in national security, junior and senior officers started down the self-made path to disaster in the Vietnam War by arguing that they could answer the challenge of communist insurgencies in the developing world. With the successful election of Kennedy to the White House, the Army got the new security strategy it desired.

The U.S. Army went from having one focus under New Look to having multiple responsibilities under Flexible Response. Counter-insurgency warfare alone was inherently complex. However, the difficulties of these tasks were not appreciated as the overconfidence of Army officers negated any realistic assessment of the Army's capabilities. What was important was that Flexible Response made the Army an important force in national security; the specifics would follow later. The adaptation of the Army to Flexible Response and the creation of its counter-insurgency doctrine began with discussions in the *Military Review*. Contributors to the *Military Review* approached counter-insurgency with the same confidence used to argue for Flexible Response. Success was assumed; the only concern was establishing the methods that would be used to bring that success. Articles were written with a confident tone and followed a 'problem-solution' style. Counter-insurgency was the problem and the Army was the answer.

The Vietnamese Revolution

Harry G. Summers claimed to have had the following conversation with a Colonel from the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) in Hanoi in April 1975: 'You know you never defeated us on the battlefield.' After a brief pause for thought, the PAVN officer replied, 'That may be so, but it is also irrelevant.'¹ During the American phase of the Vietnam War, many of those involved failed to grasp the political, economic and social underpinnings of the conflict. Historian George W. Hopkins states that 'Americans often minimize or ignore the Vietnamese dimension of the war - just as the US too often did while in Vietnam'.² In other words, historical analysis has done little to rectify a flaw in our understanding of why American military intervention failed to save the RVN. Only through understanding why the RVN was brought to the brink of defeat by the NLF in 1965 does the scale of the political, social, economic and military challenge that faced the U.S. Army become apparent.

The Communists³ laid the foundations of their success during the interwar period. Through years of trials, they came to appreciate the need for a broad and progressive nationalist front with a structured and coherent strategy. They tapped into the increasing discontent of the peasantry and other social groups, who were demanding increased political, economic and social reforms. They combined these opponents of

¹ Summers, *American Strategy in Vietnam*, p. 1.

² George W. Hopkins, 'Historians and the Vietnam War: The Conflict Over Interpretations Continues', *Studies in Popular Culture*, Vol. 23, No. 2, (Oct, 2000), p. 105.

³ 'Communists' refers to the Vietnamese Workers' Party and the organisations that fell under its umbrella, including the National Liberation Front and the People's Revolutionary Party. Using 'Communists' to describe the opposition to the RVN is not entirely accurate. Not all members of the NLF were communists, as the purpose of the NLF was to create a group bringing together all the opponents of the RVN. Nevertheless, the NLF was under the ultimate control of the VWP (Vietnamese Workers' Party), and the word 'Communists' is a useful term to use.

colonialism into a broad nationalist front, known as the Viet Minh, which ended French rule in 1955. Two Vietnamese states emerged from the anti-French war - the DRV under Communist rule in the North and the non-communist RVN in the South. Although French colonialism had ended, the RVN inherited many of its practices and institutions. Therefore, the social, political and economic grievances of the peasantry remained unsolved in the South. If the RVN was to survive in the long term, it required an ideology that appealed outside of the small and mainly Catholic urban elite.

The Communists formed the NLF in January 1961, which united groups opposed to the oppressive rule of Ngo Dinh Diem, the RVN's first President. Once the Communists had the support they required, they needed a strategy with which to direct them that negated the military advantages and exploited the political, economic and social weaknesses of South Vietnam. The strategy they used was *dau tranh*, which roughly translates into English as 'struggle'. *Dau tranh* consisted of two parts - *dau tranh chinh tri* (political struggle) and *dau tranh vu trang* (violent struggle).⁴ Douglas Pike has argued that 'only when combined - the marriage of violence to politics - can victory be achieved'.⁵ Political struggle mobilised the majority of the people and destroyed the enemy's forces with help from violent struggle. Political struggle and military struggle complemented each other and made each other effective, weakening the enemy and empowering the cadres, but political struggle formed the bulk of the overall effort. The desired result of the potent mix of political struggle and violent struggle was an uprising of the people, known as *khoi nghia*.

⁴ Translations are taken from Douglas Pike's *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (New York, 1991), *War, Peace and the Viet Cong* (Cambridge, MA, 1969) & *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA, 1968).

⁵ Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (New York, 1991), pp. 216-217.

Dau tranh chinh tri (political struggle) was the most important of the two *dau tranh*. Without a successful political struggle as a base, violent struggle could not bring victory. *Dau tranh chinh tri* consisted of three action programmes that would defeat the enemy politically. The first action programme was *dich van* (action among the enemy), which meant non-military activities among the population under enemy control. Secondly, *dan van* (action among the people) stood for activities and management in places under the authority of the revolution, also known as ‘liberated areas’. Finally, *binh van* (action among the military) was a programme of non-military activities among the enemy’s military forces.⁶ The action programmes mobilised the people, expanded the revolution’s political control and eroded the will of the enemy to resist.

The Vietnamese Workers’ Party’s (VWP) 15th Plenum in 1959 outlined the purposes of *dau tranh vu trang* (armed struggle): ‘Armed *dau tranh* is to make the people rise up, to lower the enemy’s prestige, to destroy the local governmental administration, to establish people’s government administrations where possible.’⁷ Violent struggle covered a broad range of actions including assassinations, military combat and guerrilla warfare. Violent struggle protected political struggle from enemy attacks and expanded the revolution’s control of the people by destroying the RVN’s political apparatus in the countryside.

The NLF’s progressive policies, broad political front and strategy of *dau tranh* made it a strong force. By 1965, the NLF was on the verge of toppling the government. It

⁶ Ibid, pp. 215-216.

⁷ Ibid, p. 222.

was the most dominant political force in the countryside, and its military forces were defeating the American supported Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). When American combat units began to arrive in 1965, they faced an opponent that had defeated the RVN politically, economically and socially and who was willing to endure hardships.

Political Struggle

Dich Van

Dich van (action among the enemy) was the non-military action programme that targeted areas under enemy control. The primary purpose of *dich van* was to win the support of the people. The NLF's cadres utilised as many methods and opportunities as they could in support of *dich van*'s objective such as propaganda, mass demonstrations and co-opting local protests into anti-government protests.

The NLF did not distinguish between events organised by itself or by another party. As far as the NLF was concerned, each protest was a sign of the people reacting to RVN oppression. The NLF would infiltrate these demonstrations for the benefit of their objectives. The NLF would organise these protests and demonstrations to make them more efficient, increase peasant agitation and direct the people's anger to the RVN and its American ally.⁸ For example, on 25 December 1960, government artillery fire killed a woman and a child in the village of Phu Phong in Dinh Tuong province. The local party organisation successfully infiltrated the protest, broadened its criticisms and

⁸ Douglas Pike, War, Peace, and the Viet Cong (Cambridge, MA, 1969), p. 115.

increased the numbers involved. By mid-February, many rallies and demonstrations involving thousands of people occurred all over the province. At each rally and demonstration, the people denounced South Vietnam and the United States.⁹

The NLF also considered minor actions to be significant victories. Convincing one person to support the NLF's cause was considered a success, as well as the creation of heroes and martyrs that would bring people to the NLF's side. For instance, on 8 November 1962, a small group of NLF cadres were en route to the capital of Ben Tre province to deliver petitions denouncing President Ngo Dinh Diem and the United States. The cadres were halted by a security checkpoint and blocked from proceeding to Ben Tre. Rather than giving up, the cadres convinced a police officer to deliver the petitions to the authorities in the capital.¹⁰ Such instances inspired the cadres and was useful for propaganda purposes, creating the impression of the NLF being an adaptive, compelling and successful force.

A woman, also in Ben Tre province, regularly clashed with the local authorities from 1960 to 1963. In one instance, she successfully heckled and questioned the governor of Ben Tre on the purpose of American aid, which caused the crowd to chant anti-government and anti-American slogans. From 1960 to May 1963, this woman had been arrested and beaten multiple times. Despite such punishment, she continued with her actions until her death as a result of torture. An NLF report on her actions concluded by stating she served as an inspiration for those in the struggle in Ben Tre province. Her death was a constant reminder to those in the NLF and the peasantry of

⁹ Douglas Pike, Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (Cambridge, MA, 1968), pp. 386-387.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 394

the harsh nature of Diem's rule.¹¹ In this example, the small and relatively minor actions of the woman had an impact out of proportion to the cost of their execution. Although she was killed, her actions and death served as an inspiration to those who supported the struggle in Ben Tre.

The NLF used propaganda, such as radio, in the pursuit of *dich van*. In 1962, the NLF established a radio station, known as 'Liberation Radio'. It had a network of 15 transmitters and the DRV's radio network, which broadcast in support of the NLF, had a total of 10 transmitters and some relays in Cambodia, which meant that anybody in South Vietnam with a radio could tune into either station.¹² Both stations aired propaganda that promoted the revolution and denounced the RVN and the United States. This kind of propaganda was used to reinforce *dau tranh*, allowing the NLF to maintain contact with the peasantry when cadres were not physically present.

Dan Van

Dan van (action among the people) was the NLF programme of activities and management in the 'liberated areas'. *Dan van* was crucial to the NLF because the liberated areas were examples of a future post-revolution society. These examples could win people over to the NLF's side. *Dan van* also allowed the NLF to tighten its hold over the peasantry, ensuring that it continued to integrate the peasantry into the movement. Also, *dan van* provided the NLF with material and human resources.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 387.

¹² John D. Bergen, Military Communications: A Test for Technology: The U.S. Army in Vietnam (Washington D.C., 1986), pp. 369-370.

Historically, communism had not been as popular in South Vietnam as it had been in the North, due to a combination of smaller support, successful French repression, popular non-communist groups such as the religious sects and a higher degree of urbanization, industrialization and education. When the VWP authorised an intense effort to overthrow the RVN government in January 1959 at its 15th Plenum, they faced a significant challenge in building a strong social, political, economic and military movement. In a few years, the NLF had managed to build such a movement that brought South Vietnam to the verge of collapse in 1965.

The VWP overcame its weakness in the South by creating the NLF, which united all opposition to the South Vietnamese government. The NLF promoted moderate policies that attracted enough followers to allow the movement to defeat the RVN. Land was the critical issue for the vast majority of the peasantry - whether they were communist or not. Other issues, such as tax and poor quality of life, were also important. The NLF's policies were carefully formulated to attract communists without alienating non-communists and vice versa. By maintaining the right balance, the NLF was able to create a movement with enough followers and resources to topple the government in Saigon.

Land was a central problem for the peasantry, and for many of them it was the basis of their allegiance to the NLF. During the colonial era, land was concentrated in the hands of a small number of absentee landowners, with the peasants who worked the land receiving little for their labour. Corruption and increasingly harsh conditions agitated the peasantry further. During the war against the French, the Viet Minh

redistributed land to the peasants in areas it controlled. However, Ngo Dinh Diem restored the authority of the landlords and persecuted former Viet Minh. For the peasantry, going back to the way things had been under the French was not an option. Diem's support of the landowners planted the seeds of hostility.

The success of the NLF's land policy can be seen in the province of Long An. When American combat forces started to arrive in 1965, the province was almost entirely under NLF control. Only the major urban centres in the province remained in the hands of the RVN. The NLF's land policy was an important part of its rapid success in Long An. NLF land distribution was enacted quickly, which immediately satisfied peasant demands and created support and sympathy for the movement. When the NLF assumed control of a village, it seized communal land, as well as land owned by French businesses, the government and fleeing landlords. Landlords who sympathised with the NLF "donated" their estate to the movement. The NLF then redistributed these acres to the peasants on a village-by-village basis under the supervision of the Farmers' Association. The NLF's rules for the redistribution of estate meant they heard peasant views clearly and could meet the needs of each village.¹³ The NLF's ability to swiftly enact its land reform led to a rapid rise in support for it among peasants in Long An. The government had no such policy and therefore could not curtail the NLF's rise in popularity in Long An.

RAND studies confirmed the importance of land as a key reason for the NLF's support. During the 1960s, RAND published a series of studies to determine the

¹³ Jeffrey Race, War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 2010), pp. 126-127.

motivations and morale of those in the NLF. Diem's regime had blocked American access to NLF prisoners and defectors. Therefore, there had been no in-depth American study of NLF followers before November 1963. The RAND study, *Viet Cong Motivation and Morale in 1964: A Preliminary Report* (1965), was the first to elaborate on the motivations of those who joined the NLF.¹⁴ The authors, with the assistance of Vietnamese translators, conducted 145 interviews with NLF prisoners, defectors and suspects from July to December 1964. Southern-born prisoners totalled 36 per cent of the people interviewed. People from the North but who were born in the South and sent to join the NLF (what RAND called 'regroupees') formed 29 per cent of those interviewed. Prisoners from the previous two categories but who defected accounted for 21 per cent. Prisoners who were arrested by the South Vietnamese as suspected guerrillas formed 11 per cent. A total 3 per cent of the prisoners interviewed were from North Vietnam.¹⁵

The different groups interviewed gave their reasons for their association with the NLF. The regroupees viewed the struggle against South Vietnam and America as an extension of the anti-imperialist war against the French. For them, the basic reasons for fighting had not changed, only the actors involved. Moreover, because they had many years of service, they were already firmly committed to the NLF's cause.¹⁶ The younger members of the NLF, however, joined for a variety of linked reasons. The clear majority of these came from poor peasant backgrounds, who often knew little beyond their hamlet or village. Land and other social issues, such as poverty and

¹⁴ John C. Donnell, Guy J. Pauker & Joseph J. Zasloff, *Viet Cong Motivation and Morale in 1964: A Preliminary Report* (Santa Monica, CA, 1965), p. 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. xi.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 19-20.

unemployment, were the most important factors for the young generation of NLF members. They believed, with justification, that the RVN was unlikely to match the NLF's land reform and social welfare programmes.¹⁷ Other reasons given included resentment at the forced relocation from their ancestral homes into government sponsored agrovilles, which the peasants had to construct themselves, as well as abusive and corrupt behaviour by local officials and security forces.¹⁸

There were many reasons people had for joining the NLF, some political and some not. Those that had land as their basis were never going to consider siding with the government as an option. However, those that left their villages for the NLF for personal reasons, such as the desire to have an adventure, never considered the government a viable option. Indeed, when the researchers suggested the government as an alternative, the interviewees found the idea offensive or ridiculous. They believed the government represented the landowners and urban elites while the NLF defended the interests of the poor.¹⁹ Therefore, whatever their motivations for doing so, service with the NLF was the natural choice for many peasants because they saw the organisation as the defender of peasant interests.

One RAND study noted that most defectors remained loyal to the NLF, despite having abandoned the cause. The defectors did not switch to the government side because of ideology. Instead, the motives of the defectors were personal. The RVN ran a programme known as *Chieu Hoi* (open arms) which encouraged those in the NLF to switch sides. RAND researchers studying the programme found that the majority of

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 20.

¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 16-17.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 17.

those who defected did so because they could not cope with the exhausting physical or mental demands service with the NLF placed upon them. For instance, the most common reasons given for defection were ones such as physical hardship or fear of death. Others cited disagreements with NLF superiors or a desire to return to their family. The majority remained sympathetic to the NLF, except for those few who changed sides because they found the NLF's use of terror to be unpalatable.²⁰

Binh Van

Binh van (action among the enemy) was the NLF's non-military action programme against the RVN's governmental organs and armed forces. Theoretically, once *dau tranh* had brought the revolution to the point of *koi nghia*, *binh van* would see mass desertions from RVN government and military forces. However, with American military involvement in 1965, the opportunity for the NLF to bring about *koi nghia* disappeared. Before the arrival of American soldiers in 1965, the NLF's *binh van* programme was one of its efforts to destroy the RVN's government apparatus and military forces. The NLF could take territory from the RVN, but as long as the RVN military and government still existed, final victory could not be achieved. Therefore, destruction of these obstacles was of vital importance to the NLF and it utilised a variety of non-violent (and violent) methods to do so.

There were specific outcomes the NLF sought for a successful *binh van* action. The optimal result of a *binh van* action was the defection of RVN personnel to the NLF,

²⁰ J.M. Carrier & C.A.H. Thomson, Viet Cong Motivation and Morale: The Special Case of Chieu Hoi (Santa Monica, CA, 1966), p. xi.

such as several ARVN soldiers defecting to fight for the NLF, and bringing with them weapons, intelligence and a great propaganda opportunity. Indeed, Radio Liberation regularly reported on incidents of defection. For instance, one broadcast claimed that on 4 January 1962, soldiers in Chau Thanh district attacked their commanders and then joined the NLF. Another broadcast declared that on 6 May 1962, a company of marines defected while the American Secretary of Defence visited Saigon.²¹ Whether these incidents were fabricated, altered or happened is almost impossible to verify. The importance of these reports and their volume was that it portrayed the NLF as an almost irresistible force causing the RVN to disintegrate. Such propaganda proved to be effective on the peasantry, with their lack of education and isolated village life.

Inducing desertion from RVN service was also deemed to be a good result of a *binh van* action. In most cases, those who deserted would return to their villages and pursue their lives as they had before. While deserters did not commit themselves to service with the NLF, some provided minor assistance when called upon, possibly to avoid any repercussion for not doing so or as a way to ‘fence sit’ until a clear victor emerged.²² Below this, the NLF encouraged mutinous acts and opposition to break the unity and reduce the effectiveness of enemy operations. The NLF would use issues such as poor pay or conditions to encourage those in the ARVN and other organisations to challenge or disobey orders. For example, Radio Liberation reported in November 1961 that in Phu Yen, 300 soldiers refused a command to extend their enlistments.²³ In a similar vein, the NLF attempted to create discord between South Vietnamese personnel and their American advisers.

²¹ Pike, *Viet Cong*, pp. 254-255.

²² *Ibid*, p. 256.

²³ Pike, *War, Peace and the Viet Cong*, p. 257.

The last outcome of a *binh van* action considered successful was to gain the cooperation of those who remained in roles with the RVN. Usually, these were soldiers and government servants in contested areas where they were vulnerable to NLF reprisals. Consequently, the NLF forced them into acts that would harm South Vietnamese efforts while allowing them to remain in their position. For example, a village chief could give the impression that his strategic hamlet had successfully separated the population from the NLF through falsifying reports or distributing RVN propaganda posters along well-used routes where district officials would see them.²⁴ In a period where the RVN could ill-afford inefficiency, these actions contributed to the inability of South Vietnam to halt NLF gains in the countryside.

Political Violence – The Terror Programme

The NLF purposefully cultivated a positive image of itself, which has contributed to an under-appreciation of the importance of terror in its successes. The movement used acts of terror such as assassinations, physical maiming, torture and kidnappings as tools to further the objectives of the three action programmes within *dau tranh chinh tri*. Crucially and unlike the RVN, the NLF's use of terror did not seriously damage its ties with the peasantry. The NLF used terror selectively, carefully choosing who would be on the receiving end. In contrast, under the RVN, acts of terror and other forms of violence were used liberally, to the point where anyone could be a victim, regardless of his or her loyalty to South Vietnam.

²⁴ Pike, *Viet Cong*, pp. 257-258.

The NLF's terror programme played an important role in the advances it made against the RVN during the early 1960s. Acts of terror aimed at village officials caused the RVN's village administrations to collapse, allowing the NLF to fill the vacuum. Jeffrey Race's study of Long An province highlighted the importance of terror in eliminating the RVN's village administrations and security forces. During Tet 1960, the NLF unleashed a week-long campaign of violence against those responsible for the running and protection of village administrations as well as cadres and others responsible for government projects. Throughout that week, 26 South Vietnamese officials were killed. Many more had been on the NLF's list, but these people recognised what was happening after the first few deaths and fled.²⁵ The NLF eliminated key people such as village officials, youth leaders and members of the secret police.

The loss of those officials and the fear it created for those who remained paralysed much of the RVN's rural administration in Long An. Fearing for their lives, many local officials fled to larger settlements or refused to leave the boundaries of their hamlet, destroying the government's control of the rural population. The RVN's rural governments, weakened by *dau tranh chinh tri*, disintegrated when the NLF unleashed its terror programme. The deputy district chief of Can Duoc reported that 90 of his 117 hamlet chiefs had resigned. By the end of the year, only six remained.²⁶ Without the village governments in Long An, the RVN struggled to collect taxes and conscript young men into the armed forces. Moreover, the elimination of Cong An agents denied

²⁵ Jeffrey Race, War Comes to Long An, pp. 114-115.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 115.

the authorities in Long An access to vital information on NLF activity.²⁷ Without money, manpower and intelligence, the RVN's efforts to combat the NLF suffered accordingly.

Creating a sense of fear was an important outcome of the NLF's terror programme. In RVN-controlled villages, the fear of being assassinated or physically harmed was often reason enough for many government officials to abandon their posts. The terror programme and the fear it created also aided the NLF in maintaining order in liberated areas. People who protested at NLF actions or policies could find themselves tortured, imprisoned or assassinated for their disobedience.

The NLF in the village of Duc Lap in Long An province used terror selectively to create a mix of fear, respect and obedience. A former village police officer recalled how the NLF was able to use the villagers easily for their purposes. One day, the NLF demanded that the villagers attend a demonstration in a village elsewhere in the province. If they refused, the NLF threatened to kidnap them at night and sentence them to months of hard labour away from the village. The villagers complied and the former police officer remarked, 'who would disobey them?'²⁸

The NLF integrated themselves into villages to build close links with the peasants. The NLF identified with peasant grievances, culture, established historical links with the Viet Minh and exploited those who had relatives in the NLF - all measures taken to

²⁷ Ibid, p. 116.

²⁸ R. Michael Pearce, Evolution of a Vietnamese Village - Part II: The Past, August 1945 to April 1964 (Santa Monica, CA, 1966), p. 26.

create a strong bond the peasants would be unlikely to break.²⁹ One government official who had served in Duc Lap remarked that the NLF lived and worked with the people for a long time and this made them more scared of the NLF than of the government.³⁰ The villagers vulnerability to the NLF's presence would make it less likely for them to provide information or assistance to the government. However, this does not fully explain why the peasants accepted NLF terror. Aside from being applied selectively, NLF terror, argues Pike, was a paradox, creating first anti-NLF and then pro-NLF attitudes among peasants. Pike outlined the terror process as engendering 'fear and hatred, the first usually predominating; but when terror is relaxed, after an area wide campaign, an exaggerated sense of relief spreads through the villages.'³¹ Crucially, had the NLF not enjoyed the majority of peasant sympathy, it would not have had the latitude to employ terror as it did.

Violent Struggle

The NLF was primarily a political, social and economic front. Violence - acts of terror and military warfare – did not form the foundation of NLF success. The organisation of the NLF reflected the primacy of politics, economics and social policy with the military wing, known as the PLAF (People's Liberation Armed Forces), being a subordinate part of it. The NLF executed violent actions almost always for political ends, whether they were acts of terror or of military warfare. 'Violent struggle', or *dau tranh vu trang*, is a useful term because it encapsulates the broad range of violent actions the NLF employed. Military warfare formed a small portion of its activities,

²⁹ Ibid, pp. 23-25.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 26.

³¹ Pike, War, Peace and the Viet Cong, p. 117.

primarily used to destroy the enemy army, expand liberated areas and bring the revolution to a successful conclusion once it reached the final stage.

Military Warfare

Until American military intervention in 1965, the course of the NLF's revolution was based on Mao's three stages of guerrilla warfare. Military warfare did not take a primary role until the final stage. The first stage was one of survival while laying the foundations for greater efforts at the subsequent phases. Small guerrilla forces would employ 'hit-and-run' tactics while hiding from enemy sweeps. Armed propaganda teams, working in remote areas, recruited and trained others to form village militias. The nascent movement then expanded these forces and created a liberated area. Next came attrition of enemy units by constant guerrilla warfare attacks such as ambushes, which allowed the revolution's forces to dictate the time and duration of an engagement.³²

Stage two gave way to a period of greater activity with more ambitious goals. The PLAF would conduct larger and more aggressive attacks with a wider degree of movement, pushing government forces out of the countryside and expanding the liberated areas. The enemy was then forced onto the defensive, starting the corrosion of his morale, and leading to the retreat of his forces to major urban centres on the coast. The PLAF would then escalate the war to its conventional phase, attacking enemy battalions and regiments with the intent of removing them from the order of battle.³³ In

³² Pike, *PAVN*, p. 224.

³³ *Ibid*, pp. 224-225.

essence, the PLAF would destroy the government's physical presence in the countryside.

The third and final stage is where military warfare would take precedence over *dau tranh chinh tri*. At this stage, the enemy would be fighting for survival with final victory for the Communists on the verge of completion. The conflict at this stage would become a conventional war with the PLAF engaging and destroying the enemy army in a series of final battles. The people would then rise, bringing about the fall of the enemy government.³⁴ Although events never progressed in this fashion, Mao's theory was the guide for the execution of armed struggle.

The PLAF were divided into three categories, each with a basic function. The backbone of the PLAF was the main force units that were heavily armed and built along conventional lines for combat against the enemy army. The next category consisted of guerrilla forces organised into companies at the province or district level. The guerrillas would direct their attention to the enemy's local units, but would cooperate with the main forces when required. The final category was that of the village militia, consisting of combat militia and regular militia. Members of the combat militia were enthusiastic youths who could be called upon to take part in military operations. They were also a recruiting pool for the guerrillas and main forces. The regular militia had a defensive role, and their members were usually older.³⁵

³⁴ Ibid, p. 225.

³⁵ William J. Duiker, The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam (Boulder, CO, 1996), p. 229.

Changing circumstances, namely the ever-deepening American involvement, posed strategic and tactical problems that forced alterations to the three stages. Kennedy's decision to increase American support to Diem would not have come as a surprise to the NLF. The appearance of American advisers, materiel and support units escalated the level of conflict to what the NLF called 'special war'. A debate about the nature of the new situation and the course forward occurred between the leadership in COSVN (Central Office for South Vietnam) and the Politburo in late 1961. By mid-1962, events in Laos suggested promise for a course of action that had the potential to bring success without drawing America into further escalation. With Kennedy ready to accept neutralisation in Laos following the weakening of the anti-communist position, the party leadership sought to isolate the government from the countryside and to achieve a decisive victory that would force the American government into a negotiated settlement. The main forces would expand NLF control of rural areas, but avoid the cities for fear of triggering direct American intervention.³⁶ In short, rather than seeking total victory, the NLF aimed for a decisive victory that would force the creation of an NLF dominated coalition government that would lead to enemy withdrawal and the unification of both Vietnams.

As 1961 drew to a close, the security situation in the RVN became a concern for the Kennedy administration. The NLF held the initiative in the countryside and increased the territory and people under its control. Alongside the growing numbers of American advisers, support units and materiel, the RVN was developing its strategic hamlet programme, which attempted to pacify villages and protect them from NLF subversion. The RVN hoped that physical separation would cause peasant support for the NLF to

³⁶ Ibid, p. 222.

disintegrate. While these efforts ultimately failed, the party leadership was greatly concerned about the impact of these measures.³⁷ Indeed, the firepower and mobility of the ARVN increased, particularly thanks to the arrival of American helicopters. Furthermore, the strategic hamlets threatened to cut the NLF from its chief source of human and material support. The strategic hamlets were erected rapidly across the RVN and they, along with a bolstered ARVN, appeared to stabilise the countryside. NLF activity decreased, the number of defectors to the RVN rose, and the taxes collected by the government increased.³⁸

In response, the NLF devoted more resources to *dau tranh vu trang* to roll back the RVN's gains and thwart the new military technology at their disposal. The strategic hamlets were a relatively easy obstacle to overcome, largely because of their flawed implementation and unpopularity with the peasantry. The RVN claimed to have built thousands of strategic hamlets, but few were viable. The pace of construction of the strategic hamlets meant that the RVN sacrificed quality for quantity.³⁹ The hamlets lacked fortifications and a population enthusiastic for the programme, with few forces willing to die for their protection. As a consequence, the NLF faced little problems in simply attacking or infiltrating the strategic hamlets. By the time of Diem's assassination, the strategic hamlets were effectively finished as a programme.

In the early 1960s, the ARVN was a growing force buttressed by American arms and advisers. With the firepower, mobility and expertise available to the ARVN, they

³⁷ William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York, 2000), p. 531.

³⁸ Eric M. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* (Boulder, CO, 1993), p. 36.

³⁹ Philip E. Catton, 'Counter-Insurgency and Nation Building: The Strategic Hamlet Programme in South Vietnam', *The International History Review*, Vol. 21, No. 4, (Dec, 1999), p. 939.

were more than a match for the PLAF on paper. Initially, the ARVN seemed to perform well for a period starting in 1961 and going into 1962. ARVN commanders utilised their newfound mobility and firepower, striking with ever increasing confidence at NLF forces. The morale of the South Vietnamese government and military seemed to improve.⁴⁰ The party-approved history of the conflict admitted that the ARVN's new technology and tactics resulted in the destruction of many military units.⁴¹ In the face of such destruction and weapons, the morale of the NLF understandably diminished. However, the NLF did not break under the strain of the strategic hamlets or reinforced ARVN and made changes that allowed them to score victories on the battlefield once again.

The Battle of Ap Bac, which occurred on 2 January 1963, is perhaps the most well-known example of the PLAF triumphing over a 'superior' ARVN force. A group of PLAF soldiers defeated a larger ARVN force complete with helicopters, armoured vehicles and American advisers. Ap Bac was a hamlet situated in the Mekong Delta some 12 miles northwest of the city of My Tho. The Delta, a swamp area of the RVN that produced large quantities of rice, meant that air mobility was the only means of fast movement. RVN intelligence indicated the presence of an NLF radio post near the hamlet and the local ARVN commander drew up a plan of attack to destroy it. In total, some 1200 ARVN soldiers including Rangers, armoured infantry and helicopter mobile

⁴⁰ Edward Miller, Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam (Cambridge, MA, 2013), p. 247.

⁴¹ Pierre Asselin, Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965 (Berkeley, CA, 2013), p. 129.

units were available for the attack.⁴² The area would be surrounded on three sides, leaving one avenue of escape for the NLF forces, which was covered by artillery.

The battle was expected to be a convincing victory for the ARVN. With the numbers and assets at their disposal, there was no reason not to expect the PLAF to follow their usual routine, which was to fight a brief engagement and then retreat to preserve their strength. The PLAF had observed ARVN preparations for an offensive in the area and prepared defensive positions in and around Ap Bac accordingly. Rather than breaking contact as had been done before, the 340 PLAF troops remained in place to fight in the face of superior numbers and firepower. The ARVN, despite their advantages, withered under PLAF fire. PLAF soldiers, in prepared positions hidden from aerial observation, ambushed the landing zone for the helicopter troops at close range. Concentrated fire from PLAF heavy machine guns brought down several American helicopters and neutralised the APCs. ARVN casualties were heavy.⁴³ The PLAF disengaged during the night, escaping through a gap in the ARVN lines that had been left open.

The victory at Ap Bac was described by one party historian as a critical moment because it demonstrated that ‘the popular forces had found the way of coping with the most modern weapons and tactics’.⁴⁴ Through accurate intelligence on enemy movements, using concealed fighting positions, utilising ambush techniques and by

⁴² David Toczec, “‘A Miserable Damn Performance’: The Battle of Ap Bac, 1963”, (Paper submitted to The Vietnam Centre, Texas Tech University, for the Third Triennial Symposium, March, 1999) <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/events/1999_Symposium/1999_Vietnam_Symposium_Papers/toczek.doc>

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road*, p. 152.

concentrating heavy weapons fire, the PLAF were able to mitigate the advantages the ARVN possessed. Partly thanks to the success at Ap Bac, many in the VWP were increasingly confident that a more aggressive *dau tranh*, coinciding with increased Buddhist unrest in the RVN's cities, could produce the decisive victory they desired.⁴⁵

Despite the division of struggle into political and military aspects, this did not mean that cadres involved in the latter paid no heed to the political side of the war. Cadres involved in military struggle were not always engaged in combat, especially when American forces arrived in 1965 and the NLF had to reduce the number of major operations to keep casualties sustainable. When cadres were not fighting, they were often in villages engaging with the peasantry, the only group they had significant contact with outside of their NLF comrades, furthering the objectives of political struggle.

A RAND study on cadres, primarily those engaged in the military side, noted the role they played in political struggle. The cadres, who spent a significant amount of time in villages with the peasantry, saw the impact of the war and the difficulties it caused families much like their own. With the peasants suffering hardships, the political functions of the military cadres took on renewed importance in ensuring peasant support and compliance during the increased destruction brought about by the American phase of the war. Villagers who appeared to be wavering in their support were regarded as having been failed by existing efforts. The answer was further

⁴⁵ Ibid, pp. 151-152.

education of the people, in other words, propagandising.⁴⁶ The role of military cadres in supporting political *dau tranh* while not engaged in combat show how the two parts of *dau tranh* were interlinked. Without successful political struggle securing the resources and support of the people, military *dau tranh* would not have been possible to conduct, which is why it was regarded as an important activity by military cadres. Indeed, to emphasise the point further, one PLAF battalion cadre member stated that his unit's mission besides combat was in support of 'political matters related to the population'.⁴⁷

Conclusion

As a state, the RVN was fundamentally flawed. It inherited much of the old French colonial administration and was reliant on the small Catholic urban elite that ran the high-level government and military organs. As a result, the RVN's base of power was small, and the state protected the interests of the mostly Catholic urban elite that ran it. Power was concentrated centrally in Saigon, and the elite had little to no understanding of peasant life. The RVN's elite was unwilling to cede political, economic and social power to the villages. Instead, they focused on village security, attempting to stop NLF access to the peasantry and preserving their political, economic and social power.

To the peasants, who formed most the population, the NLF delivered crucial reforms while the RVN tried to maintain the power of the landlords. Therefore, much of the peasantry either sided with the NLF openly or were sympathetic to its goals. The

⁴⁶Melvin Gurtov, Viet Cong Cadres and the Cadre System: A Study of the Main and Local Forces (Santa Monica, CA, 1967), p. 74.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 74.

NLF's policies and its judiciously applied terror programme maintained peasant support and obedience in the midst of a fierce struggle.

The NLF's *dau tranh* strategy employed political and military measures that eradicated the RVN's government apparatus in the countryside and weakened the ARVN. By 1965, the NLF was on the brink of victory, and only the deployment of American combat forces saved the South Vietnamese government from collapse. The arrival of American military forces prevented the NLF from completing the final stage of its revolution, but no more. The NLF's success was in the crucial political arena, making it near impossible for the military solutions of the United States to reverse. American military action, being that of a foreign power, also had the added benefit of making the peasantry more susceptible to the NLF. It was easy to convince the peasantry, especially since it was obvious that the American presence was going to be temporary, that the destruction was the result of American forces and would cease when they left.

Crucially, the NLF had already defeated the RVN in the political, economic and social arenas by the time American combat units arrived. The defeat of the RVN in these areas would remain unchanged even with the assistance of American forces, which conducted military action with superficial non-military programmes in support. A foreign force, unable to understand the people they were aiding, will always find it almost impossible to defeat a political revolution with military solutions. If the RVN were to survive it required radical changes that would shift its base of support to the peasantry. The RVN, however, was incapable of such fundamental changes. It was

under these circumstances that American combat forces began to deploy to South Vietnam in 1965.

The U.S. Army and Counter-Insurgency, 1961-1965

On 6 June 1962, President Kennedy addressed a graduating class of cadets at the United States Military Academy (USMA) at West Point. Kennedy used the address as an opportunity to describe what he expected from these new officers who would soon be serving in the military under the new strategy of Flexible Response. The crux of this strategy was a flexible military force, capable of reacting to the broad range of threats the U.S. faced. Kennedy stressed to the cadets that the ‘demands upon our military leadership are more exacting and more wide-ranging than at any previous time in our history’.¹

A major part of Kennedy’s confident address was his description of the unconventional tasks the military would execute during his term. Kennedy placed the importance of these missions on par with the military responsibilities of the cadets, declaring that ‘the non-military problems you will face are equally great -- diplomatic, political or economic problems’.² The President talked about service with the Special Forces, combating guerrillas and advising foreign armies and governments. Kennedy bluntly outlined the skills necessary for these new roles. For instance, he highlighted abilities such as fluency in foreign languages, an understanding of the politics of allied nations and a grasp of economics. The cadets were to be ambassadors for the U.S. and possess an appreciation of the limits of military power because the ‘problems facing the

¹ Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Papers, President’s Office Files, Speech Files, Address at U.S. Military Academy, West Point, New York, 6 June 1962, JFKLM, <<https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKPOF-038-035.aspx>>

² Ibid.

world today are not susceptible of a military solution'.³ In short, Kennedy expected these new officers to be more than soldiers. They were also to be complements to American diplomacy.

Kennedy demanded a variety of skills from the Army's leaders, and creating a doctrine and force capable of delivering the goals in his speech was a difficult task. He addressed counter-insurgency to those cadets in sweeping terms, covering a dizzying array of potential scenarios the Army could face. The U.S. Army, which had little experience with counter-insurgency warfare, had to build a doctrine from almost nothing. To help with this task, officers consulted the Army's recent combat history and the threats presented by the USSR, whose leader, Nikita Khrushchev, proclaimed that he would support emerging insurgencies throughout the developing world.

Many Army officers responded to the counter-insurgency challenge with the 'can-do' attitude that typified American confidence in the early 1960s, born from success in the Second World War and personified by Kennedy's youth and energy. Studying past examples for the *Military Review*, these officers identified methods that worked, with the conviction that they would also work elsewhere. Students at schools such as the CGSC, did the same enthusiastically for course papers, believing they were building a universal theory that would be successful when combined with American rigour and resources.

³ Ibid.

Lewy, a scholar belonging to the ‘hearts and minds’ strand, argued that the U.S. Army was wedded to aggressive conventional warfare since that was its chief purpose and that ‘Bureaucracies, whether civilian or military, tend to do what they are equipped to do.’⁴ Krepinevich makes a similar judgement, stating that Army strategy remained largely unchanged during the 1960s despite its counter-insurgency mission, and its campaign in South Vietnam reflected ‘traditional methods of operation in a conflict that was dramatically different over its wars from the previous half-century’.⁵ Lewy and Krepinevich are correct that the Army placed significant emphasis on defeating the main force battalions of the NLF and PAVN. However, they overestimate the ability of the Army to adapt to the non-military side of the war and integrate itself into the villages of rural South Vietnam with the dual purpose of destroying the NLF and rebuilding the government.

Lewy and Krepinevich did not fully grasp how the United States viewed its counter-insurgency role in foreign states, the limits of American power or the strategy of *dau tranh*. They are correct that the Army made dangerous assumptions. However, the fatal assumptions were that the states receiving assistance were not fundamentally flawed and that the insurgencies were mere extensions of the Cold War and not born as a consequence of internal factors. These assumptions were the result of American government policy, which believed that the rise of communist insurgent movements in the emerging world was because of the Soviet Union and China. In short, the Cold War context dictated American government and military views of insurgencies in the developing world.

⁴ Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, p. 86.

⁵ Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, p. 164.

An understanding of U.S. Army counter-insurgency doctrine in the 1960s requires knowledge about how the Army understood and treated doctrine. Doctrine is the official theory which directs thought, planning, materiel, and action. In the U.S. Army, doctrine is officially sanctioned by the leading hierarchy and made available to personnel primarily through the publication of field manuals. Doctrine and its specifics are taught throughout the Army's various schools and rehearsed during exercises.

The creation of military doctrine is a combination of historical examination and an understanding of current challenges. The Army attempts to prepare for the next war by analysing previous engagements and implementing those lessons into doctrine. Different interpretations of history emerge, but only one can become institutionalised and shape doctrine. The institutionalisation of understanding current challenges takes a different process. Army officials had a degree of freedom in interpreting their service's history. However, their perception of contemporary threats was heavily influenced by the Cold War, policy-makers, and their biases.

The U.S. Army was new to counter-insurgency; its struggle to understand its origins and complexities were evident in its confusion over terms. In articles, words including 'guerrilla' and 'insurgent' were used interchangeably. The process of doctrinal creation was slow, and the Army's understanding of insurgencies stifled by over-confidence, an underestimation of the complexity of counter-insurgency warfare and the belief that the Cold War was at the root of insurgencies in the developing world. Nevertheless, a

counter-insurgency doctrine did emerge, although it was weak and entirely unsuited to the struggle in Vietnam.

The Historical Influence on Counter-Insurgency Doctrine

There is a saying within Western military circles that soldiers always prepare to fight the last war, indicating the military's tendency to study previous conflicts in readiness for future ones. This system of preparation is what the U.S. Army used for its counter-insurgency doctrine, examining the few experiences it had fighting guerrillas. The Army encountered guerrilla tactics in the Korean War, the Second World War, the Greek Civil War, and the Philippines, among others. How the Army viewed these events, investigated them, and the context in which they took place was crucial in shaping its views on insurgencies and how to counter them.

The Greek Civil War, 1946-1949

Greece, which plunged into civil war after the end of the Second World War, was the first Cold War insurgency America faced, and it proved to be a formative experience. The KKE (Communist Party of Greece) rose to significance following the German occupation of Greece in 1941. The British and their allies supported communist and non-communist resistance groups alike against the German occupiers. After the war, these groups clashed for control of Greece. The British supported the Greek government but lacked the resources to continue to do so, resulting in withdrawal and an American takeover of their role. As part of their aid package, the United States sent materiel and advisers to help the Greek government.

The KKE insurgency impressed on American military and government officials in Greece two factors that they came to regard as universal truths. The first was the denial of international support and border sanctuaries for the KKE, which proved to be critical to Greek government success. The rugged terrain also proved to be a consideration as it made it easy for guerrillas to operate in while government forces struggled to traverse with speed, resulting in the loss of the element of surprise. The importance of international support and sanctuaries in the Greek case led to the incorporation of those factors into doctrine.

Boyd T. Bashore of the U.S. Army, who served in the Philippines, and the RVN, penned a piece for the *Military Review* on what he termed 'frontless wars'. During the Greek Civil War, Yugoslavia and Albania (albeit to a lesser extent), provided the KKE with sanctuaries from which they could operate. These sanctuaries could not be attacked by the Greek government, as doing so would violate international law, potentially escalating the conflict. As a result, the KKE's military wing could rest and refit in these sanctuaries without fear of attack. Changes in international politics and the KKE's decisions saw the loss of support and of the border sanctuaries. Examining multiple instances of 'frontless wars', Bashore cites the denial of border sanctuaries as a critical reason for the defeat of the KKE.⁶

Sam C. Holliday and Pierre C. Dabiezies agreed with Bashore's findings in an assignment written during their time at the CGSC in 1962. Holliday, of the U.S. Army

⁶ Boyd T. Bashore, 'Organization for Frontless Wars', *Military Review*, Vol. XLIV, No. 5, (May, 1964), p. 14.

infantry and Dabezies, an officer with the French military, co-wrote a paper optimistically called *Irregular Warfare in a Nutshell*. The paper caught the attention of Harold K. Johnson, Commandant of the CGSC, who argued for its availability in the library and elsewhere, believing it would help American efforts to combat ‘irregular warfare’.⁷ The authors identify external support as a critical factor in the sustainment of a communist insurgency. Holliday and Dabezies posit that ‘Experience has shown that when the rebels have not had the benefit of external support they were eliminated little by little,’ and cite Yugoslavia in the Greek Civil War in support of their arguments.⁸ The authors also stress awareness of communists masking their insurgency as an indigenous reaction to oppression, to gain international sympathy and hide ties to external powers. Again, Holliday and Dabezies refer to the actions of the KKE in support of their arguments.⁹

The Philippines, 1942-1954

Edward Lansdale’s success advising the head of defence, Raymon Magsaysay, in the suppression of the Hukbalahap rebellion in the Philippines added to American confidence. Lansdale was evidence that with American vigour, the correct attitude and tactics, ‘wars of national liberation’ could be defeated. His impact was so profound that a fictional character called Colonel Hillandale from the famous political novel, *The Ugly American* (1958), was based on his exploits. Lansdale’s experiences in the

⁷Harold K. Johnson in Pierre C. Dabezies & Sam C. Holliday, ‘Irregular Warfare in a Nutshell’, (unpublished dissertation, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1962)

⁸ Pierre C. Dabezies & Sam C. Holliday, ‘Irregular Warfare in a Nutshell’, (unpublished dissertation, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1962), pp. 22-23.

⁹ Ibid, pp. 24-25.

Philippines shaped the Army's nascent counter-insurgency doctrine, particularly in the area of civic action.

Civic action is the use of military resources in programmes to aid civilians and civilian authorities in areas such as engineering and medicine. The basic function of civic action is to alleviate some of the hardships of war and other disasters. Civic action programmes were put into place by the Army during the Second World War as well as the Cold War, albeit under varying circumstances and with different degrees of success. American government and military officials believed civic action had an important auxiliary role in counter-insurgency by fostering strong links between a people and their government. Instances like the defeat of the Huks appeared to offer proof that civic action worked.

By the time of Edward Lansdale's arrival in the Philippines, the Huk's strength had grown beyond the capabilities of the police. Lansdale recognised this and believed that a concerted national effort including social, economic and political programmes was required to defeat the Huk's burgeoning revolution. Civic action constituted a portion of these efforts and was a concept Lansdale encouraged Magsaysay to implement as part of his ministry. Lansdale's encouragement led to Magsaysay's creation of the Civil Affairs Office (CAO) which trained teams of personnel in civic action. These teams of specialists would be attached to units in the field. Civic action also included improving the behaviour of soldiers towards the people, using military hospitals to care for sick

villagers and providing military lawyers to tenants in dispute with their landowner.¹⁰

Lansdale's civic action ideas led to increased cooperation with villagers who became willing to share intelligence on the Huks with government forces.

In a similar manner to the Greek Civil War, Army officers noticed the impact of Lansdale's civic action programmes in the defeat of the Huks, regarding it as essential to any counter-insurgency campaign. Charles T. R. Bohannon served with the U.S. Army during the Huk rebellion and co-wrote a study of the campaign with a Philippine military officer, Napoleon D. Valerian. Originally published in 1962, their book, *Counter-Guerrilla Operations: The Philippine Experience* examined the highs and lows of the counter-insurgency campaign. 'Too much emphasis cannot be placed on the importance' of ensuring that soldiers understand the value of civic action, the authors declared.¹¹ Stating the crucial role of civic action in the Philippines is one thing, but establishing it as a historical truth is another. Nevertheless, the authors regarded it as such and gave their thoughts on its position in a theoretical model.

Although Bohannon and Valerian concluded that civic action was vital in counter-insurgency, they struggled to construct a coherent counter-insurgency theory which explained how civic action, combat actions and psychological operations worked together precisely.

In practice, effective counterinsurgency action – especially that of troops – so intermingles concrete useful actions, protective actions (combat against guerrilla), and psychological operations that it is difficult to tell where one action leaves off and the other begins. Properly performed, they blend in a spiral, moving more and

¹⁰ Edward G. Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars: An American's Mission to Southeast Asia* (New York, 1991), pp. 70-71.

¹¹ Charles T. R. Bohannon & Napoleon D. Valerian, *Counter-Guerrilla Operations: The Philippine Experience* (Westport, CT, 2006), p. 173.

more rapidly from one success to another, from one field to another, until the desired objective is achieved, until the fish is driven out of the sea in which he can no longer live.¹²

Bohannon and Valerian's description is vague, but the implication seems to be that commanders need to be able to employ counter-insurgency tactics whenever they are required.

Bohannon and Valerian's conclusion on civic action appeared to be confirmed by other studies. For instance, Keith C. Nusbaum of the U.S Army reached similar ideas in his article on the Colombian government's anti-bandit campaign. Nusbaum admired the Colombian strategy, claiming that the Colombians borrowed from American experiences in Greece, Korea, Laos and South Vietnam.¹³ According to Nusbaum, the Colombian's built their anti-bandit campaign on three pillars – offensive combat, civic action, and psychological warfare. The Colombian military's civic action programme created trust between the soldiers and the people, as well as the building of schools and the provision of medical care. Consequently, the bandit groups retreated into remote areas because they lost the support of the people, and although the campaign was not over, Nusbaum praised the victories the Colombians had achieved.¹⁴

Nusbaum ends his study of Colombia's anti-bandit campaign by stating that 'we can logically conclude that our own teachings in the field of counterinsurgency continue to be sound'.¹⁵ His understanding of the Colombian example and its relation to other insurgencies was superficial. He failed to go into the details and nature of the

¹² Ibid, p. 174.

¹³ Keith C. Nusbaum, 'Bandidos!', *Military Review*, Vol. XLIII, No. 7, (July, 1963), p. 22.

¹⁴ Ibid, pp. 23-25.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 25.

Colombian insurgency and establish how it compared with Vietnam and other insurgencies. His choice of the word 'bandit' indicates that he did not think the Colombian insurgency was political in nature. His article, extremely confident in tone, merely pointed to the success of civic action in Colombia and simplistically assumed it would have the same impact elsewhere.

The Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960

The anti-communist conflict in Malaya, known as the 'Malayan Emergency', was one of the most recent examples Army officers could study. From 1948 to 1960, the British Commonwealth and Malayan authorities fought and defeated the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM). Not only was the Malayan Emergency the result of a communist insurgency, but it also took place in the same region as Vietnam, and Malaya itself was also a post-colonial state. The Malayan Emergency was of interest to Army officers, and shaped strategies employed in the RVN. If John A. Nagl's *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (2004) is any indication, little has changed, with British practices in Malaya still shaping thinking on Iraq and Afghanistan.

Robert Thompson, who made a name for himself as a counter-insurgency expert during the Malayan Emergency, would exercise significant influence over American and South Vietnamese counter-insurgency strategies. Thompson was the head of the British Advisory Mission (BRIAM) in South Vietnam from 1961 until his departure from Saigon in 1965. The purpose of BRIAM was to help the RVN develop counter-insurgency strategies, based on the methods used in Malaya. According to Robert Thompson, one of the crucial lessons from the Malayan Emergency was that the

government must break the ties between the people and the guerrillas. In Malaya, which remained a British colony for much of the conflict, this was done by moving people into government-protected villages. The security provided by these villages, in combination with effective government and propaganda, won the loyalty of the people.¹⁶ Once the British secured the villages, security forces were free to concentrate on destroying the MCP.

As the NLF was increasing in strength in the early 1960s, Robert Thompson's ideas on defeating the NLF had gained the ears of Kennedy and Diem. Thompson had discussed South Vietnam's war effort with President Kennedy and influenced some counter-insurgency projects the RVN implemented, such as the surrender policy and the strategic hamlet programme.¹⁷ The strategic hamlet programme was the counter-insurgency effort that BRIAM became most associated with, inspired by the 'new villages' of the Malayan Emergency. Thompson felt that the strategic hamlet programme, concentrated in the vital Delta region, provided one of the best chances for success, with the separation of the NLF from the people being the guiding idea in his strategy.¹⁸ Since it had worked in Malaya, Thompson had no reason to believe it would not work in the RVN.

It became apparent by late 1963 that strategic hamlets were not a universal solution to the problem of counter-insurgency. The hamlets had failed to shift the war effort in the government's favour, and the anti-Diem coup brought the programme to a standstill.

¹⁶ Robert Jackson, *The Malayan Emergency: The Commonwealth's Wars* (London, 1991), p. 116.

¹⁷ Peter Busch, 'Killing the Vietcong: The British Advisory Mission and the Strategic Hamlet Programme', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1, (2002), p. 136.

¹⁸ Peter Busch, *All the Way with JFK? Britain, the US and the Vietnam War* (Oxford, 2003), p. 133.

The problem with Thompson was the same problem many Americans dealing with South Vietnam had, the ignorance of political, economic and social factors in the larger picture. Thompson was chiefly concerned with developing counter-insurgency methods like the strategic hamlet programme, taking a tactical view resulting in ignorance of the critical issues with Diem's government and the ones that followed.¹⁹ Many Americans also came to see strategic hamlets as the way forward in the RVN and a cornerstone of any counter-insurgency strategy. The Army included the strategic hamlet concept in its counter-insurgency manual. The 'secure population centers', as the Army called them, would separate the people from the guerrillas, destroy the support the insurgency received from the villages and give the people a secure environment in which political, social and economic programmes would create strong bonds with the government.²⁰

The Cold War Influence on Counter-Insurgency Doctrine

How American government and military officials understood the Cold War had a detrimental impact on the U.S. Army's counter-insurgency doctrine. Americans saw their country grow from a great power to a victorious superpower through the course of the Second World War, along with the decline of the European powers and the rise of communism. There was no doubt in the minds of many Americans that their nation, with its unparalleled political, economic and military power, could overcome any challenge. A few thousand lightly armed guerrillas in a distant part of the world paled in comparison to what the Army faced during the Second World War.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 162.

²⁰ DAFM, FM 31-22 U.S. Army Counterinsurgency Forces (Washington D.C., 1963), pp. 98-99.

The Impact of the Cold War

Nikita Khrushchev, signalling a new battleground in the Cold War, declared that the Soviet Union would support 'wars of national liberation' during a speech at the Kremlin on 6 January 1961. The United States and other western nations became aware of Khrushchev's speech on 18 January. Kennedy and his staff discussed Khrushchev's confident blustering, taking his 'wars of national liberation' threat more seriously than his recent conciliatory overtures.²¹ Khrushchev's speech signalled to the American government that insurgencies would be the result of Soviet Cold War manoeuvring. Therefore, the belief that the Soviet Union and other communist powers were ultimately responsible for 'wars of national liberation' was a central concern in the construction of the Army's counter-insurgency doctrine.

The U.S. Army made clear the role of the Cold War in their overall doctrinal field manual *FM 100-5 Operations* (1962). Chapter 11, which carries the title 'Military Operations against Irregular Forces', declares that 'The ideological basis of an irregular force frequently is inspired by out-of-country elements who create and sponsor irregular forces as a means of promoting their own cause.'²² This instructed Army personnel that the insurgencies they were likely to face were the result of machinations by foreign powers - chiefly the USSR. This logic implied that insurgencies were not the result of fundamental political, economic and social problems with the state.

The Political, Social and Economic Dimension

²¹ Deborah Welch Larson, Anatomy of Mistrust: U.S.-Soviet Relations During the Cold War (Ithaca, NY, 1997), p. 110.

²² DAFM, FM 100-5 Field Service Regulations Operations (Washington D.C., 1962), p. 137.

Academics familiar with the Vietnamese dimension of the conflict consider the political, social and economic aspects of the NLF's revolution as critical elements in the RVN's eventual downfall. The U.S. Army understood that an insurgency generally included political, economic and social issues which helped sustain its existence. Indeed, counter-insurgency doctrine reminds personnel that 'The fundamental cause of large-scale irregular activities stems from the dissatisfaction of some significant portion of the population, with the political, social, and economic conditions prevalent in the area.'²³ At a glance, this logic appears to be sound, but further details reveal it to be superficial. Moreover, this reasoning is secondary to the Army's belief that irregular forces are created 'by out-of-country' elements.

The Army did not grasp the fundamentality of the political, social and economic issues in an insurgency. Its use of the word 'conditions' in *FM100-5* suggests issues that can be easily remedied with the correct resources and expertise. Its doctrine contended that areas where insurgencies existed were characterised by one or more of the following criteria. The first was that the society will be agrarian with poor living standards, possess underdeveloped industry with poor infrastructure and have unequal access to food. The second criteria was that the society will experience crop failures and food shortages. The third was that the society will be poorly educated, with a lack of schools, high illiteracy and inadequate medical care.²⁴ The implication is that if it were not for these issues, the insurgency would have no grievances with which to sustain its existence.

²³ Ibid, p. 137.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 137.

Due to the recognition that an insurgency contained political, economic and social elements, the U.S Army developed practices to help address them. This was to be done through civic action (sometimes called civil affairs), similar to the programmes Lansdale developed in the Philippines. Commanders were informed that ‘Success is dependent upon a definite program of civil affairs and psychological warfare activities to create proper attitudes and relationships with the people in the area both as individuals and as members of the community.’²⁵ In other words, the Army was to become the people’s friend, ensuring that they were adequately cared for and governed. The positive effects of this would, presumably, lead to support for the local government.

The Army identified seven methods which it believed would generate positive links between its soldiers and the people. The first was to treat the population justly and humanely in order to win their friendship. The second was to take care of the basic needs of the people until the local economy was able to do so. The third was to establish projects with the involvement of the population to raise their living standards. The fourth was to assist in the creation of local government organs and to determine that it is ‘properly constituted and properly functioning with justice to all’.²⁶ The last three points covered the detection of dissident elements, the well-being of refugees, and informing people on American and local government activities.²⁷

The Army’s dedicated counter-insurgency manual, which appeared in late 1963, provided 27 examples of civic action that would help accomplish its seven points. One example suggested to commanders that they could employ their troops in the planting or

²⁵ Ibid, p. 152.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 153.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 153.

cultivation of crops. Another encouraged the running of youth groups until the government was in a position to administer them. An interesting idea was for commanders to run elementary schools and night classes for local children and adults.²⁸ At a glance, these proposals appear to be sound, but further consideration reveals critical problems. For instance, they rely on the commander having personnel within his unit with the skills necessary to implement such proposals. In addition, it is hard to envisage how a commander could run youth groups or teach locals effectively if his soldiers have no command of the local language. Yet, the Army did not consider such obvious pitfalls, and one must question why this was the case.

The Mentality behind Counter-Insurgency

The United States and the U.S. Army were brimming with confidence in the early 1960s. President Kennedy and Army commanders had participated in the Second World War, witnessing the rise of the United States and its toppling of two powerful threats in Germany and Japan. This resulted in overconfidence and a failure to appreciate the complex nature of insurgencies. A few thousand guerrilla fighters appeared insignificant in comparison to the might of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. This overconfidence is evident in General George H. Decker's alleged assurance to Kennedy that 'any good soldier can handle guerrillas'.²⁹ Kennedy, who had a greater appreciation for the complexities of counter-insurgency warfare than Decker, nevertheless suffered from the same confidence. His speech to West Point graduates, as noted earlier, is filled with such conviction.

²⁸ DAFM, *Counterinsurgency Forces*, p. 96.

²⁹ Lloyd Norman & John B. Spore, 'Big Push in Guerrilla Warfare', *Army* (Washington D.C., March 1962).

How the Army Built its Counter-Insurgency Doctrine

U.S. Army officers approached the building of counter-insurgency doctrine in the early 1960s with great self-belief. Counter-insurgency was a problem which the Army, with its victorious leaders and advanced resources, could solve. All that was required was determining the correct methods to apply. Doctrine was constructed primarily through the use of historical examples. By studying historical examples and identifying what methods worked, then a successful theory could be created. The U.S. Army in the 1960s approached counter-insurgency in this manner, by determining examples that worked from previous conflicts and then assembling them into a theory. This approach had many drawbacks and little in the way of redeeming features.

The Pitfalls and Strengths of the Army's Approach

The Army's approach to counter-insurgency as a science meant that they viewed history in a similar manner. For instance, if population resettlement in the Malayan Emergency worked, then surely it would work in South Vietnam and starve the NLF of peasant support. The problem is that history is not a science. There are no laws of history. Therefore, what worked in one historical event would not necessarily work in another. Army officers ignored the unique context of the historical examples that they studied, failing to appreciate that this made it difficult to achieve success by replicating what happened in a different time and place.

The early 1960s was a time of faith in objective study and technology to produce results. The rise of limited war theory, the idea that adjustments in pressure could bend

an opponent to one's will, and systems analysis were signs of this time. Secretary of Defence Robert S. McNamara was the personification of theoretical and technological advancement. McNamara provided his expertise to the U.S. Army Air Forces (USAAF) during the Second World War, specialising in increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the bombing campaign. James William Gibson describes this as a period when "scientific" methods became popular within government where a 'deeply mechanistic world view emerged'.³⁰ This influenced attitudes towards counter-insurgency, which was seen as an issue that could be solved with the correct methods. Indeed, in official circles the RVN was often referred to as a 'laboratory' for counter-insurgency, emphasising what many saw as the scientific nature of the subject.³¹

The strength of this style of enquiry lay in the Army's development of small-unit tactics in counter-insurgency operations. These tactics evolve primarily due to changes in technology, not political, economic and social contexts. Moreover, small-unit tactics in conventional warfare share much in common with its counterpart in counter-insurgency warfare. Actions such as patrolling, reconnaissance and static security could be found in the Greek Civil War as well as in the Second World War. Therefore, there were lessons in tactical combat to be learned from examples like the Greek Civil War and Huk insurgency as well as from conventional wars.

In tactical engagements, with superior weaponry and training, the U.S. Army would generally triumph over weaker and poorly equipped guerrillas. Although guerrilla forces might escape, the Army would emerge as victors, at least in the sense that they

³⁰ James William Gibson, The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam (New York, 2000), p. 14.

³¹ Jack Raymond, 'Vietnam Gives U.S. 'War Laboratory'', New York Times (May 3, 1965).

were the force left standing on the field. If tactical battlefield victories had been the key to success in a counter-insurgency war, then the U.S. Army would have triumphed in South Vietnam. Even for all the Army's tactical advantages, guerrillas were often able to escape entrapment to fight another day, or just simply choose not to initiate contact. The key to success in counter-insurgency lay in a solution from the local government that addressed the fundamental political, social and economic structures that fuelled the guerrillas, thus making the Army's tactical superiority insignificant in the grander scheme. Moreover, despite the Army's expertise in tactical combat, they struggled to influence the ARVN with their methods. Those methods that did gain traction with the ARVN, namely fire support, negatively impacted the RVN's anti-NLF campaign.

The Advisory Presence

One of the journalists writing about the American military advisers in the RVN during the early 1960s was Daniel Ford. His account of his experiences, called *The Only War We've Got: Early Days in South Vietnam* (2001), describes not only his own optimism, but also that of many of the advisers and other officials whom he met.³² The advisory presence, which grew significantly under President Kennedy to 16,000, occurred at the same time as doctrinal reform. Not only did the number of advisers increase, but so did their responsibilities, with many joining ARVN units on operations and participating in combat. With American military and civilian officials regarding the RVN's nascent insurgency as a 'laboratory' for counter-insurgency, the results of the experiment were not heartening.

³² Daniel Ford, *The Only War We've Got: Early Days in South Vietnam* (Durham, NH, 2012)

John Paul Vann was a personification of American confidence in the early 1960s. Neil Sheehan described Vann as the manifestation of the 'faith and optimism of post-World War II America that any challenge could be overcome by will and by the disciplined application of intellect, technology, money, and, when necessary, armed force'.³³ Vann arrived in the RVN in 1962, eventually being posted to the fertile and populous Delta region as adviser to Colonel Huynh Van Cao's 7th ARVN Division. He and his team of advisers crafted an ambitious plan to deny the NLF control of the Delta's people and resources. However, Vann and his subordinates did not consider failure, and unsurprisingly ran into numerous problems as well as an impressively adaptive foe. They discovered that confidence and technological superiority was not enough to defeat an insurgency.

A Glimpse of Doctrinal Weaknesses

The ARVN 7th Division was responsible for the northern part of the Delta, which consisted of around 2 million people. Vann's plan for victory was to go on the offensive as soon as possible, seize the initiative from the NLF and strike at enemy main force units. American helicopters would be used to chase the NLF and force them into engagements from which they could not escape.³⁴ The NLF would be denied safety at night, with the ARVN and their American advisers initiating night operations.³⁵ To increase the effectiveness of the 7th Division, Vann and his staff assumed control of the unit through stealth by placing advisers at lower levels in the division and through the

³³ Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York, 1989), p. 5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

manipulation of Cao and his subordinates.³⁶ Also, ARVN forces received extra training from American advisers on a regular basis.³⁷

Vann's strategy correlated with some of the thinking on counter-insurgency flowing through the Army during this period. The idea of using the mobility and reach of helicopters to search and destroy guerrillas was one that had gained currency, and there appeared to be historical precedent for it. Robert K. Sawyer's August 1961 piece on the conflicts in Mexico from 1910 to 1919 seemed to confirm the success of rapid cavalry attacks in hunting guerrilla bands, with infantry defending lines of communication and important outposts.³⁸ The U.S. Army's counter-insurgency manual encouraged rapid offensives to destroy guerrilla forces. In regard to using airmobile forces, the counter-insurgency manual argued that continuous pressure can be brought to bear to 'entrap and destroy guerrilla forces and to deny support to those forces'.³⁹

The first-time Vann put his plan into practice, it produced results that impressed everyone, including Cao, who happily took the credit. Airmobile troops had flushed a force of guerrillas into open territory where superior firepower and air support were brought to bear. The NLF dead amounted to 95, with 24 taken prisoner, including a battalion commander, and 33 weapons seized.⁴⁰ Soon, Vann had penetrated the division's command levels with advisers and ran it as an American unit behind the scenes, allowing Cao to take the credit. It looked as if everything would be well.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 53.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 55.

³⁸ Robert K. Sawyer, 'Viva Villa!', Military Review, Vol. XLI, No. 8, (August, 1961), p. 65.

³⁹ DAFM, Counterinsurgency Forces, pp. 47-48.

⁴⁰ Sheehan, A Bright Shining Lie, pp. 52-53.

After a short period, things began to unravel for Vann who became increasingly frustrated at his inability to break the back of the NLF in the northern Delta. The American advisers to the 7th Division soon discovered an unwillingness among ARVN officers and soldiers to expose themselves to risk. Indeed, during an operation to destroy a significant portion of the NLF's forces, an ARVN officer refused to advance into battle. In addition, Cao often stonewalled Vann's attempts to operate at night, again due to the fear of casualties, particularly those of American advisers.⁴¹ ARVN officers' aversion to high casualties was due to their aspiration to climb the career ladder, which appeared to be a higher priority for them than defeating the NLF. Diem ordered that high casualties were to be avoided, possibly for fear of sparking another coup attempt, and his officers complied for the chance at promotion.⁴² The advisers, trained and educated to assist the ARVN in counter-insurgency, found that the of the situation differed greatly from their expectations.

Vann and his team's experiences were not unique. Other advisers, sharing the same optimism, experienced similar frustrations. Martin J. Dockery volunteered for service as an adviser and arrived in 1962 believing that the American effort to help South Vietnam overcome the NLF was a worthy cause.⁴³ His experience was similar to Vann's time with the 7th Division, in that it culminated in disappointment and disillusionment. Arriving in South Vietnam with belief in the mission and a strong desire to assist his Vietnamese counterparts, Dockery soon found the situation to be different from what he had expected.

⁴¹ Ibid, pp. 91-98

⁴² Ibid, pp. 121-122.

⁴³ Martin J. Dockery, Lost in Translation: Vietnam: A Combat Advisor's Story (New York, 2003), pp. 10-11.

Dockery was meant to be a member of a team advising a battalion in the Delta. However, due to personnel shortages he worked alone and struggled to integrate with the Vietnamese soldiers and their culture. His focus quickly shifted to surviving his tour of duty and he only filed one report while there, without any repercussions, despite the requirement to inform his superiors with regular updates. He concluded that the purpose of his presence as an adviser was to reaffirm the American commitment to South Vietnam and that the advising was of secondary importance. He was entirely reliant on the ARVN for his well-being and security and often wondered if his superiors remembered he was there.⁴⁴

Dockery expected the training in the United States to prepare him for his role as an adviser. The language training was rudimentary, providing just enough to allow him to fulfil his role. Strangely, he learned the Vietnamese word for 'igloo', and remarks that 'This should have been a tip-off that the training was imperfect.'⁴⁵ Training also covered small-unit tactics, but the instruction on Vietnamese culture was flawed, leaving advisers inadequately prepared in culture and language. This lack of cultural instruction made it very difficult for Dockery and other advisers to develop an understanding and close relationship with their ARVN counterparts.

The doctrinal literature on advising was inadequate. It was not a representation of the reality Dockery and other advisers faced, and much of the instruction seemed vague and nonsensical. For instance, one guide issued to him stated that advisers should

⁴⁴ Ibid, pp. 27-28 & 40.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 12.

‘Avoid making recommendations that lead to decisions.’⁴⁶ Nor did Dockery’s training or manuals anticipate that his ARVN counterpart would ignore him more often than not. Dockery’s advisee, Captain Beng, resented the presence of an American officer who was much younger, of lower rank and had little understanding of Vietnam. Captain Beng would listen to Dockery and then ‘smile, nod, mumble something and walk away’.⁴⁷ Beng was not interested in American advice, and Dockery had no idea how to overcome what was effectively an impassable obstruction.

Army counter-insurgency doctrine, developed through an American Cold War view and in a comfortable office many miles from South Vietnam, bore little resemblance to the reality faced by advisers. The authors of doctrinal manuals assumed many things, neglecting to consider failure. There were no instructions for advisers who found that their counterparts were not willing to listen and who often considered survival or personal ascendancy more important. Advising was only one part of counter-insurgency, but the problems were grave, and a clear indication that not all was going to be well.

Small-Unit Tactics: The Strength of Army Counter-Insurgency

Despite the obstacles in Dockery’s way, he remained determined to pass on knowledge he believed could benefit Captain Beng and his battalion. He identified small-unit tactics as a weakness in the ARVN. While out on operations with the battalion, he witnessed methods that made Beng and his men more vulnerable to attack,

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 26.

⁴⁷ Ibid, pp. 37-38.

with the potential for heavy casualties. Beng's battalion would move on operations with the point guard, the group that were supposed to detect ambushes, too close to the main body of troops. The battalion would also advance without regard for effective cover or concealment in a formation that left it easy prey for any ambushing NLF force.

Dockery tried to get Beng to heed his advice by asking why the battalion operated in ways that made it easy for the NLF to attack.⁴⁸ Beng tended to ignore his questioning.

The Army's years of experience with small-unit combat was demonstrated clearly with less conventional ARVN units like the Civilian Irregular Defence Group (CIDG). The CIDG programme was an effort established in the early 1960s to train the ethnic peoples that populated the Highlands into an effective irregular force to combat the NLF. These minorities, known collectively as 'Montagnards', were trained by U.S. Army Special Forces detachments that started to arrive in the RVN in late 1961. The Special Forces, known as the 'Green Berets', were originally formed to act as guerrillas behind enemy lines in a conventional war.

Flexible Response expanded the responsibilities of the Special Forces to include counter-insurgency. By February 1962, Special Forces detachments were in operation in the Highlands, organising the Montagnards and training them in defence, strike missions, and community projects. Initial experiments proved successful, with Montagnards displaying enthusiasm and skill fighting against NLF guerrillas.⁴⁹ Soon after, the CIDG programme was expanded across the Central Highlands.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 38.

⁴⁹ Francis John Kelly, U.S. Army Special Forces, 1961-1971 (Washington D.C., 1989), p. 32.

The U.S. Army's influence on ARVN small-unit tactics was not entirely positive. Indeed, one drawback outweighed any benefits on small-unit procedures. ARVN officers, unwilling to risk taking casualties which could damage their careers, embraced the fire support American advisers were able to provide. The thousands of American military personnel in the RVN during the early 1960s included fire support assets, not just advisers. Rather than risk their lives in combat with the NLF, the ARVN unit would stop and request an air strike or artillery barrage from their American adviser. Vann believed the ARVN's reliance on firepower was detrimental to the war effort, killing peasants indiscriminately and destroying any hopes of building bridges between the people and the government.⁵⁰ The ARVN's appetite for firepower inhibited any attempt to build links with the people, and it developed a disastrous dependence on American support.

The ARVN, overall, performed poorly in the early 1960s while the NLF appeared to be ever ascendant, quickly adapting to the increasing American presence. This became abundantly clear at the Battle of Ap Bac in January 1963. Vann watched an ARVN force with American equipment, including APCs and advisers, suffer a defeat that, on paper, should not have happened. Vann and Dockery recognised tactical weaknesses with the ARVN and attempted to rectify them, but these efforts often failed. They, and other advisers, struggled to understand why the ARVN could not match the NLF in motivation and dedication. The American military advisers found themselves in the midst of a civil war, and not the Cold War insurgency they had been trained and expected to fight.

⁵⁰ Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, pp. 108-112.

Conclusion

American confidence was at its peak in the 1960s, and the U.S. Army's counter-insurgency doctrine reflected this. The Cold War context was also detrimental to the Army's development of counter-insurgency theory. The Army constructed their doctrine around the belief that the states requiring assistance were weak because of external interference, rather than an inherent instability. This idea would prove to be fatal.

The U.S. Army would provide military forces, material assistance and American expertise that would allow states battling insurgencies, supported by external powers, to become effective and triumph. By 1965, the doctrine that was emerging reflected these lines. The *Counterinsurgency Forces* manual stated that a major objective of American policy was to 'thwart further communist inroads into non-communist areas by safeguarding and assisting the less developed nations in fulfilling their aspirations to remain free.'⁵¹ The manual went on to claim that few of these nations were aware of the 'insidious nature of the threat posed by communist subversion' and how to deal with it.⁵² The Army's main job was to 'provide additional resources and capabilities' to augment the local government's efforts.⁵³

Army counter-insurgency forces deploying to a nation would consist of a 'Special Action Force' (SAF) and larger regular forces to provide the main combat capability

⁵¹ DAFM, *Counterinsurgency Forces*, p. 3.

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 4.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 4.

against an insurgency with a high level of violence. A Special Action Force would be composed of Special Forces detachments, engineers, medical units, psychological warfare soldiers, civil affairs units, intelligence detachments, military police and troops from the Army Security Agency. The regular forces, although combat was their primary purpose, would also be expected to mirror the missions of the SAF.⁵⁴

Army counterinsurgency strategy consisted of training local forces, providing intelligence and propaganda capabilities, establishing basic medical assistance for the people, aiding local security organs and running civic action programmes. In theory, this strategy would provide security and win the loyalty of the people for the beleaguered government. The combat element was only to perform tactical missions in a host country under exceptional circumstances. Moreover, local government military units were to be integrated into Army organisations to build ‘self-sufficiency’.⁵⁵ This was perhaps a fair assumption in theory, but it effectively amounted to absorbing local forces into the American command structure and left the United States open to charges of neo-colonialism.

Instructions for combat units consisted of conflicting philosophies. In one instance, artillery units were advised to use their communication equipment to help in civic action by linking remote settlements to the central government. In contrast, one section stated that guerrillas in developed areas would be treated in ‘the same manner as hostile troops’.⁵⁶ In other words, they were to be assaulted and destroyed through the use of heavy firepower. Of course, the Army did not expect to use such levels of force unless

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 16.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 46.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 57.

the insurgency had reached the final stage.⁵⁷ However, this assumed that insurgencies were universal and followed one model of development, which was not to be the case in the RVN.

The experiences of the Army's advisers in the RVN revealed problems with counter-insurgency doctrine. Instructions were vague, confusing, contradictory and did not envisage problems or failure. The U.S. Army, because of its Second World War successes and its growing confidence in the early 1960s, assumed victory in a counter-insurgency campaign was an inevitability. All that mattered was developing the correct doctrine and applying the necessary resources.

The U.S. Army did recognise that political, economic and social factors in a counter-insurgency campaign were important if it was to be successful. The issue was that the Army did not understand these factors in-depth or their role in creating and sustaining an insurgency. Even if they had understood the problems, they did not possess the necessary resources to effectively address them. The insurgency in the RVN was complex, had deep historical roots and did not lend itself to simple solutions like the ones stipulated in the Army's field manuals. The strategy of *dau tranh* was a formidable combination of politics and violence and unique to the NLF and its circumstances. These factors were simply not understood by the majority of American military and government officials, which would become evident as the American phase of the war progressed from 1965.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 56.

The U.S. Army and Counter-Insurgency, 1965-1968

Reflecting on a photograph of his counter-insurgency training in the early 1960s, Philip Caputo laments that ‘we were little more than overgrown kids playing soldier, but, judging from our grim expressions, we must have thought it serious business’.¹ Caputo, a Marine Corps platoon commander, simulated counter-insurgency warfare in the ‘jungles’ of Virginia by laying ambushes and encircling pretend guerrillas. By 1965, counter-insurgency had become a firm interest of aspiring military careerists. Caputo described a few of his classmates as counter-insurgency ‘cultists’ and the instruction as having been far from stimulating. Caputo remarked that his fellow officers acted like medical students, studying as much as they could because ‘they thought it would make them better at their profession if and when the time came to practice it in earnest’.² He and his U.S. Army comrades arrived in the RVN in 1965 at the request of General William C. Westmoreland who led Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), unaware that their counter-insurgency instruction bore no resemblance to the war to come.

Starting with the Tonkin Gulf Incident in August 1964, the American role in the war rapidly escalated, leading to the arrival of Marines to protect Da Nang airbase in March 1965. Soon after, the American military assumed significant responsibility for the war effort. Many in the White House, including President Johnson, increasingly came to the

¹ Philip Caputo, A Rumour of War (London, 1999), p. 18.

² Ibid, pp. 17-18.

view that American forces, resources and leadership were required to save the RVN from succumbing to the NLF.

Following the attack on Pleiku on the night of 6 February 1965 which killed nine Americans, the President declared at a White House meeting that he had ‘kept his shotgun over the mantel and the bullets in the basement for a long time now’, and that no longer could he ask that military advisers continue to work without the ability to defend themselves.³ With American combat troops arriving to protect major bases and urban areas, MACV reported on 7 June that the crumbling ARVN and Saigon government required additional assistance to survive.⁴ The purpose of American troops changed from defence to offence, with the majority of those in government confident in the ability of the U.S. Army to win. Indeed, in a 30 December 1964 telegram to Ambassador Taylor, Johnson stated that ‘We have been building our strength to fight this kind of war ever since 1961, and I myself am ready to substantially increase the number of Americans in Vietnam if it is necessary to provide this kind of fighting force against the Viet Cong.’⁵

From 1961, Army officers built a doctrine guided by over-confidence, assumptions and the experience of the Cold War. Escalation of the American role in South Vietnam put the new counter-insurgency doctrine to the test, which made clear its basic flaws. Civic action programmes and measures to protect the rural population failed to address

³ Document 77. Memorandum for the Record, Washington, February 6, 1965, FRUS 1964-1968, Vol. II, January-June 1965, pp. 158-160.

⁴ David Kaiser, American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson and the Origins of the Vietnam War (Cambridge, MA, 2000), pp. 440-441.

⁵ Document 477. Telegram From the President to the Ambassador in Vietnam (Taylor), December 30, 1964, FRUS 1964-1968, Vol. I, Vietnam, 1964, p. 1059.

the South Vietnamese government's chronic political, economic and social problems, as well as its poor standing with the peasantry. Obstacles in the form of culture and language made it difficult for the Americans to gain the acceptance and trust of the Vietnamese.

The war also shattered the Army's confidence in technology, firepower and statistical analysis after they failed to help achieve victory. The Vietnamese Revolution posed insurmountable problems for the U.S. Army. Its contradictory strategy of combining a war of destruction against the enemy's main forces while simultaneously supporting the pacification of the countryside failed to help its ally. The U.S. Army's experience of fighting in the quagmire of South Vietnam resulted in the cleansing of counter-insurgency from its doctrine following a bittersweet withdrawal in 1973, with Saigon falling to Communist forces two years later.

The Failure of U.S. Army Counter-Insurgency Doctrine

Considering the problems in Army counter-insurgency doctrine, the strength of the NLF and the political, economic and social ills of the RVN, the Army's counter-insurgency doctrine had no realistic chance to succeed. The Vietnam War showed that the Army's assumption that historical methods of counter-insurgency would work in any context was incorrect. Additionally, the Army's understanding of the role played by political, economic and social factors in an insurgency was superficial. Its grasp of Vietnamese culture and language fared no better, exacerbating the execution of an already flawed doctrine. The war also made obvious a significant problem in counter-

insurgency doctrine, the fatal contradiction between the Army's desire to combine an aggressive spirit utilising its military superiority with attempts to win the 'hearts and minds' of the people.

By late 1965, Westmoreland had formed a basic strategy that reflected the Army's counter-insurgency doctrine. In a 17 September 1965 document distributed to officers under his command, Westmoreland stated that the war was both political and military in nature because 'the ultimate goal is to regain the loyalty and cooperation of the people, and to create conditions which permit the people to go about their normal lives in peace and security'. Westmoreland went on to add that large parts of South Vietnam were under NLF control, necessitating the 'application of U.S. military force'.⁶

Westmoreland's strategy was to use the American battalions at his disposal to destroy the enemy's base areas and main forces while supporting the rebuilding of the South Vietnamese government's rural position. Civic action programmes, population security measures and cooperation with the South Vietnamese would play key roles in Westmoreland's counter-insurgency strategy.

Civic Action

Edward Lansdale's success with civic action in the Philippines during the 1950s made a significant impact on many Army officers, leading it to become an established part of counter-insurgency doctrine. Consequently, civic action formed part of the strategy for defeating the NLF and rallying the people to the RVN. When the 1st

⁶ William C. Westmoreland 'General William Westmoreland, directive to U.S. commanders, 17 September 1965' in Michael Hunt, ed, A Vietnam War Reader: American and Vietnamese Perspectives (London, 2010), pp. 89-90.

Infantry Division arrived in July 1965, Westmoreland instructed them to work with the South Vietnamese on civic action.⁷ Additionally, at a 24 April 1966 conference in Nha Trang, Westmoreland told his officers to ‘set the example and encourage the Vietnamese’ on civic action, which would ‘do much to boost revolutionary development’.⁸ Westmoreland frequently reminded his subordinates at these conferences of the importance of civic action and good relations with the Vietnamese.

The 9th Infantry Division extensively utilised civic action programmes in its area of responsibility. The division arrived in December 1966 and began operations in the populated and rice producing Mekong Delta region in January the following year. The division was posted to the Mekong Delta to support the South Vietnamese government’s pacification efforts.⁹ The division earned a South Vietnamese medal for their work in civic action and Ira Hunt, who served as an officer with the unit, writes with pride that the 9th completed their mission successfully in July 1969.¹⁰ Hunt makes this claim based on the combination of civic action and the relentless pursuit of enemy forces which produced results that were quantifiable through statistical analysis.

The NLF was a powerful military, political, economic and social force, and civic action formed a portion of the effort to nullify their non-military programmes. The civic action projects implemented by the 9th Infantry Division in the Mekong Delta included psychological operations to win the ‘hearts and minds’ of the local

⁷ Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland’s War* (Oxford, 2014), p. 99.

⁸ Report, Office of Information - Extracts of Remarks by Gen. Westmoreland Relating to NonCombatant Casualties - Record of MACV Part 1, undated, Folder 0590, Box 0006, VAC, VCA, TTU, <<https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=F015800060590>>

⁹ Ira A. Hunt Jr., *The 9th Infantry Division in Vietnam: Unparalleled and Unequalled* (Lexington, KY, 2010), p. 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 1.

Vietnamese, assistance to civilians injured in battles, basic medical aid, education programmes and the construction and repair of infrastructure.¹¹ According to Hunt, the most effective civic action programme was the Medical Civic Action Programme (MEDCAP). The MEDCAP consisted of a team of medics with infantry for protection. These teams travelled throughout the area, providing basic medical assistance to villages, sometimes remaining overnight to deny NLF cadres access to the people. Aside from generating goodwill towards the RVN, the assistance provided by the MEDCAPs would encourage villagers to provide the visiting American soldiers with intelligence on NLF movements.¹²

The lack of Vietnamese speakers was a significant barrier to the MEDCAP mission. It made the job of the medics more difficult; they often struggled to diagnose the ailments of villagers. Nor could the Army units gather intelligence from the locals on NLF activity, and if an interpreter was available and intelligence was passed on, its authenticity could not always be verified. Elijah Taylor, who was drafted in 1966 and trained as a medic, recalled that ‘We would give out some medicine, but there was a language barrier.’ Taylor believed the MEDCAP programme did some good, but nothing capable of dislodging the NLF’s political hold on the villages.¹³ While the provision of basic medical aid was probably welcomed, it is difficult to envisage such a minor act changing the tide of rural politics.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 87.

¹² Ibid, pp. 89-90.

¹³ Elijah Taylor in Andrew Wiest, ed, Vietnam: A View from the Front Lines (Oxford, 2012), pp. 121-122.

David Donovan, who served as a lieutenant in the Mekong Delta, recalled the problems he encountered in trying to win the trust of the Vietnamese. Donovan's experience of the war differed from the majority, as he spent his tour with a Mobile Advisory Team (MAT). Rather than leading a regular Army unit, Donovan commanded a four-man team, wore an ARVN uniform, held an ARVN rank and lived in the villages of Kien Phong province.

The job of the MAT was to assist villages with military and civic issues. Upon his arrival to his assigned unit, Donovan asked his colleagues about the ways in which the MAT helped villages with civic problems. His colleagues replied that village chiefs were unconvinced by American pleas to request aid from Saigon because 'from past experience' they knew that the government did not 'give a damn about them'.¹⁴ When Donovan made it into the field, he experienced these frustrations first-hand. A basic objective of the MAT was to establish friendly relations with the local Vietnamese, which was not an easy task. Donovan recalled a feeling of joy at what appeared to be acceptance by one local because 'There were just too many slips to be made, too many oversights to be misconstrued, and too many attitudes to be changed for real acceptance to come easily.'¹⁵

Donovan's elation at gaining some acceptance from a local peasant, as well as the villager's contempt for the government, reveals the mountainous challenges the U.S. Army faced in South Vietnam. It is a fair assumption that if merely getting along with locals was a major goal that was difficult to achieve, then influencing their political

¹⁴ Daniel Donovan, Once a Warrior King: Memories of an Officer in Vietnam (London, 2005), p. 62.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 304.

allegiance was virtually impossible. A foreign military force imposing itself in villages was unlikely to change the attitudes of locals towards their government. At best, the MAT teams could create a friendship with someone they met regularly, but their temporary presence would not change the political, economic or social dynamics of rural life.

The 9th Infantry Division conducted civic action programmes that constructed schools, roads, and even playgrounds for children in an attempt to improve rural life. The programmes aimed to meet this goal by having the villagers provide their labour for these projects. A report from the 9th Infantry Division noted problems with self-help civic action construction schemes. One issue was the reluctance of villagers to work on an American and South Vietnamese project, partly for fear of NLF retaliation, as their security could not be guaranteed. Members of the village militia were also reluctant to volunteer their labour, believing their job was to defend the village. Despite the protestations of the villagers and the militia, their participation was provided either ‘voluntarily or by order of the chief’.¹⁶ In other words, the villagers were dragooned into these projects if they did not volunteer. The practice of forced labour obviously created a degree of resentment. It was also reminiscent of French imperial rule and earlier initiatives such as the *agrovilles*, which fostered animosity between the peasants and the government.¹⁷

¹⁶ Operations Report - Lessons Learned, HQ 9th Infantry Division, 1 May - 31 July 1967, 17 January 1968, Folder 6, Box 1, Michael J. Allums Collection, VCA, TTU, <<https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=22830106001>>, pp. 53-54.

¹⁷ Joseph J. Zasloff, ‘Rural Resettlement in South Viet Nam: The Agrovillage Program’, *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 35, No. 4, (Winter 1962-1963), pp. 334-335.

The Army's civic action initiatives merely addressed some of the superficial conditions of the people, and therefore was not a viable alternative to the NLF's political, economic and social policies. The lack of medical care or village infrastructure were not factors which influenced peasant support of the NLF. The U.S. Army's civic action efforts, unlike *dau tranh*, did not provide solutions to the fundamental political, economic and social grievances of the peasantry. The responsibility for providing solutions to those grievances lay with the South Vietnamese government, and their feeble attempts made no headway among a population they had already alienated years before.

Population Resettlement and Security

Partly inspired by the British counter-insurgency model used in Malaya, methods of securing the population from guerrilla interference were included in the U.S. Army's counter-insurgency doctrine. The RVN, with American support, would move peasants into villages that offered some form of security from NLF attack or infiltration. The basic idea of these villages was that physical separation of the people from the guerrillas would help create security, deny the NLF resources and allow the government to establish a lasting presence. What had worked well in Malaya, and brought the British success, did not have the same results in South Vietnam.

The U.S. Army's doctrine described the separation of the population from the guerrillas as a 'serious course of action in a counter-insurgency battle'.¹⁸ The ramifications of coercing people from their homes or creating high numbers of refugees

¹⁸ DAFM, Counterinsurgency Forces, p. 98.

with an escalation of violence were given scant attention in doctrine. *Counterinsurgency Forces* did pose the question to commanders on how they could convince the people to accept such measures but provided no solutions or insights. Doctrine appeared to assume that the people would be naturally anti-communist and wish to serve what the Army expected to be a legitimate government. The U.S. Army's involvement in the resettlement of internal refugees into secure villages made these flaws clear.

While the strategic hamlet programme effectively ended with the assassination of Diem and Nhu in November 1963, it reappeared in various guises from 1964 onwards. Although the name changed, for example with 'New Life Hamlets', the programme was essentially the same with the purpose of providing a village secure from the NLF. U.S. Army units were used to move people from their ancestral lands to these strategic hamlets, while they were not often directly ordered, the destructive war around the countryside often left no realistic alternative. Indeed, in Dinh Tuong province, a questionnaire of refugees showed the centrality of the war in forcing them to move from their homes. Of those questioned, 88.9 per cent cited American and ARVN operations as factors in their move.¹⁹ The escalation of violence in the countryside displaced an estimated 4 million people, around 25 per cent of the population, from their villages.²⁰ Unsurprisingly, the loss of homes and ancestral lands generated resentment and anger among the peasantry.

¹⁹ Field Research Memorandum No. 6: The Refugee Situation in Dinh Tuong Province, August 1967, Folder 03, Box 31, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 - Refugees and Civilian Casualties, VCA, TTU, <<https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2223103004>>, p. 14.

²⁰ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York, 2002), p. 197.

One report described the problems caused by the Army's work around the resettlement hamlet of Van Son in Khanh Hai village. As a way of improving transportation links, the Army built a bridge over a nearby river, which disrupted the irrigation system causing the rice fields to become flooded. The flooded fields ruined the livelihoods of the peasants, and further destruction was possible if rainfall was going to be heavy, which would lead to the flooding of homes.²¹ The people of Khanh Hai and the newly resettled people of Van Son became frustrated with the situation and complained to the Americans that even during the days of colonialism, the French-built projects did not destroy parts of the village.²² The resources of the Americans and South Vietnamese fell far short of the scale of the refugee problem. The number of resettlements was too few, and the new villages or hamlets were inadequate to make amends. The result was the appearance of shanty towns filled with refugees near the urban centres of South Vietnam. According to the historian George C. Herring, these shanty towns became 'fertile breeding grounds for insurgent fifth columns'.²³

U.S. Army units also helped resettle peasants into new villages, linking American forces with another painful experience of the war. Perhaps the most well-known and biggest relocation took place during Operation Cedar Falls (January 1967) at the village of Ben Suc. Ben Suc was situated in the NLF stronghold known as the 'Iron Triangle' and the purpose of Operation Cedar Falls was to eliminate this stronghold. On 8 January thousands of soldiers launched the operation into the Iron Triangle which enemy forces had already evacuated. During the operation, the 3,500 residents of Ben

²¹ Report on Khanh Hai Village at Thanh Hai District, Ninh Thuan Province, 20 October 1967, Folder 22, Box 18, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 06 - Democratic Republic of Vietnam, VCA, TTU, <<https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2321822004>>, pp. 11-12.

²² Ibid, p. 12.

²³ Herring, *America's Longest War*, p. 197.

Suc were forcibly removed from their village and relocated elsewhere. While the relocation was already a bad experience, it was made worse by heavy-handed treatment, resulting in a great piece of propaganda for the NLF.²⁴ The village and base areas surrounding it were then systematically destroyed and turned into a free-fire zone, meaning the people of Ben Suc would not be able to return to their ancestral lands for the duration of the war. After a few weeks, the NLF reoccupied the area of Ben Suc, making the operation and the disruption to the villagers worthless.

Cooperation with the ARVN

Army doctrine was based on the understanding that the government they were assisting had to be at the forefront of efforts to defeat the insurgency. Army strategy reflected this belief, although in practice effective cooperation was difficult and the increased American military involvement introduced further problems for the weak government in Saigon. Differences in language and culture provided complications in working with the ARVN, often frustrating their American counterparts and creating a cautious attitude among Americans to working with the South Vietnamese. As with other aspects of counter-insurgency doctrine, these were hurdles that the Army failed to envisage.

The U.S. Army's 25th Infantry Division was deployed near Saigon during January 1966, establishing a base camp at Cu Chi, which was the site of an extensive enemy tunnel network housing soldiers, hospitals and supplies. The 25th Infantry Division

²⁴ James Westheider, Fighting in Vietnam: The Experiences of the U.S. Soldier (Mechanicsburg, PA, 2011), pp. 18-19.

operated in the densely populated province of Hau Nghia. Furthermore, the government presence in the province had been significantly weakened in the preceding years, making the 25th Infantry Division the primary force holding back the NLF. These reasons necessitated greater American involvement with the RVN's pacification programmes in the province.

Greater American participation in the pacification of Hau Nghia also meant a closer relationship with ARVN units. The main ARVN unit in Hau Nghia province was the 25th ARVN Division, which was still reeling from the political intrigues of Saigon in the preceding years, as well as problems with low morale and desertions, all of which hampered any attempts to pacify the province. *Counterinsurgency Forces* did not envisage such issues, instead concerning itself with issues of organisation, and encouraging Army officers to explore whether American methods would increase the efficiency of local forces.²⁵ For officers of the 25th Infantry Division, it would quickly become apparent that cooperation with the ARVN was a constant struggle.

A lack of cultural awareness, no common language, no empathy for the circumstances of the ARVN soldier and military ineffectiveness in comparison to the NLF made a close and positive cooperation with the South Vietnamese military an elusive goal. Many Americans held low opinions of their ARVN counterparts. Thomas Giltner, who led a platoon, quickly learned not to trust reports from an ARVN unit. Sweeps in Hau Nghia would involve the ARVN going through an area with the Americans following a short time later. An ARVN report of 'no contact' could not be

²⁵ DAFM, *Counterinsurgency Forces*, p. 18.

trusted, as Giltner remarked: ‘We soon learned that these ARVN sweeps either never occurred or they were “search and avoid” missions.’²⁶

Tensions were inevitable when American soldiers could not communicate with their ARVN counterparts or understand their struggles. The American soldier in South Vietnam served for one year before being discharged. In contrast, the ARVN soldier fought for the duration of the war. When American combat forces arrived in 1965, many had been fighting for years. Moreover, the life of a soldier in the ARVN was tough in comparison with that of a soldier in the U.S. Army. An ARVN soldier made only half of what a common labourer earned. Nor did this pay rise with rapid inflation, which made it a struggle to purchase even basic goods.²⁷ As a consequence of these issues, ARVN soldiers would steal food from villages, which horrified American advisers who argued that such acts damaged pacification, because they would alienate the people from the government.²⁸ Ironically, MACV’s destructive battles against the NLF’s main forces, which killed civilians and obliterated homes, most definitely had a greater negative impact on the effectiveness of pacification than ARVN soldiers stealing some chickens.²⁹

U.S. Army doctrine left commanders woefully underprepared for the pitfalls and complexities of cooperating with an allied military battling an insurgency. Since doctrine assumed that developing states were weak because of Communist-bloc interference, it was thus further assumed that the military being assisted would still be a

²⁶ Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, p. 227.

²⁷ Brigham, *ARVN*, pp. 60-61.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 58.

²⁹ Hunt, *Pacification*, p. 187.

viable force to cooperate with, and the American presence would have a positive impact. Therefore, counter-insurgency doctrine did not contemplate other possibilities. The RVN, however, was fundamentally flawed and the ARVN reflected the state it served. Additionally, the Army's lack of Vietnamese culture and language training exacerbated cooperation problems as it made communication and empathy with ARVN soldiers difficult. Rather than making the ARVN more effective, the large presence of American combat soldiers made charges of neo-imperialism easy and undermined the independence and confidence of the South Vietnamese, who were so obviously dependent on the United States for survival.

The Failure of Superior Technology, Firepower and Statistical Analysis

The U.S. Army's confidence in its ability to prosecute counter-insurgency warfare was partly the result of its advantages in technology, firepower and statistical analysis. One of the most important technological advances was the introduction of the helicopter. The helicopter with its range and mobility was supposed to make guerrilla forces vulnerable to attack almost anywhere, and at short notice. Meanwhile, statistical analysis gauged the progress of the fighting, and the pacification of the countryside. The number of enemy soldiers killed and the number of villages secured would show the Americans the effectiveness of their efforts. The helicopter and air mobility, however, proved to be no 'silver bullet' for defeating guerrillas. Nor did statistical analysis provide insight into the war, instead reflecting the Army's preconceived notions on the important factors in counter-insurgency warfare.

The Helicopter and Air Mobility

Arguably the most visible sign of the Army's technological prowess was the use of helicopters. Not only could helicopters move units, but they could also scout for enemy forces and armed variants could bring heavy firepower to bear. The helicopter also led to the creation of the air-mobile division during the early 1960s, spurred on by McNamara. The 1st Cavalry Division, activated in 1965, could move all its subordinate units by helicopter. The 1st Cavalry Division's order to the RVN was announced by President Johnson on 28 July, with the commanding officer stating that 'I have no misgivings whatever about the ability of this division to perform superbly in Vietnam in any way that may be required'.³⁰ However, helicopters and the supposed advantages they provided failed to live up to the Army's expectations.

In theory, air mobility was supposed to deny the advantages afforded to guerrillas fighting an army tied to the land. Air-mobile units could move swiftly, relentlessly pursuing or encircling guerrilla forces, denying them outside support and resulting in their elimination. Army doctrine regarding aviation in a counter-insurgency war identified the destruction of enemy forces and their isolation from outside support as key tactical advantages.³¹ Discussing the value of air-mobile forces in an article for the *Military Review*, Fred L. Walker Jr. stated that 'Not only do air-mobile units, with their vehicles, often become less vulnerable to enemy action, they also attain other tactical advantages of possibly sweeping significance.'³² Potential issues such as the inherent

³⁰ J. D. Coleman, *Air Cav: History of the 1st Cavalry Division in Vietnam 1965-1969* (New York, 2011), p. 12.

³¹ DAFM, *FM 1-100 Army Aviation* (Washington D.C., 1963), p. 47.

³² Fred L. Walker Jr., 'Are Air-Mobile Forces Vulnerable?', *Military Review*, Vol. XLIV, No. 10, (October, 1964), p. 28.

difficulty of locating enemy guerrillas in densely covered areas, or trying to make contact with a force that did not want to seek battle, were not considered. Additionally, Walker's assertion that air-mobile units were less vulnerable to enemy action was a hasty one. The U.S. Army's confidence in their superiority over less-technologically advanced groups contributed to a catastrophic underestimation of the abilities of the NLF.

The war brought the problems with helicopters and air mobility to light. Despite the Army's significant air-mobile forces, their supposed advantages never dealt the enemy war effort a crippling blow. Additionally, the main forces of the NLF and North Vietnamese developed measures to cope with the Army's air-mobility, resulting in high losses of soldiers and machines. Robert Mason, who was a helicopter pilot with the 1st Cavalry Division from 1965-1966, recalled many instances in which his UH-1 and others within his unit were shot down by shrewdly emplaced machine guns. During one flight to unload troops, enemy guns opened fire at the landing zone while the soldiers disembarked. The firing came from all sides, with the gunfire from the front and back out of reach of the UH-1's door gunners. Moreover, the enemy guns at the front covered the direction of the flight's egress route. As Mason's flight made a quick exit, more machine guns in the surrounding area began firing. As a result, the ambush damaged six out of eight helicopters in the flight and killed two crew members.³³

Robert Mason's unit and others in that area of operations had endured intense fire multiple times. 'This was their home, and they were thoroughly dug in', Mason wrote,

³³ Robert Mason, Chickenhawk (London, 1984), pp. 226-227.

adding that ‘No matter where we flew, we were shot at.’ In just two days, enemy action damaged 45 helicopters from Mason’s unit. Another unit in the area, which flew the larger Chinook, and had been relatively unharmed in the fierce Ia Drang battles in late 1965, suffered damage from enemy ground fire and lost ten pilots.³⁴ From 1 January 1961 to 31 December 1976, hostile and non-hostile action killed a total of 5,289 helicopter pilots, aircrew and passengers. The period from 1961 to 1971 saw a total of 4,642 helicopter losses.³⁵

Finding and Fixing Enemy Forces

Despite the help of the helicopter’s range and scouting potential, it was a difficult task to find and fix enemy forces, with the NLF only choosing to initiate contact when it was to their advantage, allowing them to control the level of casualties they sustained while slowly eroding American numbers and morale. The nature of the war was one of unforgiving brutality. Trying to clear enemy forces from areas to allow pacification to succeed, and attempting to destroy NLF and PAVN battalions time and time again, without much success, was a frustrating and demoralising experience. Bernard Edelman, who has interviewed veterans and studied their personal correspondence from the conflict, writes that ‘In this war without a front, a guerrilla war against a crafty and elusive enemy, a pervasive angst set in among the troops.’³⁶

Douglas Kinnard, who served with the U.S. Army in the RVN, conducted research in 1974 to gauge the opinions of generals who held commands during the war. Saigon’s

³⁴ Ibid, p. 228.

³⁵ Shelby L. Stanton, *Vietnam Order of Battle* (Mechanicsburg, PA, 2003), pp. 346-348.

³⁶ Bernard Edelman, ‘On the Ground: The US Experience’, in Andrew Wiest, ed, *Rolling Thunder in a Gentle Land: The Vietnam War Revisited* (Oxford, 2013), p. 178.

fall was still a year away, and the opinions of the two-thirds that responded to Kinnard's questionnaire would undoubtedly have changed after 1975. Nevertheless, by 1974 it was clear that the Army's counter-insurgency doctrine had failed, and the generals reflected on its flaws. On the campaign against the enemy's main forces, 58 per cent of respondents believed that the repeated search and destroy missions were unsound or became unsound as the war dragged on.³⁷ In a section dealing with the NLF and PAVN, one general commented that 'Giap could have gone on indefinitely. It was unwinnable the way we played it'.³⁸

The 25th Infantry Division's operations provide good examples of the futility American forces experienced trying to defeat the NLF. The 25th Infantry Division used a special tactic which exploited the Army's assets in air-mobility, in the hopes of breaking the enemy's back. Jerry Liucci, a soldier who served with the 25th Infantry Division, participated in operations where this special tactic was used. Essentially, units would be lifted into enemy strongholds to establish a defensive position, with the purpose of goading the enemy into attacking. The division used this tactic numerous times in the Ho Bo Woods, which Liucci described as 'Charlie's stronghold' and that the 'VC that you fought in the Ho Bo Woods were hard-core, fight-to-the-death kinds of characters'.³⁹ However, the methods used by the 25th Infantry Division failed to clear the Ho Bo Woods. Years later it remained an NLF stronghold, and American troops were still sent into the same woods using the same tactics, including Dan Vandenberg in

³⁷ Douglas Kinnard, The War Managers (Annapolis, MD, 1977), p. 45.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

³⁹ Eric M. Bergerud, Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning: The World of a Combat Division in Vietnam (New York, 1994), p. 139.

1969, in unsuccessful attempts to clear the area.⁴⁰ The enemy did usually respond to these incursions. However, their fortifications, ambushes and ability to break contact when under pressure kept their losses at a sustainable level.

The Army also tried to fix enemy forces, even if it could not see them, through the use of artillery fire. This tactic was known as 'harassment and interdiction fire' (H&I). Based on rough intelligence, the Army launched H&I fire missions at suspected enemy locations with the hope of forcing them into certain areas and eroding their morale through the fear of random death. The Army used almost half of its ammunition from 1966 to 1967 in H&I missions.⁴¹ The H&I concept suffered from major drawbacks, which outweighed any possible advantages. The high number of shells fired for H&I missions meant there was a risk of civilian casualties, regardless of any safety measures. In Long An province, H&I missions did cause some NLF and PAVN soldiers to surrender. However, the impact on the countryside and the peasants was far more devastating. Nevertheless, American and South Vietnamese officials considered H&I to be a good use of their superiority in technology and firepower, despite the damage it caused to pacification efforts.⁴²

Measuring Success - Statistical Analysis

The war in South Vietnam was a frontless war, where the allegiance of the rural population was the key goal. The U.S. Army recognised this and thus understood that progress in a counter-insurgency war had to be measured differently. The answer they

⁴⁰ Ibid, pp. 139-140.

⁴¹ John M. Hawkins, 'The Costs of Artillery: Eliminating Harassment and Interdiction Fire During the Vietnam War', *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 70, No. 1, (January, 2006), p. 91.

⁴² Race, *War Comes to Long An*, p. 236.

developed for measuring progress lay in statistical analysis, made popular by the Kennedy administration in the early 1960s and favoured by McNamara. Numbers based on things that could be measured dictated progress. If more and more villages were deemed secure, and more and more enemy soldiers killed, then surely the United States was winning the war.

Writing after the war in the 1970s, Westmoreland commented that ‘statistics, were, admittedly an imperfect system of measurement’.⁴³ The system was open to abuse as there was often no way of corroborating figures reported by American or RVN sources. Body counts would at times be inflated to meet unit targets or Vietnamese civilians killed in the crossfire would be counted as NLF, deliberately or mistakenly.

Kinnard’s study shows the problems Army generals had with the body count system. Of the generals surveyed, 55 per cent considered the kill ratio ‘a misleading device to estimate progress’, while 61 per cent stated that the body count was ‘often inflated’.⁴⁴ In his study on the methods used by the Army to measure progress, Daddis writes that manipulation of the body count was common due to the pressure from higher commands to demonstrate success. As reports went up the chain of command, the number of enemy said to have been killed tended to increase, exaggerating the effectiveness of American operations. This inevitably led to inflated body counts, at times by significant amounts. For instance, Daddis cites the body count following the

⁴³ William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York, 1976), p. 332.

⁴⁴ Kinnard, *War Managers*, pp. 74-75.

siege of the Special Forces camp at Pleiku, which was originally reported at 40 enemies killed, but became 400 when announced in Saigon.⁴⁵

Measuring the progress of rural pacification was the purpose of the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES). HES was launched in January 1967 to track the control of the 13,000 hamlets dotted across the provinces. Developed by the CIA, HES required American advisers to know their assigned hamlets intimately. Advisers were responsible for evaluating a diverse range of issues to determine the security of the hamlets and loyalties of the peasants that lived within them. The complication was that, as outsiders, the advisers were never going to have the intimate knowledge and trust of the hamlets that HES required. Moreover, analysing the security of a hamlet and the loyalties of its residents objectively was a task easier said than done.

The conditions of each hamlet were graded on 18 points divided into six categories. The grades ranged from 'A' to 'E', with the former being the best and the latter being the worst. These grades were then collected, processed, and the overall result determined the course of pacification in South Vietnam. Advisers were reliant on translators, due to their lack of Vietnamese language and cultural skills, and all too often officials merely told what they believed the Americans wanted to hear. Additionally, Army advisers struggled to understand an array of matters they had no expertise in, such as agriculture and taxes.⁴⁶ If an adviser did have doubts about the security of a hamlet and the attitudes of its people, they would not downgrade its status for fear of eliciting a harsh response from superiors who received a report that went against the grain of

⁴⁵ Gregory A. Daddis, No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War (Oxford, 2011), pp. 99-102.

⁴⁶ Daddis, No Sure Victory, p. 120.

optimism.⁴⁷ Indeed, before the Tet Offensive, HES figures indicated an upward trend in the security of South Vietnam's hamlets, hiding the major blow that was to follow.⁴⁸

Measuring progress by analysing the number of secure villages and enemy killed was a symptom of the Army's superficial understanding of the NLF's insurgency. Without a firm grasp of the political, social and economic dynamics of rural South Vietnam, the Army's attempts to measure progress through the pacification of hamlets did not reveal the actual state of the war. Aside from this fundamental problem, the HES had no way to ensure the reports met a universal standard. For instance, not all advisers shared the same definition of secure. By the end of the war, U.S. Army generals were still at a loss on methods to measure pacification. In Kinnard's survey, 75 per cent of generals that responded agreed that HES had problems but was 'about as good as could be devised'. Only 2 per cent believed HES was a good way of measuring progress in pacification.⁴⁹ In the war against NLF and PAVN main forces, the body count was inaccurate and meaningless to the causes of the conflict. As the war dragged on, and the Army slowly began to realise the quagmire it found itself in, they invested more in technology, organisational changes and analysis to make their existing efforts more effective, rather than question strategy. In short, the U.S. Army reinforced a failed counter-insurgency doctrine.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 120.

⁴⁸ Austin Long, On "Other War": Lessons from Five Decades of RAND Counterinsurgency Research (Santa Monica, CA, 2006), p. 40.

⁴⁹ Kinnard, War Managers, p. 108.

Proposed Alternatives

Studying the Vietnam War almost inevitably leads to the temptation of considering alternatives. What could have been done to ensure American victory and the survival of South Vietnam as a non-communist state? Many historians and scholars of the war have engaged in suggesting potential ‘what ifs’ that they argue would have changed the course of the war in the American favour. ‘What ifs’ should always be treated with a large degree of scepticism and considered within the context of the period, because the Vietnamese Revolution was a formidable political, economic, social and military problem that lay beyond easy answers. One common theme among the suggested possibilities is greater emphasis on counter-insurgency. However, the suggestions put forth would have encountered the same problems, because they did nothing to change the political, economic and social dynamics of the RVN.

The Marine Alternative - The Combined Action Platoon

The basis of one of the most cited alternatives comes from the USMC’s Combined Action Platoon (CAP) programme. John Ripley describes the CAP as representing a fundamental difference between how the USMC and U.S. Army saw the conflict and describes it as ‘one of the biggest ‘what-ifs’ of the Vietnam War’.⁵⁰ Ripley had a long and successful career in the Marines, winning the Navy Cross in 1972 for destroying a bridge under intense enemy fire, and became the director of the USMC History and Museums Division in 1999 following his retirement from active service in 1992.

Ripley’s account is not without bias and the high regard he shows for his former branch

⁵⁰ John Ripley in Otto J. Lehrack, The First Battle: Operation Starlite and the Beginning of the Blood Debt in Vietnam (New York, 2006), p. xi.

of service is evident, claiming that the years of experience in defeating insurrections made the Marine Corps 'institutionally oriented to base the struggle on pacification of the population'.⁵¹ Ripley's assertion contains two assumptions. The first is that a national CAP strategy was fundamentally different to previous efforts and that such a strategy would have transformed the political landscape of rural South Vietnam.

The CAPs began life in 1965 during the initial deployment to Da Nang. With some 150,000 people living in proximity to the Marines, commanding officer General Lewis William Walt emphasised counter-insurgency programmes at the village level.⁵² Operating around Phu Bai on its own, a unit of the 3rd Marines responded to Walt's instructions by sending out small teams of volunteers to villages in their area. These Marine teams would work with the village militia to defend the hamlets while living with the locals. The volunteers were given one week of instruction on Vietnamese customs, language and politics and then sent into the field. The goal of these teams was to hunt the NLF at night with the village militia while using their constant contact with the peasants to win their trust.⁵³ Eventually, this became the CAP and was a feature across the USMC's area of responsibility.

The CAPs were not a revolutionary alternative; rather they represented MACV's strategy on a smaller scale, and did not alter the political landscape of rural South Vietnam. Bing West, who served as a Marine officer in South Vietnam from 1966-1967, commanded a CAP. He described his experience in the CAP as 'personal and

⁵¹ Ibid, p. xi.

⁵² Edward F. Murphy, Semper Fi Vietnam: From Da Nang to the DMZ Marine Corps Campaigns, 1965-1975 (New York, 1997), p. 13.

⁵³ Ibid, p. 14.

bloody', highlighting this in vivid detail throughout his book. The CAPs ran into the same problems as advisers serving with ARVN units, the MATs and others that spent time with the Vietnamese.

Being foreign, lacking in cultural awareness and with a poor command of the language, the CAP Marines struggled to integrate into the villages as intended. Indeed, West and his Marines preferred to leave contact with the locals to the militia. For example, during one night patrol conducted by the CAP, they stumbled upon a suspicious local. Discussing what to do, one Marine commented that 'Every time we pick up some villager by ourselves we screw up...we just end up pissing off some innocent farmer.'⁵⁴ One of the chief purposes of the CAP was to build trust with the South Vietnamese peasants and win them over from the NLF, but in this case contact with the peasantry had the opposite effect. Clearly, building relationships with the people was not as easy as simply living with them in the same village. Extensive training in language and cultural awareness would have been required if a CAP programme was to have been the cornerstone of American strategy. However, it is questionable if such training could have been realistically provided on a large-scale.

Preferring to leave the peasants alone, West's CAP focused on patrolling the surrounding area of the village. One night-time patrol saw the village militia demand a return to base when they discovered a light barricade at the entrance of a nearby village, which indicated the NLF's presence. With the militia's refusal to fight, the patrol turned back and faced an irate squad leader, Sergeant Sullivan. He yelled at the returning

⁵⁴ Bing West, The Village (New York, 2003), p. 94.

patrol, 'We have to show these people there is no place we won't go. No place. If they think there are Cong out there, then we go out.'⁵⁵ Unable to fulfil the portion of the CAP mission which required them to build close relations with the peasants, Sullivan and the Marines concentrated on finding and eliminating enemy guerrillas.

The CAP is regarded as a counter-insurgency alternative because it featured smaller units living and fighting with the Vietnamese. It did not involve altering the political, economic and social conditions of the peasantry, which were the factors that underlined support for the NLF. Additionally, the arrival of uninvited American soldiers made the villages a target for NLF attacks. The Americans were only ever going to be a temporary presence, and they could not always guarantee the security of the village, making them a largely unwelcome group that attracted destruction. In some cases, despite the obstacles, CAPs would establish a great relationship with their assigned village or hamlet, but this could never happen on a large scale that would be a base for inducing change, and a successful bond would cease to exist when the soldiers left at the end of their tour.

External Support and Sanctuaries

The American fixation on the alleged importance of external support and sanctuaries in sustaining insurgencies was a very influential factor in determining strategy. The *Counterinsurgency Forces* manual section on Vietnam stated that the 'insurgency has been organized from a neighbouring communist state', with outside support and

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 91.

sanctuaries being critical to the sustainment of the NLF.⁵⁶ Lyndon Johnson, who feared a wider conflict which might undermine his domestic agenda, placed limitations on the American war effort, which forbade ground troops from intervening in Cambodia and Laos. Arguments were put forward during and after the war for destroying the enemy supply routes and sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos, with those in favour believing it would deliver a heavy blow to the insurgency. The assumption of those who have argued this point is that the NLF lacked genuine legitimacy as a political movement.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail, as it is most commonly known, was a supply route which ran from North Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia and terminated at various points along South Vietnam's border. Construction of the route began in 1959 and took on increasing importance as the conflict in South Vietnam escalated. Manpower and supplies began to flow down the Ho Chi Minh Trail in significant numbers following the arrival of American combat forces in 1965. Also, Laos and Cambodia provided safe havens for PAVN and NLF main forces to rest and refit, since American ground forces could not operate beyond South Vietnam's borders. As a consequence, pressure on the Johnson administration to authorise military action against these safe havens began. For instance, a March 1966 study titled *A Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam* (PROVN), disregarded the complex political context and advocated the elimination of external bases and supply lines.

Some scholars regard the PROVN study as a break from the strategy used by Westmoreland, recognising that the fate of the war lay in the villages. Lewis Sorley

⁵⁶ DAFM, Counterinsurgency Forces, p. 6.

describes it as a ‘dismissal of Westmoreland’s way of war but also a detailed articulation of a more availing option’.⁵⁷ Nagl stated that it ‘repudiated the army’s current emphasis on search-and-destroy operations and urged a move toward pacification through winning over the population to the government’s cause’.⁵⁸ However, a closer examination of the report shows that it had much in common with Westmoreland’s strategy, rather than being a radical alternative.⁵⁹ The PROVN study criticised attempts at monitoring people and supplies coming out of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the inability of aerial bombing to stop it. The authors recommended substantial ground action in concert with the existing bombing campaign. It warned that such measures would entail ‘territorial violations’ but that the situation was ‘sufficiently grave that technical and diplomatic considerations cannot be overriding’.⁶⁰

A significant number of those within the Army, including the authors of PROVN, believed the insurgency originated outside the RVN. Therefore, if the NLF was cut off from its external sources of support and its safe havens, the insurgency would wither away and allow the RVN to reassert its presence in the countryside. This belief was proven incorrect during the 1970 and 1971 incursions into Cambodia and Laos respectively. The incursions also showed the ARVN to be weak and incapable of survival without American support. The 1971 incursion into Laos, which featured no American ground forces, turned into a retreat as ARVN troops broke under pressure. While both incursions led to the destruction of some transportation links and supply

⁵⁷ Lewis Sorley, Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam (New York, 2011), p. 105.

⁵⁸ Nagl, Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife, p. 159.

⁵⁹ Andrew J. Birtle ‘PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal’, The Journal of Military History, Vol. 72, No. 4, (October, 2008), pp. 1215-1216.

⁶⁰ Deputy Chief of Staff for Military Operations, PROVN, Volume I, (Washington D.C., 1966), pp. 510-512

caches, it did not cause fundamental harm to the insurgency, because its roots lay within the RVN.

The Cambodian incursion was a limited attack against the supply routes and base areas within that country, authorised by President Nixon. Following the Cambodian incursion, the NLF continued to function in South Vietnam, and the Communists in Cambodia simply waited for the American and South Vietnamese forces to leave before returning. The incursion caused greater political damage to the United States as student and youth protests erupted around the country.⁶¹ The incursion into Laos - known as Lam Son 719 - also failed to live up to the expectations of the Nixon administration. The objective of Operation Lam Son 719 was to disrupt the Ho Chi Minh Trail to gain time for the withdrawal of American forces and allow the RVN a chance to stabilise and strengthen. The plan had American forces clearing the route to Khe Sanh and reoccupying the old base there to support the ARVN's advance into Laos.

Operation Lam Son 719 failed in its objective and showed that 'Vietnamization', the process of strengthening South Vietnamese forces to take total control of the war effort, had made little progress in improving ARVN effectiveness. On 8 February 1971, ARVN forces advanced and made air-assaults into Laos along a single route, establishing firebases and searching for enemy supply caches along the way. Resistance was minimal, and things appeared to be going well until the ARVN advance stalled for a week at A Loui and PAVN main forces massed for a counter-attack. The ARVN lost

⁶¹ John Prados, The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War (New York, 1998), pp. 299-301.

some firebases and suffered high casualties from advancing PAVN troops and artillery.⁶² A rejuvenated attempt to reach the supply centre at Tchepone was successful. However, the NLF had evacuated the supplies at Tchepone leaving only secondary caches.⁶³ As the ARVN began to withdraw, the PAVN launched another series of attacks turning it into a disastrous retreat.

The Communists were aware of plans for an offensive in Laos and took the necessary preparations to weather the blow and capitalise on the opportunity to counter-attack.⁶⁴ What casualties the Communists had suffered and the supplies they had lost were insignificant to the survival of the revolution in the RVN. The South Vietnamese failed, and 'Vietnamization' had shown that the ARVN had changed little since its creation, being incapable of operating without extensive American support and advisers.

Conclusion

The Army's campaign against the NLF revealed its counter-insurgency doctrine to be fundamentally flawed. The doctrine's generic solutions and superficial understanding of insurgencies and their unique contexts meant that Army leaders failed to grasp the complex political, economic and social issues that fuelled peasant support of the NLF. In addition to the doctrine's inherent flaws, the Army also failed to consider obvious pitfalls such as the lack of cultural awareness and Vietnamese

⁶² Andrew Wiest, Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN (New York, 2008), pp. 207-209.

⁶³ Ibid, p. 216.

⁶⁴ The Military History Institute of Vietnam, trans. Merle L. Pribbenow, Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975 (Lawrence, KS, 2002), pp. 272-273.

speakers, making the implementation of counter-insurgency programmes extremely difficult.

The Army did understand that political, economic and social issues played a role in the creation and sustainment of an insurgency. The Army believed, however, that these issues were not at the epicentre. Conditioned by the Cold War, the Army believed that the Communist-bloc used these issues to create insurgencies in the developing world with the goal of extending their control and influence. Therefore, the Army did not question the legitimacy of the governments of these developing states, since these governments were assumed to be weak because of Communist-bloc interference in their internal political affairs. Army counter-insurgency doctrine was consequently built on this assumption, focusing on projects like accessible basic healthcare and enhanced transportation links, to make the local government more effective. This would then draw the people away from the insurgency, leading to their support for the government.

In South Vietnam, the Army's assumptions did not match reality. The grim situation in 1965 forced the Johnson administration to deploy combat forces to stop the South Vietnamese government from collapse. With the enemy's main forces on the offensive, and the rural position of the South Vietnamese government severely weakened, Westmoreland devised a strategy that attempted to solve those two problems simultaneously within the limited timeframe of American combat intervention. The American military would seek to destroy the enemy's main forces while supporting South Vietnamese attempts to gain control of the countryside. The Army did not grasp the contradiction of conducting a destructive war of attrition in combination with a

counter-insurgency campaign. The impact of the former would negate any positive gains of the latter.

Army personnel could have learned Vietnamese. They could have become more culturally aware. They could have placed more emphasis on civic action. These ‘what ifs’ may have made the Army more efficient and more sensitive to peasant needs, but it would have made no difference to the outcome for they did not counter the formidable political, economic, social and military force of the well-organised and motivated NLF. Unless one imagines a reality divorced from context, where the Americans arrive in South Vietnam as some imperial power willing to wage war indefinitely, it is hard to see any suggested alternatives making a difference to the outcome. Those in the NLF and North Vietnamese forces were willing to struggle to achieve their goals in the face of gargantuan challenges. They managed to succeed in sustaining the revolution through the difficult task of wearing down American forces while preserving their own strength. They knew that if they could do that, the Americans would eventually leave, which they did. At the end of the American phase of the war was a demoralised U.S. Army, which pushed counter-insurgency to the side and spent the 1970s rebuilding itself.

Conclusion

The Tet Offensive made it clear to most Americans that there was no immediate end to the war in sight. The offensive, launched at the end of January 1968 and continuing in phases over the next 18 months, saw the NLF attack the American embassy, military bases, provincial capitals and district capitals across South Vietnam. There was no major success in increasing the size of the liberated areas or in sparking *khoi nghia*, and the NLF suffered thousands of casualties. The NLF's failure did not mean victory for the Americans and South Vietnamese however. Footage of NLF guerrillas fighting in the American embassy and holding it for six hours made for shocking viewing. The ability of the NLF to launch such a massive offensive and an attack on what was supposed to have been one of the most secure buildings in the country contradicted the optimism previously displayed by Westmoreland and those in the Johnson administration.

Rather than question American strategy in South Vietnam, Westmoreland saw an opportunity to strike a blow and requested an additional 205,000 men, the bulk of which would have been for the Army and Marines. Such a substantial number would have necessitated mobilising the reserves and increasing the American commitment to South Vietnam. Clark Clifford, Chair of the President's Intelligence Advisory Board and then Secretary of Defence, warned that 'Despite optimistic reports, our people (and world opinion) believe we have suffered a major setback. Problem is, how do we gain support

for major program, defense and economic, if we have told people things are going well?'¹

President Johnson shocked many when he announced on 31 March that he would not seek re-election. The Tet Offensive, no clear solution to ending the stalemate and withering public support for the war all contributed to Johnson's decision. The American public wanted a swift end to the war, but only on terms that did not sacrifice South Vietnam's independence or tarnish America's honour. Nixon, with his eyes on the election, stepped forth claiming that he possessed a plan to achieve what the American people wanted and this helped him to victory. Of course, once in the seat of power, Nixon and his principal adviser, Henry Kissinger, struggled to achieve that difficult task. What followed was more years of bloodshed until both sides reached a settlement on 9 January 1973, which started the process of the withdrawal of American forces. However, the settlement was a hollow achievement, it did not offer a solution to the conflict and was at best a short-term ceasefire. The NLF were never dealt a political defeat and remained a powerful force within South Vietnam. Additionally, the settlement allowed North Vietnamese troops to remain inside the RVN's territory, which left it vulnerable. Almost as soon as the settlement was signed did both sides begin preparations for the resumption of war.

The removal of American troops and the signing of the settlement signalled the beginning of the final phase of the war. South Vietnam used the ARVN to extend its presence across the country while the North Vietnamese and NLF prepared for an

¹ Document 89. Notes of Meeting, Washington, February 27, 1968, FRUS 1964-1968, Vol. VI, Vietnam, January-August 1968, pp. 261-262.

offensive. The problem for the RVN was that they were dependent on a steady stream of American aid which soon dried up. On the other hand, North Vietnam continued to receive aid from the Communist-bloc. With the ARVN spread thin, lacking supplies and an America unwilling to rally to South Vietnam's defence, the offensive launched in December 1974 by PAVN and PLAF forces ended with the fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975.

The experience of the Vietnam War eroded the confidence Americans had in their nation and its role in the world. The belief they had during Kennedy's administration in their country to solve any problem, great or small, disappeared. The U.S. Army suffered a similar crisis of confidence and damage to its credibility. The Army that arrived in South Vietnam in 1965 departed in 1973 a demoralised force. The demoralisation of the Army from the Vietnam War was evident through a rise in disciplinary problems, with 40 per cent of soldiers stationed in Europe confessing to recreational drug use, and 12 per cent charged with serious offences.² After the Vietnam War, the Army had to find a new purpose and re-build.

The U.S. Army entered the mid-1970s seeking to regain its confidence and pride, in addition to adapting to its new status as an all-volunteer force. The Army refocused its attention on its principal mission, which was the Soviet threat in Central Europe, and started the process of creating a new doctrine for this purpose. General William E. DePuy was one of the chief architects of the Army's new doctrine and helped write parts of the 1976 version of *FM 100-5*. Discussing the new field manual, DePuy

² Richard Lock-Pullan, "An Inward Looking Time": The United States Army, 1973-1976', The Journal of Military History, Vo. 76, No. 2, (April, 2003), p. 487.

commented that it ‘focuses principally upon the mission of the United States Army in Western Europe’, taking the Army out of the ‘rice paddies of Vietnam’.³ Preparing for a potential clash with the Soviet Union in Central Europe defined the U.S. Army for the rest of the Cold War.

This dissertation has contemplated the U.S. Army’s counter-insurgency doctrine from its creation in the early 1960s to its application during the Vietnam War. It has traced the origins of the Army’s counter-insurgency mission from the late 1950s, examined the factors that dictated the nature of Army doctrine, explained the NLF’s strategy and methodology, studied the creation of counter-insurgency doctrine and ended by analysing its application against the NLF in South Vietnam. This comprehensive analysis has resulted in a firm understanding of why the Army’s counter-insurgency methods failed to defeat the NLF and save the RVN.

As discussed in the introduction, a study of U.S. Army counter-insurgency doctrine during the Vietnam War is not breaking new ground. This thesis has set itself apart by studying the Army’s counter-insurgency doctrine over a wider timeframe and by understanding why the NLF’s strengths and methodology were so formidable in the face of the Army’s counter-insurgency doctrine, which proved ineffective. By doing the former, it reveals the selfish nature of the Army’s support for a counter-insurgency mission in the 1950s. It was not the result of a realistic assessment of national security needs nor was it the basis for the development of a sound counter-insurgency doctrine that understood the complexities and non-military character of most insurgencies. It

³ William E. DePuy, ‘Talking Paper on Field Manual 100-5’, in Richard M. Swain, compiler, Donald L. Gilmore & Carolyn D. Conway, eds, Selected Papers of General William E. DePuy (Ft Leavenworth, KS, 1994), p. 194.

also reveals the influence of the Cold War on how the Army viewed insurgencies, believing them to be under the direction of the Communist-bloc, and how this shaped their counter-insurgency methods.

Studying the origins and development of the U.S. Army's counter-insurgency doctrine brings some important yet neglected sources to the fore. Journal articles, military college essays and monographs by Army officers and other individuals associated with the Army or interested in its counter-insurgency mission provide numerous instances of the flaws in its evolution. These sources demonstrate how officers viewed insurgencies through the prism of the Cold War, their arrogant belief in America's military power that did not contemplate reverses and a fatal oversight on the political nature of most insurgencies. Doctrinal manuals also highlighted these issues as they were shaped by these monographs and articles.

This thesis has made the following arguments. Contrary to what many scholars in the 'hearts and minds' strand of the historiography have claimed, the U.S. Army did implement counter-insurgency warfare into its doctrine. The problem was not that the Army did not execute counter-insurgency programmes in South Vietnam, the main issue was that its counter-insurgency doctrine was fundamentally flawed. The counter-insurgency doctrine the Army developed was flawed because it did not understand that political, economic and social factors lay at the heart of most, if not all, the insurgencies it expected to face in the developing world.

Instead, because it believed the Communist-bloc to be the cause of the insurgencies in the developing world, they thought that political, economic and social factors played a secondary role in helping to increase support for those insurgencies. States in the developing world, often former colonies, struggled with issues such as poor economic development, weak governments, social inequality and corruption to name a few. The Army believed these problems were used and manipulated by Communist-bloc supported insurgent groups to incite support for their cause, bringing people to their side. Consequently, the Army's counter-insurgency doctrine recommended programmes that improved economic development, alleviated social problems and aimed to make the local government more effective and efficient. The results of these actions, they expected, would bring people back over to the local government's side and deny the insurgents an important source of support.

The problems that the Army's counter-insurgency doctrine proposed to solve were indeed problems, but they were not what fuelled the NLF's revolution. It was the political, economic and social foundations of the RVN that drove the NLF's revolution. As a result of its colonial heritage, South Vietnam inherited many French imperial practices, and its political, economic and social character continued to reflect the interests of the small urban Catholic elite that rose to prominence under French imperial rule. This small group of urban elites failed to adapt and reform the state to reflect the interests of the rural peasantry that formed the majority of its population. If South Vietnam was to be viable in the long-term, it needed to enact fundamental changes in areas of crucial importance to the peasantry such as land.

As events unfolded and the NLF grew in strength, the South Vietnamese government repeatedly proved incapable of making the radical changes necessary for its survival. On the other hand, the NLF crafted its policies to ensure it could muster enough communist and non-communist support and wasted no time putting policies into practice, such as redistributing land almost immediately in villages that came under its control. The Army's counter-insurgency doctrine did not address these critical issues, instead focusing on the futility of trying to make the already unpopular and incapable South Vietnamese government more effective and defeating the NLF by killing guerrillas, which proved to be a frustrating experience as the NLF decided when and where to fight.

The primary reason the U.S. Army could not overcome the NLF was that its counter-insurgency doctrine did not address the political, social and economic factors that underpinned peasant support for the revolution. Therefore, contrary to what some scholars have argued, it was not the Army's inattention to counter-insurgency that lost the war. Rather, it was because the NLF built a strong political revolution with a formidable strategy that the weak and inept RVN could not resist.

The arrival of American combat forces in 1965 saved the South Vietnamese government from falling to the NLF's main force battalions. However, it could not defeat the NLF politically. Not only was the U.S. Army's counter-insurgency doctrine not suitable for fighting the NLF's political revolution, its officers never grasped the political nature of the war. Therefore, the Army's efforts in South Vietnam were doomed to failure. Many scholars from the 'hearts and minds' strand of Vietnam War

historiography still fail to fully appreciate the political dynamics of the war, meaning that the alternative counter-insurgency strategies they have proposed also do not recognise the NLF's political revolution and its social and economic dimensions.

The U.S. Army's inability to defeat the NLF does not detract from the fact that an effort was made by its leadership to develop a comprehensive counter-insurgency doctrine. It was a flawed doctrine created as a result of the Army's effort to reverse the impact of the New Look strategy and to ensure an important role in fighting the Cold War. Consequently, the Army's counter-insurgency doctrine lacked a solid foundation based on a dispassionate assessment of Cold War strategy and a firm understanding of insurgencies and their political nature. Indeed, Soviet statements and actions regarding the developing world confirmed to many Americans that the Communist-bloc played a key role in creating and sustaining insurgencies, which was not the case in South Vietnam as the NLF had strong historical roots and a powerful strategy in *dau tranh*. It was these factors along with an unsound South Vietnamese government that made the NLF and its revolution insurmountable obstacles for the U.S. Army.

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