

Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam

Michael A. Hennessy, Ph.D.

Chair, Department of History
Royal Military College of Canada
Kingston, Ontario, Canada.
e-mail: hennessy-m@rmc.ca

Dr. Michael A. Hennessy is an Associate Professor of History and War Studies at the Royal Military College of Canada, Kingston, and Chair of the Department of History. He is the former Deputy Project Director of the Canadian Forces Leadership Institute, and remains a Research Fellow of the Institute. Dr. Hennessy served as the founding editor of the Canadian Military Journal/Revue militaire canadienne, which published its first issue in March 2000, and remains a member of its editorial and advisory boards. He is also a member of the editorial board of Defence Studies. The Journal of the Joint Services Command and Staff College (UK). He supervised the new case studies, future war studies and operational art portions of the new higher command and staff courses offered by the Canadian Forces Command and Staff College, Toronto, and served as a member of the joint Chief Research & Development-DG Strategic Plans Operational Working Group on the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) that outlined Canada's response to the RMA. He has also been the Chief of Land Staff's ABCA representative on the Historical Data Analysis sub-committee. His teaching fields include war technology, intelligence, foreign policy, naval policy and low intensity conflict. He has authored scholarly articles on Canadian naval and maritime history, intelligence, strategy during the Vietnam War, and Canadian foreign and defence policy. His publications include Strategy In Vietnam: The Marines and Revolutionary War in I Corps, 1965-1971, (Praeger, 1997), and "Operation Assurance: Planning a multinational operation for Rwanda/Zaire," Canadian Military Journal (Spring 2001). And with B.J.C. McKercher, The Operational Art: Developments in the Theory of War, (Praeger, 1996), and War in the Twentieth Century. Reflections at Century's End, (Praeger, 2003). He admits addictions to his three children and to golf.

Current Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) efforts in Afghanistan owe much to US counter-insurgency doctrine and practice—indeed the first PRTs (originally called JRT or Joint Reconstruction Teams) were primarily a COIN tool employed locally and without any national plan. Local US commanders moved to coordinate Special Operations Forces (SOF), humint assets, Civil Affairs activities, and support from locally operating NGOs to garner local intelligence and security. The creation of the teams came as an impulse to local conditions, rather than because of pre-existing American military doctrine, guidance or planning. From such ad hoc arrangements a counter-insurgent strategy is born. The experiences of COIN in Vietnam share many similarities to this case; moreover, in the case of Vietnam a tremendous amount of study, development and resources were dedicated to trying to build a functioning state in the throes of an internal and international war. Constitutional reform, election reform, land reform, police and security development, mass education and a host of other programs were employed. This chapter aims to summarize some of these developments and programs not to belabour the details of the Vietnam War, but to highlight some of the lessons of that experience applicable to other cases, such as Afghanistan.

The COIN effort in Vietnam fell under two general names, Nation Building and Pacification. Nation Building referred to a host of measures taken to develop the South Vietnamese state as a functioning democracy along the constitutional lines of the United States. Pacification, a term first employed by the French, referred primarily to the efforts in the countryside to undermine the popular elements of the insurgency through security and local development initiatives, such as providing schools, medical facilities, roads etc. In American doctrine both efforts fell under the responsibility of the US country-team headed by the US Ambassador. The US Overseas Internal Defence Plan, promulgated by the US State Department in the early 1960s established these responsibilities. The ungainly title of USOIDP soon disappeared to be replaced by the shorter Foreign Internal Defence (FID). This term is still in use and captured in current American military doctrine. In Vietnam the country team concept proved almost wholly unworkable once the military campaign escalated. In some measure the FID made the ambassador responsible for all military activities and civil activities conducted throughout a war zone; however, he lacked both the authority to command military forces or resources to employ widely across the civilian community.

After a series of intermediate steps a new organization called CORDS was created. CORDS, short for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, marked a major departure from the ODP. Its director was double hated, being both appointed the “deputy commander” (a three star general equivalent) of the Military Assistance Command, for pacification, and was also a deputy Ambassador in charge of the civilian side of the pacification effort. The new authority as head of this joint military-civilian pacification structure ran counter to the basic divisions of responsibility envisioned in the prewar doctrine articulated in the Internal Defense Policy. Whereas that policy placed the military in a supporting role, subordinate to and separate from civilian agencies and programs, CORDS reversed the relationship. Indeed the new structure ran counter to what was currently being taught as counterinsurgency doctrine in the service schools—and indeed contained in the most recent iteration of US COIN.¹ The civilian agencies operating within Vietnam were now integrated into the military command system. This measure promised to seal a major flaw in the American effort.

Although the role caused continual friction with Washington, and sometimes in Vietnam most accounts agree the new structure proved a success.² For the first time, a well-coordinated, centrally controlled pacification program would be pursued. This lesson, however, was not captured in post Vietnam military doctrine. In practice it has had to be relearned in Central America, the Middle East and Central Asia. Integration of the civil and military efforts would appear a fundamental step, and one certainly evident in the experiences of Britain so it remains curious that the United States has had to relearn this principal in almost every case.

Integration of the American approach to pacification solved many problems but could not resolve many of the contradictions inherent to American actions. The core objectives of all

-
1. This paper is based largely on my *Strategy in Vietnam: The Marine's and Revolutionary Warfare in I Corps, 1965-1972*, (Westport CT: Praeger Press, 1997). On US ODP see lesson plans “Foreign Internal Defense Planning,” C-5120 RLUT 0036 and “Employment of Fleet Marine Forces in Counterinsurgency,” C(C) 5130I, 1970 (Quantico, VA: Breckinridge Library). For the continuation of this problem see, HQ USDept. of the Army, *Counterinsurgency Operations*, FM 3-07.22 (October 2004).
 2. *United States-Vietnam Relations 1945-1967 [The Pentagon Papers]*, (USGPO, 1971), Book 6, IV.c.II, pp. 135-136; U.S.G.Sharp and W. Westmoreland, *Report on the War in Vietnam (as of June 30 1968)* (USGPO, 1968), pp. 233-234.

pacification programs were: (1) protecting the rural population from the insurgents and so depriving the Viet Cong of their popular base; and (2) generating popular support for the South Vietnamese government through extending rural administration, meeting the needs of the population, and increasing political participation at the village and national levels.³

On the question of reform and security, two broad schools of thought emerged within the U.S. government, namely (1) the liberal reformist approach, and (2) the organizational approach.⁴ The reformist approach formed the most commonly accepted doctrine about insurgency. Reformists believed “that popular attitudes and popular support” played “the decisive role” in enabling insurgent movements to get started, gain momentum, and erupt into “liberation wars.”⁵ Consequently, reformists believed that once a government solved the basic socioeconomic inequities, support for the insurgency would dwindle.

Those advocating a structural or organizational approach, on the other hand, recognized the need to reform but believed insurgencies should be recognized “not as an inscrutable and unmanageable force grounded in the mystique of a popular mass movement, but as a coherent operating system that can be understood,”⁶ managed, and countered. Though divorced from any explicit ideology, the organizational school offered to counter the insurgency through pursuing individually, or in tandem, a series of measures. Primarily, these entailed emulating certain mobilization techniques of the communists and creating governmental structures--political and military--which enmeshed the population in a series of organizations or military institutions similar to those employed by the guerrillas.

To many Western liberals and reformists, structural-organizational approaches appeared too mechanical. They did not seem to explain how “organization” could have generated support for the Viet Cong, and appeared to ignore the major economic, political, and social grievances the revolutionary movement promised to ameliorate.⁷ The American province advisor to Thua Thien best summarized this argument: “Revolution does not originate with peasants with a high standard of living and full stomachs.”⁸ The organizational approach, therefore, insulted Western sensitivities by appearing to ignore the element of individual conviction that seemingly compelled the Viet Cong and local peasants to take up arms against the government.

Such tension marked the entire effort. These contradictory positions were never rectified during the US war in Vietnam; however, the latter position, i.e. establishing security, appeared to prove the most fundamental determinant of success.

-
3. Robert Komer, in Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell, *Lessons of Vietnam*, (New York: Crane Russak, 1977), p. 214.
 4. Lawrence E. Grinter, “How They Lost: Doctrines, Strategies and Outcomes on the Vietnam War,” *Asian Survey*, (Dec. 1975) pp. 1114-1132 served as a guide for these classifications and the ensuing discussion.
 5. Charles Wolf Jr., “Insurgency and Counterinsurgency: New Myths and Old Realities,” *Yale Review*, Vol. 61, (Winter 1967), pp. 225-226. For a much longer discussion of the argument presented in this 1967 article, see Charles Wolf Jr. and Nathan Leites, *Rebellion and Authority: An Analytic Essay on Insurgent Conflicts*, R-462-ARPA (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 1970).
 6. Wolf, “Insurgency and Counterinsurgency,” p. 227.
 7. Robert Sansom, *The Economics of Insurgency in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970), p. 242.
 8. MACV-CORDS, Province Report, Thua Thien Province, I CTZ, MACV Advisory Team 18, 1 May, 1969, p. 19, James Walker Truillinger, *Village at War: An Account of Revolution in Vietnam*, (New York: Longman, 1980), p. 149 served as the source of this comment.

The American Mission in Saigon recognized the importance of an effective pacification effort. While definitions of various programs altered frequently during the initial years of escalation, the two main efforts fell somewhat consistently between the appellations “nation building” and “revolutionary development.” The former effort focused on generating an efficient political system of elected national, district, and village officials, whereas the latter focused on “reestablishing and protecting security and order, so that the population may live in peace and develop their activities.”⁹ Numerous AID programs focused on the generation of a sound economic infrastructure. Village level development programs progressed under a series of similar names: New Rural Life became Rural Reconstruction, then Rural Construction, and finally Revolutionary Development.

While the means of implementing each program varied, the national objectives deviated little.¹⁰ With guidance from the Central Intelligence Agency, the training of Revolutionary Development teams commenced in early 1965 at the Vung Tau military academy. RD Cadre teams of 59 members were trained to operate in South Vietnamese government controlled territory and work with the local peasants, to win their political support and weed out the Arice roots@ VC infrastructure.¹¹ Revolutionary Development was loosely modeled after several earlier counterinsurgency programs. In general, they shared the purpose of providing a “fuller life for the peasants” by demonstrating that a free national government could accomplish what the Viet Cong had promised but had failed to produce.¹² The RD program, however, departed from previous efforts by systematically emulating the methods and rhetoric of the Viet Cong. However, the RD effort did not entail a systematic terror campaign.

Members of the team were trained in village administration, small-scale development projects, and political indoctrination. But the majority of the team was there simply to provide local--hamlet and village--security. In theory the Cadre would reside in a hamlet for three to six months, weed out the Viet Cong supporters, indoctrinate the locals, conduct a census, establish a local-defense capability, declare the hamlet “reconstructed,” and depart.

Initial attempts of the RD Cadre met with little more than transitory success. In 1966 the program was restructured and given more U.S. funding. With the revised program more emphasis was given in training to indoctrination. This process of indoctrination is most notable for its resemblance to the techniques employed by the Viet Cong. The program in fact originated with a former Viet Minh leader, and went so far as to have each team member wear a “black pyjama” uniform, just like the Viet Cong. The political aspects of the program included “the elimination of wicked village notables,”¹³ and called for the “promotion of a new national spirit of solidarity.”¹⁴ Such objectives clearly echoed the “antifeudal anti-colonialist” slogan that had mobilized so many in favor of the Viet Minh.

Such ideology indicates the RD program's attempted revolutionary social mobilization. This communist-developed approach was regarded by most Westerners as successful because

-
9. Decree 64-TTP, 5 April 1965, and decree No. 156/XDNT, 30 July 1965 “USOM Bulletin” #24 (Saigon, 31 Aug. 1965), p. 4. See also *Public Administration Bulletin*, #13 (May 1964), p. 2. Both bulletins cited are in fact generated by the same agency which repeatedly changed the *Bulletin's* title.
 10. See also Capt. Russell H. Stolfi, USMCR, *U.S. Marine Corps Civil Action Efforts in Vietnam, March 1965-March 1966* (Washington, D.C.: Historical Branch, HQUSMC, 1968), p. 9.
 11. Gen. L. Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy*, (New York: Funk and Wagnells, 1970), p. 103.
 12. Wesley R. Fishel, ed., *Vietnam: Anatomy of a Conflict* (Itasca, IL: Peacock Publishers, 1968), p. 598.
 13. Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake*, (Boston: Little Brown, 1972), pp. 411-412.
 14. Charles A. Joiner, “The Ubiquity of the Administrative Role in Counterinsurgency,” *Asian Survey* (August 8, 1967), p. 547.

it promised social reform and operated at the grass roots of the peasant society, where local grievances could best be championed. Less well understood by the West was the organizational strength of the Viet Cong. Though the VC had solved many local grievances, they mobilized the population to support the VC through a “net” of social, political, and military organizations cast over the local population.¹⁵ The local peasants either volunteered or were coerced into supporting the local VC organizations.

This is not to ignore the many motives peasants had for supporting the insurgency,¹⁶ but it is essential for understanding the dynamics of exploiting support. A social-political-military montage of VC organizations controlled and directed the support of the peasants. As Samuel P. Huntington pointed out, “only the communists have constantly demonstrated the ability to organize and structure (political) participation and thus to create new institutions of political order.”¹⁷ Since it was both the redress of local grievances and the development of new mass institutions enabling the Viet Cong’s exploitation of local support, it would follow that any attempt to emulate the VC would require a similar approach.

Idealistic aims were problematic enough but the RD program also experienced many mundane problems in implementation: the Cadre were overextended, suffered from low morale, had little knowledge of the peasants’ mode of life,¹⁸ and were given little military support by other South Vietnamese military, or police formations. Moreover, all these problems were exacerbated by the VC making the RD Cadre a primary target for assassination and terror. At the grass roots of the program the local security forces, comprised of the Regional Force and the Popular Force, were supposed to provide protection for the RD Cadre. In reality that protection was wholly inadequate. In many areas the RF/PF remained too weak to protect the RD Cadre. In many villages the RF/PF had developed an accommodation with the local Viet Cong. Without effective protection the RD Cadre were often driven off by the VC, thereby ensuring anyone who had supported the Cadre would become a target of Viet Cong terror. One observer described the ensuing credibility gap: “people have come to believe in VC promises of retaliation more than in GVN [Government of Vietnam] promises of help.”¹⁹

The RD program received progressively less support through 1968-1969. By late 1969 many of the 59-member RD Cadre teams had been broken into 30-member platoons operating without their own security sections or into groups of 4-8 members working on development projects throughout urban and rural areas. The centralized planning and budgeting from CORDS saw funds for the Cadre eventually denied by 1970. Remaining

15. For the Viet Cong approach to social mobilization, see John C. Donnell, *Expanding Political Participation: The Long Haul from Villagism to Nationalism*, @ *Asian Survey* (August 1970), p. 703; and Joiner, *The Ubiquity of the Administrative Role*, @ p. 552.

16. There were many reasons to support the insurgency; the desire for land, the dream of national unification; the hope of advancing within the ranks of the Viet Cong are among a few of them. See Dennis J. Duncanson, *How and Why the Viet Cong Holds Out*, @ in *Encounter* (December 1966), p. 80.

17. Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 335. See also Grinter, *How They Lost*, @ p. 1119.

18. Many of the RD Cadre were volunteers with urban backgrounds, consequently they knew little about rural life.

19. See the remarks of Colonel John Paul Vann, cited in Daniel Ellsberg, *Papers on the War*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p. 154. Frances J. West makes the same point about the RD Cadre's failure to protect themselves, let alone their villages; see “The War in the Countryside: A Case Study in Binh Son District, Quang Ngai Province, 1965-1968,” RM 5923-ARPA (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., June 1969), p. IV-E-21.

Cadre were subsequently parcelled off within the ministries of Agriculture, Rural Development, and the newly created General Commission of Public Service, according to the skills they possessed.²⁰ Like all previous efforts, the RD program became overextended and underfinanced. Through a combination of ill-will, financial neglect, and repeated problems of physical security, the RD Cadre program became absorbed into the more general pacification effort.²¹

While such problems seriously limited the success of the program, they were not the major cause of its failure. What really prevented the program from progressing was the resistance it encountered from the more established and powerful components of the GVN. At the province level the RD Cadre were provided little support because land reform and other programs they sought to implement conflicted with the established prerogatives of the province chief and others. In fact there was a major disjunction between the senior members of the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Revolutionary Development, and the mission of the RD Cadre. Premiers Ky and Thieu, espoused the ideological verbiage of the Cadre, but the “revolution” remained largely rhetorical. For many Americans, this resulted in a serious misunderstanding of the program. A literal translation of the program’s title is more properly rendered “Rural Construction,” but since the experimental RD Cadre program was being integrated into the Interior Ministry’s pacification program, the term “Revolutionary Development” rather than “Rural Construction” became the agreed English translation. This semantic change did not alter the GVN’s understanding of the program as one of construction within the bounds of the current political system rather than a “revolutionary” change to anything. In effect, then, the “revolutionary” aspects of the program were not allowed to progress.²² Precisely for that reason Revolutionary Development was prevented by forces within the GVN from progressing too far: it was too revolutionary. Tainted by its emulation of the ideological and organizational structures of the Viet Cong, the GVN prevented Revolutionary Development from progressing in its aims.

While Revolutionary Development was aimed at “pacifying” the rural population, the development of democratic institutions was supposed to pacify the urban elite and other political interest groups by providing them with the means to pursue their interests without suppression by the GVN. In one sense, “nation-building” can be regarded as the urban counterpart to the RD effort.

However, pacification and counterinsurgency doctrines were never designed for handling urban problems. Rather their orientation was against rural guerrillas. From the start, the U.S. military forces were explicitly excluded from confronting the urban political problems. The Internal Defense Policy, however, did recognize the need for such action but it was strictly the domain of the State Department. The State Department approach to nation building relied largely on the creation of democratic institutions drawn from the American model. Elections were to legitimize the government, while a tripartite structure with an executive, legislature,

20. Presidential Decree, No# 691-TT/SL, 15 Dec. 1969; Prime Minister's Decree, No# 201-SL/PTNT (Cornell Collection). Lt. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong, *Territorial Forces*, Indochina Monograph (Washington, D.C.: CMH, 1981), p. 66.

21. For earlier efforts see, Wesley R. Fishel ed., *Vietnam: Anatomy of a Conflict*, (Itasca, IL: Peacock Publishers, 1968), p. 598.

22. The RD program threatened too many vested interests of the military and political elite. See Ellsberg, *Papers on the War*, p. 156 and p. 162; for more technical problems with the RD effort, see Robert Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on US-GVN performance in Vietnam*. Report 967-ARPA. Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1972), p. 112.

and judiciary would provide a system of checks and balances, thereby preventing the establishment of dictatorial power. The establishment of such a government, the United States believed, would garner popular support for the GVN, while support for the guerrillas would consequently dwindle.²³

The limitation of power inherent to the democratic institution approach contrasted sharply with the historical-cultural proclivities of GVN officials. The traditional Vietnamese approach to leadership was to centralize power in an elite strata. Diem had typified the approach with his methods of social control and his stress on social order and conformity. While control and order were emphasized among the peasants, manipulation and intrigue among political rivals marked the conduct of higher officials and power elites. As Douglas Pike noted, the best Vietnamese leaders from a traditional perspective were paternalistic, sly, skilled at intrigue, masters of deception, possessing untold layers of duplicity, and highly effective in the world in which they moved.²⁴ Nearly all of South Vietnam's rulers, from Diem to Thieu, and other contenders for power fit Pike's description.

Despite such obstacles, U.S. pressure to reform met some success. Constant demands, such as those made by President Johnson at the 1966 Honolulu Conference, were responsible for the adoption of a new and quite liberal constitution.²⁵ Hamlet, village, municipal, and national election programs were undertaken. Only continual American pressure ensured that the national election program continued to move South Vietnam Adown the road@ toward "democracy and equality." Yet elections and liberal constitutions could not a democracy make.

The realization that the interests of the GVN were not necessarily those of America shattered the simplistic client-partner allied relationship envisioned by the Internal Defense Policy. In theory American "common sense" advice, balanced on a dependency fulcrum, was to have moved the GVN toward reforms. These reforms had not been realized. Dependency had not bred a compliant ally. The ultimate sanction of that relationship could only have been the termination of U.S. support. Since such a measure would jeopardize America's primary objective of preventing a communist victory, this tended to stay America's hand. The ensuing situation, described by one observer as the 'tyranny of the weak,' saw the GVN constantly postpone, or only half-heartedly implement, promised reforms.

On the Nation Building front, national elections occurred in 1967 and again in 1971, but the GVN placed numerous restrictions on candidates, which prompted much criticism from Western observers. It became clear that U.S. diplomats conspired with GVN officials to prevent suspected communists and neutralist candidates from winning high office.²⁶ Why did the United States and GVN prevent certain election results which might have been more truly representative at the time? The answer lies with the origins of U.S. involvement: preventing communist subversion of developing nations. The long-term objective of U.S. support, however, was the development of democratic institutions. These separate objectives created a dilemma: in the long run the GVN would have to become nationally accepted and respected, but the decentralization of authority and power in the short run could only play into the hands

23. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing*, p. 61.

24. Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966), pp. 9-10.

25. For an example of the rhetoric surrounding this effort, see Gen . William Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), p. 221.

26. See Ellsberg, *Papers on the War*, p. 199.

of the communists. The contradiction of the host government being both vassal and sovereign remained unresolved.²⁷

Unilateral American initiatives at pacification are best typified by the efforts of the USMC in the five northern provinces of South Vietnam. The Marine's pacification effort experienced problems similar to those of South Vietnamese programs but were also rather more innovative. Some of these innovations warrant review. The Marine's TAORs contained roughly 798,000 people, out of the total population of 2,600,000. According to the Marines rating system, 900 square kilometers were raised to the 40 percent Asecure@ or Apacified@ level--the terms being employed somewhat interchangeably. The details of the criteria to achieve this rating varied between the GVN and USMC. The specifics are not particularly noteworthy here expect to note many were repeated in the national Hamlet Evaluation System later adopted for the whole country. Both would include:

1. completing a village census;
2. establishing a local intelligence net;
3. providing a detailed self-defense plan;
4. creating a local security force;
5. reestablishment of a village market; and,
6. reestablishment of a functioning government.²⁸

For a war that had to be won in the villages, the fact that less than a third of villages, within the Marine TAORs received a 60 percent rating is truly revealing of the necessarily slow pace of expanding control and providing security with reliable regular troops. Given that the estimated 20,000 VC/North Vietnamese main-force troops reported living in I Corps had an annual requirement of some 7,200 tons of rice, it would be virtually impossible for the Ho Chi Minh trail to be the sole source for this demand. The most ready source was the densely populated coastal strip, which annually produced 470,000 tons of rice. Of the total forces operating in I Corps, the Marines' various missions meant they could assign only limited forces to permanent pacification duties.

The VC tax system remained extensive well into 1966. In some areas employees of U.S. AID paid road taxes to the VC on their private vehicles. As well, most trucking companies, even those contracted to move U.S. military supplies, paid VC taxes.²⁹ Through 1967 little succeeded in destroying this nexus of guerrilla support.

It was in the counter-guerrilla effort that the Marines showed their greatest tactical innovations. County Fair and Golden Fleece operations were two major tactical innovations first developed in 1965 and refined over the course of 1966. Commodity-control and population-screening operations were the express responsibility of the GVN. It had long been clear that the GVN lacked the skill, manpower, or resolve to launch effective population

27. Leslie D. Cooper Jr, J.E. Corson and L.J. Legere, *The American Experience with Pacification in Vietnam*, Vol. 1, (Arlington VA: Institute for Defense Analysis, 1972), p. 32; *Pentagon Papers*, Book 6, IV.c.8, pp. III-iv, and 1-45; Ellsberg, *Papers on the War*, pp. 144-145; Lawrence E. Grinter, *ABargaining Between Saigon and Washington: Dilemmas of Linkage Politics During War*, @ *Orbis*, No. 18 (Fall 1974), pp. 837-867.

28. On the various GVN criteria, see Cooper, et al., *The American Experience*, Vol. III, pp. 205-216; on USMC rating system see Russell H. Stolfi, *U.S. Marine Corps Civil Action Efforts in Vietnam, March 1965-March 1966*, (Washington DC: USMC Hist. Division, 1968), p. 76.

29. "The Viet Cong," briefing for CG III MAF, July 1966 (McCutcheon Folders-USMC Historical Division holdings), pp. 11-15.

control measures in the contested areas. County Fair was essentially a joint U.S.-ARVN cordon operation conducted around specific hamlets and villages. While the Marines established a secure cordon, South Vietnamese forces conducted a thorough screening of the population. Similar cordon operations, termed Golden Fleece sought to prevent VC collection of rice harvests and taxes.³⁰

Also well developed by mid-1966 were several programs of a more offensive character. Many Marine patrols employed what became called the Stingray technique. Essentially Stingray operations consisted of a Marine patrol adopting a static position in proximity to suspected VC infiltration routes. Once VC activity was clearly identified, the patrol would call in supporting air and artillery strikes. The technique proved highly successful and extremely cost effective.³¹ Moreover, to improve their knowledge of the local terrain and VC organization the Marines began employing former VC personnel as “Kit Carson” scouts. This program commenced in the Da Nang TAOR during the spring of 1966.³² Both efforts added greatly to reducing Marine casualties.

As part of their standard routine of Civic Action the Marines constructed schoolhouses, bridges, water wells, irrigation systems, and numerous other small projects. Civic Action also included the provision of medical assistance, such as inoculation campaigns, dental inspections, and other forms of medical aid. The scope of the Civic Action program undertaken included over 618,000 medical treatments for civilians; the training of 357 dispensary technicians; distribution of 522,000 pounds of food, 98,000 pounds of soap, 184,000 pounds of clothing; and the direct and indirect funding of the education of 26,000 students. The altruism of this effort was reinforced by the realization that good deeds prompted the flow of good timely intelligence.³³

But the Combined Action Program (CAPS for shorts) was perhaps the greatest innovation devised by the Marines. Started purely as a local security initiative around the air bases at DaNang CAPS consisted of a platoon comprised of one section (12 men, including a medic) of Marines and a platoon of local regional security troops. The force would be dedicated to the security of a particular village and spend its days moving between hamlets within the village, developing an intelligence net, ensuring the continuation of aid programs and related activities. The Marines would eventually have a large number of CAPS operating throughout their TAOR. Security ratings for villages proved highest in CAP dominated areas. Nevertheless, the CAPS also became a primary target for local guerrilla forces who made concerted efforts to undermine their success.

By September 1966 the TAORs encompassed approximately 110 villages, but less than a quarter of these had seen the completion of the civic action/security measures necessary to be termed “GVN controlled.”³⁴ The CAP villages had generally made the greatest gains. Every village manned by a CAP for longer than six months recorded a 60 percent secure rating or

30. Jack Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam, 1966: An Expanding War*, (Washington, DC: USMC Historical Division, 1982), p. 233.

31. Thomas. C. Thayer, ed., “A Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War,” 11 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Assistant Secretary of Defense for Systems Analysis Office, collated 1975) OASD (SA), Vol. 4, June 1967, pp. 35-37.

32. See Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam 1966*, pp. 245-247.

33. Figures derived from letter of FMFPac CG LT. General V.N. Krulak, to Sec. of Navy Paul H. Nitze, 17 July 1966, FMFPac Comand Chronology, July 1966, USMC Historical Center.

34. III MAF Report to the Senate Armed Forces Preparedness Committee, Oct. 1966, III MAF (G-5) Comd. Chron. Oct. 1966.

better. Analysis demonstrated that CAP forces experienced markedly fewer desertions from the Popular Force than were experienced elsewhere. Expanding at a rate of four CAPs per month, the program appeared a most able vehicle for improving village security and the performance of the PFs.³⁵ Expansion did not occur however because the conventional war drew forces away from the effort. While the Corps marshalled impressive statistics, the Civic Action campaign was never a primary operational focus. Rather, Civic Action always remained a secondary duty. Quite simply, the Marine Civic Action program overlapped the program supposedly being implemented by American civil agencies and the GVN.

The ability of the host government in Saigon to generate dependable follow-on forces remained a chronic problem. While USMC and Army of the Republic of Vietnam [ARVN] units could generally keep the main force threat at bay, the GVN forces charged with consolidating control of cleared areas remained of dubious quality and in short supply. Since the primary responsibility for neutralizing the VCI rested with the National Police--not the ARVN-- the shortfall in their numbers and deployments ensured that destroying the communists' rural political and administrative forces received only sporadic attention. As for the RD Cadre, of an authorized strength of 111 RD teams for I Corps, only 13 teams were actually operating. The "social revolution" was in trouble—one late 1966 USMC staff study estimated that at current rates of progress the Marine Corps Headquarters estimated it would take 20 years to complete the GVN's rural development effort.³⁶

Measuring what success there was fell to a tool developed after a successful USMC measure first employed in 1966. The Hamlet Evaluation System, or HES for short, sought to measure the success of rural pacification through a series of relatively objective measures. HES became a monthly statistical report, compiled by U.S. advisors, based on the subjective answers to objective questions concerning security, development, the South Vietnamese government's presence, and other factors, such as strength of the local VC political structure. While often overly optimistic, the system was generally more accurate at designating a VC-controlled or -influenced area. Hamlets were initially rated according to a five-letter rating system with A designating "secure," B "relatively secure," (i.e., only an irregular VC presence), C "undergoing securing," D "contested," and E, VC "controlled."³⁷ Such statistics came to play an important role in measuring relative success of the various pacification efforts. Like any statistical tool however its results could be misused or misrepresented. Moreover it never avoided the 'garbage in, garbage out' effect of poor or faulty or fraudulent statistical reporting. Many district advisors simply flew over areas they considered too insecure to visit physically but might report them as undergoing security etc. Nevertheless, the count helped generate a more objective picture and proved fundamental in shaping CORDS program planning.

35. FMFPac Rpt. "The Marine Combined Action Program, Vietnam," Aug. 1965-Jan. 1967, prepared for OASD (SA), during (Oct.?) 1967, p. 22.

36. Declassified Documents Reference System, DOD 1986, 060656, pp. 28, F 1-2.

37. The HES underwent much refinement throughout the era of American involvement, becoming most effective only after the strategic decision to withdraw American forces. Its concept of reporting was derived from a Marine Corps program. For a brief description of both, see *U.S.M.C. Hist. 1967*, pp. 194-195. The HES map here is derived from CORDS-HES map, published in May 1967, CORDS file, USMC History & Museums Division, Washington.

CONCLUSION

The Vietnam experience yields many examples worth considering. Nation Building held many innate contradictions that do not appear to be unique to the case at hand. Election and constitutional reform in the face of open rebellion proved and promises to remain tension ridden and a sever test of trust between the host government and its reform minded benefactor. Pacification covered a range of actions and activities requiring cooperation and coordination between allies and among forces of the state—civil and military. Forging the connecting links took time and wasted valuable time and resources before effective coordination took effect. Even then assumptions about the ability of the host government to provide security forces of sufficient numbers and satisfactory stamina often proved overly optimistic. The USMC CAP program offered one clear means of stiffing their backbone, but entailed its own costs and limitations. That local security appeared the most important element in swaying or keeping local loyalties became recognized relatively early, providing both psychological and physical security proved far more difficult.