

Counterinsurgency in Vietnam: Lessons Learned, Ignored, then Revived

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Beginning in the summer of 1954, after the Geneva Accords had divided Vietnam at the 17th Parallel into North and South, there was a tenuous chance for the South Vietnamese to build an independent government and to develop a new military and political approach to pacification of the rural areas where the communist dominated Vietminh guerrilla movement remained strong. I arrived in Saigon, an inexperienced U.S. Army Infantry second lieutenant, just as Geneva went into effect. The South was in political turmoil. My boss, the legendary Colonel, later Major General Edward G. Lansdale, USAF, had earlier developed a winning counterinsurgency strategy and set of tactics in the Philippines against the rural based communist led Huk Balahap (Huk) movement. In 1948 the Huks were on the verge of winning control of the Philippines. The Philippine government was corrupt and incompetent. Its army was poorly led, taking on the Huks with conventional military tactics and in the process often alienating the civilian population.

Lansdale became the advisor to an extraordinary Filipino leader, Ramon Magsaysay, who as Secretary of Defense changed the army's approach. Adopting a policy he called "all-out friendship or all-out force," Magsaysay persuaded the army to put the security and well-being of the population first while aggressively using small unit combat operations and psychological warfare to defeat the Huk guerillas. This was combined with a surrender program offering the Huks resettlement in peace on farms they could own with government help. During a crucial congressional election, which his own President was illegally trying to fix, Magsaysay had the army guard the polls to ensure voters would not be intimidated, either by the President's goon squads or the Huks. The President's party lost the elections but the faith of the average Filipino in their democratic system was restored and Magsaysay became so popular he eventually ran for President winning in a landslide.

Protecting the civilian population and ensuring their security and well-being were put ahead of other military objectives such as killing Huks and force protection. Military civic action in which each soldier was indoctrinated to believe he derived his authority from the people and was honor bound to protect and help them became both the order and the practice of the day. Popular support for the Huks was winnowed away and the

movement collapsed when their hard core communist leader, Luis Taruc, turned himself in, saying he no longer had a cause worth fighting for.

Lansdale undertook a similar approach to establishing security in the South Vietnamese countryside. I was assigned to work with the Vietnamese army and became the sole advisor accompanying that army on two large pacification operations occupying large swaths of South Vietnam territory previously controlled for nine years by the communist Vietminh. Under the terms of the Geneva Accords, the communists were supposed to evacuate their guerrilla troops north while the French Army evacuated south. There was an obvious need for the South Vietnamese to extend government into areas formerly under communist control. The only institution available for this purpose was the South Vietnamese army which had never conducted independent operations under the French in less than battalion size, was demoralized with many desertions and whose chief of staff was spending his time during most of 1954 plotting a coup against the newly arrived Prime Minister, Ngo Dinh Diem.

By the end of 1954, coup plotting was foiled so the army could begin seriously considering its pacification assignment. No one knew whether the Vietminh might reinstate active resistance with stay-behind cadre in the zones they were evacuating so we had to help prepare the army for possible combat as well as for an active pacification campaign to win the support of the civilian population which had only known communist rule. During the first occupation operation we tried to improve troop behavior mainly through lectures. One such lecture was given to army truck drivers to stop them from running over people and their livestock when they passed through villages. After that lecture, I witnessed these same drivers getting back into their trucks only to go off barreling through villages scattering people and chickens right and left. Obviously a few lectures were not going to do the job. The first occupation was a learn-as-you-go affair. Communist resistance was passive not active and the operation went off without serious adverse consequences but without creating a strongly positive relationship between the army and the population.

Consequently, in preparing for the next occupation of a large zone in Central Vietnam containing about two million people, the army leadership with our help undertook much more intensive training in troop behavior and civic action all the way down to the platoon level with skits illustrating good and bad behavior as well repeated lectures. The army as servant of the people and civic action – actively helping the population – was instilled as every soldier's duty down to the lowest private. As a consequence, the entire occupation came off without a single untoward incident between the troops and the population. Towards the end of the operation, people were actually coming out of their houses voluntarily offering drinking water to the soldiers. (It was the dry season when daily temperatures climbed over 100 degrees). The popular response in turn generated real pride down in the ranks. While there was no active combat, had it occurred I believe the positive attitude of the army towards civilians would have prevailed. The population's initial fear and indifference turned into active support as the local people began

identifying arms caches left behind by the Vietminh (the existence of these caches clearly indicated they intended to return), as well as fingering active Vietminh stay-behind cadre.

After Lansdale left in 1956, the Vietnamese Army was taken out of its territorial security role to be organized and trained as regular infantry divisions to oppose an overt North Vietnamese invasion over the 17th parallel. This left a security vacuum in the rural areas which was supposed to be filled by provincial Civil Guard units but they were ill-trained and ill-equipped. At the village level a self defense corps was recruited but received little training while owning even worse weapons (an occasional pistol and shotgun along with a few old French rifles). When the North Vietnamese reignited the insurgency in South Vietnam in 1959-1960, the South Vietnamese armed forces (the army, the civil guard and the self-defense corps) were not organized or prepared to ensure population security while taking on the newly labeled Vietcong (Vietnamese communists). Thus the insurgency thrived.

Enter the Americans in 1961 under President Kennedy's orders to help the South Vietnamese foil the attempted takeover by the Vietcong. An overall American Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) was set up headed by General Paul Harkins over the existing Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) which was beefed up. American officers were inserted as advisors down to battalion level of the Vietnamese National Army (ARVN) and at the military sector (provincial) level. The last American war experience had been in Korea, a conventional war. Lansdale by this time a general in the Pentagon (Chief of Special Operations, OSD) had tried to convince McNamara and the Joint Chiefs in 1961 that what was needed was a people first approach to counterinsurgency, the buzz-word of the time. Few understood this and the counterinsurgency effort would become largely a traditional military approach to killing insurgents as the main objective. Typical of Secretary Robert McNamara's outlook he once asked Lansdale for comments on an evaluation system he was creating to determine if our side was winning. It was all body counts, weapons captured and other numerical factors. When Lansdale looked at it he said, "Something's missing, the x factor." McNamara was perplexed as Lansdale explained that the "x factor" consisted of the "the feelings of the Vietnamese people." McNamara couldn't put a number on it so he put it out of his mind. Bean counting was substituted for practical indicators that meant something in an unconventional ("irregular" to use the current term) war. An intelligent approach to counterinsurgency started to disappear.

I became re-involved in Vietnam in 1962 when I was asked by the Director of USAID in Washington to take a month's leave of absence from the family engineering business to go back to South Vietnam to survey how our Saigon economic aid office, the U.S. Operations Mission (USOM), could constructively become involved in counterinsurgency. The Vietnamese had adopted the Strategic Hamlet Program, which was at its heart a village self-defense, self-government and self-development program, as their main response to the Vietcong insurgency. I found the program promising but generally under funded, poorly planned in a number of provinces with too much

uncompensated population relocation and lacking sufficient security support. Except for one experimental province in the Center, there was little tie-in between combat operations by regular ARVN units and the strategic hamlets. While senior American advisors at the Corps and Division level were pushing ARVN units of never less than battalion size to conduct sweeps (the predecessor to “search and destroy” operations), the provinces had inadequate security forces to keep larger Vietcong guerrilla units away from the hamlets.

Based on what I saw I recommended a decentralized economic, social and security assistance program to be funded by AID focused on the hamlet level and administered at the province level where a troika of the Vietnamese province chief, the American military advisor and a USOM provincial representative would jointly decide how to expend funds in support of the hamlet program. Activities to be supported included hamlet and hamlet defense construction, hamlet civic action teams, hamlet militia training and a surrender program as well as agricultural and livestock development, the building and equipping of schools, and village self-help projects (wells, roads, irrigation works, fish ponds) for which the population furnished the labor and the government furnished the materials. To be eligible for such projects the hamlet had first to conduct an election for hamlet chief and council, a step towards active self-governance and self-defense.

When I came back to Washington I was asked by the White House to run the program so I quit my job. By September 1962, I was back out there in charge of the special USOM office of Rural Affairs, putting funds and representatives into the provinces in active collaboration with the Vietnamese. Rural security improved as our support took hold in those provinces where the province chief had a real concern for the security and well being of the population. The problem persisted, however, of inadequate security resources at the provincial level with the exception of a few provinces where the Vietcong were weak or where a regular army regiment had been specifically assigned to a province. With that exception, however, ARVN divisions were kept intact and had areas of responsibility covering several provinces. These forces were habitually deployed in battalion-sized or larger sweeps looking for regular VC forces, based on intelligence – often twenty-four hours old. Sometimes larger VC units would be trapped, but for the most part they evaded the sweeps, fading back into their base areas. While our military MAAG provincial advisors were clearly tied in with the strategic hamlets, MACV headquarters and the corps and division advisory levels were not, and with few exceptions were more interested in traditional combat operations. There was an over-reliance on air support and indiscriminate artillery interdiction, too often striking civilians but hitting few Vietcong. There was little understanding that the war could be fought more effectively by protecting and winning over the population, and little appreciation, particularly at the top, of its political and psychological aspects.

The disconnect between regular army units and the civilian population was also in large measure responsible for troop misbehavior, alienating the people we needed to win over. The people first doctrine instilled in the army back in 1955 and 1956 had been lost. There

was talk of civic action but few American military advisors to ARVN knew what it meant or thought it important. Things were different with our military advisors at the provincial level as they could see first hand the connection between good troop behavior, civic action and the positive reaction of the population which would then start providing intelligence about the Vietcong and participating willingly in their own self-defense. Unfortunately, these provincial advisors could only serve a year and were mandatorily replaced by new advisors with little overlap or prior orientation and training. By the time most got read into the local situation they were in the latter half of their assigned tour.

In many provinces the lack of effective backup military support for the hamlets made permanent security difficult if not impossible. When properly armed and at least minimally trained, the hamlet militia could resist small-scale, local VC incursions. The village-level Self-Defense Corps (SDC) was the next line of defense, but it was often poorly trained and under armed, at a time when more and more VC were armed with AK-47s smuggled in from Cambodia or down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. While most MAAG provincial advisors understood the importance of the SDC, at higher levels its needs received little attention. At the next highest level in the provinces, the Civil Guard was mainly employed in static duty, guarding bridges and provincial and district headquarters.

Though General Harkins as head of MACV issued an order in February 1963 explaining the importance of “clear and hold” operations and support for the Strategic Hamlet Program, declaring that it was “absolutely essential” that Vietnamese army resources be applied to this effort, the main emphasis at division and corps remained on large-unit sweeps. Most of these operations were ineffective and not worth the side effect of driving more recruits to the Vietcong. A MAAG “lessons learned” report of June 1962 had condemned sweep operations as “indicative of poor intelligence,” recommending that they “should be avoided.” This was obviously being ignored, as was another recommendation that “participating troops and commanders must be “Civic Action minded.” Troop abuses continued. It was hard to figure out why the top level of MACV remained so impervious to its own firsthand, field-based recommendations.

To question military tactics openly would have brought Rural Affairs into direct conflict with General Harkins about a subject on which civilians were thought not qualified to speak. A further complication was Ambassador Nolting’s endorsement in April of increased air interdiction, arguing it had few unfavorable side effects. Typically, Rural Affairs had not been asked to comment on these operations, although we were better informed about the side effects than others, with the exception of the MAAG provincial advisors, who also believed that air support and artillery interdiction were much too loosely controlled but they also were not consulted.

I hoped the assignment of Brig. Gen. Richard Stilwell to MACV as J-3 (Operations) in April, 1963, would change the orientation at the top. Lt. Col. Charles Bohannon, (USA ret), whom I brought over from the Philippines to help start the Vietnamese government’s surrender program (Chieu Hoi), had been deeply involved in the anti-Huk campaign as

Lansdale's Deputy. He had led Filipino guerrillas during World War II and had even written a book about how the Huk campaign was won (*Counter Guerrilla Operations*, republished in 2008 by Praeger). Bohannon had known Stilwell when Stilwell had been involved in supporting Lansdale's efforts against the Huks. We thought Bohannon might influence changes in the MACV's approach.

My office began giving Stilwell verbal reports about harmful Vietnamese army actions. He listened, but little happened. Later written memos were sent which Stilwell was reading but without much reaction. He said he had warned some of the American advisors about improper ARVN troop behavior, but I saw few results from our verbal or written warnings. I told him personally how back in 1955 the Vietnamese had taken two much less disciplined and untrained army divisions, and after three weeks of intensive indoctrination, had occupied an area previously controlled by the Vietminh for nine years without a single civilian/soldier incident. Comprehensive civic-action indoctrination was again needed, I urged. Stilwell seemed to agree, but the idea received no priority within MACV.

In the first systematic attempt to induce a change in military tactics, Rural Affairs focused on the largely indiscriminate use of firepower by our planes and helicopters when fired upon even from friendly villages, as well as on the bombing and shelling of suspected VC locations when they included villages with civilians. I sent a memo to Ambassador Nolting with a copy to General Stilwell emphasizing that winning the support of the people was the only way to defeat the insurgency. What that meant "was [that] . . . so long as actions taken in the war contribute to winning the people, they contribute to winning the war. When they do not contribute to winning the people, they contribute to losing the war." A mistaken view, all too prevalent in practice, was that "those who do not support the government, or are not in government-controlled areas, must suffer for this (after all, war is hell). . . . [A]fter suffering enough they will either blame the VC or will come over to government controlled areas to escape the bombs, shells, . . . their lot when the VC are around."

Consistent with American principles, I argued, there were two reasons why the United States should neither countenance nor support such actions. First, "No one should be punished for actions beyond his control or forced on him by fear of his life . . . [and] when punishment is possibly unjust, as well as excessive, it is certain to create hatred for those that inflict it." Second, we should, "absolutely prohibit any attacks by U.S. aircraft or pilots on . . . targets where the absence of women and children cannot be positively determined." So called 'Free Fire Zones,' which could be shelled or bombed indiscriminately, should be eliminated." The memo concluded, "This war is not an isolated phenomenon. The actions that we take, or support, here in Vietnam, must be viewed in that context, and as they may be made to appear long after our major involvement here has ended."

The difference in outlook and understanding of the reality of the insurgency and the effectiveness of our counterinsurgency efforts, particularly in the critical area of the Delta, came to a head at a September 1963 meeting at the White House. As a prelude, there had been a political uprising of the Buddhists resulting in a raid on the Pagodas in early July which had in turn convinced newly arrived Ambassador Lodge that the only solution to increasing Vietnamese political unrest and a diminishing war effort was the removal from office of both President Diem and his brother Nhu. An early effort to organize a coup by the generals had failed and President Kennedy was trying to figure out what policy to follow, either continuing Lodge's effort to give covert support to a coup, or to soldier on with both Diem and Nhu in power.

To find out whether we were winning the war, President Kennedy sent two emissaries to Saigon, one from the State Department, Joseph Mendenhall, and one from the Pentagon, Major General Victor Krulak to report back on the "true" state of affairs. Their reports were so at variance that President Kennedy asked, "The two of you did visit the same country, didn't you?" I was in Washington because my father was gravely ill and was called into the same meeting and asked to report directly to the President right after Mendenhall and Krulak. I told him every thing I knew about the current situation and recommended he send my old boss, General Lansdale, the only American Diem really trusted, to see if Diem could be persuaded to send his brother Nhu out of the country so relations could be patched up with the army and the Buddhists. Kennedy thanked me about recommending Lansdale but then asked what I thought of the military situation. I responded that I had just been in Long An Province south of Saigon where some 60 strategic hamlets had been overrun by the Vietcong because Vietnamese troops were confined to barracks over fears of a coup. We were not winning the war, particularly in the Delta, I said. This caused a sensation because General Krulak had just claimed we *were* winning the war handily, *particularly in the Delta*. I knew this was what General Harkins thought because he only listened to favorable reports but the Vietnamese Secretary of Defense had confirmed my conclusions as had the ARVN officer in charge of the strategic hamlet program at the national level. This generated attempts by General Harkins to have me replaced but when Secretary McNamara and General Taylor paid a visit about a month later what I had said was completely confirmed. This was the degree to which the wrong tactics and a willingness at the top to listen only to good news had skewed official military views.

Over the next five years nothing ever came of my memo about controlling the use of largely indiscriminate bombing and shelling. The "we had to destroy it to save it" approach would intensify during the later American direct-intervention phase of the war under Gen. William Westmoreland. This turned too much of South Vietnam, according to one critic, into "a lush tropical bombing range", alienating not only many Vietnamese but the American public as well. We were going to win the war ourselves by attriting the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese who presumably were going to give up so we could then turn the country back to the South Vietnamese. All the lessons about Maoist revolutionary warfare were forgotten if they had ever been learned. As General Maxwell

Taylor would later reflect just before he died, we failed to understand our enemy, the North Vietnamese, our South Vietnamese allies or ourselves.

The damaging effect of such highly destructive tactics came to a head in Saigon during a second Vietcong offensive called “Mini-Tet,” in the spring of 1968, after the major Tet Offensive in January. General Lansdale had been back in Saigon since 1965 as a State Department civilian in our Embassy trying to implement pacification and political development and was still there. I had been coming out periodically to help him. In May, as part of mini-Tet, a small Vietcong unit invaded a heavily populated, poor but pro-government area, on the south side of the Saigon River called District Eight and began lobbing mortar shells into Saigon. Under Westmoreland’s orders American forces replied with intensive shelling and bombing. Through Lansdale’s intercession the bombardment was stopped but not before destroying over five thousand dwellings, killing two hundred civilians, wounding two thousand and creating forty thousand refugees. Incredibly some of the Vietcong were still there until arms were given to the local population who drove them out. I visited District Eight in June to see what had happened. Afterwards I reported the unhappy news directly to Vice President Humphrey who had a special interest in the area. In 1967, he had visited District Eight as an example of how the slum dwellers of Saigon could be converted into supporters of the government.

As he was taking over command from Westmoreland, General Abrams had seen the immense destruction wrought by American firepower while flying over the city. He decreed that no further bombing would be conducted in the greater Saigon area without his personal permission. This started the change in military operations to an emphasis on pacification, giving priority to population security and protection with compatible combat tactics, which began a major shift in the way the war was being fought. This change has been most ably chronicled by Dr. Lewis Sorley in his book, *A Better War*, and described in his article in Issue 4 of this magazine entitled “Reflections on the Vietnam War.” By 1970 practically all of the countryside had been pacified. Unfortunately, this came too late to affect the ultimate course of the war.

We have recently seen a workable doctrine of counterinsurgency being implemented by General Petraeus in Iraq, giving population protection a priority over killing insurgents and even over force protection. Also, we seem to have come full circle with a recently issued (Dec. 1, 2008) Department of Defense policy directive which elevates the mission of “irregular warfare” to an equal footing with traditional combat. With this focus and an understanding that protecting and securing the population must have priority in our combat operations, we can hope that a better model of counterinsurgency will soon be implemented in Afghanistan.

Rufus Phillips, the author of Why Vietnam Matters: An Eyewitness Account of Lessons Not Learned, recently published by the Naval Institute Press, spent the better part of the years 1954 to 1968 in carrying out counterinsurgency in Vietnam while trying to influence U.S. policies in Saigon and back in Washington. Successively, as an army

officer detailed to the CIA, a CIA Case Officer, USAID director of an on-the-ground, unconventional, economic and social rural development program in support of counterinsurgency, and as a consultant to the State Department, he was involved from the rice paddy level to the President's National Security Council in implementing U.S. policies and programs while trying to make changes. His efforts brought him into contact with all the major players of that era: President Ngo Dinh Diem, his brother Nhu, four American ambassadors to Vietnam including Henry Cabot Lodge and General Maxwell Taylor, Secretary McNamara, Secretary Rusk, Director of USAID Bell, and Generals Harkins and Westmoreland as well as President Kennedy. Why Vietnam Matters (www.whyvietnammatters.com) is a firsthand account from which this article is derived. A review of this book in the November-December issue of the VVA Veteran says the last chapter, which deals with Vietnam's lessons applied to Iraq and Afghanistan, "should be mandatory reading in Washington, D.C."

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