

# MACV Execution of Lines of Effort During the Directed US Withdrawal

A Monograph

by

LTC Meghann E. Sullivan  
US Army



School of Advanced Military Studies  
US Army Command and General Staff College  
Fort Leavenworth, KS

2018

**REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE**

*Form Approved  
OMB No. 0704-0188*

The public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing the burden, to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

**PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.**

<b>1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)</b> 24-05-2018		<b>2. REPORT TYPE</b> Master's Thesis		<b>3. DATES COVERED (From - To)</b> JUN 2017 - MAY 2018	
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b> MACV Execution of Lines of Effort During the Directed US Withdrawal				<b>5a. CONTRACT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5b. GRANT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5d. PROJECT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5e. TASK NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER</b>	
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b> LTC Meghann E. Sullivan				<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b>	
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> US Army Command and General Staff College ATTN: ATZL-SWD-GD Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027-2301				<b>10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)</b>	
<b>9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> Advanced Military Studies Program				<b>11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)</b>	
<b>12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b> Approved for Public Release, Distribution is Unlimited					
<b>13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b>					
<b>14. ABSTRACT</b> In order to support the Presidential directives, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) developed the Combined Campaign Plan for 1970. The campaign plan consisted of three major lines of effort in support of withdrawal from Vietnam. The lines of effort were Vietnamization, support of pacification and participation in development programs, and defeat the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Vietcong forces. Any military approach developed in support of a flawed policy will not bring about the desired outcome no matter how much effort is made. That is the case here. There could be no military victory. MACV employed operational art to synchronize its actions against North Vietnamese forces in order to stimulate a negotiated settlement and end the conflict. Unfortunately, the South Vietnamese military and government proved inadequate and were unable to take the lead without US support. The execution of the MACV Campaign Plan's lines of effort will demonstrate their effectiveness in support of the national objectives during the directed withdrawal.					
<b>15. SUBJECT TERMS</b> LOEs; Vietnamization; Pacification; Withdrawal; Insurgency; Afghanistan					
<b>16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:</b>			<b>17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b>	<b>18. NUMBER OF PAGES</b>	<b>19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON</b>
<b>a. REPORT</b>	<b>b. ABSTRACT</b>	<b>c. THIS PAGE</b>			LTC Meghann E. Sullivan
(U)	(U)	(U)	(U)	42	<b>19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code)</b>

Reset

## Monograph Approval Page

Name of Candidate: LTC Meghann E. Sullivan

Monograph Title: MACV Execution of Lines of Effort During the Directed US Withdrawal

Approved by:

\_\_\_\_\_, Monograph Director  
Ricardo A. Herrera, PhD

\_\_\_\_\_, Seminar Leader  
Richard A. Martin, COL

\_\_\_\_\_, Director, School of Advanced Military Studies  
James C. Markert, COL

Accepted this 24th day of May 2018 by:

\_\_\_\_\_, Director, Graduate Degree Programs  
Robert F. Baumann, PhD

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the US Army Command and General Staff College or any other government agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

Fair use determination or copyright permission has been obtained for the inclusion of pictures, maps, graphics, and any other works incorporated into this manuscript. A work of the United States Government is not subject to copyright, however further publication or sale of copyrighted images is not permissible.

## Abstract

MACV Execution of Lines of Effort During the Directed US Withdrawal, by LTC Meghann E. Sullivan, United States Army, 42 pages.

In order to support the Presidential directives, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) developed the Combined Campaign Plan for 1970. The campaign plan consisted of three major lines of effort in support of withdrawal from Vietnam. The lines of effort were Vietnamization, support of pacification and participation in development programs, and defeat the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Vietcong forces. Any military approach developed in support of a flawed policy will not bring about the desired outcome no matter how much effort is made. That is the case here. There could be no military victory. MACV employed operational art to synchronize its actions against North Vietnamese forces in order to stimulate a negotiated settlement and end the conflict. Unfortunately, the South Vietnamese military and government proved inadequate and were unable to take the lead without US support. The execution of the MACV Campaign Plan's lines of effort will demonstrate their effectiveness in support of the national objectives during the directed withdrawal.

## Contents

Abstract .....	iii
Acknowledgement.....	v
Acronyms .....	vi
Introduction .....	1
Vietnamization .....	5
Pacification .....	16
Defeat of the NVA and Viet Cong .....	28
Conclusion .....	36
Bibliography.....	40

## Acknowledgements

The utmost thanks to Dr. Ricardo Herrera for pushing me to make my thoughts intelligible. I would also like to thank my family for their support. Finally, I would like to thank my teammates Jose and Jan for reviewing my pages and providing thoughtful guidance throughout the year.

## Acronyms

ADP	Army Doctrine Publication
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
COSVN	Central Office South Vietnam
CORDS	Civil Operations and Rural Development Support
CSOP	Combined Strategic Objectives Plan
CTZ	Corps Tactical Zone
GVN	Government of Vietnam (Referring to the Republic of Vietnam)
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
JGS	Joint General Staff (Republic of Vietnam)
LOE	Line of Effort
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
PF	Popular Forces
RF	Regional Forces
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
RVNAF	Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces
US	United States
VAC	Village Administrative Committee
VPC	Village People's Council
VC	Viet Cong
VCI	Vietnamese Communist Infrastructure
VSO	Village Stability Operations
VSP	Village Stability Platform

## Introduction

Shortly after his inauguration, President Richard M. Nixon met with his national security staff and military leaders to assess a new way forward in the war in Vietnam. In April 1969, President Nixon directed a withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam to begin in July 1969.<sup>1</sup> US combat troops continued working with the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) to train, advise, equip, and transition it to take over security for the country. In order to support the Presidential directives, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) developed the Combined Campaign Plan for 1970. The campaign plan consisted of three major lines of effort in support of withdrawal from Vietnam. The lines of effort were Vietnamization, support of pacification and participation in development programs, and defeat the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Vietcong forces.<sup>2</sup> These three lines of effort in support of the strategic end state were, in retrospect, what is today termed operational art. Operational art is the synchronization of actions in time, space, and purpose, to achieve an end.<sup>3</sup>

The Combined Campaign Plan for 1970 spelled out MACV's operational approach to achieve the military end state in support of the strategic end state. Ultimately, President Nixon wanted to support the South Vietnamese enough to negotiate a settlement with North Vietnam and end United States involvement in the conflict.<sup>4</sup> American public opinion of the war had shifted to opposition and the desire to end the US commitment, was not positive, and he needed to decrease casualties quickly. The plan developed supported both of those end states by directing

---

<sup>1</sup> US National Security Council, National Security Study Memorandum 36, April 1969 (The White House: Washington, DC, 1969), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Headquarters USMACV, United States Military Assistance Command, *Vietnam Command History 1970 Volume 1*, Compilation of reports and assessment (Saigon: Military History Branch, Office of the Secretary, Joint Staff, 1971), II-4 -II-7. The Campaign plan objectives and goals are described in Chapter II.

<sup>3</sup> US Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2017), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Gideon Rose, *How Wars End* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 167.



the withdrawal and enabling the South Vietnamese forces to take the lead in the country's defense and security.

In 1969 President Nixon directed the timetabled withdrawals, but the actual shift of the strategic main effort to Vietnamization began when General Creighton W. Abrams Jr. assumed command of the MACV in 1968. General Abrams had served as General William C. Westmoreland's deputy commander in Vietnam since 1967 and had observed how Westmoreland's strategy to secure had failed.<sup>5</sup> General Abrams recognized the need to put the South Vietnamese forces in the lead to build support from and secure the South Vietnamese population. In recognizing this, he shifted efforts to focus on building up the South Vietnamese military forces and pacification efforts. Combat operations became a supporting effort in the new strategy.

General Abrams did not completely embrace the directed guidance as he was very concerned about the accelerated withdrawals. However, he clearly understood the administration's intent to redefine what constituted success.<sup>6</sup> Rather than focusing on a military victory, it was now more important to facilitate the withdrawal and accomplish this in an honorable fashion.<sup>7</sup> President Nixon's political strategy trumped the military strategy. The new strategy could still attempt to fully support the first two lines of effort, Vietnamization and Pacification, but not the third. The strategy also focused on shifting the brunt of military operations to the South Vietnamese Army while simultaneously protecting the population so that the South Vietnamese government could establish its authority.

---

<sup>5</sup> Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and the Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1999), 1-15. In Chapter 1, Sorley discusses General Westmoreland's strategy of attrition and how General Abrams went to Vietnam in May 1967 and observed for a year before taking command of the MACV.

<sup>6</sup> James H. Wilbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 50.

<sup>7</sup> Gregory A. Daddis, *Withdrawal: Reassessing America's Final Years in Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 9.

Lewis Sorley argues this was a complete shift in the operational approach than that of General Westmoreland.<sup>8</sup> Upon closer examination, however, it is clear that it was not the case. The difference in the strategies has more to do with prioritization of lines of efforts than in the lines of effort themselves. General Westmoreland recognized the need of all three lines of efforts during his tenure as the MACV Commander. More importantly, he executed all three. General Abrams shifted the priority of the lines of effort as he believed that in order to secure the population, combat operations were secondary. The buildup of the South Vietnamese forces, enabling them to take the lead and pacification became the main efforts while still acknowledging the need to accomplish all three.<sup>9</sup>

The operational approach taken by the US military during the Vietnam War is still highly relevant today. Despite economic aid and commitment of resources and personnel, the Vietnamization program ultimately failed. The South Vietnamese were unable to take the lead in their country's defense and security; they were unable to stand on their own without US support. Many of the problems that the US military faced in Vietnam, such as host government corruption and instability, the lack of popular legitimacy, and a weak military, are similar to the challenges in Afghanistan. The US military was involved broadly in Indochina and deeply in Vietnam for over twenty years, but with no success. The US military has conducted operations in Afghanistan for seventeen years, since 2001. The inabilities of the host governments to establish their legitimacy within their borders and the inability of both nations' military and security forces to secure their populations or borders has created other tensions. Even so, the United States continues to train and build the inadequate and failing Afghan military forces, just as the US military did during the Vietnam War.

---

<sup>8</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 17-30. In Chapter 2, Sorley argues General Abrams changes tactics immediately.

<sup>9</sup> US Military Assistance Command Vietnam, *Command History 1970 Volume 1*, II-3; Sorley, *A Better War*, 23; Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 170-171.

Similar to the outcome of the Vietnam War, US popular support for the Afghanistan War has dwindled and it may be only a matter of time before the United States draws down in similar fashion to Vietnam. Over the years, the US national military strategy shifted from a fear of the spread of communism to a containment strategy during the Cold War, what President Nixon called “Asia after Vietnam.”<sup>10</sup> The US efforts in Vietnam were a response to Chinese and Soviet actions. The current environment is similar. With the end of the Cold War and changes in global leadership, national objectives for many nations have shifted. In the last fifteen years, the United States has shifted from a war on terror to a focus on defeating violent extremism and responding to challenges against US power, influence, and interests, from China and Russia.<sup>11</sup> In both instances, the Vietnam War and the Afghanistan War, the United States became involved in conflicts deemed vital in support of national interest, but could not exit for fears of failure or looking weak on the global stage.

Again, as the military approach to the conduct of the Vietnam War and MACV’s lines of effort are evaluated, it appears that the approach is solid. The underlying problem lies with the flawed policy. According to Colonel (retired) Harry Summers, “the confusion over the objectives had a devastating effect on our ability to conduct the war.” He quotes Brigadier General Douglas Kinnard who commanded in Vietnam as stating “almost 70 percent of the Army generals who managed the war were uncertain of its objectives,” and this “mirrors a deep-seated strategic failure: the inability of the policy makers to frame tangible, obtainable goals.”<sup>12</sup>

Any military approach developed in support of a flawed policy will not bring about the desired outcome no matter how much effort is made. That is the case here. There could be no military victory. MACV employed operational art to synchronize its actions against North

---

<sup>10</sup> Rose, *How Wars End*, 161-162; Daddis, *Westmoreland’s War*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> US National Security Council, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (The White House: Washington, DC, 2017), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Harry G. Summers Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982), 105.

Vietnamese forces in order to stimulate a negotiated settlement and end the conflict.

Unfortunately, the South Vietnamese military and government proved inadequate and were unable to take the lead without US support. The execution of the MACV Campaign Plan's lines of effort will demonstrate their effectiveness in support of the national objectives during the directed withdrawal.

## Vietnamization

The definition of what Vietnamization encompassed evolved over time. In the spring of 1969, six months after his election, President Nixon announced his new policy. It was not, however, a new idea. General Westmoreland had previously discussed turning over the fight to the South Vietnamese in 1967 during a National Press Club Speech. Moreover, training and preparing Republic of Vietnam (RVN) forces to defend South Vietnam had been a US LOE since 1968. But there was a major difference in the plan that General Abrams would have to accomplish. Under President Nixon's new definition, "the South Vietnamese Army would be expected to fight both the Vietcong and the NVA after the eventual withdrawal of U.S. troops." Now General Abrams would have to train the ARVN to fight a conventional NVA and an insurgency.<sup>13</sup>

Historian James Wilbanks states that the "ultimate objective of the Vietnamization program was to strengthen the armed forces of South Vietnam and bolster the Thieu government to make the South Vietnamese capable of standing alone against their Communist opponents."<sup>14</sup> Again, the efforts to build up the military forces and legitimize the government in South Vietnam were not new. The US had been providing advisors to Indochina since the 1950s and previous

---

<sup>13</sup> Wilbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 18-20.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

administrations had worked with the different presidents and their governments to build legitimacy.<sup>15</sup>

One of the military end state conditions stated in the January 1970 MACV Combined Strategic Objectives Plan (CSOP) was “RVNAF and the Civil Security Forces show a high degree of professionalism and are properly structured and trained to meet any potential threat.”<sup>16</sup> This condition translates simply to a desire to have wholly functional military forces in support of their ultimate objective of a free and viable South Vietnam. Functional military forces are comprised of manned organizations, competent, honest leaders, and properly trained and equipped forces who are dedicated to service and loyal to their units and the government. Herein lay the most difficult hurdle.

There were multiple problems facing the RVN forces to include corruption, desertion, and a lack of competent leadership. These problems saturated most units and organizations, and most advisors were doubtful of the ability of the RVN forces to overcome these challenges and perform professionally. The biggest problem was the recruitment for and filling of all positions. At the higher levels, colonels and generals, were from South Vietnam’s elite class. Their positions and promotions were largely based on personal and familiar relationships. They also looked to protect family and friends who held lower ranks within the army. One premier joked that “before he could fire a driver he would have to check with eight generals and their families.”<sup>17</sup> Their leadership abilities, generally speaking, tended to be weak.

Moreover, many officers were incompetent, dishonest and corrupt. General Abrams consistently requested that President Thieu relieve or replace corrupt and incapable commanders at all levels. Most of the time President Thieu disregarded General Abrams’s requests, but

---

<sup>15</sup> Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 3.

<sup>16</sup> Headquarters MACV, *The Combined Strategic Objectives Plan, 1970* (San Francisco: Headquarters MACV, 1970), 23.

<sup>17</sup> Spector, *After Tet*, 100-101.

sometimes he abided by the MACV commander's recommendation. His rationale for replacing people varied from actually replacing incompetent leaders to keeping loyal supporters in key positions for political reasons. Regardless of President Thieu's rationale for replacing people, General Abrams and his advisors said the replacements, in most cases, for these positions, were significantly better than the previous commanders. Politics dominated the military. President Thieu took care of his loyalists and their network of supporters, from the highest levels to the lowest levels.<sup>18</sup>

As more US aid poured into South Vietnam, fraud, waste, and abuse increased due to rampant corruption in the military. Commanders lied about the number of soldiers on their rolls and simply kept the money for personal use. They would also offer better assignments for money. Drug trafficking occurred by some of the top officers. The most offensive was the trading of goods with the Vietcong for profit. The South Vietnamese forces would sell equipment, fuel, food, and medical supplies. Since military salaries were inadequate and benefits virtually nonexistent, the underlying reasons for corruption were understandable.<sup>19</sup> Food concerns plagued the soldiers which resulted in them stealing chickens and fruit from local villagers and trampling rice paddies in their search for food.<sup>20</sup>

Raising the forces to fill positions in the expanding ARVN was a challenge. Depending on personal wealth, it was entirely possible to avoid military service altogether. For those who could not afford to buy out their time, they found other ways. There were draft evaders, and pure luck for some of the poorer population due to bad record-keeping in remote areas. The other choice was desertion. Some infantry combat units lost up to 10,000 soldiers per month. According to US advisors and interviews with deserters, the major causes of desertion had to do

---

<sup>18</sup> Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2006), 275.

<sup>19</sup> Spector, *After Tet*, 102-105.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-109.

with personal and family concerns such as homesickness or being posted to isolated locations, as well as poor leadership.<sup>21</sup> US advisors encouraged commanders to punish deserters, but the repercussions were too insignificant and inadequate to prevent desertion from occurring again.<sup>22</sup>

Even with the leadership and manning problems, President Thieu wanted to expand the RVNAF in order to retain the ability to fight two types of wars. At a meeting between President Nixon and President Thieu at Midway Island in June 1969, the two leaders discussed the future military ability of the South Vietnamese Army following a US withdrawal. President Thieu wanted to increase the size of the army by almost 200,000 troops to man two armored brigade headquarters and three armored cavalry squadrons. His reasoning was sound. He recognized that there was both a conventional fight and a growing insurgency and needed the soldiers to fight both the NVA and the Vietcong. President Thieu also made requests to President Nixon for equipment such as more modern tanks to deal with the conventional NVA attacks. He also requested more artillery, air defense systems, radars, and aircraft for transport, search and rescue, river and coast surveillance, and commando operations to restructure and modernize the military and defeat the Vietcong and NVA.<sup>23</sup>

Washington did not support all of these requests because the budget would not support them. Planning for improving and modernizing the RVNAF began as early as 1968 during the Johnson administration and had continued. By 1970, under President Nixon, the economy of the United States and subsequent fiscal constraints, became dominant factors as Vietnamization progressed.<sup>24</sup> With the push to improve the RVNAF quickly, the Joint Chiefs of Staff developed

---

<sup>21</sup> Headquarters USMACV, *United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam Command History 1970*, vol. 2, *Compilation of Reports and Assessment* (Saigon: Military History Branch, Office of the Secretary, Joint Staff, 1971), VII-29 - VII-31.

<sup>22</sup> Spector, *After Tet*, 107.

<sup>23</sup> Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, The U.S. Army in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1988), 351-352.

<sup>24</sup> Willard J. Webb, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam, 1969-1970* (Washington, DC: Office of Joint History, 2002), 231.

the Consolidated Phase III RVNAF Improvement and Modernization (I &M) Program (CRIMP). The aim of the program was “to raise RVNAF effectiveness to the point where the Republic of Vietnam could maintain at least current levels of security while US forces were reduced to a support force by 1 July 1971 and to an advisory force two years thereafter.”<sup>25</sup> General Abrams recommended supporting the increases to the territorial forces because it would free conventional forces of the area security mission. He did not, however, recommend approval to any of the equipment requests as he did not believe the South Vietnamese army could provide trained personnel to operate and maintain the equipment. The Joint Chiefs agreed. They believed that the equipment was sufficient for the moment as the South Vietnamese did not have the technical ability to operate or maintain sophisticated equipment.<sup>26</sup> This view found political backing. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker agreed and stated “we must avoid providing more resources than the Vietnamese can digest.”<sup>27</sup>

Again in 1970, President Thieu proposed changes to the RVNAF. The new proposals were approved, albeit cautiously. The new force structure authorized growth up to 1.1 million uniformed personnel in the RVNAF over three years and approved two additional brigade headquarters for command and control, additional artillery assets to support the territorial forces and along the demilitarized zone, as well as additional air defense artillery assets.<sup>28</sup> The new force structure, authorized in the approved CRIMP, would provide twelve combat divisions with the appropriate logistical support and artillery assets and address additional regional and popular forces.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Webb, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 69-70, 232.

<sup>26</sup> Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years*, 352-353.

<sup>27</sup> US Military Assistance Command Vietnam, *Command History 1970*, vol. 2, VII-2.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, VII-3 - VII-5.

<sup>29</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 214-215.



As part of the CRIMP, the Joint Chiefs of Staff submitted a training plan developed by General Abrams and his MACV staff. The plan detailed that the training facilities in South Vietnam would be at capacity for the next three years. Other off shore facilities were already being used to augment training, which would continue. However, the withdrawals would impact the number of advisors available, which would cause shifts in the training priorities.<sup>30</sup>

The South Vietnamese established training facilities and service schools between 1946 and 1954 during the Indochina War.<sup>31</sup> The US military and MACV utilized these facilities in support of both train, advise, assist efforts and the Vietnamization effort. There were a total of 57 army training centers and schools. The main problems the MACV faced were insufficient facilities and life support areas, as well as untrained instructors. Also, now, in accordance with the new policy, the US military would have to train more South Vietnamese forces on an increased number of tasks. And the United States would need to do it exceptionally well in order to enable the RVNAF to take the lead in their own country.<sup>32</sup> The withdrawals would hinder training, though, as enabler forces would redeploy and so would the combat service support subject matter experts and maintainers.

The status of training became one of the key indicators to gauge readiness of ARVN units. In 1970, the US military used the Training Objectives and Measurement Management System (TOMMS) to evaluate effective training at national training centers and schools. This system measured effectiveness and progress of training in nine areas of performance. Most of the end of the year ratings were satisfactory or better to include the categories of: improvements in training quality, facilities conditions and upgrades, and use of training aids. However, quite a few of the categories received poor or unsatisfactory ratings to include: poor quality of cadre, no standardization for training, personnel shortfalls, poor quality training, poor logistics support to

---

<sup>30</sup> Webb, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 233.

<sup>31</sup> US Military Assistance Command Vietnam, *Command History 1970*, vol. 2, VII-33.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, VII-33 - VII-34.

training centers and schools, and poor school management. Despite these indicated faults in training, at the end of 1970 the US had trained “503,740 personnel in 12 national, regional force, popular force, and division training centers, and 87,197 personnel in 15 technical, four academic, and four combat arms schools.”<sup>33</sup>

The role of the advisor and his skills and qualifications became increasingly important as the withdrawal progressed. The military assistance effort had begun in 1951 with a small logistics group during the Indochina War and had continued to expand. In the 1950s, South Vietnamese forces total strength was close to 200,000 and in 1970 the total strength exceeded one million. The advisory effort increased from around 340 to approximately 14,000 advisors to account for this massive growth. Now MACV not only provided advisors to the staffs at the operational level down to battalions, but also to the regular armed forces.<sup>34</sup>

After a directed review of the advisor program in December 1969 by the Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, General Abrams conducted an assessment focusing on the roles and responsibilities, the training and quality, and the reduction of advisor support.<sup>35</sup> Previously, the advisors functioned more as liaison officers who coordinated US logistical and tactical support for ARVN units up until 1969.<sup>36</sup> Now with the shift of focus from combat operations back to training during Vietnamization, the role changed back to one of “training, guiding and supporting the Vietnamese in civil and military programs.”<sup>37</sup>

The effectiveness of the advisors varied tremendously and was inconsistent. Effective advisors demonstrated professional competence, technical skill, and were able to build relationships with their counterparts. According to a BDM Corporation study on lessons learned

---

<sup>33</sup> US Military Assistance Command Vietnam, *Command History 1970*, vol. 2, VII-56 - VII-57.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, VII-61 - VII-62.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, VII-77.

<sup>36</sup> BDM Corporation, *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*, vol. 6, *Conduct of the War* (McLean, VA, 1980), 12-9.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-8.

from Vietnam, ineffective advisors failed to build relationships with their counterparts and were not competent enough to provide advice or guidance. Most of the ineffective advisors were young and inexperienced, lacked culture and language training, did not try to communicate effectively with their counterparts, and failed to realize the expertise and experience of their counterparts. The South Vietnamese forces had been fighting most of their lives and they understood the enemy and the terrain. Most were older, experienced fighters who understood the character of the war and believed that the counterinsurgency fight was the main effort and the conventional fight was second. The South Vietnamese forces also did not appreciate the negative connotation of the term advisor and were fearful of feeling subordinate to a US advisor. The advisors who let the South Vietnamese forces take the lead and did not disregard advice or the experiences of their counterparts, were able to build up trust within the relationships, and were the most successful. The largest failure of all advisors overall was the lack of training, education, and understanding to advise on politico-military matters.<sup>38</sup>

For over fifteen years the United States was unsuccessful in building a robust, functional South Vietnamese military force. It is incredible to believe the MACV would be successful in the next few years while conducting a withdrawal and continuing to fight. From spring of 1969 to spring of 1972, US troop strength fell from over 400,000 to fewer than 70,000.<sup>39</sup> The budget was also disastrous for General Abrams and the MACV mission in Vietnam since the RVNAF Modernization and Improvement Program would not be fully funded.<sup>40</sup> The budgetary and personnel constraints hamstrung General Abrams. Together with the MACV, he accomplished as much as was possible under the given conditions and resource constraints. They maximized their

---

<sup>38</sup> BDM Corporation, *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*, vol. 6, 12-8 - 12-27.

<sup>39</sup> Rose, *How Wars End*, 121.

<sup>40</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 176.

ability to train at the training centers with resource constraints, but withdrawals affected the MACV's ability to provide subject matter experts.

The stress of the war also had an impact on the morale of the US troops in Vietnam. There were many problems with race relations, poor leadership within the US units, and rampant drug use, specifically heroin.<sup>41</sup> Soldiers also felt the impacts of the decline in popular support for the war. Additionally, public dissatisfaction led to budget constraints which actually slowed Vietnamization and hampered diplomatic negotiations. Despite all of these challenges, General Abrams continued with Vietnamization. In 1977, General Cao Van Vien acknowledged MACV efforts when he said, "the total effort by US advisers contributed directly and immeasurable to the development and modernization of the Vietnamese Armed Forces."<sup>42</sup> General Abrams and MACV strengthened the RVNAF but were unable to bolster the Thieu government. Ultimately, without a strong and legitimate government in the eyes of the South Vietnamese population, US military efforts would be marginalized and Vietnamization would fail.

This setting is comparable to the US actions in Afghanistan. The US military has likewise been conducting partnering and training for Afghan National Forces. Programs have expanded to include military forces – army, air force, Special Forces, and police forces. Similar to the evolution of the advisor role in Vietnam, the advisor and now partner roles, have shifted significantly the longer the United States remains in Afghanistan. The United States has provided personnel and other resources to include economic aid and infrastructure improvements, equipment, and training to Afghan forces. Arguably, the Afghan forces still have a long way to go. As Ambassador Bunker said about the Vietnamese, the United States must be cautious about overwhelming the Afghans with sophisticated equipment and infrastructure. The Afghans do not have enough trained personnel to operate or maintain the equipment and infrastructure the United

---

<sup>41</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 287-293.

<sup>42</sup> BDM Corporation, *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*, vol. 6, 12-1.

States has provided or built. The military, government, and society of Afghanistan are also similar to that of the South Vietnamese in that they are unstable and corrupt by US standards. The corruption occurs at all levels. The government lacks the support of the people and the country is not politically cohesive. Until the Afghan government is thought of as a legitimate entity by the people and maintains the ability to protect and secure its people, the military efforts will continue to be largely unsuccessful.<sup>43</sup>

## Pacification and Development Programs

Pacification is the military, political, economic, and social process of establishing or reestablishing local government responsive to and involving the participation of the people. It includes the provision of sustained, credible territorial security, the destruction of the enemy's underground government, the assertion or re-assertion of political control and involvement of the people in government, and the initiation of economic and social activity capable of self-sustenance and expansion.

– Brigadier General Tran Dinh Tho, *Pacification*

Previous pacification efforts were unsuccessful. Paul Vann, an experienced former army advisor in Vietnam, and senior advisor to General Abrams for the pacification program, argued that “in the past pacification programs failed because the first basic requirement, security, was not met.”<sup>44</sup> He argued that neither the United States nor South Vietnamese governments were prepared to provide long term security. He argued that permanently stationed, smaller scale security forces could better provide security to villages.<sup>45</sup>

Since 1961, the basis for pacification had existed in Vietnam. In fact, in September 1961 the Military Advise and Assist Group (MAAG) published a plan called the “Geographically Phased National Level Operation Plan for Counterinsurgency,” however, the plan was never

---

<sup>43</sup> This is the author’s opinion based on almost three years of experience in Afghanistan. This included serving on a civil affairs team in Afghanistan in 2003, working and travelling extensively to Afghanistan from 2007 to 2009 as a company commander for 249<sup>th</sup> Engineer Battalion (Prime Power), and for 15 months from 2012 to 2013 working on the NATO Training Mission, Afghanistan (NTM-A) engineer staff and as the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force, Afghanistan (CJSOTF-A) CJ7 Engineer.

<sup>44</sup> Spector, *After Tet*, 283

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

actually executed.<sup>46</sup> Thus, when General Abrams stated that pacification was the key objective among the three lines of effort, he was in effect maintaining operational continuity long established. When he assumed command of MACV, General Abrams emphasized to his commanders and staff, “I know the fighting’s important...but pacification...I really think that, of all things, that’s the most important. That’s where the battle is ultimately won.”<sup>47</sup> He understood that to provide security for the population, US and ARVN forces would need to protect the South Vietnamese people from the enemy and attack the critical infrastructure of the political and military campaigns. The goals were to target areas controlled by Vietcong and purge the influence in contested areas. The Accelerated Pacification Campaign began in November 1968 targeting base areas and supporting programs to win the ‘hearts and minds’ of the South Vietnamese population.<sup>48</sup>

One of the agreed combined objectives for the South Vietnamese government found in the CSOP under Support for Pacification and Development was for “expanded areas of a secure environment, within which the GVN carries out national development programs.”<sup>49</sup> Similarly, one of the end conditions for this objective was the “RVNAF and the Civil Security elements are restructured, and well equipped to support the combined strategy.”<sup>50</sup> The combined team of MACV and RVNAF planners developed this document to codify the strategy and synchronize efforts between the two forces within South Vietnam, and General Abrams’ influence is prominent within the pages.

Pacification encompassed a wide range of activities with the two main goals of establishing and maintaining security for the population by reducing the insurgent reach, and

---

<sup>46</sup> Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam*, 66.

<sup>47</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 169.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-66.

<sup>49</sup> Headquarters MACV, *The Combined Strategic Objectives Plan, 1970* (San Francisco: Headquarters MACV, 1970), 20.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

influence, and increasing communication with and loyalty to the government.<sup>51</sup> Pacification efforts in Vietnam were to contribute to the defeat of the Vietcong. The Pacification LOE was part of the operational approach developed by MACV to ensure a stable and legitimate government in South Vietnam.

President Lyndon Johnson directed the creation of the Office of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) in May 1967. He assigned the control of the office to the MACV as a “single manager” of pacification efforts for the country, and he appointed Ambassador Robert M. Kromer, a longtime CIA analyst and National Security Council staff member as a deputy under General Westmoreland. Ambassador Kromer, nicknamed “Blowtorch,” was in charge of the entire pacification effort in Vietnam. With all the civilian agencies and different programs in South Vietnam, there was competition for resources and coordination of civilian and military efforts was increasingly more challenging. This restructuring was a way to reorganize and integrate efforts between the civilian and military forces.<sup>52</sup>

All programs related to pacification now fell under Ambassador Kromer and the CORDS program. MACV assumed the responsibility for coordinating all efforts between the many agencies. It was responsible for the development programs in the villages to include infrastructure projects such as roads and bridges, village and hamlet training, and other agricultural or economic programs. MACV was now responsible for directing the execution of pacification. To do this, it published policy directives and advised and trained commanders on civic action programs. MACV and Ambassador Kromer even assumed the responsibility of building, training, and equipping the South Vietnamese territorial forces.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> Chester L. Cooper et al., *The American Experience with Pacification in Vietnam*, vol. 1, *An Overview of Pacification* (Arlington, VA: Institute for Defense Analysis, 1972), 28.

<sup>52</sup> Daddis, *Westmoreland's War*, 128-129.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 128-130.

Just as President Johnson directed a reorganization of the pacification effort, Ambassador Kromer restructured the CORDS program as well. Once in charge, he assigned a civilian deputy for CORDS to each corps headquarters. Ambassador Kromer also assigned advisors to each of the South Vietnamese provinces. Some were military and some were civilian. It was an even distribution. These new advisors reported to the newly established corps deputies for CORDS. The restructuring helped immensely to facilitate and coordinate the vast number of pacification programs throughout South Vietnam.<sup>54</sup> MACV also injected new life in the CORDS Program by providing more military advisors. In 1969, there were over 6,100 military advisors assigned to CORDS including three civil affairs companies to facilitate nation building.<sup>55</sup>

After the Tet Offensive of 1968, the government of Vietnam shifted its focus to pacification efforts as the NVA conventional forces recovered from its crushing losses. The South Vietnamese government efforts towards pacification sought to achieve three goals: “to end the war, to develop democracy, and to reform society.” The government and President Thieu understood the need to defeat the Vietcong and maintain security for their population, the need to establish a legitimate government, and the need to provide its population with opportunities to grow economically and socially.<sup>56</sup> To accomplish these goals, ARVN forces worked with the US military forces and advisors. The CORDS program and restructure also provided better coordination between the South Vietnamese government and the United States. The CORDS structure called for the advisors to work directly with their South Vietnamese counterparts within the bureaucracy to facilitate, coordinate, and synchronize efforts.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Daddis, *Westmoreland's War*, 130.

<sup>55</sup> Spencer C. Tucker, *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011), 76.

<sup>56</sup> Tho, *Pacification*, 8, 19.

<sup>57</sup> Cooper, et al, *American Experience*, vol.1, 22.



For CORDS to be successful in its pacification mission, the territorial forces comprised of regional forces (RF) and popular forces (PF) had to provide improved security.<sup>58</sup> MACV was successful in creating more RF/PF units as well as improving their training and equipment. From 1964 to 1971, the ARVN forces conducting pacification and providing security in rural population areas increased significantly. The regional and popular forces grew from 150,000 to over 550,000; the hamlet militia expanded to over four million; and the national police forces were up to over 90,000 from 18,000 in 1962. But just because the numbers grew significantly, did not mean that the quality was there. Territorial forces faced the same problems as the conventional army forces and in particular dealt with inadequate leadership. Even still, these units took an increasing role in security. The RF/PF actually suffered the highest casualty rates of any of the South Vietnamese forces at an estimated 66 percent.<sup>59</sup>

The US understood the need to bolster the territorial forces and conducted intelligence training with the local forces. MACV also developed mobile advisory teams which consisted of five advisors to live with their partner forces and advise and assist in organizing security in villages and districts. In theory, the mobile advisory team would move to another area once their counterparts were sufficiently trained, but in reality, the RF/PF's training deficiencies or minimal progress with security limited their ability to move to new areas.<sup>60</sup> Most of the time, these teams were on one-year deployments, which also hindered the relationships since transitions caused pauses in operations to acclimate the new advisors on the situation and environment.

To provide security for the population, the US and RVNAF conducted "clear and hold" operations in the rural areas. The goal of these operations was to defeat or drive out the Vietcong forces and destroy their infrastructure to reduce their influence over the population in these areas. The RF/PF forces worked with the local police forces to interrogate captured insurgents and

---

<sup>58</sup> Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam*, 219.

<sup>59</sup> Daddis, *Westmoreland's War*, 156.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 136-137.

collect information about the Vietcong network and infrastructure to prevent the enemy from reviving operations.<sup>61</sup> The police forces worked with other agencies to defeat the network as well.

After the civilian and military merger, a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) program named *Phuong Hoang*, or *Phoenix*, fell under *CORDS*. The *Phoenix* program was an effort to assist in identifying the Vietcong infrastructure (VCI) and network within the villages and hamlets and neutralize it. The CIA targeted individuals identified to be part of the VCI. The goals were to convince VCI personnel to defect, recruit them as spies, or detain them.<sup>62</sup> The national police were in charge of the program and most of the support came from the CIA. The police forces and the provincial reconnaissance units (PRU), CIA controlled specially trained and armed forces, conducted joint operations and worked with the provincial chiefs to capture, collect, and exploit the enemy for intelligence.<sup>63</sup> President Thieu and ARVN generals Cao Van Vien and Dong Van Khuyen understood the importance of the program and targeting of the Vietcong infrastructure.<sup>64</sup> General Vien, the Chief of the ARVN Joint General Staff, acknowledged that “as long as the VCI continued to exist, total victory could not be achieved.”<sup>65</sup>

Communist authorities have since acknowledged that “*Phoenix* was the single most effective program used against them in the entire war.”<sup>66</sup> The *Phoenix* Program was successful in killing and capturing over 15,00 VCI in 1968, 19,534 VCI in 1969, and 22,341 VCI in 1970.<sup>67</sup> The residents of villages and hamlets began to feel secure once the coercion tactics and

---

<sup>61</sup> Tho, *Pacification*, 19-21.

<sup>62</sup> Spector, *After Tet*, 287.

<sup>63</sup> Tho, *Pacification*, 66-70; Spector, *After Tet*, 287.

<sup>64</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 67.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>67</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 145; Prados, *Vietnam*, 327.

propaganda were eliminated. The permanently assigned territorial forces in that area could then establish local governance, after securing the people, which would lead to elections.<sup>68</sup>

Village elections were an effort by the national government of South Vietnam to expand their control and authority to the local communities. Previous local tradition appointed village councilmen to positions, and holding elections was in direct contrast to that tradition. This was a drastic shift in governance. Before this, only the rich or politically connected could hold office. The new village government structure consisted of the Village People's Council (VPC) as the legislative branch and the Village Administrative Committee (VAC) as the executive branch. Whomever won the election became the Chairman of the VPC. The VPC would then elect the chairman of the VAC from its members. The council members also elected the village chief. The village chief would be responsible for enforcing Saigon government policies in the village and hamlets, security, and maintaining law and order. Usually a member of the territorial forces would be selected for the position of Commissioner for Security and would work with the chief to secure the population. Any of the villagers could run for office if they submitted an application to the provincial government team. After review and screening it would be approved if there were no Communist connections. Once elected, the village officials attended training to reinforce their effectiveness and knowledge of administrative procedures to better serve the population. This training would strengthen the legitimacy of the Saigon government as well as the local government in the eyes of the population. The village elections occurred with very good results and by 1971, 2,053 out of 2,151, or 95%, of villages had elected village councils.<sup>69</sup>

Once the local governments were in place and the areas secured, development programs began. The goals were to improve the economy and the welfare of the people living in those rural areas.<sup>70</sup> CORDS, in coordination with rural development cadre, executed programs and training

---

<sup>68</sup> Tho, *Pacification*, 19-21.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 144-150.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

in support of the specific needs for the population. These needs included training on hygiene, sanitation, agriculture and animal husbandry, construction of roads and bridges, public works, education, land reform, and the construction of schools, hospitals, clinics, and wells.<sup>71</sup>

ARVN Brigadier General Tran Dinh Tho described the various efforts involved in pacification and the coordination required. He writes that the government realized the need to improve the welfare of its population to be successful with pacification. The government developed programs to assist rural farmers such as farm credit and land reform. These programs led to economic growth as the farm workers became land owners and agricultural growth occurred. The programs also taught modern techniques for farming, trained farmers on the use of pesticides and fertilizers, and encouraged planting secondary crops and the breeding of farm animals.<sup>72</sup>

Social reform and economic development also relied on self-help programs.<sup>73</sup> The government of South Vietnam came up with the “three selves” policy which aimed to facilitate the country’s long-term goals; self-defense, self-management, and self-sufficiency were the pillars.<sup>74</sup> The Self- Help Hamlet Development programs were developed by the government to promote moderate projects managed by the people that did not rely on foreign aid. The government only provided up to 50,000 Vietnamese dollars per project and no more than 150,000 Vietnamese dollars for three projects. CORDS provided some materials such as cement, iron, and roofing sheets. The hamlet populations recommended projects to the Provincial Chief, and he approved the funds and material for the projects. Most projects were small construction projects to repair infrastructure such as digging wells to provide water and irrigation, or repairs of roads, bridges, and construction of animal pens. The program was successful when it brought the

---

<sup>71</sup> Tho, *Pacification*, 51-53.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 109-110.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

community together to decide what projects were needed and most beneficial to their community as a whole.<sup>75</sup>

In spite of all of its subordinate programs, the effectiveness of pacification under MACV from 1967 to 1972 is debated. Security improved considerably, but most attribute this to the weakened NVA after the Tet offensive in 1968. Arguably pacification efforts succeeded because the Vietnam War ended with a massive conventional offensive. Either way, the pacification efforts clearly weakened the Vietcong.<sup>76</sup> Senior district advisor and observer, former Marine Corps Colonel Robert D. Heintz, declared pacification to be overwhelmingly successful, and MACV's hamlet evaluation survey showed that ninety seven percent of the villages and hamlets were secure.<sup>77</sup> Security was measured by the number and percentage of hamlets under South Vietnam control versus the Vietcong and the ability of the local forces to defend. The calculation also incorporated numbers relating to killing or capturing VCI. On the development side, progress of the social and economic programs to include elections, land reform, and agricultural development contributed to the effectiveness calculations.<sup>78</sup>

The hamlet evaluation system was "a computer based measurement to discern the status of rural security, the progress of the pacification program, and identify problem areas" developed by CORDS based on assessments filled out by MACV advisors.<sup>79</sup> Robert Thompson, an unofficial advisor to President Nixon, was largely convinced pacification had succeeded by late 1970.<sup>80</sup> None of the lines of effort were completely successful, but of all, the pacification and development LOE came closest.

---

<sup>75</sup> Tho, *Pacification*, 110-111.

<sup>76</sup> Tucker, *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, 315.

<sup>77</sup> Wilbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 122; Tho, *Pacification*, 164.

<sup>78</sup> Tho, *Pacification*, 163.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>80</sup> Wilbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 122.

According to Ronald Spector, “between 1969 and 1971 the Americans and their South Vietnamese allies came as close as they would ever come to winning the war for the countryside. Yet, it was not close enough.”<sup>81</sup> Moreover, as the withdrawal continued, the South Vietnamese would not be able to continue securing the people and shadow governments would reemerge in the villages.

The shape-clear-hold-build-transition framework outlined in current doctrine is similar to the approach that the United States and MACV assumed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. According to the 2014 FM 3-24, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*, an insurgency “is the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region.”<sup>82</sup> Current doctrine defines counterinsurgency as “comprehensive civilian and military efforts designed to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes.”<sup>83</sup> The host nation is ultimately responsible for defeating an insurgency. The United States recognized this key factor during the Vietnam War and made efforts to enable the ineffective government and security forces. The United States developed an approach that consisted of a cohesive effort between the host nation, the US forces, and other civilian government and non-government organizations to aid in the development of effective governance and legitimacy.

This mobile advisory team concept implemented during the Vietnam War is similar to the current special forces village stability operations (VSO) and village stability platforms (VSP). In Afghanistan, the US Army positioned special forces advisors in different villages and rural areas to help secure the population. The teams worked with the local forces and government to promote security and governance. The teams provided assessment to determine success and then would relocate to other high priority areas as necessary, but VSPs did not transition very often during

---

<sup>81</sup> Spector, *After Tet*, 290.

<sup>82</sup> Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2014), 1-2.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

that time. During 2012 to 2013 the teams were on year deployments, but most had been deployed to the same location multiple times. The special forces teams were familiar with the environment, the leadership in the villages, the problems faced in those districts and provinces, and worked well with the local population to create and maintain security. While constantly trying to build the relationships with the local population, the teams remained wary. The Taliban was not supported by the locals in most areas, but the population was not fully supportive of the United States efforts either.

The same concept is used for the train, advise, and assist teams and new security force assistance teams being fielded today, and is a key concept used in the US approach to partnership and nation-building since the early 2000s. Similar to the Vietnam war, the approach has been successful to a point, but the insurgent networks reemerge in areas as the US forces leave, and the propaganda, coercion and fear tactics permeate the population.

## Defeat of the NVA and Vietcong

Vietnamization was the first leg of the three-pronged approach supporting the CSOP. Moreover, Vietnamization was fundamental to achieving the ultimate military objective, defeat of the enemy. However, if Vietnamization failed, then the plan would fail as well. Ultimately it led to the failure to achieve a military victory. By 1970, with the US withdrawal underway, it was increasingly important to tackle the issue of communist sanctuaries along the borders with the countries of both Cambodia and Laos. The communists had carved out a large secure strip in Cambodia to provide sanctuaries and safe havens. Some of this area included portions of the Ho Chi Min Trail used to resupply the NVA and Vietcong. MACV also believed, contrary to the CIA and State Department, that the NVA and Vietcong forces trucked most of the weapons and ammunition in the III and IV CTZs to border bases from Sihanoukville.<sup>84</sup> Removal of the

---

<sup>84</sup> Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2006), 283.

sanctuary zone and disruption of the supply routes was especially critical to the RVNAF as the US troop levels decreased and the South Vietnamese forces were left to fend for themselves.<sup>85</sup>

There were two successful ways to block communist supply lines, with either US or ARVN ground troops or airpower. The earliest efforts to disrupt the flow of supplies to communist forces commenced with air strikes to bomb the NVA in Cambodia. There had previously been controversy over the rules of engagement and authority to act, but for now bombing actions would resume.<sup>86</sup> President Nixon approved the secret bombings of Operation Menu on 18 March 1969. The first strike in Cambodia was a B-52 strike against a sanctuary in Tay Ninh province and the aerial offensive lasted until August. It was supported by Secretary of Defense Laird, Ambassador Bunker, and General Abrams.<sup>87</sup> The bombings alone could not change the momentum in South Vietnam. President Nixon and MACV Commander, General Abrams, recognized this, and began planning for operations to seize opportunities still available due to the weakened enemy since the aftermath of the Tet Offensive.<sup>88</sup>

By April 1970, over 115,000 US troops had redeployed and another 150,000 planned to leave by April 1971. While the withdrawals occurred, US units halted operations in those areas and the ARVN would transition to the lead. The withdrawals also increased the size of the areas in which the ARVN forces secured.<sup>89</sup> MACV acknowledged that ARVN coverage areas were increasing with the US troop redeployments and the United States wanted to seize the initiative and attack the enemy while the enemy was weakened. General Abrams was concerned with the amount of logistical support being pushed by the enemy during this protracted war.<sup>90</sup> He was

---

<sup>85</sup> Wilbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 69-70.

<sup>86</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 195-197.

<sup>87</sup> John M. Shaw, *The Cambodia Campaign: The 1970 Offensive and America's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 12-13.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-15.

<sup>89</sup> Nguyen Duy Hinh, *Vietnamization and the Cease-Fire* (Washington DC: Center of Military History, 1976), 64.

<sup>90</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 198.



wary of an enemy offense as their road networks had expanded significantly since 1966. To counter the enemy preparations, the MACV commander allocated 70 percent of the planned fighter sorties to interdiction.<sup>91</sup> By early 1970, General Abrams knew that a ground invasion of Cambodia and Laos was also necessary.<sup>92</sup>

Political turmoil in Cambodia in 1970 provided an opportunity for the United States and South Vietnam. On 18 March 1970, the communist Prince of Cambodia was overthrown. The new government favored the United States and requested military assistance from the United States and South Vietnam to clear the border areas. They acknowledged that their borders had been used as sanctuaries to launch attacks, and housed base camps for medical and logistic support, as well as training areas.<sup>93</sup> The new government also acknowledged that the Ho Chi Min Trail and the Sihanoukville port supplied communist forces from bases in Cambodia. The new government closed the port and only a week later, the United States and ARVN conducted several successful operations into enemy areas to destroy food and weapons caches found in these sanctuaries.<sup>94</sup>

MACV had discussed operations into Cambodia since 1969. Ambassador William E. Colby, a CIA agent who had assumed the role of MACV deputy for CORDS after Ambassador Kromer, also favored a cross-border operation. While discussing the importance of the enemy bases and lines of communication Ambassador Colby said, "That's the interminable part of the war. Unless you can solve that, you are here forever." General Abrams agreed and said, "No amount of bombing in North Vietnam is going to cause him to rethink his problem. But if we go into those base areas, he's got to rethink the whole damn problem."<sup>95</sup> After an almost year long

---

<sup>91</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 198.

<sup>92</sup> Shaw, *The Cambodia Campaign*, 30.

<sup>93</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 191.

<sup>94</sup> Hinh, *Vietnamization and the Cease-Fire*, 64-65.

<sup>95</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 200.

discussion on cross border operations, President Nixon granted authority.<sup>96</sup> It just happened to coincide with the deposing of Prince Sihanouk by the Cambodian National Assembly.<sup>97</sup>

The Cambodian Incursion in 1970 was a test of MACV's Vietnamization efforts up until this point. The success or failure of the operations would show whether the RVNAF could win or defend against a Communist attack without US support.<sup>98</sup> The plan that was approved consisted of ARVN led operations followed by US participation a day later. While a South Vietnamese force, with US advisors, initiated operations in the Parrot's Beak, a US and ARVN force assaulted the Fishhook area of Cambodia. The ARVN committed 5,000 troops to the operations and targeted fourteen enemy sanctuaries along the border.<sup>99</sup> The results of the operations were largely successful and seemed to achieve the strategic objectives of saving Cambodia from being overrun by the NVA while also disrupting and interrupting supply routes.<sup>100</sup>

Military experts saw the results of the Cambodia raids differently since they were largely unopposed. After the war, General Bruce Palmer wrote that a false sense of confidence enveloped the MACV. He believed that the operation was far from a success because it resulted in an even more drastic reduction in US military advisory effort and aid that was fatally damaging to the South Vietnamese.<sup>101</sup>

A similar operation in Laos beginning in February 1971, Lam Son 719, used only ARVN troops. The North Vietnamese used the eastern Laotian panhandle to transport materials to sustain the wars in South Vietnam and Cambodia. The area had many logistics hubs and bases. Moreover, after the port of Sihanoukville closed on 18 March 1970, this corridor became

---

<sup>96</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 201.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>98</sup> Shaw, *The Cambodia Campaign*, xi.

<sup>99</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 202.

<sup>100</sup> Wilbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 81-85.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

increasingly important to the NVA and Vietcong.<sup>102</sup> General Abrams approached ARVN General Cao Van Vien, the Chairman of the Joint General Staff, in January 1971 about a cross border operation into Laos. General Vien briefed President Thieu on the plan, and he approved it. Immediately, MACV and ARVN began joint planning to launch the operation on 8 February 1971.<sup>103</sup>

ARVN I Corps forces conducted the operation with US airpower and fire support, but without advisors or other United States support in Laos.<sup>104</sup> The US forces were not allowed to cross into Laos due to political restraints, but provided logistics support from South Vietnam.<sup>105</sup> The operation was planned in four phases with the objectives of “destroying enemy forces and stockpiles and cutting enemy lines of communications in base areas 604 and 611.”<sup>106</sup> Once the base areas were secure near Tchepone, the ARVN would continue to “interdict the Ho Chi Min Trail and destroy logistical facilities.”<sup>107</sup> Twenty thousand ARVN forces and ten thousand US forces in support conducted this combined operation.<sup>108</sup> Within six weeks, they were forced to withdraw and the attempts to disrupt enemy supply lines failed. Terrain, weather, intelligence, and ARVN reliance on US support contributed to the directed early withdrawal.<sup>109</sup> Despite the outcome, President Nixon declared the operation a victory and evidence that Vietnamization was working.<sup>110</sup> Nothing was further from the truth, but the narrative was convincing. Major General Hinh describes Lam Son 719 as “a bloody field exercise for ARVN forces under the command of

---

<sup>102</sup> Nguyen Duy Hinh, *Lam Son 719* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1979), v.

<sup>103</sup> Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 33-34.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, v.

<sup>105</sup> The Cooper-Goldman amendment restricted American participation in Laos. Sorley, *A Better War*, 306.

<sup>106</sup> Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 35.

<sup>107</sup> Wilbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 99.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>110</sup> Tucker, *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, 307.

I Corps. Nearly 8,000 ARVN soldiers and millions of dollars worth of valuable equipment and materiel were sacrificed.”<sup>111</sup> The United States lost 107 helicopters and over 544 were damaged.<sup>112</sup> The poor execution provided many lessons learned for the South Vietnamese which they taught at their service schools and training centers.<sup>113</sup> The RVNAF would still need to defend South Vietnam effectively after the United States left. Since President Nixon declared Lam Son 719 a military success for the ARVN, he accelerated the withdrawal by bringing home an additional 100,000 US troops by the end of 1971.<sup>114</sup>

After this operation, public support in the United States was at an all-time low. Polls indicated the public was concerned that President Nixon was leaving out information about the operation, that this operation would delay the withdrawal of US troops from South Vietnam, and most acknowledged they would support a resolution to withdrawal all troops immediately. Just as during the Cambodia Incursion, the US public conducted protests and demonstrations against continued United States involvement in Vietnam and the President’s handling of the war effort. Later that year in June, Congress approved the Mansfield Amendment which called for US troops to be out of Vietnam within nine months, and later amended to “earliest practicable date,” of a settlement. The growing discontent and passing of this legislation pushed the Nixon administration to continue serious negotiations in Paris.<sup>115</sup> A 1973 Gallup poll showed that sixty percent of Americans believed the Vietnam War was a mistake.<sup>116</sup>

After the incursions into Cambodia and Laos, the United States undertook a new aerial campaign to slow enemy infiltration into South Vietnam.<sup>117</sup> In November 1971, the United States

---

<sup>111</sup> Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 163.

<sup>112</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 262.

<sup>113</sup> Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 163.

<sup>114</sup> Wilbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 115.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-119.

<sup>116</sup> Prados, *Vietnam*, 513.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 460.

launched Operation Island Tree. This operation consisted of targeted strikes using electronic sensors to transmit enemy movements to B-52 bombers and it lasted until the end of the year. With the withdrawal virtually complete, President Nixon was forced to rely on air and naval operations to engage the communist forces.<sup>118</sup> In December 1971 he approved a bombing campaign across North Vietnam to dissuade North Vietnam from invading.<sup>119</sup> This was the first step in an air campaign that lasted until October 1972 in which the United States dropped 155,548 tons of bombs on North Vietnamese lines of communication. The air campaign destroyed “almost all fixed oil storage facilities and 70 percent of the electric power generating capacity” in Hanoi and significantly disrupted the lives of the people who lived there. Many believed that the air campaign broke Hanoi, however, other military planners felt that was an overestimate of the success.<sup>120</sup> While this campaign did not lead to a settlement, it did allow for concessions during negotiations.<sup>121</sup>

Meanwhile, increasing attacks in the North continued. All of these actions were designed to prevent a communist offensive operation into South Vietnam.<sup>122</sup> American actions in Cambodia, Laos, and further aerial campaigns to disrupt supply lines represented a substantial change in strategy. No longer was the United States concerned with winning the war, the efforts were now taken to delay defeat. The United States was now anticipating a renewed communist offensive. Even still, the South Vietnam military expansion and improvements were substantially completed by 1972 and there was an air of confidence throughout the population.<sup>123</sup>

---

<sup>118</sup> Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 149.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>120</sup> Prados, *Vietnam*, 512.

<sup>121</sup> Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, 166-168.

<sup>122</sup> Prados, *Vietnam*, 462.

<sup>123</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 305-306.

## Conclusion

No matter how generous our military support and assistance, a country that is not politically cohesive and lacks legitimacy cannot achieve stability. There must be strong political and bureaucratic institutions to work with. We cannot significantly alter the nature of a society or its regime merely by volunteering our support.

– General Maxwell D. Taylor, 1979

It is simple to say that the United States lost the war in Vietnam because the South Vietnamese were unable to take the lead in their own country's defense and security and were unable to stand on their own without US support. This was a direct result of the failure inherent in the operational approach approved in the CSOP. The three LOEs were never fully accomplished, and the withdrawal efforts and micromanagement from Washington ensured this failure. Vietnamization failed because US military decision makers wasted valuable years before implementing it. The South Vietnamese forces had been unsuccessful in building their military forces since the 1950s. It is unimaginable to think the United States could do it in a little more than three years. Moreover, the government turmoil did not inspire confidence or loyalty throughout the population and the corruption diminished its ability to function successfully.

The failure of Vietnamization was two-fold. First was the attempt to reshape ARVN in the image of the US military at the time. The United States implemented Vietnamization in 1969, but withdrawal outpaced the ability of the US forces to train to an acceptable standard.<sup>124</sup> The effort to train South Vietnamese forces should have started years earlier. The expanded structure of the army and the compressed timetable doomed the efforts. US advisors build up a conventional force of heavy divisions that was unable to defeat an insurgency.<sup>125</sup> Finally, the US advisory role diminished the ARVN's ability to develop competent leaders by over-shadowing them in the eyes of their subordinates. The advisory role also reduced the ability of unit leaders to

---

<sup>124</sup> Wilbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 278.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

develop their own sense of confidence in themselves.<sup>126</sup> The United States let the ARVN become dependent on their support efforts and that hindered their progress to take the lead.

The US pacification effort, however, was more successful. The United States successfully cleared and held hamlets and villages from the insurgents and diminished the Vietcong infrastructure. The insurgents stopped harassing the population. The pacification and development effort was successful because it combined tactical actions, economic aid, governance, and development to diminish local support for the insurgents. The continued efforts also contributed to a sense of pride in the communities and facilitated in establishing a legitimate government. General Abrams deserves credit for implementing shifts in the operational approach after succeeding General Westmoreland. The war became a reshaped “One War” designed to regain popular support and ensure security in the villages and hamlets of South Vietnam. However, he could not overcome the flawed policy that underpinned his efforts. Furthermore, any decisions he made could be immediately overridden by the Nixon administration.

The South Vietnamese Army accepted the idea that it was fully capable of defeating Hanoi on their own. Nothing was further from the truth as exemplified in the crushing Laotian expedition and their reliance on US airpower and fire support. The South Vietnamese military forces could never get out from underneath the shadow of US advisors. The army was mostly manned and equipped for success, but lacked effective strategy, tactics, leadership, and training.

The failure of Vietnamization meant that a military victory would never come about. The North Vietnamese communist forces had the advantage of time and their protracted warfare strategy would ultimately succeed. They knew they could wait out the United States as they had been fighting for twenty years, and the US population and Congress vocalized their desire for US forces leave Vietnam. The withdrawal doomed the South Vietnamese; and the corrupt and inefficient South Vietnamese government failed at every level to create, lead, and sustain a

---

<sup>126</sup> Wilbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 280-281.

capable, functional military force. At the end, “the Nixon administration pursued an Indochinese settlement in which the Asian belligerents would pause and accept the political status quo long enough for the United States to leave.”<sup>127</sup>

Insurgent actions plagued both Vietnam and Afghanistan. It is important in a counterinsurgency that the host nation government demonstrate to their own people that it is responsive to their needs. In Vietnam the host nation government failed, and the government of Afghanistan is failing as well. The challenges of corruption and the weakness of the Afghan government have hindered legitimacy, and the continued US economic aid and military assistance has crippled the Afghans ability to function on their own. Just as in Vietnam, the Afghans have become dependent on US support for survival.

The United States will never be able to produce a military win in Afghanistan. The best outcome for the United States would be for the Afghans to negotiate and bring the Taliban and other insurgents to the table. As in Vietnam, the United States has done what it can to bolster the government and military force. The United States has given them a fighting chance for survival, but the government and military need to stand on their own. According to author Andrew Krepinevich “the Army ought to have learned in Vietnam, America’s enemies are not going to play to its military strong suits, rather they will exploit its weaknesses.... In spite of its anguish in Vietnam, the Army has learned little of value.”<sup>128</sup>

---

<sup>127</sup> Rose, *How Wars End*, 188.

<sup>128</sup> Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam*, 275.



## Bibliography

- BDM Corporation. *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*. Vol. 6, *Conduct of the War*. McLean, VA, 1980.
- Clarke, Jeffrey J. *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973*. Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1988.
- Clodfelter, Mark. *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006.
- Cooper, Chester L., Judith E. Corson, Laurence J. Legere, David E. Lockwood, and Donald M. Weller. *The American Experience with Pacification in Vietnam*. Vol. 1, *An Overview of Pacification*. Arlington, VA: Institute for Defense Analysis, 1972.
- Cosmas, Graham A. *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*. Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2007.
- Daddis, Gregory A. *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- . *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- . *Withdrawal: Reassessing America's Final Years in Vietnam*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Karnow, Stanley. *Vietnam*. New York: Penguin, 1991.
- Krepinevich, Andrew F. *The Army and Vietnam*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986.
- Herring, George C. *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*. New York: MacGraw-Hill, 1996.
- . *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Hinh, Nguyen Duy. *Vietnamization and the Cease-Fire*. Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1983.
- . *Lam Son 719*. Washington, DC: US Army Chief of Military History, 1979.
- Military History Branch, Headquarters, US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). *Command History, 1970*. Vol.1. Saigon: MACV, 1971.
- . *Command History, 1970*. Vol. 2. Saigon: MACV, 1971.
- Prados, John. *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009.

- Rose, Gideon. *How Wars End: Why We Always Fight the Last Battle*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010.
- Shaw, John M. *The Cambodian Campaign: The 1970 Offensive and America's Vietnam War*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005.
- Sorley, Lewis. *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*. New York: Harcourt, 1999.
- Spector, Ronald H. *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.
- Summers, Harry G. *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*. Novato: Presidio, 1995.
- Tho, Tran Dinh. *Pacification*. Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1977.
- . *The Cambodian Incursion*. Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1983.
- Tucker, Spencer. *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Vien, Cao Van. *The U.S. Advisor*. Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1980.
- . *The Final Collapse*. Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1985.
- Webb, Willard J. *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam 1969-1970*. Washington, DC: The Office of Joint History, 2002.
- Willbanks, James H. *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004.
- US Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Unified Land Operations*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2016.
- US Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 5-0, *The Operations Process*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2012.
- US Department of the Army, Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2014.
- US National Security Council, National Security Study Memorandum 36, April 1969. Washington, DC, 1969.
- US National Security Council, National Security Strategy of the United States of America, December 2017. Washington, DC:2017.
- United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). "*Combined Strategic Objectives Plan*." January 1970, Douglas Pike Collection. The Vietnam Center and Archive. Texas Tech University, Lubbock. Accessed October 1, 2017. <http://www.virtual.vietnam.ttu.edu>

———. "*Commander's Summary of the MACV Objectives Plan.*" 1969. Douglas Pike Collection. The Vietnam Center and Archive. Texas Tech University, Lubbock. Accessed October 1, 2017. <http://www.virtual.vietnam.ttu.edu>