



ACSC Quick-Look

Catalyst for Air & Space Power Research Dialogue



Military Assistance Command, Vietnam: The Imperative of Pol-Mil Unity

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Composition. The Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), was established in 1962 to support a more active US operational effort in the war against communist insurgents in South Vietnam. Two years later, MACV absorbed the Military Assistance and Advisory Group, Vietnam, (MAAG) when General William Westmoreland assumed command. The MAAG continued to assist the development of the South Vietnamese armed forces, but the command change fragmented its operational efforts among the MACV staff. By 1965, MACV's responsibilities were considerable, consisting of Army, Navy, Marine, Air Force, "nine Army advisory groups," and coordination with the South Vietnamese Armed Forces.

MACV was supposed to unify the operational and advisory efforts under a single command, but unity of effort in the Vietnam War required a consolidation of power at a higher level. Ironically, proposals to centralize power within MACV threatened to increase its "span of control" beyond the point which he could effectively manage it. Military and political command were never adequately coordinated. For instance, if the ambassador and the commander of MACV could not agree on a policy issue, their only recourse was to refer the matter to their superiors in Washington, DC. The pacification effort ought to have been unified under Westmoreland and MACV, but Ambassador Robert Komer ran this vital counterinsurgency effort as a separate war. In fact, Westmoreland was happy to have only the "shooting war" to worry about. President Johnson forced MACV to take responsibility for the pacification effort in 1967.

Strategic Failure. An examination of MACV quickly points to problems beyond the realm of military command and control. The effort in Vietnam consisted of warfare by US forces, an advisory and coalition effort with the Vietnamese military, political efforts by the US Ambassador in Saigon, nation building, and the CIA's clandestine actions in the region. Each effort reported to a separate cabinet-level post in the United States; there was no single commander. A more sensible way of running the war in Vietnam would have been for the President to have placed the Ambassador to Vietnam in charge—as long as he did not treat the Vietnamese as colonials, as Ambassador Maxwell Taylor did. Instead, a Navy admiral in Honolulu supervised MACV. The Secretary of State advocated giving the Ambassador in Saigon authority over MACV, but lost. Theoretically, civilian leadership of the theater would have resulted in better coordination of political goals with military operations. Given South Vietnam's political chaos in the mid-1960s and the absence of political connections between rural villages and the central government, achieving political stability inside South Vietnam was necessary if military actions were going to have fruitful consequences. Naturally, such an arrangement would have placed US military commanders under the State Department which would have encroached on the Pentagon's turf, but an alternative of placing ultimate power in the hands of a MACV general would have violated American constitutional traditions of military subordination to civilian authority. The absence of either unity of command, or satisfactory coordination between political and military policy in Vietnam ensured that a disharmony of purpose characterized the war in Vietnam.

Successes and Failures. MACV botched its mission in several ways. It failed to comprehend the relationship between the insurgency, the threat from North Vietnam, and political instability within South Vietnam. Opportunities existed for a smarter effort at carrying out US policy. MACV should have made the invigoration of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces a high priority in 1964 instead of 1969, and should have demonstrated the patience to give them time to train and develop. It is noteworthy that South Vietnamese militia had frustrated the Viet Cong by 1971, and that in 1972, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam—wrecked by chaos in 1966—crushed the North Vietnamese Army. MACV should have waged a two-track strategy of anti-guerrilla pacification, and action against the more conventional army of the North Vietnamese. MACV should have coordinated more effectively with American and Vietnamese political efforts, instead of

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perceiving of war and politics as two separate realms. In 1965, General Westmoreland actually considered it a “violation of the prerogatives of the military commander” when the Secretary of State and the Ambassador in Saigon sought to direct him on “strategic matters.” Westmoreland actively resisted encroachment by policy makers. Throughout the critical years of the mid-1960s, MACV accepted analyses which supported favorable predictions, while ignoring evidence that its strategy was flawed. The only significant strategic solution it proffered was to ask for more soldiers. MACV’s strategic mistakes culminated in early 1968 when it shifted thousands of US troops into the Vietnamese hinterland to fight the North Vietnamese, a choice which played into the hands of the enemy. The communists’ strategy was to draw US forces away from population centers so that the Viet Cong could run amok among the Vietnamese people.

Implications for Iraq. One can see some common ground between the MACV experience and current operations in Iraq. In both cases, the United States objectives required establishing a self-sustaining democracy. In Vietnam, however, MACV had to wage war against a massive insurgency supported by North Vietnamese infantry. Iraq’s smaller insurgency, like the larger one in Vietnam, threatens nation building, but because coalition forces in Iraq face no external military threat comparable to North Vietnam, and because the insurgency is far smaller, the coalition can devote more of its effort toward developing a functioning government in Iraq. Since military forces are supporting political action in Iraq and are not fighting for the existence of the country, a comparison with MACV and the Vietnam War suggests that today’s coalition can better achieve its policy goals through a civilian leader in charge of both nation building and military. Such an arrangement clashes with reality as it stands, and would be culturally challenging to both the State and Defense Departments. Some sort of ambassador, working side by side with the Iraqi government, might be less inclined to seek military solutions to what are becoming problems of politics and policing, given the recent success in Falluja.

Perhaps the most significant operational lesson one could derive from the MACV example is to coordinate operational and political objectives under one civilian leader, either the US ambassador to Iraq, or even the President of Iraq himself. The reason for this is that at this point in the war, combat operations have to serve the goals of increasing the political power, legitimacy, and robustness of the Iraqi government. That may lead to choices that are counterintuitive to the most “efficient” purely military operations. If warfare is, in fact, an instrument of policy, policy makers have to call the shots. A second recommendation is to realize that it is no failure if it takes several years to field an Iraqi Army which can wage successful operations independently. Those efforts should begin at once.

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