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OPERATIONAL ART  
AND THE COUNTERINSURGENCY PROGRAM IN THE VIETNAM WAR

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Abstract of

OPERATIONAL ART  
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Operational art was applied during the American counterinsurgency campaign in the Vietnam War. The campaign reflected the employment of operational art in the coordination and conduct of a variety of programs designed to achieve the pacification of the rural population and the destruction of the enemy's means to make war both militarily and politically. Operational art was not uniformly applied to the pacification program, and it was only after the formation of the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development and Support organization that it could be applied. The pacification program became effective only after this operational level coordinating body provided coherency to a program long plagued by a lack of focus and resources. U.S. efforts in the operational level planning of a comprehensive pacification program taught that the military must possess flexibility, a wide repertoire of skills, and an ability to adapt to circumstances. Strict reliance on firepower, mobility, and technology ignores the primacy of the political element of counterinsurgency and in so doing may yield the initiative to the enemy.

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## **Introduction**

The effective application of operational art in the prosecution of a coherent counterinsurgency effort in the Vietnam War was hampered by fundamental conflicts in the national strategy and a lack of commitment at the operational level of leadership. Facing a communist backed insurrection, U.S. strategy was unevenly divided between proponents of a large intervention of conventional forces and those who favored pacification. Although a counterinsurgency strategy based on pacification was enunciated in government documents very early in the war it was not given nearly the weight of the conventional approach in terms of men, material, or funding in practice. Additionally, a strategy of pacification was not supported by the operational commander until several years into the war after purely conventional methods had been demonstrated to be costly and ineffective. Consequently it was not until after the formation of an operational level organization in 1967, charged with the control and integration of all counterinsurgency efforts, that the strategy gained support at the operational level and the practice of operational art can be subjected to analysis.

## **Background**

Prior to the massive, large-scale introduction of American troops to Vietnam in 1965 a counterinsurgency approach was a significant element of the stated national strategy. Secretary of Defense McNamara and General Maxwell Taylor composed and presented a memo to President Kennedy in October 1963 following a fact-finding trip to South Vietnam. Among the recommendations contained in that memo McNamara and Taylor proposed that "emphasis on clear and hold operations instead of terrain sweeps which have little permanent value and a consolidation of the Strategic Hamlet Program,

especially in the Delta, and action to ensure that future strategic hamlets are not built until they can be protected, and until civic action programs introduced."<sup>1</sup> These policies had support at the Presidential level as evidenced by the formation of the Special Group - Counterinsurgency, upgrading of the Army Special Forces, and the strengthening of police assistance programs abroad. However, at the operational level the Commander of the Military Assistance Command - Vietnam (MACV), General Paul Harkins, failed to effectively implement an integral counterinsurgent strategy. "General Harkins was content to leave to someone else both the program of pursuing the political and social struggle and the problem of seeing that military measures did not destroy it. As a result, the strategic concept was never fully implemented and military factors were emphasized over political."<sup>2</sup>

Accepting the definition of operational art as described in the Army Operations Manual (FM 100-5) as "the skillful employment of military forces to attain strategic and/or operational objectives within a theater through the design, organization, integration, and conduct of theater strategies, campaigns, major operations, and battles"<sup>3</sup> it is apparent that the U.S. command in Vietnam failed to practice operational art in regard to pacification despite many high level policy directives emphasizing the need to begin a widespread counterinsurgency strategy to attain their stated objectives. The nature of the desired strategy was to include a priority on internal security and governmental reform. As R. W. Komer pointed out, U.S. military commanders having been over-influenced by the Korean War "put the bulk of its military aid and advice into building a conventional Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) ill-suited to the challenges it faced."<sup>4</sup>

Despite the numerous attempts to carry out various pacification efforts, the overall program had been plagued from the beginning by a lack of a unified management structure. The "new model" pacification program began in 1967 and was distinguished by the creation of the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development and Support (CORDS) organization. CORDS was developed to integrate all the elements of both civilian and military pacification efforts. CORDS was headed by a civilian (R. W. Komer) but was placed under the command of MACV to preserve unity of effort. The result was that it allowed those involved in the pacification program to stake a claim to a greater percentage of military resources available. CORDS was a unique organization in that it combined military and civilian personnel under a unified command structure. The CORDS director, although a civilian, served as a deputy directly under COMUSMACV and was viewed as a civilian general with operational authority, not just advisory responsibilities. In this sense the CORDS director can be considered an operational level commander with authority over the planning, personnel (both military and civilian), and execution of a theater-wide pacification campaign. The reemergence of the pacification program was a result of National Command Authority (NCA) disillusionment with the attrition strategy employed by General Westmoreland. Unification of the pacification effort was dictated from Washington over the advice of senior military advisors who generally agreed with General William DePuy (Commanding General, U.S. 1st Div) who summed up the military point of view when he said "the solution in Vietnam is more bombs, more shells, more napalm...till the other side cracks and gives up."<sup>5</sup> Once the organization had been established the

conduct of operational art in the prosecution of a coherent counterinsurgency campaign could begin.

### **Operational Art as Applied to Pacification: Analysis**

CORDS was organized to conduct the pacification campaign on a theater level. The civilian director enjoyed status as an assistant Chief of Staff working directly for COMUSMACV. It is interesting to note that as an indication of his status he was given one of only three Chrysler Imperial sedans in Vietnam. The other two were used by General Westmoreland (COMUSMACV) and his Chief of Staff, General Creighton Abrams.<sup>6</sup> CORDS was further organized on the basis of four regional deputies who served under the U.S. corps level commanders. The cutting edge was unified civil-military advisory teams in all 250 districts and 44 provinces comprising South Vietnam.<sup>7</sup> In this way CORDS was fully integrated into the existing military structure and could exercise command authority under the auspices of MACV.

Several factors led to an increased operational support of the pacification strategy. The 1968 Tet Offensive by the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) shocked the American political leadership. The results of the Tet campaign yielded devastating political results in the U.S. domestic arena and discredited the U.S. strategy employed from 1965-67. Secondly, the performance by ARVN during the offensive led U.S. leadership to believe that the South Vietnamese could take on a more active role in the prosecution of the war. Finally, General Westmoreland was relieved as COMUSMACV in July 1968. His successor, General Creighton Abrams, had a more favorable attitude towards the possible benefits of an intensified pacification campaign.

In carrying out the pacification program CORDS initiated several innovative efforts designed to promote internal security, and the weakening of the Viet Cong political structure. Aside from the military and political considerations facing the CORDS leadership other issues such as health, road building, rural construction and education were addressed. CORDS was developing as an operational level institution that was beginning to adapt a strategy that marshalled both the military and civilian forces of the U.S. and the Government of South Vietnam (GVN) to cope with the problems specific to the country and its peculiar circumstances.

Soon after the results of the Tet Offensive became known MACV and CORDS prevailed upon President Thieu of South Vietnam to engage upon a firm pacification program. What resulted was known as the Accelerated Pacification Campaign (APC). This program contained many of the elements of previous pacification efforts. However, it differed in the important aspect that a much greater number of U.S. resources and troops were committed in its support. The APC was a major campaign that drew upon American and allied planners to prepare for the targeted pacification of over 1,000 contested or Viet Cong controlled hamlets.<sup>8</sup> General Abrams, the new COMUSMACV, in late 1968 ordered large numbers of U.S. troops to join ARVN units in support of APC. The thrust of U.S. operations throughout the theater turned to the defense of cities and villages. In the wake of Tet, U.S. commanders sought to employ military assets in such a way as to protect population centers and in so doing extend the control of the GVN into areas that had been previously controlled by the Viet Cong.

Given MACV's new commitment to pacification and the influence of CORDS, operational art was increasingly applied to the counterinsurgency strategy. To a much



greater extent the concept of combined arms with the ARVN was promoted in all undertakings. In addition to increased cooperation among large unit ARVN and U.S. forces, more priority was given to integration on a small unit scale. Among the most notable of these efforts was the formation of Mobile Advisory Teams (MATs) and Combined Reconnaissance and Intelligence Platoons (CRIPs). MATs assigned a small group of U.S. soldiers to GVN militia units concentrating on militia training. CRIPs also combined U.S. and GVN militia units but for the purpose of joint reconnaissance. The CRIPs were lightly armed but extremely mobile. Formed in 1967 they became regarded as a success in internal security and continued to operate throughout the war. The use of CRIPs was expanded during 1968 and they became a significant factor in the increased security of local hamlets.

In addition to altering the character of the American commitment CORDS was also instrumental in changing the composition of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF). To a great degree the success of the pacification program rested on the ability of the RVNAF to perform in a counterinsurgency role. The U.S. operational leadership realized the critical nature of the role of an effective paramilitary force and was able to increase the strength of the South Vietnamese Regional Forces and Popular Forces (RF/PF) from 300,000 in 1967 to approximately 532,000 by 1971. In addition to the increase in numbers and quality, resulting from MATs training, RF/PF weaponry was upgraded from World War II vintage rifles to M-16's and other light weapons.<sup>9</sup> Designed specifically for a long term local security role, the RF consisted of company-sized units of volunteers serving in their own province. The PF were also militia volunteers who operated in thirty-man platoons in their local village area. The local

focus of the RF/PF allowed them to work in an area over a prolonged period of time thereby enhancing population security.

The relationship of operational art to the counterinsurgency strategy was strengthened by the formulation of a plan that featured a pacification campaign as its centerpiece. The strategy formally adopted by MACV in 1969 was contained in "The Strategic Objective Plan." This plan, initiated by MACV, contained the following elements: "(1) security and protection for the rural population; (2) severely weaken the Viet Cong political organization in rural areas; and (3) to create a sense of political community between the GVN and rural population through political, social, and economic reform."<sup>10</sup> The Strategic Objective Plan was a program of pacification developed by the operational commander, COMUSMACV, that required the practice of operational art in its implementation throughout the theater. MACV and CORDS planned a pacification campaign that contained a variety of elements designed to achieve the objective of establishing area security and preparing the RVNAF to accept an expanded role in the war. Although American military power remained a key ingredient in the overall strategy, the concept also targeted each of the various arms of the RVNAF on a specific aspect of the Viet Cong infrastructure (VCI). Within the operational design of the pacification program MACV envisioned that:

ARVN had the primary mission of locating and neutralizing enemy main force units, base areas liaison, communications, and logistical systems in clearing border zones. These regular forces also prevent enemy main force incursions into...secure areas. The Regional Forces (RF) were concerned with enemy provincial and local units, and additionally were to assist in neutralizing the VCI, interdicting enemy LOC's, and protecting local resources. The Popular Forces (PF) was also to participate in local VCI neutralization. Finally the National Police were responsible principally for VCI neutralization but were also to assist in village and hamlet defense.<sup>11</sup>

The design of the pacification campaign was not limited to military operations. It was also composed of a number of elements whose purpose was to gain the allegiance of the South Vietnamese people, usurp the Communist agenda of social and land reform, and to destroy the Viet Cong political structure at a local level. This rural development program revolved around three critical points. First was the revival of a rural administrative program to include hamlet self-government. Second was to provide incentives to farmers through a program of land reform. Finally to provide essential rural services to include health, medical, educational and refugee care.<sup>12</sup> Two other programs were revitalized to attack the Viet Cong political structure. The "Open Arms" and "Phoenix" programs dealt with the problem on two different but complementary levels. The Open Arms program sought to encourage the surrender of Viet Cong political leadership through a system of rewards and protection. The Phoenix program targeted members of the VCI for direct action, either arrest or assassination. Although there are differing opinions on the effectiveness of the Phoenix program, evidence gained in post-war interviews with Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) officials revealed that from 1970-71 Phoenix was having a severe impact in some areas.<sup>13</sup> It is possible that the degree of planning, coordination, and resource allocation provided by CORDS in the execution of this program led to greater success in its most covert aspects than the government was willing to admit.

As the organization that brought the practice of operational art to the pacification program, CORDS was not only concerned with effective management of the war from the point of view of pacification but also sought to implement a system for measuring its effectiveness. The Pacification Evaluation System (PACES) was

developed as a procedure for monitoring the overall progress of the pacification effort. Within PACES was a subsystem called the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES) that maintained a data base relating to the security of hamlets throughout the theater. The CORDS leadership began to rely on HES as "a powerful tool for setting priorities, allocating resources and placing emphasis to implement programs."<sup>14</sup> HES was applied throughout the country covering over 2,000 villages and 12,000 hamlets.<sup>15</sup> The data was supplied by the CORDS District Senior Advisors (DSA) working in conjunction with GVN officials. The automated HES then compiled the data and assigned a hamlet rating system based on a relative scale of hamlet and population control. This data was not only used in planning and adapting the ongoing pacification campaign at an operational level but was used by the American political leadership in the recently established Vietnam Special Studies Group (VSSG) headed by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

The formation of CORDS facilitated the application of operational art to the pacification campaign. It did so by altering the institutional framework that existed in the command structure during the Vietnam War. The creation of CORDS brought about the consolidation of all assets involved in the pacification effort. Centralized management of the overall pacification program, at an operational level, developed a degree of coherency and unity within the strategy that must be present in order to observe the practice of operational art. Nonetheless, the performance of the military in responding to a situation that required an unconventional approach was constrained by its own institutional rigidity. The U.S. Army consisted largely of general purpose forces trained to fight in a technologically sophisticated military environment. These forces

were not tailored to meet individualized threats such as those that existed in Vietnam at the time of our involvement. "U.S. military doctrine, tactics, equipment and organization were designed primarily for NATO or Korean War-type contingencies."<sup>16</sup> This military structure made it difficult to perform in an unconventional setting. Although U.S. military and technological strength were effective in countering NVA infiltration in 1965 and providing a perimeter behind which pacification could be conducted, it did not present U.S. policy makers with an instrument sufficiently flexible to deal with counterinsurgency on a local level.

### **Lessons Learned**

The American experience in Vietnam continues to provide lessons for today's operational commanders. It can be anticipated that, with the demise of the Soviet Union and the reduction of great power affiliation among third world nations, that the incidence of unconventional war will increase throughout the world. The army of the present and future must seek to expand its operational repertoire to avoid the constraints and lack of flexibility that characterized its performance in Vietnam. Effective counterinsurgency techniques must be included in the military repertoire if it is to play a role in protecting U.S. interests in environments ill-suited for a large, technology based conventional force.

The military, and the Army in particular, are faced with great difficulty in preparing their forces for a variety of regional, unconventional conflicts. In view of a decreasing military budget and a significant reduction in size, the Army must carefully prioritize its training expenditures. Ultimately the Army's mission is to "defend the constitution of the United States. It does that by deterring war and, if deterrence fails,

by providing army forces capable of achieving decisive victory as part of a joint team on the battlefield."<sup>17</sup> This means that in a worst case scenario the Army must be prepared to fight a large scale conventional war in defense of the United States. To be able to field a well-trained, conventional force to fight and defeat another large conventional force is a task that is absolutely fundamental to the Army.

Given this basic responsibility the Army must maintain a large general purpose force that is trained in conventional warfare but who retain sufficient flexibility in doctrine to adapt to unconventional warfare requirements. "Flexibility implies more than simply doing the same thing in a different way. Military flexibility involves tailoring forces and techniques to accommodate changed circumstances."<sup>18</sup> Vietnam taught us that there are dangers associated with the overmilitarization of a conflict involving counterinsurgency. Complete reliance on massive firepower, technology, and mobility emphasizes the military component of counterinsurgent warfare and diminishes the political aspects. The military establishment must learn to "think small" in unconventional warfare. The large, mobile force that we employed in Vietnam tended to overwhelm our Vietnamese allies and failed to provide population security thereby enabling the enemy to organize them politically for his own benefit.<sup>19</sup>

The current Internal Defense and Development (IDAD) strategy for counterinsurgency acknowledges that "the successful counterinsurgent must realize that the true nature of the threat to his government lies in the insurgent's political strength, not in his military power. Although the government must contain the insurgents armed elements, concentration on the military aspect of the threat does not address the real danger."<sup>20</sup> Inherent within IDAD is the lesson that the host nation must retain primary

responsibility for the conduct of the counterinsurgency. To avoid a repetition of "Americanizing" a counterinsurgency, as we did in Vietnam, American forces will seek to avoid direct combat action and to act in a support role providing security assistance training, logistics support, and advice.

### **Conclusion**

Operational art was applied to the American counterinsurgency campaign in the Vietnam War. Hindered initially by unresolved national policy discussions, the reluctance of operational commanders to engage upon a campaign of pacification and a lack of flexibility in the military repertoire, the pacification program eventually received support at the operational level. Although discussed from the earliest time of American involvement, pacification was not supported by the practice of operational art until the formation of CORDS in 1967. In the years preceding the formation of CORDS the pacification program was neglected by the military leadership and as a result it proceeded in a disjointed and uneven manner. CORDS brought about a degree of unity and integration in the pacification program never before achieved by U.S. forces in Vietnam.

The years between 1967 and 1971 mark the period of most intensive effort in support of pacification. The conventional attacks conducted, by the NVA in the spring of 1972, indicated a desire on the part of the DRV leadership to draw U.S. and ARVN forces out of their pacification roles where they had been making significant progress in the fields of population and internal security.

Pacification required coordination and support at an operational level before it could begin to have an impact upon the course of the war. The increase in the number of ARVN and U.S troops committed to pacification, and the implementation of a series

of related programs, both military and civilian, are evidence of the application of operational art. The conduct and coordination of a variety of initiatives including programs such as the APC, Phoenix, Open Arms, the use of MATs and CRIPs, and the revitalization of Vietnamese paramilitary forces such as the RF/PF reflect the application of operational art to the counterinsurgency strategy. Finally, the promulgation of the Strategic Objective Plan of 1969 provided a formal enunciation of a detailed pacification program by outlining a campaign that combined population security, political action, and social and economic reform packages. The American counterinsurgency effort in Vietnam did not ultimately achieve national policy objectives. However, it did produce a significant body of information that has influenced the American military establishment's attitude toward unconventional warfare. The Vietnam War demonstrated that a counterinsurgency strategy must be supported by the practice of operational art in order to be effective. Although future counterinsurgency conflicts will differ in character, their successful resolution will demand a skillfully integrated campaign of military and civil action focusing on the fundamental causes of the political instability.



## NOTES

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