

THE NECESSITY FOR THE MILITARY ASSISTANCE COMMAND-  
VIETNAM STUDIES AND OBSERVATIONS GROUP

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by

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## ABSTRACT

THE NECESSITY FOR THE MILITARY ASSISTANCE COMMAND–VIETNAM STUDIES AND OBSERVATIONS GROUP, by MAJ Frank D. Razzano, Jr., 72 pages.

The Military Assistance Command, Vietnam–Studies and Observations Group was created in 1963 as the result of President John F. Kennedy’s strong desire to conduct an unconventional war against the communist regime in North Vietnam. First tasked to the Central Intelligence Agency, the mission was assigned to the Department of Defense in 1962 once it was realized that the CIA did not possess the resources or the desire to conduct covert, paramilitary activities. Throughout its eight-year existence, SOG executed a variety of missions focusing on psychological warfare, maritime interdiction, reconnaissance patrols, and personnel recovery missions.

This study examines the strategic and operational necessity for which MACVSOG was required. The research explores what exactly was MACVSOG? It then answers, did the political environment of the 1950s and 1960s contribute to not only the necessity for but also the lack of effectiveness of MACVSOG? Finally, the research explores if MACVSOG is a model for modern day, covert paramilitary operations? The scope of the research is from 1946 to 1964; it is during these years in which numerous actions by the nation’s political, military, and intelligence apparatus contributed to the necessity for MACVSOG.

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## ACRONYMS

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
DOD	Department of Defense
HALO	High Altitude, Low Opening
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
JFK	John Fitzgerald Kennedy
LBJ	Lyndon Baines Johnson
MACV	Military Assistance Command—Vietnam
MACVSOG	Military Assistance Command—Vietnam, Studies and Observations Group
NSAM	National Security Action Memorandum
NSC	National Security Council
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
OPLAN	Operations Plan
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
SACSA	Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities
SOG	Studies and Observations Group

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This is another type of war, new in its intensity, ancient in its origin—war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins, war by ambush instead of by combat; by infiltration, instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him. It is a form of warfare uniquely adapted to what has been strangely called “wars of liberation,” to undermine the efforts of new and poor countries to maintain the freedom that they have finally achieved. It preys on economic unrest and ethnic conflicts. It requires in those situations where we must counter it, and these are the kinds of challenges that will be before us in the next decade if freedom is to be saved, a whole new kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of force, and therefore a new and wholly different kind of military training.

— John F. Kennedy’s remarks to West Point’s  
1962 graduating class

#### Introduction

On April 30, 1972, one of the most secretive units of the Vietnam War experienced an unceremonious end as the result of a United States Pacific Command (USPACOM) communiqué ordering it to stand down and transfer all ongoing programs to the CIA.<sup>1</sup> The unit—officially constituted as the Military Assistance Command—Vietnam, Studies and Observations Group (MACVSOG), and commonly referred to as SOG, was formed in 1963. SOG was established because of President John F. Kennedy’s strong desire to have “guerillas operate in the North,” and, eventually, his lack of confidence in the Central Intelligence Agency’s ability to conduct the covert, paramilitary

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Schultz, *The Secret War Against Hanoi: The Untold Story of Spies, Saboteurs, and Covert Warriors in North Vietnam* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2000), 265.

activities required to achieve the said goals.<sup>2</sup> As a joint special operations task force, the organization was designed to conduct unconventional warfare in North Vietnam in an effort to destabilize the communist regime. For nearly eight years, SOG conducted a variety of tasks, to include psychological warfare, maritime interdiction, reconnaissance patrols, and recovery missions. The unit's operations typically consisted of covert movement into officially declared neutral yet, in reality, hostile territory. These missions into Laos and Cambodia occurred even as the United States' political apparatus claimed that the war was contained to Vietnam. Yet, while the organization contributed many successes to the Vietnam War throughout its existence, SOG's accomplishments never fully achieved Kennedy's original intent—to take the war to North Vietnam.

It seems preposterous to consider the military's most decorated unit since the Civil War an operational or strategic failure. The unit did indeed contribute numerous tactical successes across Vietnam as well as inside of Laos and Cambodia; its members routinely displayed unparalleled acts of heroism on the battlefield. During its existence, members of SOG received twelve Medals of Honor, to include Colonel Robert L. Howard, the United States' most decorated soldier since World War II, amongst a plethora of other valorous medals. Yet, in the end, SOG, whether through its own failures or other external influences, was unable to successfully derail the communist regime and subvert the counterinsurgency that the Viet Cong was executing in South Vietnam.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 3.

### Research Question

Did MACVSOG achieve the specific strategic and operational necessity for which the organization was created? The scope of this research is from 1946 through 1965. It does not focus on the tactical achievements during the unit's operational years. To support the primary question, the research will also answer the following secondary and tertiary questions: (1) Did the political environment of the 1950s and 1960s contribute to not only the necessity for, but, also the lack of strategic and operational effectiveness of MACVSOG? (2) Is MACVSOG a model for current clandestine operations? In answering these questions, the research will show that a shift in the nation's policy towards Vietnam not only provided a requirement for a Department of Defense-led, covert, paramilitary organization, but, also unwittingly led to the organization's inability to initiate an insurgency inside of North Vietnam.

### Thesis Outline

This thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the topic, identifies the research question, and outlines the research. The purpose of chapter 2 is to analyze of this thesis' main question—the necessity of SOG. It initially explores the roots of clandestine warfare, specifically the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during WWII. The chapter explores the Eisenhower Administration and its struggle to identify a viable strategy for Indochina. It then transfers to Kennedy's desire to utilize unconventional warfare against North Vietnam in an attempt to destabilize the regime. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the CIA's inability to achieve JFK's goals and the transition of the mission to the Department Defense. Chapter 3 examines President Lyndon B. Johnson's establishment of SOG; the obstacles encountered by those

tasked to create SOG; and how politics influenced the organization. Chapter 4 explores whether SOG is an applicable model for current clandestine mission sets. It examines the link between SOG and the modern special operation forces. The essay concludes with chapter 5 that explores the findings of the research.

### Literature Review

In researching this thesis, a wide range of sources were reviewed. These included books, research papers, as well as primary sources to include various government documentation. A number of works were cited in this research; yet, several sources were more complete than others and thus utilized more frequently.

While the bulk of the research obviously focused on the organization itself, it was, nonetheless necessary to explore other contributing topics to answer the primary research question. These included the OSS, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Eisenhower Administration and its reliance on massive retaliation, as well as the utilization of unconventional warfare post-Vietnam. Each of these topics contributed in determining the necessity of SOG.

There were several challenges posed in completing this research. First, many of the unit's exploits remained classified into the late 1990s. Moreover, even to this day, numerous excerpts within those documents remain redacted. The second challenge involved the validity of the sources. While much has emerged in regards to SOG in recent years, many of these products are rife with inaccuracies and embellished stories. When such a doubt existed, the author relied on the primary source document as the more accurate version.

The first book reviewed was Richard H. Schultz's *The Secret War Against Hanoi*. Researched and published shortly after the majority of the documents associated with SOG were declassified, Schultz's work is, without a doubt, the most complete resource on MACVSOG. *The Secret War* provides an in depth analysis of the organization at the strategic level as well as a detailed description of the unit's tactical contributions. As such, it was the primary resource for this study's research.

John Plaster's *SOG: The Secret Wars of America's Commandos in Vietnam* is a first-hand account of various tactical exploits by a SOG veteran. Plaster's book paints a perfect picture of the life of a reconnaissance team leader. The anecdotes within Plaster's book provided a descriptive overview of numerous tactical operations the unit executed. Yet, as with many personal recollections, *The Secret Wars* contains numerous discrepancies and contradictions and, as such, should not be used as a primary resource in researching MACVSOG. Plaster has also written two additional books, *Secret Commandos* and *SOG: A Photo History of the Secret Wars on MACVSOG*.

Thomas Ricks' *The Generals* provided an in-depth analysis of President Dwight Eisenhower, his administration's policies and the decisions which led the United States into the war in Vietnam. Ricks' work was useful in exploring those decisions by the Eisenhower Administration which unwittingly led the United States toward full-scale involvement in Indochina. *The Generals* also explored Kennedy's reliance upon General Maxwell Taylor and the latter's impact on the nation's security strategy.

First published in 1979 and now in its 5th edition, George Herring's *America's Longest War* is often considered the definitive source on the Vietnam War. The work is all-encompassing exploring the duration of the nation's involvement in Vietnam. For the

purpose of this research, *Longest War* was referenced to examine those decisions of both the Eisenhower and Kennedy Administration's which contributed to the Vietnam War.

Former CIA Director William Colby's *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* is a detailed recollection of his involvement throughout the Vietnam War. As the CIA's station chief in Saigon through 1962, Colby was intimately involved with the Kennedy Administration's efforts to initiate a covert war against North Vietnam. *Lost Victory* examines, from a CIA standpoint, the problems surrounding Kennedy's plan to include the decision to task the military to execute the operation.

Former SOG Chief Major General John Singlaub's *Hazardous Duty* was the final resource of the core group of books that contributed to this research. The book is an autobiographical account of his dedicated service to the nation. Singlaub reflects upon his service in special operation units during three different wars. *Hazardous Duty* is an excellent resource for those interested in SOG as it combines tactical anecdotes with the operation insight that only a former commander can offer.

The preceding six books formed the basis for the bulk of information included in this research. However, in addition to these works, numerous other sources were studied. These included additional books, other academic research, as well as various government documents. The government documents were of particular benefit.

Whereas books often provide a definitive and current narrative in regards to historical events, these primary resources provide insight into the thoughts and emotions of those intimately involved even as the situation developed. Whether due to blind optimism or simple ignorance, the government memorandums researched for this study

often portrayed a positive outlook even as the situation in Vietnam rapidly devolved. One such CIA memorandum offers cautious optimism in regards to the capabilities of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) despite the reality that it could not hold its own against lesser forces. Even when a government agency questioned the situation, bureaucracy often prevailed and the report was subsequently mitigated with more-positive correspondence.

The sources analyzed in this literature review are primarily representative of the information included within this research. While there was plenty of other information available regarding MACVSOG, these sources were not reviewed as they did not assist in answering the primary, secondary or tertiary research question. For additional information regarding SOG, it is suggested that one read any of these available resources. Finally, much remains unanswered in regards to this covert organization; it is all but certain that further information surrounding MACVSOG will continue to be developed for the foreseeable future.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE STRATEGIC NECESSITY FOR MACVSOG

The roots of clandestine warfare stretch far beyond the existence of the United States. The modern-day parable of the Trojan Horse springs to mind in the application of trickery within warfare. The scope of this research, however, will limit itself to the United States and the period during and after World War II. It is within this time span that certain events occurred which would ultimately dictate the necessity of a covert paramilitary organization inside of Southeast Asia. The establishment of SOG on September 9, 1963 was not the first time that the United States employed clandestine warfare. In fact, SOG's organizational structure closely resembled that of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during World War II.<sup>3</sup> This precursor unit to the United States covert entrance in the Vietnam War served as a baseline in regards to the formation and execution of similar organizations.

Established six months after the nation entered World War II, the OSS mandate was to "plan and operate such special services as may be directed the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff." The organization was formed as a result of bureaucratic infighting between the then-existing Office of the Coordinator of Instruction, headed by William "Wild Bill" Donovan, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.<sup>4</sup> This newly founded relationship was contentious amongst senior military leadership since the military was now tasked to

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<sup>3</sup> John Plaster, *SOG: The Secret Wars of America's Commandos in Vietnam* (New York: NAL Trade, 2010), 7.

<sup>4</sup> R. Harris Smith, *OSS: The Secret History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency* (London: University of California Press Berkeley, 1972), 2.



oversee covert military actions. The military leadership argued that covert actions were not part of traditional military requirements. Yet, Donovan, a World War I Medal of Honor recipient and personal friend to President Roosevelt, was able to argue that wartime events required paramilitary activities synchronized with conventional military tactics.<sup>5</sup> During the height of its execution, the OSS employed more than 9,000 personnel excelling in propaganda, subversion, and post-war planning.<sup>6</sup> Among the numerous contributions of the OSS inside of both theatres was its utilization of Jedburgh teams. A forerunner to the Army's Special Forces, the three-man teams parachuted primarily into Nazi-occupied France and the Netherlands in order to "liaison with the underground, arm and train the Maquis, boost patriotic morale, and coordinate resistance activity with Allied military strategy."<sup>7</sup> These teams proved quite successful in linking resistance forces with the Allied Command. Many of the American Jedburghs would hold positions of great responsibility inside of both the Army and the Central Intelligence Agency, to include John Singlaub, Chief of SOG from 1966 to 1968. Yet, despite its successes and, perhaps, as a personal insult to Donovan, the OSS was dissolved at the end of World War II. President Harry Truman reasoned that with the world at peace, there was not a need for secret activities. However, by 1948, with the onset of the Cold War, reality dictated that there was indeed a requirement for such capabilities.

The National Security Act of 1947 was a major overhaul of both the nation's military and intelligence community in the years following World War II. The intent of

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<sup>5</sup> Schultz, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 174.

the legislation was to, “provide a comprehensive program for the future security of the United States.” Amongst numerous other initiatives, the act formally created the Central Intelligence Agency, two National Security Council directives (NSC 4 and 4A) published in 1948 officially assigned responsibility for covert operations to the agency.<sup>8</sup> NSC 10, issued in June of the same year, superseded the previous directives and officially charged the CIA “with conducting espionage and counter-espionage operations abroad.”<sup>9</sup>

There are numerous opinions in regards to how and when the United States entered the Vietnam Conflict. The scope of this research mainly starts with the Eisenhower Administration; it focuses on the administration’s policies as they had a direct impact on the creation of MACVSOG. Eisenhower’s agenda towards Vietnam is as interesting as it is complex. One author’s view of Eisenhower’s policy reveals a contradiction in his ideals, “His anti-colonial views kept the U.S. from providing critical direct military assistance to the French during the Battle Dienbienphu, even though strong pressure was being applied from many directions. But (sic) his persistent anti-Communist approach kept America involved.”<sup>10</sup>

In reviewing the April 1954 Domino Theory speech, one would think that Eisenhower was committed to ensuring the sovereignty of South Vietnam. In the address to the American public, Eisenhower stated, that if left alone, Indochina would “go over

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<sup>8</sup> Schultz, 9.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, Records of the National Security Council, NSC 10/2, accessed March 10, 2015, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945-50Intel/d292>.

<sup>10</sup> James Slaton, “Intervention in Vietnam: President Eisenhower’s Foreign Policy” (Thesis, Air War College, Carlisle, PA, 1995), 5.

very quickly,” like a “row of dominos” when the first is knocked over. He also argued, “So you have the beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences. Asia, after all, has already lost some 450 million of its people to the Communist dictatorship, and we simply can't afford greater losses.” Ike concluded, “So the possible consequences of the loss are just incalculable to the free world.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet, despite this reassuring rhetoric, there are numerous examples of Eisenhower's reluctance to become involved with Vietnam. In a 1951 journal entry, Eisenhower wrote, “I am convinced that no military victory is possible in that kind of theater.”<sup>12</sup> In a meeting several years later, Eisenhower was purported to remark, “as long as I'm president we will not go in with ground troops to Vietnam.”<sup>13</sup> During the siege at Dienbienphu, Eisenhower, due to his anti-colonialist views, chose to remain on the sidelines as the French suffered a sound defeat. In a meeting with General Taylor on May 24, 1956, Eisenhower expanded on his view, remarking, “We would not . . . deploy and tie down our forces around the Soviet periphery in small wars.”<sup>14</sup>

However, after the fall of Dienbienphu in 1954, Eisenhower found himself in an awkward position. While not necessarily inclined to support French colonialism, Eisenhower's anti-communist ideals led to a certain level of support to Vietnam. Certainly not apparent at the time, the fall of Dienbienphu and the subsequent Geneva Conference continued the United States on the inevitable road to full-scale intervention.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, *The Generals* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 223.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

The conference commenced shortly after the fall of Dienbienphu during the summer of 1954. Initially intended to settle lingering problems surrounding Korea, Indochina's addition to the conference was at France's behest. Yet, with the United States in opposition to France's last-minute request, the United States assumed a passive role throughout the discussions as other nations worked towards a resolution.

The final declarations of the Geneva Conference purportedly achieved a cessation of hostilities, a prohibition against the introduction of foreign troops, and, most importantly, an agreement to conduct unifying elections by July 1956. Additionally, during the conference, Ngo Dinh Diem assumed the presidency of South Vietnam. Diem's ascension to power caused skepticism within the administration, which believed that South Vietnam needed a leader able to match Ho Chi Minh's charisma and General Giap's military prowess. Unfortunately, that person did not exist. In a reluctant endorsement, Ambassador Dillon stated the United States was, "prepared to accept the seemingly ridiculous prospect that this Yogi-like mystic could assume the charge he is apparently about to undertake, only because the standard set by his predecessors is so low." Eisenhower was even less enthused announcing, "In the land of the blind, one-eyed men are kings."<sup>15</sup> This passive acceptance continued to lead the United States towards an inevitable situation of full-scale commitment in Vietnam.

In November of 1954, Eisenhower sent former Army Chief of Staff J. Lawton Collins to Vietnam as a special representative and with the mandate to "sustain the Diem

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<sup>15</sup> Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 686.

government and establish security in Free Vietnam.”<sup>16</sup> It only took Collins five months to realize that Diem was incapable leading the nation citing the inability to achieve any of the reforms that Diem had claimed. Collins proposed that United States should cut its losses and punt the mess back to France, it “should it be determined that in view of the unsound situation in Vietnam the U.S. should gradually withdraw support from this country, then it would be necessary, in my opinion, to increase aid to the French expeditionary corps so that it would remain strong enough during the next year to permit the U.S. to withdraw essential equipment which might otherwise fall into Communist hands.” Collins was not the only individual expressing doubt towards Diem; French Prime Minister Edgar Faure declared Diem, “mad.”<sup>17</sup> Despite the doubt and, at one point, almost deserting Diem, Eisenhower, nonetheless, continued to support the erstwhile South Vietnamese President.

Throughout 1955 and into 1956, the situation in Vietnam continued to devolve. An October 1956, National Intelligence Estimate at that time concluded, “Diem will probably seek to bind the U.S. more specifically to the defense of Vietnam. . . . Should the Vietminh elect openly to invade the South with regular forces, they are capable of defeating the VNA (Vietnamese National and any French forces (if Committed) now present in South Vietnam.” Accordingly, Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson urged Eisenhower to get out “completely and as soon as possible,” warning that he could “see nothing but grief in store for us if we remained in that area.

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<sup>16</sup> David L. Anderson, *Shadow on the White House. Presidents and the Vietnam War. 1945-1975* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 49.

<sup>17</sup> Slaton, 39.

Eisenhower, however, chose to follow the advice of MAAG Chief Lieutenant General John W. “Iron Mike” O’Daniel who argued for continued support to Vietnam by claiming, “the Vietnamese people are ripe for an active change away from the Vietminh and toward the free Vietnamese government.”<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, nothing was further from the truth. Upon the realization that, if Vietnam held elections, the communist regime of Ho Chi Minh would overwhelmingly prevail; there was little desire by the United States or any other pro-democracy participating nation to force a national election.

This decision to forego elections to unify Vietnam forced the United States to take actions inconsistent with long standing principles. Vietnamese self-determination was abandoned, the inability to achieve democratic reform was rationalized, and covert operations, including bribery, were ordered.<sup>19</sup> It proved to be a very expensive commitment. Between 1955 and 1959, the United States gave Vietnam \$140 million in direct economic assistance. Additionally, the United States also provided the erstwhile nation with in excess of a billion dollars through a commercial-import program designed to keep inflation at bay.<sup>20</sup> While President Eisenhower succeeded in keeping the nation out of a war, his multitude of non-military actions left his successor few options inside of Vietnam.

By the time, Kennedy assumed the presidency the situation in Vietnam had, unbeknownst to politicians in Washington, devolved into uncertainty. On January 28,

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> George Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam 1950-1975* (New York: Newberry Awards Record, 1986), 57.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 60.

1961, during his first National Security Council briefing, recently inaugurated President John F. Kennedy received an unsettling presentation from Brigadier General Edward Lansdale. The council learned that the situation in South Vietnam had deteriorated to the point that the sovereignty of the nation was now uncertain. In speaking with the council, Lansdale was not selective with his words. He succinctly detailed a situation in which the North Vietnam aided-Viet Cong was increasing its terrorist activities throughout South Vietnam.<sup>21</sup> The Viet Cong employed “kidnapping, and murder of village and hamlet officials, ambushes, and armed attacks.”

Lansdale further stated that under these conditions, the Saigon government could do little to postpone its own demise. Sometime during this meeting, Kennedy began to formulate a unique approach towards the nation’s commitment to Indochina—one not employed since the waning days of World War II by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). A supporter of unconventional warfare, Kennedy believed that for the United States to achieve success in South Vietnam, it must create a legitimate insurgency in order to destabilize the communist regime in Hanoi. In a clear-cut case of “if you can’t beat them, join them” Kennedy later outlined a four-tiered approach consisting of spy networks, psychological warfare, maritime interdiction, and cross-border reconnaissance operations in order to take the fight to North Vietnam and areas in which it was operating.<sup>22</sup>

The decision to employ such a strategy was not a sudden and rash decision by Kennedy. Rather the president viewed it as a culmination of the numerous missteps

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<sup>21</sup> Schultz, 2.

<sup>22</sup> Plaster. xi.

committed by the United States and the Eisenhower Administration during the previous decade. There is much debate in regards to what JFK's plan in Vietnam would have been had he lived. Regardless, the actions Kennedy took during the early days of his presidency clearly demonstrate that he believed there was a need for continued involvement in the region. Kennedy's actions demonstrate a belief that the Eisenhower Administration had grossly mishandled the situation by its non-military commitment. Yet, as George Herring states, "Vietnam stands as the most tragic legacy of the global activism of the Kennedy era. Kennedy had long taken a close personal interest in Vietnam, which he had once described as the 'cornerstone of the free world in Southeast Asia.'"<sup>23</sup>

As a United States Senator, Kennedy was a member of the American Friends of Vietnam, a diverse organization of intellectuals, politicians, and senior military officials, as well as then-Colonel Edward Lansdale. An opponent of President Eisenhower's laissez-faire attitude towards French Colonialism, the organization sought to find an independent nationalist alternative for South Vietnam.<sup>24</sup> In his book on Vietnam George Herring states, "in his (Kennedy) eyes and those of many of his advisers, moreover, South Vietnam, would become a test case of America's determination to uphold its commitments in a menacing world and of its capacity to meet the new challenges posed by guerrilla warfare in the emerging nations."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Herring, 75.

<sup>24</sup> Schultz, 17.

<sup>25</sup> Herring, 75.



Undoubtedly, Kennedy took issue with the Eisenhower Administration's massive retaliation strategy. The rhetoric of Eisenhower's secretary of state demonstrates that the president did not believe it was possible to contain the conflict in Vietnam with nuclear weapons. John Foster Dulles, Eisenhower's Secretary of State, stated the following in a speech before the Council on Foreign Relations, "A potential aggressor must come to know that he will not be able to impose battlefield conditions that suit him. We will take advantage of our superior nuclear strategic strike capability to deter both, direct and indirect, local and general; efforts by the communist achieve gains at America's expense. However, Kennedy was skeptical.

He did not have confidence that it was possible to defeat guerrilla warfare with nuclear weapons stating, "events in Indochina and elsewhere have already knocked the props out from the assumptions of massive retaliation; and our reduction of strength for resistance in brushfire or guerrilla wars, while threatening atomic retaliation, has in effect invited expansion by the communists in areas such as Indochina through those techniques which they deem not sufficiently offensive to induce us to risk atomic warfare."<sup>26</sup> While massive retaliation invited images of devastation and destruction, it had little basis in reality. Did anyone honestly think that the United States would attempt to solve a guerilla war with atomic weapons?

Instead, Kennedy argued that any governmental action ought to be symmetrical as opposed to Eisenhower's asymmetrical, massive retaliation strategy. While the previous administration chose to view warfare in a traditional, force-on-force situation, JFK observed that nonnuclear and guerilla warfare has since 1945 constituted the most active

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<sup>26</sup> Schultz, 5.

and constant threat to Free World Security.<sup>27</sup> Kennedy's June 6, 1962 speech to West Point cadets reinforced his belief that the Eisenhower's massive retaliation policy was flawed in its design; rather guerilla warfare required a symmetrical response.

Given Kennedy's beliefs, it is no surprise that the transition between the Eisenhower and Kennedy Administrations signaled a significant change in not only the totality of the nation's military strategy but also its stance towards Vietnam. To achieve this strategy, JFK surrounded himself with senior advisors that supported his agenda. Most interesting was Kennedy's military advisor—General Maxwell Taylor. 1960, only a year removed as Army Chief of Staff, Taylor authored *The Uncertain Times*, a bitter critique of the Eisenhower Administration's defense strategy.<sup>28</sup> Taylor also supported Kennedy's unconventional platform. In a 1961 article for Foreign Affairs, Taylor advocated for the nation to develop a capacity to respond to guerrilla tactics in the Third World.<sup>29</sup>

The president's selection of Robert McNamara as the secretary of defense further demonstrated his commitment to guerrilla warfare. McNamara was among a group of 10 Air Force veterans, otherwise known as the Whiz Kids, who had rescued Ford Motor Company from financial difficulties. Today, McNamara is best remembered for the United States' involvement in Vietnam as well as his unattainable desire to contain the war within Vietnam. Yet, upon his selection as the secretary of defense, McNamara was a staunch proponent for the use of guerrilla warfare and covert activities inside of

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>28</sup> Ricks, 219.

<sup>29</sup> Schultz, 6.

Vietnam.<sup>30</sup> Also included within Kennedy's unconventional warfare supporters were McGeorge Bundy as special assistant for national security affairs, Walt Rostow, Bundy's deputy, and Robert F. Kennedy, the president's brother and the nation's attorney general. A final key figure was Roger Hilsman, an intelligence aid to Kennedy. Hilsman's breadth of experience included a stint as an OSS operative in Burma during World War II.<sup>31</sup> These individuals shared the view that the Third World was the new theater in the Cold War. In line with their boss, they believed that, rather than the previously accepted strategy of massive retaliation, unconventional warfare and the use of special warfare forces were the key to successfully winning the conflict in Indochina.

Initially tasking the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to execute these covert actions, Kennedy's vision was poorly received and slow to materialize. In relying on the CIA, the Kennedy administration failed to account for not only the CIA's capabilities but also the situation in North Vietnam. Established by the National Security Act of 1947, the CIA filled the void created by the dissolution of the OSS following World War II. Several security directives throughout 1948, NSC 4, 4A and 10/2, specifically assigned covert operations to the CIA<sup>32</sup>. Throughout the 1950s, the CIA achieved several successes. Its actions in the Philippines assisted Ramon Magsaysay in defeating a communist insurgency in 1953. The agency's actions inside of Iran and Guatemala in the early 1950s prevented a further spread of communism. However, these operations succeeded for several key reasons and circumstances. First, "there was clear cut,

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 9.

consistent, policy coordination and leadership at the top that seized opportunities. Second, “creative planners . . . identified allies who shared American objectives.” Lastly, capable case officers were able to not only develop but also effectively execute their objectives.<sup>33</sup>

Yet, within denied areas, the CIA was unable to duplicate its other successes. Attempts to destabilize communist regimes in Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Ukraine, and Albania all failed.<sup>34</sup> This was not for a lack of effort. Many agents were trained and inserted into these countries to develop resistance networks and execute paramilitary operations. Unfortunately, few were ever heard from again. The few that lived were marginalized and ineffective. One anecdote speaks of a case officer encountering an agent at a reception several decades after his insertion. He had managed to survive, but that was about it.<sup>35</sup> Similar actions throughout Southeast Asia also did not produce positive results. As SOG would discover firsthand in Vietnam, while the CIA was able to train and insert agents into denied areas, few were heard from again. Those that did live were often doubled by the communist regime. The failure to understand the importance of a viable resistance force or the ability to operate inside of denied areas would prove to be a crucial mistake for the Kennedy Administration.

By early March, Kennedy was less than enthused to discover that little happened in the weeks since his initial National Security Council meeting. Disgusted by the bureaucratic obstacle, Kennedy forced action on March 9th issuing National Security

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 17.

Action Memorandum 28 which directed the CIA “to report as soon as feasible your views on what actions might undertaken in the near future and what steps might be taken to expand operation in the longer future.” In April, Kennedy established a Presidential Task Force consisting of interagency representation to draft a Program of Action for Vietnam.

Members of the task force included, in addition to the president’s inner circle consisting of Lansdale and Rostrow, U. Alexis Johnson, deputy undersecretary of state, and Desmond Fitzgerald, the CIA’s chief of the Far Eastern Division of Directorate of Plans. Its objective was to “counter the communist influence and pressure upon the development and maintenance of a strong, free South Vietnam.” While relatively vague the president’s instructions nonetheless demonstrate a departure from Eisenhower’s strategy and a step towards an emphasis upon unconventional warfare. The task force made quick work of its mission; it issued a report to the president in the month following.<sup>36</sup> The group spoke plainly stating, among other bleak news, that “58% of the country is under some degree of communist control.” In issuing its report, the task force’s final assessment included several recommendations primarily focused on internal defense of South Vietnam. The group also agreed with the President’s original assessment that the United States should employ covert operations against North Vietnam. Kennedy subsequently issued NSAM 52, which approved the task force’s concept of operations “to initiate, on an accelerated basis, a series of mutually supporting actions of a military, political, economic, psychological and covert character.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>37</sup> Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Papers, National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda Series, National Security Action Memorandum Number 52, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, accessed March 24, 2015,

The CIA generated a viable, albeit small, program of covert activities consisting of infiltrating agent teams, intelligence collecting, psychological warfare, maritime operations directed at North Vietnam's coast, and the creation of a notional resistance force. In addition to its modest nature, the vast majority of the CIA's effort focused on South Vietnam.<sup>38</sup> Given the President's clear intent, why the meager response? Former CIA Director William Colby appears to provide the most reasonable answer in his 1989 autobiography. At the time, Colby was the CIA's station chief in South Vietnam. Colby believed that Kennedy's "modest increase was pushing the machinery about as far as (he) dared at the time," and "essentially secondary to a proper military approach to the problem of protecting South Vietnam."<sup>39</sup>

In the midst of the CIA's limited response, the Bay of Pigs debacle occurred. Intended to overthrow Fidel Castro, Cuba's communist dictator, the CIA-backed invasion was a complete and abject failure. It further demonstrated the CIA's inability to operate in a denied area as well as a major political embarrassment for Kennedy. The president, during the previous year's election campaign, publicly criticized the nation's handling of Cuba describing it as "the most glaring failure in American foreign policy." Kennedy vowed that the situation would be different in his presidency.<sup>40</sup> The Bay of Pigs fiasco cast further doubt on the CIA's capabilities and, even, for a short time, its existence, as

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<http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/National-Security-Memoranda.aspx>.

<sup>38</sup> Schultz, 18.

<sup>39</sup> William Colby, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989), 96.

<sup>40</sup> Schultz, 19.

Kennedy stated he would like “to scatter it to the winds.”<sup>41</sup> The fallout from the Bay of Pigs claimed the jobs of CIA Director Allen Dulles and Richard Bissell, the architect of the invasion. It also affected the situation in Southeast Asia.<sup>42</sup>

In spite of firing Dulles and Bissell, Kennedy, nonetheless, believed that the mission’s failure was not the result of personnel problems but rather a much larger, institutional issue. The president was now convinced that the CIA was not the proper agency to plan or execute covert paramilitary operations.<sup>43</sup> On June 28, only two months removed from the fiasco, Kennedy issued a series of three National Security Action Memorandums, numbered 55, 56, and 57. In order, the memorandums served to drastically reduce the CIA’s authority over covert paramilitary operations.

National Security Action Memorandum 55, *Relations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the President in Cold War Operations*, eliminated CIA authority over covert paramilitary programs. Addressed to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Kennedy wrote, “I look to the Chiefs to contribute dynamic and imaginative leadership in contributing to the success of the military and paramilitary aspects of Cold War programs.” NSAM 56, *Evaluation of Paramilitary Requirements*, requested that the Secretary of Defense “inventory the paramilitary assets we have in the United States Armed Forces, consider various areas in the world where the implementation of our

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<sup>41</sup> Colby, 96.

<sup>42</sup> Schultz, 19.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

policy may require indigenous para-military forces, and thus arrive at a determination of the goals which we should set in this field.”<sup>44</sup>

The Secretary of Defense tasked General Lansdale, the bearer of bad news at Kennedy’s first NSC meeting, to conduct the inventory, identify deficits within the structure, and recommend any additional assets required to meet the President’s intent. Lansdale produced several papers pertaining to his task. In an October 1961 memorandum to General Taylor, Lansdale concluded, “current plans for action against North Vietnam appear to be about as extensive as can be made under present U.S. policy.” Lansdale recommended a change to policy and that “Consideration should be given to a long-range policy towards North Vietnam. If the communists can wage subversive war to capture a country, then it is high time that we paid them in the same coin.”<sup>45</sup>

The last and most important of the three documents, NSAM 57 set the ground rules for planning and executing covert operations by the CIA and the military. The delineation for responsibility of such operations focused on the capabilities of the CIA. “Where such an operation is to be wholly covert or disavowable, it may be assigned to CIA, provided that it is within the normal capabilities of the agency. Any large

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<sup>44</sup> Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Papers, National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda Series, National Security Action Memoranda, National Security Action Memorandum Number 56, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum Boston, accessed March 24, 2015, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/National-Security-Memoranda.aspx>.

<sup>45</sup> Department of State, Office of the Historian, Memorandum from the Secretary of Defense’s Deputy Assistant for Special Operations (Lansdale) to the President’s Military Representative (Taylor), accessed March 10, 2015, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v01/d186>.



paramilitary operation wholly or partly covert which requires significant numbers of military trained personnel, amounts to (sic) military equipment which exceed normal CIA-controlled stocks and/or military experience of a kind and level peculiar to the Armed services is properly the primary responsibility of the Department of Defense with the CIA in a supporting role.”<sup>46</sup>

With the CIA officially removed, the military was poised to accept its role as primary executor of covert paramilitary operations. Yet, to state that the military’s response was less than enthusiastic is an understatement. The majority of the senior military leadership saw no reason to alter the conventional strategy that had proved successful in both world wars. In some instances, these were the same men who had attempted to stymie the OSS in World War II. Concurrently, technological advances in the years between World War II and the Kennedy Administration seemingly reaffirmed this approach.<sup>47</sup> As head of the Office of the Assistant to the Secretary of Defense, General Lansdale was to have responsibility for special defense activities approved by the Secretary. This essentially made Lansdale the action officer for the military’s involvement in covert warfare and, in certain cases, more powerful than the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Not surprisingly, the assignment resulted in an acrimonious relationship between

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<sup>46</sup> Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Papers, National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda Series, National Security Action Memoranda, National Security Action Memorandum Number 57, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum Boston, Accessed March 24, 2015, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/National-Security-Memoranda.aspx>.

<sup>47</sup> Schultz, 270.

Lansdale and the Joint Chiefs. Throughout 1961, both sides fought for influence within the White House.<sup>48</sup>

Even as the military's infighting continued, Kennedy grew tired of the lack of progress towards developing a plan for covert operations within Southeast Asia. By the end of 1961, the President expressed his displeasure to the Joint Chiefs. The military's response was the creation of the Office of the Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities, informally known as SACSA.<sup>49</sup> This move seemingly demonstrated that the military was ready to execute Kennedy's wishes; it also ensured it maintained control of such operations. The Joint Chiefs, with approval from the White House selected U.S. Marine Corps Major General Victor "Brute" Krulak to head the agency.

The selection of Krulak was not due to any previous special warfare experience of which he had none but because of his service with Kennedy during World War II. In fact, Krulak maintained mainstream views toward Vietnam—not the unconventional attitude that the president was seeking.<sup>50</sup> In the end, General Edward Lansdale, due to a series of political missteps, saw his influence inside of the Kennedy Administration to the point that he was reassigned to oversee Operation Mongoose, the operational plan designed to uproot Fidel Castro, and ultimately forced to retire several years later.<sup>51</sup> At the same time,

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>49</sup> Kenneth Conboy and Dale Andrade, *Spies and Commandos: How America Lost the Secret War in North Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2000), 85.

<sup>50</sup> Schultz, 287.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 288.

the conventional military leadership was now in a position to control the extent of covert paramilitary operations inside of Vietnam.

In July of 1962, Secretary of Defense McNamara held a meeting with various officials, to include representatives from US Pacific Command, to discuss NSAM 57. Labeled Operation Switchback, the purpose of the meeting was to plan for the military's takeover of covert actions inside of Vietnam. Sometime during the gathering, the commander of Military Assistance Command-Vietnam General Paul Harkins enthusiastically stated, "We are on the winning side. If our programs continue, we can expect VC actions to decline." A delighted McNamara asked how long before "the VC could be eliminated as a disturbing force?" Harkins retorted that he "estimated about one year," from the time that ARVN would be operational. McNamara, perhaps hesitant to fully accept the general's assessment, thought that it would take approximately three years.<sup>52</sup> Regardless whether it was one year or three years, neither man fully understood the situation inside of the war-torn nation. The situation in South Vietnam was not improving; rather it was rapidly deteriorating.

Harkins and McNamara's positive assessment quickly received criticism. Throughout the remainder of 1962 and into the first several months of 1963, several reports from both the CIA and NSC surfaced that painted a much different picture of the situation in Vietnam. A January 11 report by the CIA's Office of Current Intelligence stated, "The tide has not yet turned. South Vietnam has made some military progress with the VC due largely to extensive U.S. support. The Viet Cong, however, continue to expand the size and effectiveness of their forces and are increasingly bold in their

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 32.

attacks.” The document also took issue with enemy casualty reports suggesting an exaggeration of the numbers.<sup>53</sup>

A National Security Council report issued on February 11 provided an even worse assessment than the CIA’s report. Composed by Michael Forrestal, an aid to McGeorge Bundy, the report correctly realized that while the Viet Cong were taking heavy casualties, the apparatus was easily able to recruit replacements.<sup>54</sup> In a battle of intelligence reports, the CIA took issue with Forrestal’s report and requested a new estimate. This time, senior leaders inside of the administration ensured that the follow-up report agreed with their original, positive assessment.<sup>55</sup>

Regardless of the political spin, events in Vietnam soon brought to light a quickly deteriorating situation. Operationally, the significantly larger Army of the Republic of Vietnam was unable to hold its own against the much smaller guerilla force. In the battle of Ap Bac, a key engagement in December of 1962, approximately 300 guerrilla soldiers effectively repelled an entire ARVN division.<sup>56</sup> The army was saturated with poor leadership and terrible morale.<sup>57</sup> Politically, the situation was much worse. Support for Diem was quickly waning. A seemingly minor incident in the late spring of 1963 involving the segments of the majority Buddhist population quickly morphed into a

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<sup>53</sup> Department of State, Office of the Historian, Central Intelligence Memorandum, Document 11, accessed March 10, 2015, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v03/d11>.

<sup>54</sup> Schultz, 33.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 33.

national crisis. During an event intended to commemorate the birth of Buddha, government troops fired on participating civilians. Diem failed to apologize for his soldiers' actions; rather he blamed the disorder on the actions of the Vietcong. This inaction resulted in numerous protests, to include hunger strikes and self-immolations by Buddhist monks, throughout the summer.<sup>58</sup> As the situation wore on, Diem lost the support of his generals. By July, senior leaders inside of the military were planning a coup.<sup>59</sup>

The gloomy events during the first half of 1963 finally caused the activation of the plan which President Kennedy had in mind since first taking office over two years prior. At the May 6, 1963 Secretary of Defense conference convened in Hawaii, the escalation of the covert war against the communist regime advanced to become a key agenda item.<sup>60</sup> As part of Operation Switchback, the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed US Pacific Command to further develop its covert, paramilitary program.

The United States Pacific Command sent a draft of its plan to the Joint Chiefs in June of 1963; it included an array of various covert operations.<sup>61</sup> Initially Taylor, by then recalled to active duty to serve as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, demonstrated a reluctance to approve the concept. It sat on his desk for roughly two months. Several combinations of reasons may have contributed to this delay, to include:

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<sup>58</sup> Herring, 98.

<sup>59</sup> Department of State, Office of the Historian. Central Intelligence Memorandum, Document 145, accessed March 10, 2015, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v03/d145>.

<sup>60</sup> Schultz, 35.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

1. The situation in South Vietnam had reached a crisis and it dominated the executive branch's time;
2. There was not a Department of Defense paramilitary organization in existence capable of executing the recommendations;
3. Taylor did not believe that the covert action would accomplish much in this particular situation.<sup>62</sup>

The concept finally received approval on September 9, 1963. Operational Plan 34A, as it was known, officially established the unit that would become the Military Assistance Command-Vietnam Studies and Observations Group. Yet, it would not be until January of 1964 that the organization would begin to be established. By then, SOG had lost its biggest supporter with the assassination of JFK; instead, it would have to make its way through numerous political and military obstacles on its own.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 35.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE CHALLENGE TO ESTABLISH MACVSOG

Several events throughout the month of November 1963 proved instrumental in the United States' involvement in Vietnam and, by proxy, its intention to executing paramilitary activities. First, on November 2, a coup resulted in the assassination of Ngo Diem. The coup, led by Duong Van Minh with the support of other senior military leaders, was the climax of the Buddhist Crisis, which had emerged several months prior. The success of the overthrow was further aided due to the United States' decision not to protect Diem. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge assured the coup's planners that the United States would not interfere if such an action were to occur.<sup>63</sup> Speculation remains as to the depth of involvement by the United States; there are those that believe the CIA orchestrated it. Regardless, South Vietnam had a new leader.

The second and more important event, at least in the context of American history, was the assassination of John F. Kennedy on November 22. To this day, speculation remains as to if Kennedy would have remained involved in Vietnam had he not been killed by Lee Harvey Oswald's bullet on that bleak Friday morning. His most ardent supporters argue that, at the time of his death, the president planned to extricate the nation from Southeast Asia. Yet, the record suggests otherwise. The speech he was to give on the day of his assassination speaks to the hefty price of commitment within third-world nations stating they were "painful, risky, and costly," yet, "we dare not weary of

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<sup>63</sup> Herring, 10.

the test.”<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, on November 20, two days before Kennedy’s death, OPLAN 34A was on the agenda in a special meeting held by Secretary McNamara in Honolulu to discuss increased involvement in Vietnam.<sup>65</sup>

The purpose of the Honolulu Conference was to further the debate that resulted from Operation Switchback. By now, the Kennedy Administration had little or no confidence in the CIA’s ability to operate inside of denied areas. The conference was the military’s opportunity to explain its plan for executing paramilitary activities within Southeast Asia. Secretary McNamara was confident that the military could achieve the results the president desired; his answer was to respond with a massive effort rather than the limited engagement the CIA employed in the preceding years.

Unsurprisingly, William Colby objected; his belief was that an expansion of force would not succeed. He questioned the military’s ability to conduct operations against North Vietnam without an active and capable resistance force. Colby’s deputy, Robert J. Myers quickly pointed out that similar operations had miserably failed in both North Korea and China. Colby suggested a program of psychological warfare aimed at the communist regime. The station chief also worried as to the complexity of transferring funding sources and other logistics to the Army.<sup>66</sup> Yet, McNamara believed an increase in military involvement would solve the issue. The secretary, obviously in line with JFK, was confident that a massive effort directed towards North Vietnam would create enough issues for the communists to no longer support the insurgency in the south.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>65</sup> Schultz, 36.

<sup>66</sup> Colby, 164-167.



Lyndon Johnson's move to the White House created additional problems for the development of paramilitary activities in Vietnam. Kennedy had never bothered to brief his vice-president on his intentions for Vietnam. Instead, Johnson was forced to wrestle with various policy issues from the start of his presidency. Intended for JFK, a revised draft of the Honolulu Conference reached President Johnson on November 24. During a subsequent meeting, Johnson was purported to have said, "I am not going to be the president who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went."<sup>67</sup> Despite being a new president, Johnson was a career politician; he knew he had to appear strong, especially with the 1964 election less than a year away.

After a brief a deliberation with his senior policy advisors, LBJ approved NSAM 273 on November 26, 1963; covert, paramilitary activities by the United States Department of Defense were now authorized against North Vietnam. This required the Military Assistance Command in Vietnam to work with the CIA to develop a twelve-month program of covert operations against North Vietnam.<sup>68</sup>

The plan of execution of OPLAN 34A was relatively quickly developed; by December 15, US Pacific Command received the outline. The proposal listed 2,062 separate missions, which the organization would conduct within its first year of existence.<sup>69</sup> The objective was ambitious. It outlined, "progressively escalating pressures to inflict increasing punishment upon North Vietnam and to create pressure, which may convince the North Vietnamese leadership, in its own self interest, to desist from its

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<sup>67</sup> Schultz, 318.

<sup>68</sup> Conboy and Andrade, 65-66.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 89.

aggressive policies.”<sup>70</sup> The program’s planners detailed five distinct categories of operations required to accomplish the mission. The first program involved intelligence gathering through both agents as well as communications. Second, psychological operations were to be maximized against both the North Vietnamese leadership as well as the populace in order to create division within the regime. The third program was directly linked to psychological warfare and was intended to create political pressure designed to deflate both the economy and security within North Vietnam. The fourth category focused on developing a resistance element. While seen as critical in the execution of the overall success of the plan, it would, ultimately prove to be the most futile. The final objective was raids to include both airborne and maritime as well as special reconnaissance.<sup>71</sup>

Johnson endorsed OPLAN 34A, albeit with a caveat. The president, in line with Secretary McNamara wanted to move cautiously. Despite rhetoric to “make it clear to the leaders of the North that they would suffer serious reprisals for their continuing support of the insurgency,” McNamara wanted to send a symbolic message, limiting targets to “those that provide maximum pressure with minimum risk.”<sup>72</sup> To meet his intent, Johnson assigned Major General Krulak, chief of SACSA, to select those operations that fit within his limited guidelines. General Krulak was quick to respond. On January 2, 1964, the committee’s report reflected the president’s caution. It selected a limited

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<sup>70</sup> Schultz, 38.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Plaster, 6.

number of low risk operations to execute during the initial four-month phase of the covert operation starting on February 1, 1964.<sup>73</sup>

There were several problems with this condensed timeline, however. First, not everyone inside of the administration was united in regards to what they this effort could ultimately achieve. Despite Kennedy's stated objective to demoralize the communist regime in North Vietnam, Secretary of State Dean Rusk stated, "98% of the problem is in South Vietnam." While supportive, McGeorge Bundy insisted that the government closely watch the program.<sup>74</sup> It had been nearly three years since Kennedy expressed his desire to take the war to the North, yet nothing positive had occurred, and in the absence of the assassinated president, dissenting opinions now emerged.

The second issue consisted of objections to specific aspects of the plan. First, all references to developing a resistance movement inside of North Vietnam, a critical aspect of the plan, were removed due to concern that China could get involved if the movement proved successful. Another key element absent was the reference to covert operations against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos for fear of violating the previously agreed to Geneva Accords.<sup>75</sup> The final, and perhaps most perplexing, issue is that the organization to execute the program was not identified. Washington, at least in theory, knew what it wanted to accomplish; it simply lacked the apparatus to do so.

President Johnson approved OPLAN 34a in mid-January 1964. The approval authorized the execution of 33 of the 72 original programs of action. On January 23,

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<sup>73</sup> Schultz, 39.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 40.

1964, MACV issued General Order 6, creating a secretive unit intended to execute the operations outlined within OPLAN 34A. It was named Military Assistance Command, Vietnam–Special Operations Group. Several months later, it was renamed as the Studies and Observations Group, a supposed collection of academics studying the situation in Vietnam. Despite the fact that MACV established SOG, the unit was not subordinate to the organization; rather it would report directly to the JCS. In fact, only a few individuals inside of MACV were ever briefed on SOG or its operations.<sup>76</sup>

Even though the concept was planned for and, to a certain extent, executed since President Kennedy’s initial NSC meeting three years prior, MACVSOG, nonetheless, had to be assembled from scratch. In terms of experience, the selection of Colonel Clyde Russell as the unit’s first commander was a positive step. A World War II paratrooper, Russell commanded several Special Forces units in the intervening years. Russell arrived in Vietnam in January of 1964 expecting to assume a robust CIA operation as well as the individuals in charge of these operations. Unfortunately, the CIA did not share the same objectives. Instead, it expected to turn over control of its limited operations, provide the minimal number of officers, and forget about the entire affair.<sup>77</sup> The CIA would not play a secondary role to an inexperienced military organization. Additionally, Colby viewed the bulk of OPLAN 34A as irrelevant to the types of missions his organization should conduct in Vietnam.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Plaster, 7.

<sup>77</sup> Schultz, 43.

<sup>78</sup> Colby, 164.

With the CIA providing minimal assistance, Russell worked to establish MACSOG. With time of the essence, Russell and his staff fell back on the tried and true OSS structure.<sup>79</sup> The organization consisted of five sections—Operation-31 through Operation-35. Operation 31, otherwise known as Op-31, was the organization's maritime unit tasked with a variety of seaborne operations to include the training and support for the Vietnamese Coastal Survey Service, sabotage and intelligence unit. Op-32 was the unit's staff division that supervised its private air force based at Nha Trang. Op-33 was SOG's psychological warfare platform. Op-34 was SOG's resistance and intelligence operations against North Vietnam. The last of the sections, Op-35, was the reconnaissance unit; arguably SOG's most used and important asset in terms of the missions it would ultimately execute.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Plaster, 7.

<sup>80</sup> John K. Singlaub, *Hazardous Duty: An American Soldier in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Summit Books, 1991), 297.

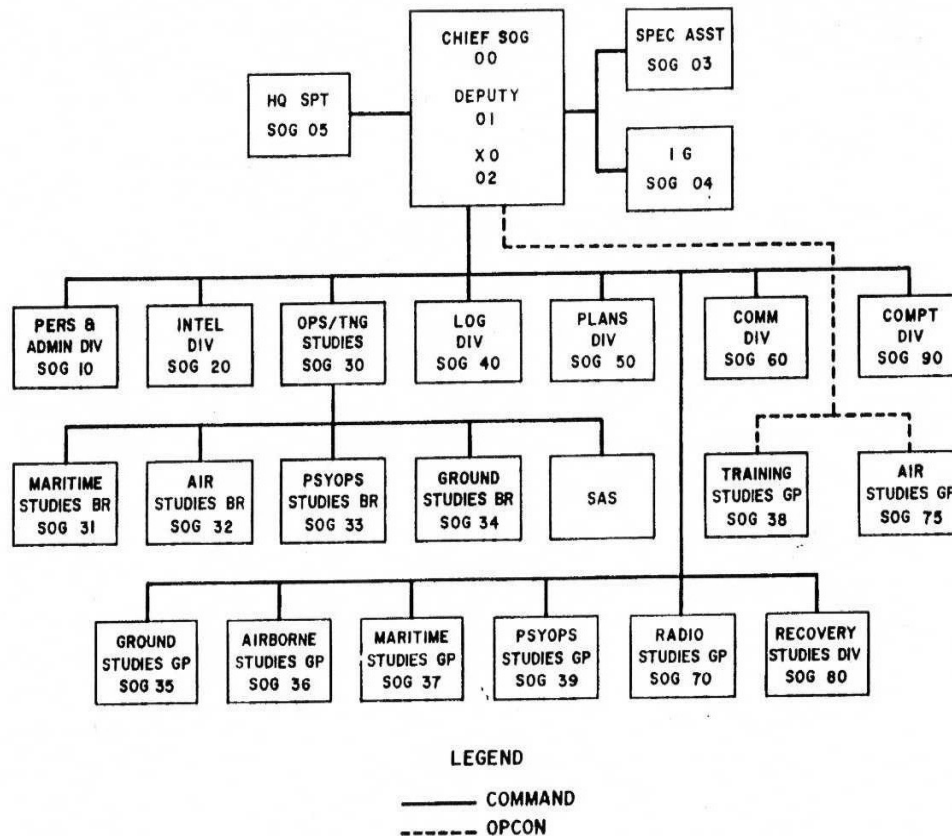


Figure 1. MACVSOG Organization, December 1969

Source: Richard Schultz, *The Secret War against Hanoi: The Untold Story of Spies, Saboteurs, and Covert Warriors in North Vietnam* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2000), 56.

The MACVSOG now officially existed, all that it needed were missions. Primarily, in Russell's mind, at least in terms of accomplishing the stated goal, was to develop a viable resistance force. Russell believed that to destabilize North Vietnam, the United States needed to attack the regime's center of gravity—its control of the populace. Yet, as with most other situations involving SOG, the United States had a conflict in what

it wanted to accomplish and what it was willing to do. Russell was not given authority to initiate a resistance force.<sup>81</sup>

Even as Russell struggled to establish his unit, Hanoi was making plans for a conventional warfare effort in the south. Several months earlier, in December 1963, the regime sent Colonel Bui Tin and a cadre of military specialists on a fact-finding mission down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Their task was to determine if the Viet Cong could win the war on their own or whether NVA units were needed. In the wake of Diem's overthrow, the regime needed to know if it was time to escalate the war. The colonel's report was unequivocal; it was time to move to a conventional war. The Ho Chi Minh Trail was expanded with no expense spared. Even as the war was coming south, SOG still did not have permission to operate in Laos and against the trail.<sup>82</sup>

That the United States military could not operate in Laos was not an oversight but rather a conscious decision by Averill Harriman, one of Kennedy's "Wise Men" and an Ambassador-at-large throughout Southeast Asia. Harriman had brokered a deal several years prior, which declared Laos a neutral country and, as such, required all nations to leave. The last thing Harriman wanted was for the United States to be caught operating in an area it was not supposed to. Harriman known as "The Crocodile" was willing to do just about anything to ensure this did not happen. In December 1963, William Jorden, a Harriman deputy, released a report stating that "available evidence of continuing support . . . for the Viet Cong," showed that it was declining. Despite his best efforts, however, by March 1964, it was increasingly doubtful that Harriman could prevent a change in

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<sup>81</sup> Schultz, 45.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

policy. McNamara requested authorization for ARVN forces to cross into Laos in instances of hot pursuit.<sup>83</sup>

The following month, while visiting Vietnam, McNamara asked Colonel Russell, “How soon I could launch operations into Laos.” Despite the Russell’s consternation of sending unmotivated, untrained Vietnamese soldiers on a dangerous mission, McNamara did not relent.<sup>84</sup> The result was a disastrous operation code named “Leaping Lena”. Russell was given thirty days to train five teams of eight South Vietnamese Special Forces soldiers to cross the border and look for enemy activity. The teams found plenty of activity; unfortunately, only five of the forty individuals made it back. Despite the realization that Hanoi was increasing its presence in Laos, due to bureaucratic infighting, the trail was left alone for the next fifteen months.<sup>85</sup> It would take an antagonistic act by the NVA against U.S. forces for Johnson to finally change his mind.

On February 7, 1965, North Vietnam launched a major attack on the U.S. air base at Pleiku resulting in the deaths of nine American soldiers and in excess of a hundred wounded. Bundy, who was in Vietnam at the time of the attack and personally viewed the aftermath, remarked, “we have to do something, we can’t just sit by, we have to protect our boys.”<sup>86</sup> The Joint Chiefs requested and received permission to conduct Operation Rolling Thunder, a bombing campaign intended to disrupt operations on the northern end

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<sup>83</sup> Schultz, 208.

<sup>84</sup> Plaster, 11.

<sup>85</sup> Schultz, 212.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 214.



of the trail. They also requested permission to conduct covert operations into Laos. This time the White House agreed.

The SOG proposed a three phase operation, “beginning with short-stay, tactical intelligence missions progressing to longer-stay intelligence missions progressing to long duration missions to develop resistance cadres.” Immediately, the State Department opposed the ambitious plan. William Sullivan, the United States Ambassador in Laos and a former student of Harriman, wanted to limit operations to ensure the nation was keeping faith with the 1962 Geneva Accords. Harriman supported Sullivan; in his mind, he did not want the war to escalate.<sup>87</sup> General John Singlaub would remark, in his 1991 biography that, “the ambassadors had a myopic view of the Indochina war. Whereas the North Vietnamese were definitely fighting on a theater scale, each American embassy tended to view enemy operations in parochial political terms.”<sup>88</sup>

The constraints were finalized in September. Teams could infiltrate Laos only by foot. Operations were limited to an area five kilometers deep along a fifty-mile section of the border. The number of operations was not limited but all requests had to pass through the embassy.<sup>89</sup> On October 18, 1965, the Studies and Observation Group’s first program, Shining Brass, was launched. The purpose of Shining Brass was to conduct limited-entry excursions into Laos to identify North Vietnamese base areas and concentrations and direct air strikes on them.<sup>90</sup> SOG recon teams consisting of three U.S. Special Forces

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Singlaub, 311.

<sup>89</sup> Schultz, 215.

<sup>90</sup> Plaster, 15.

soldiers and a complement of six to eight Montagnards, members of an indigenous Vietnamese tribe, conducted the missions. A seasoned Special Forces veteran otherwise known as a one-zero led the team. The two other Americans were the assistant team leader or the one-one and the team's radio operator or the one-two. Initially, MACVSOG scored numerous tactical and operational successes with minimal losses. Of these successes, perhaps most significant, was a deeper understanding of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 25.

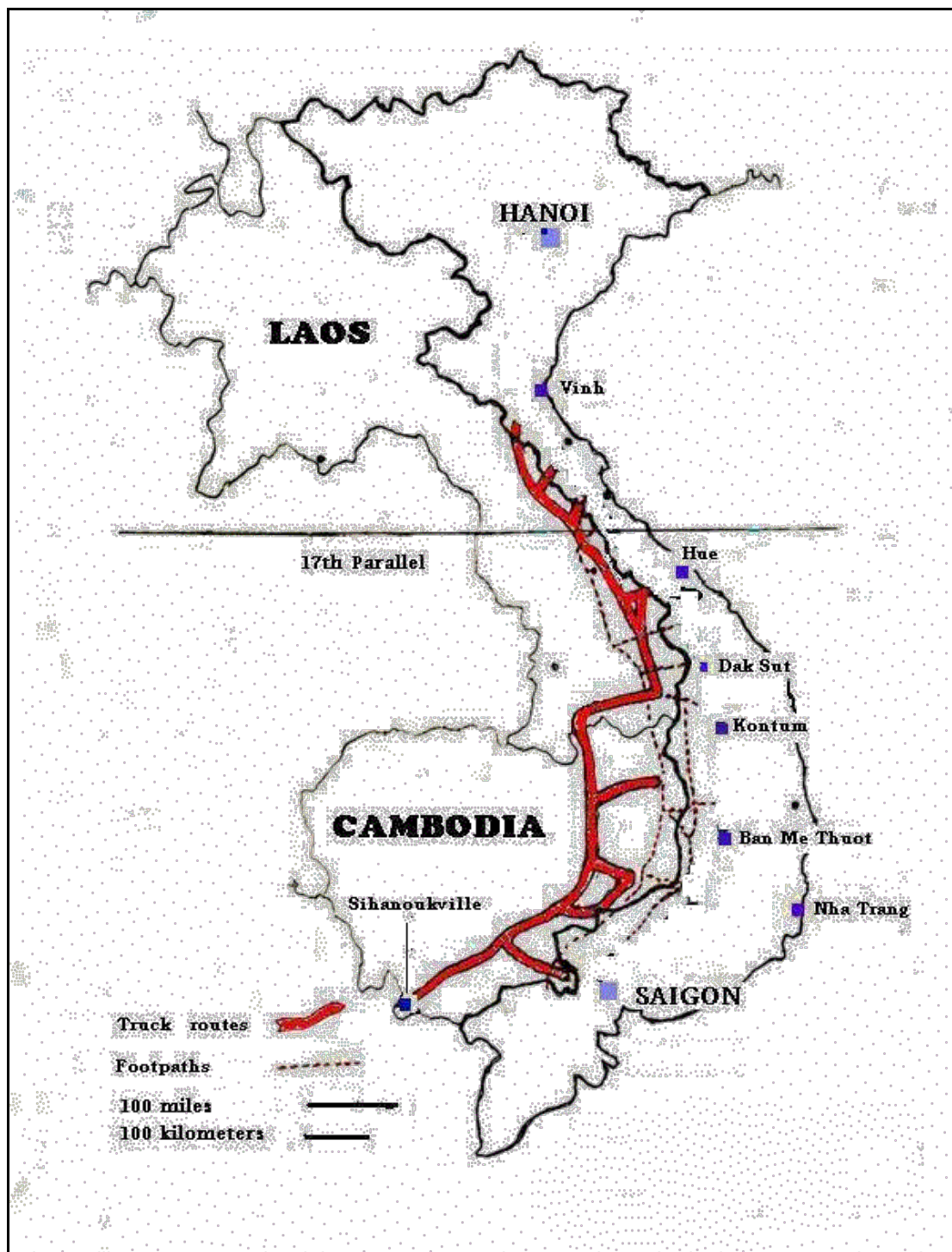


Figure 2. Ho Chi Minh Trail

Source: The Psywarrior, "Hochiminh Trail," accessed March 15, 2015, <http://www.psywarrior.com/HochiminhTrails4.gif>.

Due to Shining Brass, MAC-V leadership realized that the North Vietnamese were supplying its troops through a sophisticated, circulatory network of trails that extended from North Vietnam into Laos and southward to South Vietnam. By July of 1966, SOG's initial program had conducted forty-eight missions into Laos without a serious casualty.<sup>92</sup> The positive results of Shining Brass proved a need for MACVSOG. Yet, these initial achievements also demonstrated the paradox that was SOG. Due to the unit's accomplishments, the United States now had proof that North Vietnam was effectively using Laos and, as later learned, Cambodia as sanctuaries to fuel the insurgency in South Vietnam. However, due to the politics of the war, it would not reveal this publicly nor would it let the unit operate freely inside of these nations.

Over the next six and a half years, SOG continued to conduct a variety of covert, paramilitary actions under its five Op categories. Shining Brass became Prairie Fire in 1967. Operations under the code name Daniel Boone commenced inside of Cambodia in April of the same year. Throughout the course of the war, the United States never acknowledged the existence of the unit; it remained a secret asset of the National Security Council. Even when soldiers were recognized for valor, the United States claimed that the action occurred just inside of the South Vietnamese border. On one particular rescue mission otherwise known as a Bright Light, the obviously elated downed pilot was perplexed as to who these men in sterile units were. He was simply told to forget what he saw.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 49.

Yet, the bureaucracy never ceased to exist. Even though Harriman's fear of an expanding, out-of-control war was never realized, SOG's operations were often limited if not cancelled altogether. A prime example of these limitations is a project proposed in 1967. John Singlaub suggested sabotaging rice caches along the Ho Chi Minh Trail by spraying it with Bitrex, an odorless chemical that made the rice too bitter to swallow but resulted in no other serious side effects. Washington unequivocally denied stating that it amounted to "chemical warfare."<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Singlaub, 314.

## CHAPTER 4

### A CURRENT APPLICABILITY FOR THE MACVSOG MODEL?

In April of 2001, veterans of SOG gathered at Fort Bragg, NC for a ceremony in which the unit received the Presidential Unit Citation. In speaking to the Associated Press on that day, John Singlaub remarked, “I think that (the award) is long overdue, and I think that we have to give some thanks to CNN because the fiasco that they produced caused an investigation by the Department of Defense and others that found that we were not only not war criminals but, in fact, we had a collection of heroes that was not equaled.”<sup>95</sup> The former SOG chief was referring to a report by CNN in 1998 in which the news agency accused the unit of employing nerve gas against defectors. The operation to which the news outlet was referring, Operation Tailwind, was a SOG diversionary tactic designed to allow the Royal Lao Army an opportunity to attack the North Vietnamese. CNN claimed that the operation was simply an attempt by the United States to eradicate defectors located inside of a Laotian village. The fallout from the incendiary report sparked an investigation Department of Defense as well as an internal audit by CNN; both entities found the accusations to be baseless.

Regardless of CNN’s motivations, the story, nonetheless, provided a modern and relevant platform for its veterans to accomplish long fought goals—most important, to set the record straight on MACVSOG. That CNN was chasing alleged atrocities by SOG 25 years after its disbandment demonstrates the secretive nature of the unit. Even though the

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<sup>95</sup> Special Forces History, “SOG Presidential Unit Citation,” accessed March 3, 2015, [http://www.sfalx.com/h\\_sog\\_Presidential\\_Unit\\_Citation.htm](http://www.sfalx.com/h_sog_Presidential_Unit_Citation.htm).

government declassified numerous documents associated with SOG in the late 1980s, facts remain redacted as of this publication. The uniqueness of SOG begs the question as to if such a unit would have applicability in the present day. Originally tasked to conduct unconventional warfare operations aimed at destabilizing the regime in North Vietnam, SOG's mission morphed into an amalgamation of both UW and foreign internal defense.

It is hardly a secret that various units and organizations have, and continue, to execute similar operations as MACVSOG 40 years prior. (One need not look any further than the May 2011 raid on Osama Bin Laden's compound by Naval Special Operations for validation.) Yet, written at the unclassified level, this thesis is not able to explore the majority of these operations, at least, in-depth. Given these parameters, the goal of this chapter is to identify if, and under what circumstances, inside of the current environment, MACVSOG would have relevance. Alternatively, and perhaps, more succinctly, is to answer if is SOG the forerunner to today's clandestine units.

In order to do so, it is important to recall SOG's major objectives; maritime, air, psychological operations, intelligence and reconnaissance, and of those objectives, which, if any, proved successful. A viable argument could be made that each objective experienced success, at least to some degree. Yet, from a measure of effectiveness standpoint, by far, the two most successful aspects were reconnaissance and psychological warfare. Second, it is necessary to understand the reasons as to why SOG never achieved President Kennedy's intent. A microcosm of the execution of the Vietnam War, SOG's utilization was limited by not only political motivations and restrictions but also the failure to understand the entirety of the strategic and operational environment. Additionally, inside of the MACV command structure and the bureaucrats inside the

Beltway in Washington, DC, the concept of irregular warfare was not viewed as a viable option for the overall execution of the Vietnam War. Former SOG Chief John Singlaub, in his 1991 memoir, aptly remembers this bureaucratic stalemate in stating; “trying to run special-warfare operations on a theater level when U.S. policy stubbornly avoided fighting a theater war was a constant frustration.”<sup>96</sup>

To analyze whether this type of unit has validity in the current environment requires an understanding of the definition of unconventional warfare and why such operations were ineffective in Vietnam. At its establishment, SOG’s primary purpose was to conduct an irregular warfare campaign against an enemy, which was fueling an insurgency in a neighboring country. Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine of the Armed Forces*, defines irregular warfare as “a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population.”<sup>97</sup> It consists of any relevant DoD activity and operation such as counterterrorism; unconventional warfare; foreign internal defense; counterinsurgency; and stability operations.<sup>98</sup> Training Circular 18-01, *Special Forces Unconventional Warfare*, dated November 2010, defines unconventional warfare “as activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area.”

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<sup>96</sup> Singlaub, 310.

<sup>97</sup> Department of Defense, Joint Publication (JP) 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2013), 6.

<sup>98</sup> Department of Defense, Department of Defense Directive 3000.07, *Irregular Warfare* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2014), 1.



Training Circular 18-01 also outlines the seven phases of unconventional warfare. The first phase is preparation—the point at which the resistance conducts psychological preparation in order to unify the populace against an existing regime. As this research demonstrated, this is, perhaps, the most critical phase in the entire process. It was the inability to identify or establish a resistance in North Vietnam heavily contributed to SOGs ineffectiveness against North Vietnam. The next two phases, initial contact and infiltration, refers to the coordination between either a government-in-exile or a resistance force and the initial contact by special operation forces. Unfortunately, as the majority of viable candidates had already fled to South Vietnam, the United States reluctantly relied upon returning exiles to the north in a futile attempt to establish a resistance. Steps four (organization) and five (buildup) address the training and expansion of the resistance force. While the inserted exiles were reporting to the United States, the enemy already doubled those that survived; any perceived resistance simply did not exist. The final steps (employment and transition) refer to the successful mobilization of the insurgent elements and eventual termination of United States' efforts. MACVSOG did experience numerous tactical successes; yet, the organization was nonetheless a strategic failure as it failed to destabilize the government in North Vietnam.

The terms clandestine and covert have seemingly been used interchangeably throughout this essay. Yet, in today's doctrinal terms, these terms have unique meanings. A clandestine operation is, "an operation sponsored or conducted by governmental departments or agencies in such a way as to assure secrecy or concealment." Whereas a covert operation is defined as, "an operation that is so planned and executed as to conceal the identity of or permit plausible denial by the sponsor." Army Doctrine Reference

Publication 1-02 (Operational Terms and Graphics) differentiates the two terms in stating the following, “A clandestine operation differs from a covert operation in that emphasis is placed on concealment of the operation rather than on concealment of the identity of the sponsor.”<sup>99</sup> Yet, the publication further reasons that, “an activity may be both covert and clandestine and may focus equally on operational considerations and intelligence-related activities.”<sup>99</sup> While the terminology may seem trivial, in today’s technologically savvy environment the failure to execute missions per available authorities could have serious effects and-or consequences for an organization conducting such missions.

The SOG’s primary nemesis, at least in terms of its original mission set, was not the enemy but rather the restrictions placed upon its operations. Even as the United States’ spiraled towards full-scale commitment, the state department struggled with a false belief that it could contain the war by restricting operations against neighboring countries. Accordingly, Laos and Cambodia were initially off the board as was the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Yet even when access was granted to these neighboring nations, political desires prevented those full-scale operations necessary to disrupt the North Vietnamese regime. However, considering that, by definition, special operations forces are expected to react to operational changes inside of conflicts, the SOG model most certainly has relevance for today’s special operations environment.

In October of 2001, several unknown Caucasian males were photographed riding on horseback throughout northern Afghanistan. Unbeknownst at the time, these men were part of a detachment from the 5th Special Forces Group assigned to Fort Campbell,

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<sup>99</sup> Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 1-02, *Operational Terms and Graphics* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2015), 15.

Kentucky. Deployed shortly after the attacks on 9/11, their mission was clear—link up and establish contact with the Northern Alliance, the main resistance force inside of Afghanistan. Whereas their special operations predecessors in Vietnam found it extremely difficult to link up with a willing resistance force, the members of this unconventional warfare operation quickly tied into the Northern Alliance. Within several weeks, the task was accomplished; the Taliban regime had collapsed and its key leadership dispersed throughout the region. The accomplishments of the Horsemen of Afghanistan, nearly thirty years after SOG disbanded, is the textbook result that President Kennedy desired for the North Vietnam regime in 1961.

Special operation forces continued to experience an increased mission set throughout the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, as well as several other regions in which extremists were populated. Running the gamut from unconventional warfare to direct action missions, nothing seemed out of the realm of possibility for the nation's special operation forces. Yet, just as SOG experienced years earlier, not all assigned missions were best matched with the capabilities of these elite personnel. More often than not, the operations best suited for present day special operations forces were often mired in bureaucracy similar to the red tape SOG experienced forty years earlier.

Typically, the missions were capture and kill raids targeting low level individuals. Rarely, did these operations yield results commensurate with the unit's capabilities. While direct action missions are indeed a core activity for special operation forces, it is not a preferred activity for many SOF veterans. Rather these units are typically best suited for unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, and special reconnaissance; oddly enough the same type of missions for what SOG was created. These operations, in

a best-case scenario, involve SOF training indigenous personnel to execute the aforementioned activities.

The leadership tasked to execute these missions was, in most cases, long-time veterans of the SOF community. In fact, several of these individuals were alumnus of SOG. Ironically, the men who had witnessed first-hand the issues which marginalized SOG were now tasked to lead special operation forces into the War on Terror. These men had entered the special operations community at a time when such service was frowned upon; a home for misfits.<sup>100</sup> Now, the craft was expected to perform in an uncertain environment. Undoubtedly their experiences within SOG contributed to the execution of their assigned missions.

Retired Lieutenant General William Tangney, who in his position as the deputy commanding officer of SOCOM, referenced his experiences with SOG while discussing the capabilities of special operation forces during the early days of the War on Terror. During the interview with National Defense Magazine, Tangney stated, “When I came in, in Vietnam, we were kind of on a high, although we had nothing that really approaches the capability we have today. . . . It wasn’t until we suffered the failure in the desert, during the Iranian rescue operation in 1980, that sufficient attention began to be paid to this business.” SOG alumni continued to make positive contribution as recently as 2007. As an enlisted team leader for RT Viper, Eldon Bargewell received the Distinguished Service Cross for actions in combat. By 2006, as a major general, Bargewell served as the operations officer for the Multi-National Forces in Iraq. In between, Bargewell’s career led him to assignments within the Ranger Regiment, Delta Force, and United States

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<sup>100</sup> Schultz, 52.

Special Operations Command, where his experiences within SOG undoubtedly led to positive contributions towards developments within the special operations community.

The Studies and Observations Group undoubtedly had an impact on today's special operations community. Ranging from its alumni shaping modern-day special operations units to the furthered development of its techniques, tactics and procedures, the legacy of SOG continues to prevail in today's forces. As noted by Army Aviator Danny Kelly in his essay on SOG in 2004, "special operations aviation units routinely conduct selected SOG-type operations in the GWOT . . . the aviation close air support, assault, and extraction techniques developed by SOG have not changed much in almost thirty years. The primary difference is that modern equipment now makes it easier."<sup>101</sup> SOG operators also developed the concept of military freefall parachuting, commonly referred to as High Altitude, Low Opening or HALO.

Yet, this complicated legacy yields several questions in regards to the application of a similar, modern-day clandestine unit. First, how would a similar, present-day, organization overcome the bureaucratic nightmare MACVSOG experienced to execute the necessary tactical and operational missions in support of an overarching strategic goal? Similar to what SOG experienced nearly 50 years ago, the will of the American populace, most notably that of the nation's elected officials, would certainly have a tremendous impact on the successful application of a modern-day unconventional warfare mission. Whereas the problem set in Afghanistan was easy—the Taliban was harboring the co-conspirators of 9/11, an underlying national security problem may not be so simple to

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<sup>101</sup> Danny Kelly, "The Misuse of SOG" (Master's Thesis, Command and General Staff College, 2005), 68.

articulate the necessity for clandestine operations to our elected officials. There are numerous rogue nations across the globe; yet, it is safe to assume that unconventional warfare by the United States is not on the horizon for many, if any, of these countries. The potential for an operation to go awry, perhaps the deaths of innocent individuals or the eruption of an international incident, will create pause amongst even the most hawkish of politicians. As noted by Schultz, “presidents have worried about employing clandestine methods, fearing the potential political fallout if the operations were exposed.”<sup>102</sup> Additionally, the removal of rogue regimes may not always be conducive to United States’ interests. The struggle to stabilize Iraq following the removal of Saddam Hussein demonstrates that replacing despots does not always yield positive results.

Second, and predicated upon the resolution of the previous issue, what would the organization and disposition of a modern-day Studies and Observation Group be? Throughout its existence, an Army Colonel led SOG. This leadership would most likely continue today as the Army leads the preponderance of special operation missions. Yet, it is realistic that such a unit would have joint capacity just as SOG enjoyed five decades ago. Regardless of its leadership structure, a clandestine organization operating into today’s environment would most certainly require assets from amongst each service component, as well as various interagency, for it to have operational success. SOG’s Operational organization tended to create operational and tactical delays as the egos of each service component often prevailed over necessity of resources and equipment.<sup>103</sup> A modern-day clandestine organization would be best suited to organize into operational

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<sup>102</sup> Schultz, 333.

<sup>103</sup> Singlaub, 312.

units designed to achieve specific-objectives (i.e. deny and or deter membership in trans-regional terrorist organizations). This alignment would, with any luck, prevent the issues that SOG faced during its existence.

The limits of special operation forces were never tested during these years. Whereas SOG continued to push the envelope with numerous unconventional tactics, today's modern day special operation forces often executed missions best suited for conventional forces. Perhaps the best example of a SOG-tactic capable of utilization in today's environment is Operation Eldest Son; later changed to Bean Pole to the operation's sensitive nature<sup>104</sup>. The brainchild of SOG Chief John Singlaub, Eldest Son entailed recon teams sabotaging enemy ammunition caches. The sabotage usually involved only a few rounds. Yet its impact was certainly measurable. As Singlaub would later state Eldest Son mitigated the caches of ammunition in and around the Ho Chi Minh Trail, "I was frustrated by the fact we couldn't airlift the ammunition discovered along the Trail."<sup>105</sup> Eldest Son provided an opportunity for paranoia to permeate amongst North Vietnamese Forces. Suddenly, NVA soldiers were questioning the reliability of their ammunition. This type of sabotage would certainly wreak havoc amongst any force, modern or past. It would have undoubtedly proven useful in Iraq where, at the height of the insurgency, combatants mostly relied upon ammunition and explosives found on the local economy. This type of psychological warfare would certainly work towards crushing an enemy's morale. Yet the thought of employing such trickery in the modern

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<sup>104</sup> Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff Publication, *MACSOG Documentation Study—Psychological Operations* (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs, 1970), 91.

<sup>105</sup> Plaster, 106.

environment is nearly impossible due to the proliferation of the media on the battlefield and the subsequent fallout should the operation be uncovered.

It is easy to state that SOG would have relevance in the current environment. A review of its contributions, in both personnel and innovation, demonstrate that SOG has had a tremendous impact on today's special operation forces. Yet, the success of any modern-day, SOG-like organization would be incumbent upon the amount of bureaucratic interference it received. Without the authorities to conduct operations such as Eldest Son or the ability to operate inside of politically sensitive areas, this present day unit would experience results similar to SOG's legacy.

### Conclusion

During his address at West Point in 1962, President Kennedy cautioned the cadets as to "another type of war," warfare, which "preys on economic unrest and ethnic conflicts." Kennedy further stated that this new form of warfare required "a whole new kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of force, and therefore a new and wholly different kind of military training." This may have been the first time Kennedy spoke of such a threat in a public forum. Yet, the necessity for the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam-Studies and Observation Group was not born on that June 6 morning. Rather, the need for SOG was an amalgamation of issues, which developed in the decade before Kennedy made his speech at West Point.

At the start of this research, it was expected that the preponderance of the effort needed to identify SOG's necessity would focus primarily on the decisions of the Kennedy Administration during the nation's early involvement in Vietnam. Yet, the exploration quickly focused before Kennedy and to his predecessor, President Dwight D.



Eisenhower. It was during this decade that an indecisive policy towards Indochina as well as a reliance on the theory of massive retaliation greatly contributed to the nation's eventual full-scale involvement in Vietnam.

Eisenhower's allegiance to nuclear weapons arguably stymied the power of the Soviet Union, and kept communism from spreading beyond its post-World War II boundaries. However, it did little to solve America's Indochina problem. Whereas the theory of massive retaliation was plausible enough to keep the Soviet Union at bay, it did not deter North Vietnam from fostering an insurgency inside of South Vietnam. The main issue with the theory of massive retaliation is that it is not symmetrical. As Kennedy would later state, opposing nations did not believe that the United States would use atomic weapons to prevent the spread of communism within Southeast Asia. The future president actually argued the opposite. In his view, the policy invited communist expansion within the region.<sup>106</sup>

By the time John F. Kennedy assumed the presidency in January 1961, the situation in Vietnam had devolved to the point where, realistically, increased intervention by the United States was almost inevitable. Yet, the new president possessed, at least in his mind, a viable strategy to tackle the growing insurgency within South Vietnam. Rather than continue to confront the insurgency in the south, Kennedy believed that the real solution lay in the north. The president outlined a campaign of unconventional warfare designed to delegitimize the communist regime in Hanoi would deflate the growing insurgency in South Vietnam. This belief developed in part because of his predecessor and a foreign policy that he saw as foolhardy. As Kennedy alluded to, did

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<sup>106</sup> Schultz, 5.

anyone honestly believe the United States would drop a nuclear bomb in an insignificant area of the globe to simply deter the aggression of communism?<sup>107</sup>

While Kennedy's plan was indeed symmetrical to the conflict, it, nonetheless, lacked feasibility. The president's goal to recruit "guerrillas to operate in the North," was not attainable.<sup>108</sup> The "guerrillas" that Kennedy wanted to recruit had left the North several years earlier. The few individuals who were willing to return were quickly spotted and either doubled as spies or simply killed. Without a viable resistance to create distrust amongst the populace, Kennedy's desire to destabilize the communist regime was not feasible. Kennedy's original intent to disrupt the communist regime in Hanoi may have had viability had the plan focused on the insurgency's center of gravity—the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Unfortunately, significance of the trail, which was located inside the "neutral borders" of Laos and Cambodia, was overlooked. Ultimately, Kennedy's concept never bore the fruit that he thought possible. This was due in part to the non-existence of a viable resistance force as well as bureaucratic infighting and other political limitations. Both of which drastically mitigated the potential capabilities of SOG.

The secondary and tertiary questions of this project sought to answer:

1. Did the political environment of the 1950s and 1960s contribute to not only the necessity for, but, also the lack of strategic and operational effectiveness of MACVSOG?
2. Is MACVSOG a model for current clandestine operations?

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Conboy and Andrade, 35.

As detailed, the election of John F. Kennedy as president seemingly brought a new approach to the nation's foreign policy. Kennedy's decision to utilize guerilla warfare in Vietnam was intended to provide the symmetrical response that he believed lacking in the previous administration. To execute the plan, the young president filled key positions within his administration with individuals of a similar mindset. Yet even as Kennedy doggedly tried to initiate his plan, bureaucratic infighting and competing egos plagued SOG from the start.

In 1962, in an attempt to further empower his ambassadors, Kennedy issued notification that both the Department of Defense and CIA were subordinate to an ambassador of a particular nation.<sup>109</sup> Kennedy's unwitting decision only worked to limit the strategic and operational impact of SOG. Instead of having unfettered access to conduct operations against the Ho Chi Minh Trail, SOG was required to seek permission from the respective ambassadors of Laos and Cambodia. William Sullivan harbored the belief that the war spill into his nation if he allowed operations inside of Laos. The irony, of course, is that North Vietnam was exploiting this decision by feeding the insurgency and, ultimately, conventional war in the south. Even when access was granted, limitation usually allowed the reconnaissance teams to travel within 50 kilometers of the border. This type of myopic thinking prevented SOG from being able to execute a detailed operational plan which would accomplish Kennedy's original goal to destabilize the communist regime in Hanoi.

Despite its lack of strategic and operational success, SOG's unique structure begged the question as to if a similar organizational structure has relevance in today's

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<sup>109</sup> Schultz, 214.

environment. Considering that SOG's structure was based off of a template for the OSS, a World War II era organization, it is not unrealistic to think that a modern-day clandestine organization could, in-turn, reachback to SOG's structure. This is due in part that for all of its limitations SOG nonetheless employed tactics that would undoubtedly have relevance today. Examples such as Eldest Son, the proposed utilization of Bitrex within enemy rice caches, and even cross-border reconnaissance missions are only a few of the activities that a clandestine organization could utilize on a modern battlefield. Yet, such an organization would only be successful if it did not have to overcome the bureaucratic obstacles that SOG did forty years prior.

In conducting research to determine the necessity of SOG, several other questions for future exploration developed. It would be interesting to explore the impact an unrestrained clandestine organization could achieve on an enemy. Another possible question is the interaction, if any, between Dwight Eisenhower and John Kennedy, most specifically, a detailed compare and contrast of each other's foreign policy.

Regardless of the bureaucracy that limited the unit operationally, SOG nonetheless left a significant tactical legacy. By the time SOG was disbanded, the organization had forged a legacy unequaled in U.S. military history. It lost in excess of 300 men. Twelve of its members received the Congressional Medal of Honor for gallantry in combat; several more received the Distinguished Service Cross. For all it accomplished, however, SOG was unable to achieve President Kennedy's original desire to destabilize the communist regime in North Vietnam.

## GLOSSARY

Bright Light. The code name for POW and evadee rescue attempts inside of Cambodia and Laos.

Chief SOG. Official title for the unit's commander. A United States Army colonel held the position throughout the unit's existence; the failure to not emplace a general in the position provided difficulty in interacting with Military Assistance Command-Vietnam leadership.

Clandestine Operation. An operation sponsored or conducted by governmental departments or agencies in such a way as to assure secrecy or concealment.

Covert Operation. An operation that is so planned and executed as to conceal the identity of or permit plausible denial by the sponsor.

Daniel Boone. SOG code-name for its Cambodian operations area.

HALO (High Altitude, Low Opening). Military skydiving.

Ho Chi Minh Trail. A camouflaged highway network in the jungled southeastern Laos corridor occupied by the NVA in which flowed supplies and soldiers for the insurgency in South Vietnam.

Montagnards. South Vietnamese hill tribesmen related ethnically to Polynesians; heavily recruited as mercenaries for SOG and other special forces units. Commonly referred to as Yards.

National Command Authority. The persons or officeholders (or their duly deputized alternates or successors) that have the legal power to direct military activities.

Operation Switchback. Designation for the CIA's 1963 transfer of covert, paramilitary activities to the military.

One-One. Code name for a SOG recon team assistant team leader.

One-Two. Code name for a SOG recon team radio operator.

One-Zero. Code name for a SOG recon team leader.

OPS-33. Numerical designation for SOG's Psychological Studies Branch, which supervised its psychological warfare efforts.

OPS-34. Numerical designation for SOG's resistance and intelligence operations against North Vietnam.

OPS-35. Numerical designation for SOG's reconnaissance teams.

Office of Strategic Services (OSS). America's World War II precursor to the CIA, responsible for espionage, sabotage, and covert operations.

Prairie Fire. SOG code name for Laotian operations area; replaced Shining Brass in 1967.

Project Eldest Son. A SOG propaganda project that inserted booby-trapped Chinese ammunition into NVA stockpiles; intended to foster doubt amongst NVA soldiers in regards to the quality of their supplies.

Recon Team. A recon team typically consisted of three U.S. personnel and nine Montagnards. Teams were named for either a state or snake as in RT Idaho or RT Viper.

Salem House. SOG code name for its Cambodian operations area; replaced Daniel Boone.

Shining Brass. SOG code name for Laotian operations area.

Viet Cong. Military units of indigenous South Vietnamese Communists; essentially ceased to exist after 1968 Tet Offensive.

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