CORDS/Phoenix
Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam for the Future

Dale Andrade and Lieutenant Colonel James H. Willbanks, U.S. Army, Retired, Ph.D.

AS THE UNITED STATES ends its third year of war in Iraq, the military continues to search for ways to deal with an insurgency that shows no sign of waning. The specter of Vietnam looms large, and the media has been filled with comparisons between the current situation and the "quagmire" of the Vietnam War. The differences between the two conflicts are legion, but observers can learn lessons from the Vietnam experience—if they are judicious in their search.

For better or worse, Vietnam is the most prominent historical example of American counterinsurgency (COIN)—and the longest—so it would be a mistake to reject it because of its admittedly complex and controversial nature. An examination of the pacification effort in Vietnam and the evolution of the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program provides useful insights into the imperatives of a viable COIN program.

Twin Threats: Main Forces and Guerrillas

In Vietnam, the U.S. military faced arguably the most complex, effective, lethal insurgency in history. The enemy was no rag-tag band lurking in the jungle, but rather a combination of guerrillas, political cadre, and modern main-force units capable of standing toe to toe with the U.S. military. Any one of these would have been significant, but in combination they presented a formidable threat.

When U.S. ground forces intervened in South Vietnam in 1965, estimates of enemy guerrilla and Communist Party front strength stood at more than 300,000. In addition, Viet Cong (VC) and North Vietnamese main forces numbered almost 230,000—and that number grew to 685,000 by the time of the Communist victory in 1975. These main

forces were organized into regiments and divisions, and between 1965 and 1968 the enemy emphasized main-force war rather than insurgency.[1] During the war the Communists launched three conventional offensives: the 1968 Tet Offensive, the 1972 Easter Offensive, and the final offensive in 1975. All were major campaigns by any standard. Clearly, the insurgency and the enemy main forces had to be dealt with simultaneously.

When faced with this sort of dual threat, what is the correct response? Should military planners gear up for a counterinsurgency, or should they fight a war aimed at destroying the enemy main forces? General William C. Westmoreland, the overall commander of U.S. troops under the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), faced just such a question. Westmoreland knew very well that South Vietnam faced twin threats, but he believed

Unidentified U.S. Army adviser and child in the III Corps area north of Saigon, date unknown.

that the enemy main forces were the most immediate problem. By way of analogy, he referred to them as "bully boys with crowbars" who were trying to tear down the house that was South Vietnam. The guerrillas and political cadre, which he called "termites," could also destroy the house, but it would take them much longer to do it. So while he clearly understood the need for pacification, his attention turned first to the bully boys, whom he wanted to drive away from the "house."[2]

Westmoreland's strategy of chasing the enemy and forcing him to fight or run (also known as search and destroy) worked in the sense that it saved South Vietnam from immediate defeat, pushed the enemy main forces from the populated areas, and temporarily took the initiative away from the Communists. South Vietnam was safe in the short term, and Communist histories make clear that the intervention by U.S. troops was a severe blow to their plans.[3] In the end, however, there were not enough U.S. troops to do much more than produce a stalemate. The Communists continued to infiltrate main-force units from neighboring Laos and Cambodia, and they split their forces into smaller bands that could avoid combat if the battlefield situation was not in their favor.

The enemy continued to build his strength, and in January 1968 launched the Tet Offensive, a clear indication that the Americans could never really hold the initiative. Although attacks on almost every major city and town were pushed back and as many as 50,000 enemy soldiers and guerrillas were killed, the offensive proved to be a political victory for the Communists, who showed they could mount major attacks no matter what the Americans tried to do.

Counterinsurgency, or pacification as it was more commonly known in Vietnam, was forced to deal with the twin threats of enemy main forces and a constant guerrilla presence in the rural areas. MACV campaign plans for the first 2 years of the war show that pacification was as important as military operations, but battlefield realities forced

CORDS advisers with hamlet chief in Binh Dinh Province, 1969.

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it into the background. In January 1966, Westmoreland wrote, "It is abundantly clear that all political, military, economic, and security (police) programs must be completely integrated in order to attain any kind of success in a country which has been greatly weakened by prolonged conflict."[4] He looked to the enemy for an example of how this was done. "The Viet Cong, themselves, have learned this lesson well. Their integration of efforts surpasses ours by a large order of magnitude."[5]

Westmoreland knew that he lacked the forces to wage both a war of attrition and one of pacification, so he chose the former. The argument over whether or not this was the right course of action will likely go on forever, but undoubtedly the shape of the war changed dramatically after the Tet Offensive. The enemy was badly mauled and, despite the political gains made, militarily lost the initiative for quite some time.

As the Communists withdrew from the Tet battlefields to lick their wounds, the ensuing lull offered a more propitious environment for a pacification plan. Westmoreland never had such an advantage. When American ground forces entered the war in 1965, they faced an enemy on the offensive, but in June 1968 the new MACV commander, General Creighton W. Abrams, confronted an enemy on the ropes. Abrams plainly recognized his advantage and implemented a clear-and-hold strategy aimed

at moving into rural enclaves formerly dominated by the VC. A Communist history of the war notes that "[b]ecause we did not fully appreciate the new enemy [allied] schemes and the changes the enemy made in the conduct of the war and because we underestimated the enemy's capabilities and the strength of his counterattack, when the United States and its puppets [the South Vietnamese] began to carry out their 'clear and hold' strategy our battle-fronts were too slow in shifting over to attacking the 'pacification' program. . . ."[6]

To cope with the new battlefield situation, the Communist Politburo in Hanoi revised its strategy in a document known as COSVN Resolution 9.[7] North Vietnam considered its Tet "general offensive and uprising" to be a great success that "forced the enemy [U.S. and South Vietnam] to . . . sink deeper into a defensive and deadlocked position," but admitted that new techniques were required to force the Americans out of the war.[8] Rather than fight U.S. troops directly, Resolution 9 dictated that guerrilla forces would disperse and concentrate their efforts on attacking pacification. The main objective was to outlast the allies: "We should fight to force the Americans to withdraw troops, cause the collapse of the puppets and gain the decisive victory. . . ."[9] Implicit in the plan was a return to more traditional hit-and-run guerrilla tactics with less emphasis on big battles.

Between late 1968 and 1971 the battle for hearts and minds went into full swing, and the government made rapid advances in pacifying the countryside. Historians and military analysts still debate the merits of Abrams's strategy vis-à-vis Westmoreland's, but the bottom line is that the two generals faced very different conflicts.[10] There was no "correct" way to fight; the war was a fluid affair with the enemy controlling the operational tempo most of the time. The successes in pacification during Abrams' command owed a lot to the severely weakened status of the VC after the 1968 Tet Offensive. Even so, with U.S. President Richard Nixon's order to "Vietnamize" the war, the South Vietnamese would be left to cope with both the enemy main forces and the Communist insurgency in the villages. Pacification alone simply could not do the job.

Essentials of Counterinsurgency

Insurgencies are complex affairs that defy all attempts at seeking a common denominator. The counterinsurgent's strategy will depend on how he is organized and how he chooses to fight. The enemy is never static, and every situation will differ from the next. Still, when an insurgency is stripped to its essentials, there are some basic points that are crucial to any COIN effort.

Security forces must be prepared to use armed force to keep the enemy away from the population. To conclude that large-scale operations play no role in COIN is a mistake. The big-unit war of 1965 and 1966 robbed the Communists of a quick victory and allowed the South Vietnamese breathing space in which to begin pacifying the countryside. Without the security generated by military force, pacification cannot even be attempted.

At the same time, government forces must target the insurgents' ability to live and operate freely among the population. Given time, insurgents will try to create a clandestine political structure to replace the government presence in the villages. Such an infrastructure is the real basis of guerrilla control during any insurgency; it is the thread that ties the entire insurgency together. Without a widespread political presence, guerrillas cannot make many gains, and those they do make cannot be reinforced. Any COIN effort must specifically target the insurgent infrastructure if it is to win the war.

These objectives—providing security for the people and targeting the insurgent infrastructure—form the basis of a credible government campaign to win hearts and minds. Programs aimed at bringing a better quality of life to the population, including things like land reform, medical care, schools, and agricultural assistance, are crucial if the government is to offer a viable alternative to the insurgents. The reality, however, is that nothing can be accomplished without first establishing some semblance of security.

Key to the entire strategy is the integration of all efforts toward a single goal. This sounds obvious, but it rarely occurs. In most historical COIN efforts, military forces concentrated on warfighting objectives, leaving the job of building schools and clinics, establishing power grids, and bolstering local government (popularly referred to today as nationbuilding) to civilian agencies. The reality is that neither mission is more important than the other, and failure to recognize this can be fatal. Virtually all COIN plans claim they integrate the two: The

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CORDS adviser, Tay Ninh Province, 1969.

(USAID), the U.S. Information Service, and the U.S. Department of State were the most important. Each agency developed its own program and coordinated it through the American embassy. On the military side, the rapid expansion of troop strength meant a corresponding increase in the number of advisers. By early 1966, military advisory teams worked in all of South Vietnam's 44 provinces and most of its 243 districts. The extent of the military's presence in the countryside made it harder for the civilian-run pacification program to cope—a situation made worse because there was no formal system combining the two efforts.

In the spring of 1966, President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration turned its attention toward pacification in an attempt to make the existing arrangement work. Official trips to South Vietnam as well as studies by independent observers claimed there was little coordination between civilian agencies. Most concluded that the entire system needed a drastic overhaul. Johnson took a personal interest in pacification, bringing the weight of his office to the search for a better way to run the "other war," as he called pacification. American ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge received written authority from the president to "exercise full responsibility" over the entire advisory effort in Vietnam, using "the degree of command and control that you consider appropriate."[11]

It was not enough. Westmoreland was cooperative, yet the civilian and military missions simply did not mesh. After a trip to South Vietnam in November 1965, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara told Westmoreland, "I don't think we have done a thing we can point to that has been effective in five years. I ask you to show me one area in this country . . . that we have pacified."[12]

McNamara's observation prompted quick action. In January 1966, representatives from Washington agencies concerned with the conduct of the war met with representatives from the U.S. mission in Saigon at a conference in Virginia. During the ensuing discussion, participants acknowledged that

Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan and the defunct Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq were attempts to combine and coordinate civilian and military agencies, although neither really accomplished its objective. In this respect, the development of the CORDS program during the Vietnam War offers a good example of how to establish a chain of command incorporating civilian and military agencies into a focused effort.

Foundation for Successful Pacification

During the early 1960s, the American advisory effort in Vietnam aimed at thwarting Communist influence in the countryside. The attempt failed for many reasons, but one of the most profound was the South Vietnamese Government's inability to extend security to the country's countless villages and hamlets. This failure was, of course, the main factor leading to the introduction of American ground forces and the subsequent rapid expansion of U.S. military manpower in 1965. (U.S. troop strength grew from 23,300 in late 1964 to 184,300 one year later). The huge increase in troop strength exacerbated the already tenuous relationship between the military mission and pacification. As a result, many officials argued that the latter was being neglected.

In early 1965, the U.S. side of pacification consisted of several civilian agencies, of which the CIA, the U.S. Agency for International Development

Robert Komer (right), with William Colby (center) at MACV Headquarters, date unknown.

simply relying on the ambassador and the MACV commander to "work things out" would not ensure pacification cooperation. A single civil-military focus on pacification was needed; however, the conference ended without a concrete resolution.[13]

Although Johnson was displeased by slow progress and foot dragging, the embassy in Saigon continued to resist any changes that would take away its authority over pacification. Then, at a summit held in Honolulu in February 1966 with South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu and Premier Nguyen Cao Ky, Johnson pushed an agenda that tasked the South Vietnamese Army with area security, allowing the U.S. military to concentrate mostly on seeking out enemy main forces. Johnson also demanded greater American coordination in the pacification effort and called for a single manager to head the entire program. In April he assigned Robert W. Komer, a trusted member of the National Security Council, the task of coming up with a solution. Johnson gave Komer a strong mandate that included unrestrained access to the White House—a key asset that was put in writing. That authority gave Komer the clout he needed to bring recalcitrant officials into line.[14]

Other steps followed in quick succession. In August 1966 Komer authored a paper titled "Giving a New Thrust to Pacification: Analysis, Concept, and Management," in which he broke the pacification problem into three parts and argued that no single part could work by itself.[15] The first part, not surprisingly, was security—keeping the main forces away from the population. In the second part he advocated breaking the Communists' hold on the people with anti-infrastructure operations and programs designed to win back popular support. The third part stressed the concept of mass; in other words, pacification had to be large-scale. Only with a truly massive effort could a turnaround be achieved, and that was what Johnson required if he was to maintain public support for the war.

It was Westmoreland himself, however, who brought the issue to the forefront. Contrary to popular belief, the MACV commander understood the need for pacification and, like a good politician, figured it would be better to have the assignment under his control than outside of it. On 6 October 1966, despite objections from his staff, he told Komer: "I'm not asking for the responsibility, but I believe that my headquarters could take it in stride and perhaps carry out this important function more economically and efficiently than the present complex arrangement."[16]

Komer lobbied McNamara, arguing that with 90 percent of the resources, it was "obvious" that only the military "had the clout" to get the job done. Komer believed that the U.S. Defense Department (DOD) was "far stronger behind pacification" than the Department of State and was "infinitely more dynamic and influential."[17]

Now the DOD was on board, but the civilian agencies uniformly opposed the plan. As a compromise, in November 1966 the Office of Civil Operations (OCO) was formed, with Deputy Ambassador William Porter in charge. The OCO combined civilian agencies under one chain of command, but failed to bring the military into it. The entire plan was doomed from the start.

The OCO was really no different from the old way of doing business because it kept the civilian and military chains of command separate. Johnson was deeply dissatisfied. So in June 1966 Komer went to Vietnam to assess the situation. He wrote that the U.S. Embassy "needs to strengthen its

own machinery" for pacification. Komer met with Westmoreland, and the two agreed on the need for a single manager. "My problem is not with Westy, but the reluctant civilian side," Komer told the president.[18]

The Birth of CORDS

In March 1967, Johnson convened a meeting on Guam and made it clear that OCO was dead and that Komer's plan for a single manager would be implemented. Only the paperwork remained, and less than 2 months later, on 9 May 1967, National Security Action Memorandum 362, "Responsibility for U.S. Role in Pacification (Revolutionary Development)," established Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, or CORDS.[19] The new system unambiguously placed the military in charge of pacification. As MACV commander, Westmoreland would have three deputies, one of them a civilian with three-star-equivalent rank in charge of pacification, and there would be a single chain of command. Komer took the post of Deputy for CORDS, which placed him alongside the Deputy MACV commander, Abrams. Below that, various other civilians and civilian agencies were integrated into the military hierarchy, including an assistant chief of staff for CORDS positioned alongside the traditional military staff. For the first time, civilians were embedded within a wartime command and put in charge of military personnel and resources. CORDS went into effect immediately and brought with it a new urgency oriented toward making pacification work in the countryside.[20] (See figure 1.)

The new organization did not solve all problems immediately, and it was not always smooth sailing. At first Komer attempted to gather as much power as possible within his office, but Westmoreland made it clear that his military deputies were more powerful and performed a broad range of duties, while Komer had authority only over pacification. In addition, Westmoreland quashed Komer's direct access to the White House, rightly insisting that the chain of command be followed. Westmoreland naturally kept a close watch over CORDS, occasionally prompting Komer to complain that he was not yet sure that he had Westmoreland's "own full trust and confidence."[21] Their disagreements were few, however, and the relationship between the MACV commander and
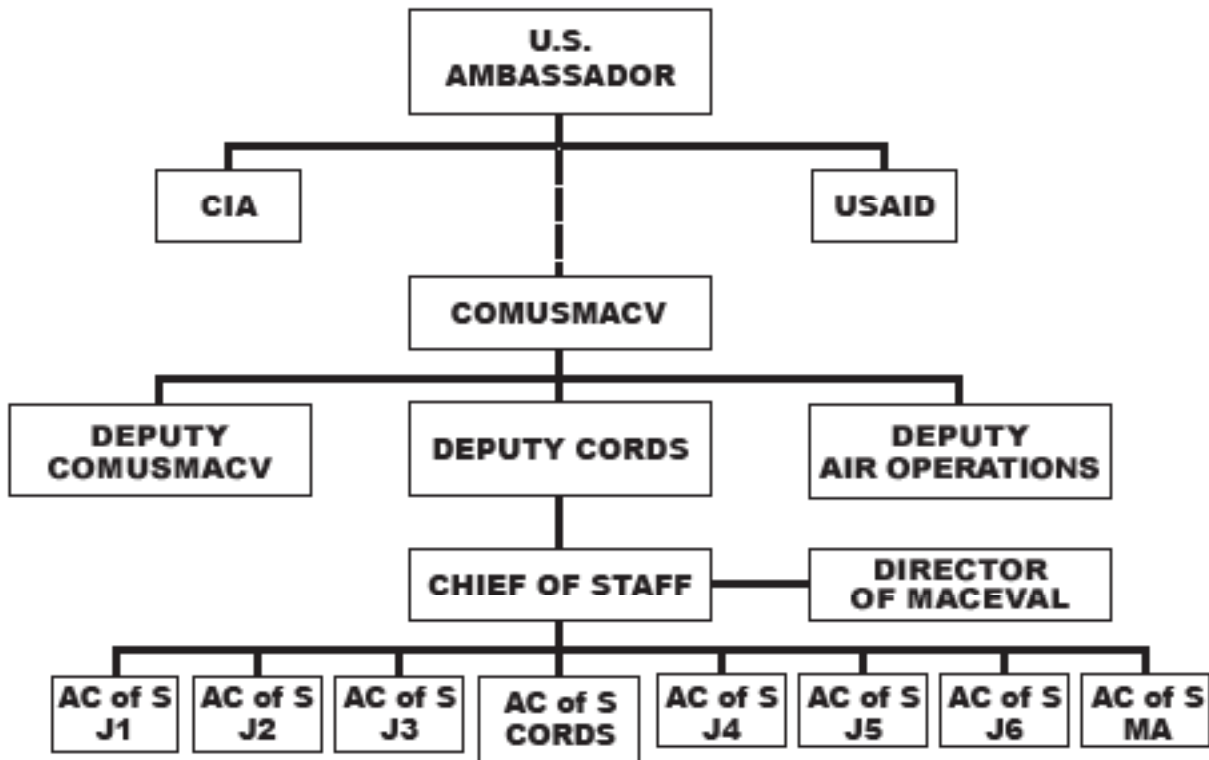
Source: Thomas W. Scoville, *Reorganizing for Pacification Support* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1991).

Figure 1. Structure of U.S. mission showing position of CORDS, May 1967.
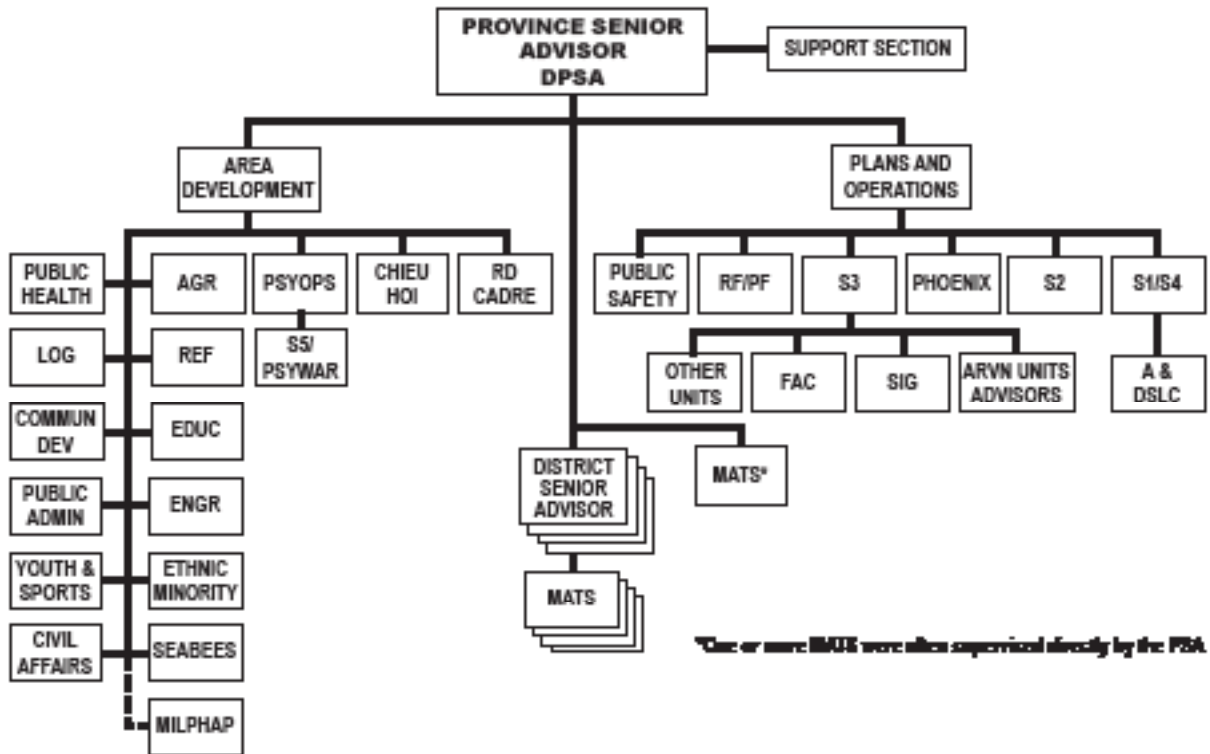
Figure 2. Organization of the CORDS team at province level.

his new deputy became close and respectful, which started the new program on the right track.

Time was the crucial ingredient, and eventually Komer's assertive personality and Westmoreland's increasing trust in his new civilian subordinates smoothed over many potential problems. According to one study, "[a] combination of Westmoreland's flexibility and Komer's ability to capitalize on it through the absence of an intervening layer of command permitted Komer to run an unusual, innovative program within what otherwise might have been the overly strict confines of a military staff."[22]

With the new organization, almost all pacification programs eventually came under CORDS. From USAID, CORDS took control of "new life development" (the catch-all term for an attempt to improve government responsiveness to villagers' needs), refugees, National Police, and the Chieu Hoi program (the "Open Arms" campaign to encourage Communist personnel in South Vietnam to defect). The CIA's Rural Development cadre, MACV's civic action and civil affairs, and the Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office's field psychological operations also fell under the CORDS aegis. CORDS assumed responsibility for reports, evaluations, and field inspections from all agencies.[23]

CORDS organization. At corps level, the CORDS organization was modeled on that of CORDS at the MACV headquarters. (See figure 2.) The U.S. military senior adviser, usually a three-star general who also served as the commander of U.S. forces in the region, had a deputy for CORDS (DepCORDS), usually a civilian. The DepCORDS was responsible for supervising military and civilian plans in support of the South Vietnamese pacification program within the corps area.[24]

Province advisory teams in the corps area of responsibility reported directly to the regional DepCORDS. Each of the 44 provinces in South Vietnam was headed by a province chief, usually a South Vietnamese Army or Marine colonel, who supervised the provincial government apparatus and commanded the provincial militia as well as Regional Forces and Popular Forces (RF/PF).

The province advisory teams helped the province chiefs administer the pacification program. The

Former Viet Cong makes radio appeal calling former comrades to join the Chieu Hoi ("Open Arms" returnee) program.

health and administration, civil affairs, education, agriculture, psychological operations, and logistics. The other part managed military issues. It helped the province staff prepare plans and direct security operations by the territorial forces and associated support within the province.

The province chief exercised authority through district chiefs, and the province senior adviser supervised district senior advisers, each of whom had a staff of about eight members (the actual size depending on the particular situation in a district). District-level advisory teams helped the district chief with civil-military aspects of the pacification and rural development programs. Also, the district team (and/or assigned mobile assistance training teams) advised and trained the RF/PF located in the district. All members of the province team were advisers; they worked closely with the province chief and his staff, providing advice and assistance, and coordinating U.S. support.

province chief's American counterpart was the province senior adviser, who was either military or civilian, depending on the security situation of the respective province. The province senior adviser and his staff were responsible for advising the province chief about civil-military aspects of the South Vietnamese pacification and development programs.

The province senior adviser's staff, composed of both U.S. military and civilian personnel, was divided into two parts. The first part handled area and community development, including public

CORDS gains muscle. Sheer numbers, made possible by the military's involvement, made CORDS more effective than earlier pacification efforts. In early 1966, about 1,000 U.S. advisers were involved in pacification; by September 1969—the highpoint of the pacification effort in terms of total manpower—7,601 advisers were assigned to province and district pacification teams. Of those, 6,464 were military, and 95 percent of those came from the Army.[25]

CORDS' ability to bring manpower, money, and supplies to the countryside where they were needed was impressive. Some statistics illustrate the point: Between 1966 and 1970, money spent on pacification and economic programs rose from $582 million to $1.5 billion. Advice and aid to the South Vietnamese National Police allowed total police paramilitary strength to climb from 60,000 in 1967 to more than 120,000 in 1971. Aid to the RF/PF grew from a paltry $300,000 per year in 1966 to over $1.5 million annually by 1971, enabling total strength to increase by more than

RF/PF adviser and district chief inspect troops in Gia Dinh Province, 1969.

50 percent. By 1971 total territorial militia strength was around 500,000—about 50 percent of overall South Vietnamese military strength. Advisory numbers increased correspondingly: In 1967 there were 108 U.S. advisers attached to the militia; in 1969 there were 2,243."[26] The enemy saw this buildup as a serious threat to his control in the countryside, and Communist sources consistently cited the need to attack as central to their strategy.[27]

What effect did all of this have on the security situation? Numbers alone do not make for successful pacification, but they are a big step in the right direction. By placing so much manpower in the villages, the allies were able to confront the guerrillas consistently, resulting in significant gains by 1970. Although pacification statistics are complicated and often misleading, they do indicate that CORDS affected the insurgency. For example, by early 1970, 93 percent of South Vietnamese lived in "relatively secure" villages, an increase of almost 20 percent from the middle of 1968, the year marred by the Tet Offensive.[28]

The Phoenix Program

Within CORDS were scores of programs designed to enhance South Vietnamese influence in the countryside, but security remained paramount. At the root of pacification's success or failure was its ability to counter the insurgents' grip on the population. Military operations were designed to keep enemy main forces and guerrillas as far from the population as possible, but the Communist presence in the villages was more than just military. Cadre running the Viet Cong infrastructure (VCI) sought to form a Communist shadow government to supplant the Saigon regime's influence.

In 1960, when Hanoi had formed the Viet Cong movement (formally known as the National Liberation Front), the VCI cadre was its most important component. Cadre were the building blocks of the revolution, the mechanism by which the Communists spread their presence throughout South Vietnam. Cadre did not wear uniforms, yet they were as crucial to the armed struggle as any AK-toting guerrilla. The cadre spread the VCI from the regional level down to almost every village and hamlet in South Vietnam. A preferred tactic was to kill local government officials as a warning for others not to come back.

Indeed, the VC's early success was due to the VCI cadre, which by 1967 numbered somewhere between 70,000 and 100,000 throughout South Vietnam. The VCI was a simple organization. Virtually every village had a cell made up of a Communist Party secretary; a finance and supply unit; and information and culture, social welfare, and proselytizing sections to gain recruits from among the civilian population. They answered up a chain of command, with village cadre answering to the district, then to the province, and finally to a series of regional commands which, in turn, took orders from Hanoi.

The Communists consolidated their influence in the countryside by using a carrot-and-stick approach. The VCI provided medical treatment, education, and justice—along with heavy doses of propaganda—backed by threats from VC guerrillas. The VC waged an effective terror campaign aimed at selected village officials and authority figures to convince fence-sitters that support for the revolution was the best course. In short, the VCI was the Communist alternative to the Saigon government.

The South Vietnamese Government, on the other hand, was rarely able to keep such a presence in the villages, and when they could, the lack of a permanent armed force at that level meant that officials were usually limited to daytime

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Phung Hoang (Phoenix) Team in field operations, Tay Ninh Province, 1969.

visits only. Unfortunately, in the earliest days of the insurgency (1960 to 1963), when the infrastructure was most vulnerable, neither the South Vietnamese nor their American advisers understood the VCI's importance. They concentrated on fighting the guerrillas who, ironically, grew stronger because of the freedom they gained through the VCI's strength and influence.

The VCI was nothing less than a second center of gravity. By 1965, when the United States intervened in South Vietnam with ground troops, Communist strength had grown exponentially, forcing Westmoreland to deal with the main force threat first and making pacification secondary.

The U.S. did not completely ignore the VCI. As early as 1964 the CIA used counterterror teams to seek out and destroy cadre hiding in villages. But the CIA had only a few dozen Americans devoted to the task, far too few to have much effect on tens of thousands of VCI. The advent of CORDS changed that, and anti-infrastructure operations began to evolve. In July 1967, the Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation Program (ICEX) was created. It was basically a clearinghouse for information on the VCI, information that was then disseminated to district advisers.[29] Unfortunately, given the lack of anti-VCI operations during the first 3 years of the war, little intelligence was available at the start. A few organizations, such as the RF/PF, actually lived in the villages and gathered information, but their main task was security, not intelligence gathering.

Phoenix rising. In December 1967 ICEX was given new emphasis and renamed Phoenix. The South Vietnamese side was called Phung Hoang, after a mythical bird that appeared as a sign of prosperity and luck. CORDS made Phoenix a high priority and within weeks expanded intelligence centers in most of South Vietnam's provinces.

At this stage, the most important part of Phoenix was numbers. CORDS expanded the U.S. advisory

Operations under the Phoenix program sought to target and neutralize members of the Viet Cong infrastructure (VCI). A U.S. Navy SEAL in the Mekong Delta leads away a VC suspect.

U.S. Army

effort across the board, and the Phoenix program benefited. Within months all 44 provinces and most of the districts had American Phoenix advisers. This proved vital to the effort. Only by maintaining a constant presence in the countryside—in other words, by mirroring the insurgents—could the government hope to wage an effective counterinsurgency. By 1970 there were 704 U.S. Phoenix advisers throughout South Vietnam.[30]

For the Phoenix program—as with most other things during the war—the Tet Offensive proved pivotal. The entire pacification program went on hold as the allies fought to keep the Communists from taking entire cities. If there was any doubt before, Tet showed just how crucial the VCI was to the insurgency, for it was the covert cadres who paved the way for the guerrillas and ensured that supplies and replacements were available to sustain the offensive. On the other hand, the failure of the attacks exposed the VCI and made it vulnerable. As a result, anti-infrastructure operations became one of the most important aspects of the pacification program.

In July 1968, after the enemy offensive had spent most of its fury, the allies launched the Accelerated Pacification Campaign (APC), which devoted new resources to pacification in an attempt to capitalize on post-Tet Communist weakness. While enemy main forces and guerrillas licked their wounds, they were less able to hinder pacification in the villages.

Under the APC, Phoenix emphasized four aspects in its attack on the VCI:

● Decentralization of the old ICEX command and control (C2) apparatus by placing most of the responsibility on the provinces and districts. This included building intelligence-gathering and interrogation centers (called district intelligence and operations coordinating centers, or DIOCCs) in the regions where the VCI operated.

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RF platoon, date and location unknown.

● Establishment of files and dossiers on suspects, and placing of emphasis on "neutralizing" (capturing, converting, or killing) members of the VCI.

● Institution of rules by which suspected VCI could be tried and imprisoned.

● Emphasis on local militia and police rather than the military as the main operational arm of the program.[31]

This last aspect was crucial. While military forces could be used to attack the VCI, they had other pressing responsibilities, and anti-infrastructure operations would always be on the back burner. So the program concentrated on existing forces that could be tailored to seek out the VCI, the most important of these being the RF/PF militia, the National Police, and Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRU).

Recruited locally, the RF/PF were ideally suited to anti-VCI operations because they lived in the villages. In addition to providing security against marauding VC guerrillas, the RF/PF reacted to intelligence sent from the DIOCC. The National Police had two units specially tailored to VCI operations: the intelligence-gathering Police Special Branch and the paramilitary National Police Field Force. For the most part, however, the police did not perform well, although there were exceptions. PRUs, which were recruited and trained by the CIA, were the best action arm available to Phoenix. However, as was

generally the problem with CIA assets, PRUs were not numerous enough to deal effectively with the VCI. Never numbering more than 4,000 men nationwide, the PRU also had other paramilitary tasks to perform and so were not always available.[32]

DIOCCs. The district was the program's basic building block, and the DIOCC was its nerve center. Each DIOCC was led by a Vietnamese Phung Hoang chief, aided by an American Phoenix adviser. The adviser had no authority to order operations; he could only advise and call on U.S. military support. The DIOCC was answerable to the Vietnamese district chief, who in turn reported to the province chief. DIOCC personnel compiled intelligence on VCI in their district and made blacklists with data on VCI members. If possible, the DIOCC sought out a suspect's location and planned an operation to capture him (or her). Once captured, the VCI was taken to the DIOCC and interrogated, then sent to the province headquarters for further interrogation and trial.[33]

Because Phoenix was decentralized, the programs differed from district to district, and some worked better than others. Many DIOCCs did little work, taking months to establish even the most basic blacklists. In many cases the Phung Hoang chief was an incompetent bureaucrat who used his position to enrich himself. Phoenix tried to address this problem by establishing monthly neutralization quotas, but

these often led to fabrications or, worse, false arrests. In some cases, district officials accepted bribes from the VC to release certain suspects. Some districts released as many as 60 percent of VCI suspects.[34]

Misconceptions about Phoenix

The picture of Phoenix that emerges is not of a rogue operation, as it is sometimes accused of being, but rather of one that operated within a system of rules. Special laws, called An Tri, allowed the arrest and prosecution of suspected communists, but only within the legal system. Moreover, to avoid abuses such as phony accusations for personal reasons, or to rein in overzealous officials who might not be diligent enough in pursuing evidence before making arrests, An Tri required three separate sources of evidence to convict any individual targeted for neutralization.

If a suspected VCI was found guilty, he or she could be held in prison for 2 years, with renewable 2-year sentences totaling up to 6 years. While this was probably fair on its surface, hardcore VCI were out in 6 years at most and then rejoined the guerrillas. The legal system was never really ironed out. The U.S. has the same problem today: Accused terrorists held at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and in other prisons fall within a shadowy middle ground that our policymakers and legal system have yet to deal with.

An assassination bureau? Between 1968 and 1972 Phoenix neutralized 81,740 VC, of whom 26,369 were killed. This was a large piece taken out of the VCI, and between 1969 and 1971 the program was quite successful in destroying the VCI in many important areas.[35] However, these statistics have been used to suggest that Phoenix was an assassination program. It was not. People were killed, yes, but statistics show that more than two-thirds of neutralized VC were captured, not killed. Indeed, only by capturing Viet Cong could Phoenix develop the intelligence needed to net additional Viet Cong. Abuses did occur, such as torture, which U.S. advisers could not always halt, but most advisers understood the adage that dead Viet Cong do not tell about live ones.

PF platoon on guard in Phu My village, Duip Tuong Province, 1970.

Phoenix was also accused of sometimes targeting civilians, because the VCI did not wear military uniforms. But the VCI was an integral—indeed paramount—aspect of the insurgency and a legitimate target. We Americans should have done a better job of pointing this out to critics.

Contracting out the dirty work? Another charge was that Phoenix relied on other units to neutralize the VCI. Of the 26,000 VCI killed, 87 percent died during operations by conventional units. How effective was Phoenix if it accounted for only 13 percent of those killed in action? A later study found that a still-low 20 percent of the killed or captured neutralizations came from Phoenix assets, with most of the rest caught up in sweeps by regular units or by the RF/PF. Both claims are almost irrelevant: Direct physical action was the conventional force, RF/PF part of a two-part job. The bottom line should have been 26,000 VCI permanently eliminated, never mind by whom.

Statistics themselves caused problems. During the first 2 years of Phoenix, each province was given a monthly quota of VC to neutralize, depending on the size of the infrastructure in the province. The quotas were often unrealistic and encouraged false reporting—or the capture of innocent people with whom South Vietnamese officials had a grudge. The quotas were lowered in 1969, and thereafter no VC could be counted in the total unless he or she had been convicted in court.[36]

Aiming low? Others critics attacked Phoenix for netting mostly middle- and low-level VC while

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RF/PF adviser with counterpart in Binh Duong Province, 1969.

senior leaders eluded capture. In fact, in 1968, before the VCI adapted to aggressive pursuit by Phoenix, about 13 percent of neutralizations were district and higher level cadre. In 1970 and 1971, that figure dropped to about 3 percent.[37] The drop, however, masks two positive results: Thanks to Phoenix, ranking VC had been forced to move to safer areas, thereby removing themselves from the "sea of the people (which did not negate their ability to control village populations, but did make the job more difficult); and by attacking mid level Viet Cong, Phoenix actually severed the link between the population and the Party-level cadre calling the shots—a serious blow to the VCI.

Communist Testimony to Phoenix's Success

In the end, attacking the VCI was not as difficult as it might seem. The VCI was a secret organization, but to be effective in the villages it had to stay among the population, which made it vulnerable. Guerrillas could melt into the bush; in contrast, the VCI had to maintain contact with the people.

Although they were not completely successful, anti-infrastructure operations were a serious problem for the enemy, and he took drastic steps to limit the damage. By 1970, Communist plans repeatedly emphasized attacking the government's pacification program and specifically targeted Phoenix officials.[38] District and village officials became targets of VC assassination and terror as the Communists sought to reassert control over areas lost in 1969 and 1970. Iron-

ically, the VC practiced the very thing for which critics excoriated Phoenix—the assassination of officials. The VC even imposed quotas. In 1970, for example, Communist officials near Danang in northern South Vietnam instructed VC assassins to "kill 1,400 persons" deemed to be government "tyrant[s]" and to "annihilate" anyone involved with the pacification program.[39]

Although the anti-infrastructure program did not crush the VCI, in combination with other pacification programs it probably did hinder insurgent progress. In Vietnam, with its blend of guerrilla and main-force war, this was not enough to prevail, but it seems clear that without Phoenix, pacification would have fared far worse. Communist accounts after the war bear this out. In *Vietnam: A History*, Stanley Karnow quotes the North Vietnamese deputy commander in South Vietnam, General Tran Do, as saying that Phoenix was "extremely destructive."[40] Former Viet Cong Minister of Justice Truong Nhu Tang wrote in his memoirs that "Phoenix was dangerously effective" and that in Hau Nghia Province west of Saigon, "the Front Infrastructure was virtually eliminated."[41] Nguyen Co Thach, who became the Vietnamese foreign minister after the war, claimed that "[w]e had many weaknesses in the South because of Phoenix."[42]

Clearly, the political infrastructure is the basic building block of almost all insurgencies, and it must be a high-priority target for the counterinsurgent from the very beginning. In Vietnam the allies faced an insurgency that emphasized political and military options in equal measure, but before the Tet Offensive weakened the Communists sufficiently to allow concentration on both main-force warfare and pacification, it was difficult to place sufficient emphasis on anti-infrastructure operations. Yet in just 2 years—between 1968 and 1970—the Phoenix program made significant progress against the VCI. What might have happened had the Americans and South Vietnamese begun it in 1960, when the Viet Cong were much weaker?

Assessing Pacification in Vietnam

Historian Richard A. Hunt characterizes the achievements of CORDS and the pacification

program in Vietnam as "ambiguous."[43] Many high-ranking civilians and other officials who participated in the program, such as Komer, CIA director William Colby, and Westmoreland's military deputy, General Bruce Palmer, assert that CORDS made great gains between 1969 and 1972.[44] Some historians disagree with this assessment, but clearly the program made some progress in the years following the Tet Offensive. The security situation in many areas improved dramatically, releasing regular South Vietnamese troops to do battle with the North Vietnamese and main-force VC units. The program also spread Saigon's influence and increased the government's credibility with the South Vietnamese people.

Evidence suggests that one of the reasons Hanoi launched a major offensive in 1972 was to offset the progress that South Vietnam had made in pacification and in eliminating the VCI.[45] In the long run, however, those gains proved to be irrelevant. Although the South Vietnamese, with U.S. advisers and massive air support, successfully blunted North Vietnam's 1972 invasion, U.S. forces subsequently withdrew after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords. When the fighting resumed shortly after the ceasefire in 1973, South Vietnamese forces acquitted themselves reasonably well, only to succumb to the final North Vietnamese offensive in 1975. In the end, Communist conventional forces, not the insurgents, defeated the South Vietnamese.

Lessons Learned

Despite the final outcome, there were lessons to be learned from Vietnam. The U.S. military applied some of these lessons to conflicts in the Philippines and El Salvador during the 1980s, and now that counterinsurgency is again in vogue, it would be wise for planners to reexamine pacification operations in Vietnam. The most important lessons to heed follow:

● Unity of effort is imperative; there must be a unified structure that combines military and pacification efforts. The pacification program in Vietnam did not make any headway until the different agencies involved were brought together under a single manager within the military C2 architecture. Once CORDS and Phoenix became part of the military chain of command, it was easier to get things done. The military tends to regard pacification tasks as something civilian agencies do; however, only the military has the budget, materiel, and manpower to get the job done.

● An insurgency thrives only as long as it can sustain a presence among the population. Make anti-infrastructure operations a first step in any COIN plan. Immediately establish an intelligence capability to identify targets, and use local forces to go after them.

● Do not keep the anti-infrastructure program a secret or it will develop a sinister reputation. Tell the people that the government intends to target the infrastructure as part of the security program. Locals must do most of the anti-infrastructure work, with the Americans staying in the background.

● Establish a clear legal framework for the pacification program, especially the anti-infrastructure effort. If this is done immediately and the program is run consistently, people will be more likely to accept it. Legality was a problem in Vietnam, and it is clearly a problem today.

● An insurgency will not be defeated on the battlefield. The fight is for the loyalty of the people, so establish a government-wide program to better the lives of people in the countryside. Improvement must go hand in hand with anti-infrastructure operations, or the population will likely regard government efforts as repressive.

● Above all, Americans must never forget that the host nation is responsible for maintaining security and establishing viable institutions that meet the people's needs, especially since the host nation will have to do the heavy lifting for itself after U.S. forces leave.

These lessons might seem obvious, and it is true that with hindsight they might be easily identified; however, in practice, they are hard to execute. This should not, however, stop us from trying to apply the lessons learned in Southeast Asia to Iraq and Afghanistan. CORDS was one of the Vietnam War's success stories, and its well-conceived, well-executed programs and successful synthesis of civilian and military efforts offer a useful template for current and future COIN operations. *MR*

NOTES

1. Thomas C. Thayer, *How to Analyze a War Without Fronts: Vietnam, 1965-72* (Washington, DC: Defense Research Projects Agency, 1975), 788-89.

2. William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1976), 175.

3. For an important source from the Communist perspective, see Merle L. Pribbenow, trans., *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

4. Message, Westmoreland Military Advisory Command 0117 to BG James Lawton Collins, Jr., Washington, 7 January 1966, Westmoreland files, U.S. Army Center of Military History (CMH), Fort McNair, Washington, D.C.

5. Ibid.

6. Pribbenow, 237.

7. Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) Resolution 9, 4, 19. English translation available at the Texas Tech Virtual Vietnam Archive, item no. 4080418002.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. The leading source taking the viewpoint that General Creighton Abrams had the only correct strategy is Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1999).

11. Lyndon B. Johnson to Henry Cabot Lodge, 28 July 1965, Historians files, CMH, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C.

12. Robert S. McNamara, quoted in Military Advisory Command Vietnam Command History, 1965, 229, Historians files, CMH, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C.

13. Thomas W. Scoville, *Reorganizing for Pacification Support* (Washington, DC: CMH, 1991), 18-19.

14. National Security Action Memorandum 343 of 28 March 1966 charged Robert W. Komer with assuring "that adequate plans are prepared and coordinated covering all aspects [of pacification]. [Komer] will also assure that the Rural Construction/Pacification Program is properly coordinated with the programs for combat force employment and military operations."

15. Memorandum from Komer to John T. McNaughton, Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs, Department of Defense, "Giving A New Thrust to Pacification: Analysis, Concept, and Management," 7 August 1967.

16. Westmoreland Historical Briefing, 17 October 1966, cited in Scoville, 38.

17. Komer, *The Organization and Management of the New Model Pacification Program, 1966-1969* (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 1970), 38.

18. Memorandum from Lyndon B. Johnson to Komer, Subject: Second Komer Trip to Vietnam, 23-29 June 1966, 1 July 1966, 6, Historians files, CMH, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C.

19. Johnson to Komer, National Security Action Memorandum 362, Responsibility for U.S. Role in Pacification (Revolutionary Development), on-line at <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/NSAMs/nsam362.asp>, accessed 27 March 2006.

20. For more detail on the CORDS organization, see Scoville, *Reorganizing for Pacification Support*, 62-68.

21. Ibid., 72.

22. Ibid., 76.

23. Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 93.

24. The CORDS organization in IV Corps was different. Because there were fewer U.S. forces in the Mekong Delta than in the other corps areas, IV Corps had no U.S. three-star general.

25. These figures have been compiled by the authors from several sources. For statistics on 1969-70, see Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973* (Washington, DC: CMH, 1988), 373.

26. Thayer, 884-87.

27. The history of the North Vietnamese 9th Division points out that one of its primary missions in 1969-1970 was to "frustrate the enemy's pacification plan." See *Su Doan 9* [*9th Division*] (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan [People's Army Publishing House], 1990), 100.

28. Hamlet Evaluation Survey (HES) Annual Statistical Analysis, 1968-71, Historians files, CMH, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C.

29. The Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation Program (ICEX) was established by MACV Directive 381-41, "Military Intelligence: Coordination and Exploitation for Attack on the VC Infrastructure; Short Title: ICEX," 9 July 1967, Historians files, CMH, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C. For a detailed study of ICEX, see Ralph W. Johnson, *"Phoenix/Phung Hoang: A Study of Wartime Intelligence Management"* (Ph.D. diss, The American University, 1985).

30. Dale Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1990), Appen. A-2, "Resource Allocations."

31. Ibid., 87-91.

32. Data on the Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRU) is scarce, but some useful documents exist. For general information see MACV "Fact Sheet: Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRU), RVN," 16 October 1969. For neutralization statistics see Thayer, *A Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War, 1965-1972,* 10 (publishing information unavailable), 91.

33. Deputy Undersecretary of the Army John Siena to Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, Subject: Memorandum of Army Vietnam Trip, 28 August 1969, Historians files, CMH, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C.

34. Ibid., 61; Military Advisory Command CORDS-PSD, "Fact Sheet: Legal Processing of VCI Detainees," 8 June 1970, 3, Historians' files, CMH, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C.

35. Andrade, appen. A-1, "Phoenix/Phung Hoang Neutralization Results."

36. Phuong Hoang 1970 End of Year Report, 11 May 1971, 4-5, Historians' files, CMH, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C.

37. MACCORDS-PSD, "Fact Sheet," 2.

38. By mid-1969, U.S. Army division operational reports contained numerous references to captured enemy plans that aimed to "disrupt pacification," in particular the Regional Forces/Popular Forces (RF/PF) and Phoenix programs, because these were a constant threat to Communist domination in the villages. See also memorandum to William Colby from Wilbur Wilson, Deputy for CORDS, Subject: Motivation of [Government of Vietnam] GVN Leadership in the Phung Hoang Program, 24 June 1971, Historians files, CMH, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C.

39. "Military Activity Plan of Sub-Region 5: July-September 1970, no. 25/KH," from captured document log no. 09-1366-70, 3, Historians files, CMH, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C.

40. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: The Viking Press, 1983), 602.

41. Truong Nhu Tang, *A Viet Cong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1985), 268.

42. Nguyen Co Thach, cited in Mark Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: The CIA's Secret Campaign to Destroy the Viet Cong* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 246.

43. Hunt, 252.

44. Colby, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989); Komer, *Bureacracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam*, (Santa Monica: Rand, R-967-ARPA, 1972); Bruce Palmer, Jr*., The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (New York: Touchstone, 1984). Taking the opposite stance from Colby, Komer, and Palmer are William Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1981), and William S. Turley, *The Second Indochina War* (New York: Mentor, 1987), among others.

45. Military History Institute of Vietnam*, Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975*, trans. Merele L. Pribbenow (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 283; Hunt, 255.

Dale Andrade is a senior historian at the U.S. Army Center of Military History in Washington, D.C., where he is writing the official volume on U.S. Army combat operations in Vietnam between 1969 and 1973. He is the author of three books on the Vietnam War: Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War *(Lexington Books, 1990);* Spies and Commandos: How America Lost the Secret War in North Vietnam *(University Press of Kansas, 2000), with co-author Kenneth Conboy; and* America's Last Vietnam Battle: Halting Hanoi's 1972 Easter Offensive *(University Press of Kansas, 2001).*

Lieutenant Colonel James H. Willbanks, U.S. Army, Retired, is Director of the Department of Military History, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. He received a B.A from Texas A&M University, an M.A. and a Ph.D. from the University of Kansas, and is a graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College and the School of Advanced Military Studies. He served in various command and staff positions in the continental United States, Panama, Japan, and Germany, and was an adviser in Vietnam to a South Vietnamese Army infantry regiment during the 1972 North Vietnamese Easter Offensive. He is the author of Abandoning Vietnam *(University Press of Kansas, 2004),* The Battle of An Loc *(Indiana University Press, 2005), and a forthcoming book on the 1968 Tet Offensive to be published by Columbia University Press.*