Revisiting CORDS: The Need for Unity of Effort to Secure Victory in Iraq

Major Ross Coffey, U.S. Army

IN NOVEMBER 2005, the National Security Council published its *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq* [hereafter called *National Strategy*], articulating the broad strategy President George W. Bush set forth in 2003 and providing an "update on our progress as well as the challenges remaining."[1] The report—

- Describes conditions for victory in the short, medium, and long term.
- Describes the three integrated political, security, and economic tracks.
- Defines eight strategic pillars with associated lines of action, subactions, and objectives for military and civilian entities.
- Presents a three-tiered "organization for victory" to achieve the strategy.

Three-Tiered Organization for Victory

According to the *National Strategy,* weekly strategy sessions at the highest levels of the U.S. Government ensure that Iraq remains a top priority. At the operational level, the "team in Baghdad—led by Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and General George Casey—works to implement policy on the ground and lay the foundation for long-term success."[2] Each of the eight pillars have corresponding interagency working groups to coordinate policy, review and assess progress, develop new proposals, and oversee the implementation of existing policies.

The multitracked approach (political, security, and economic) to counterinsurgency in Iraq has historical parallels with the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program of the Vietnam War era. Established in 1967, CORDS partnered civilian and military entities engaged in pacification of Vietnamese rural areas. The program enhanced rural security and local political and economic development and helped defeat the Viet Cong (VC) insurgency. Significantly, CORDS unified the efforts of the pacification entities by establishing unity of command throughout the combined civil-military organization.

Lack of unity of effort is perhaps the most significant impediment to operational-level interagency action today. The victorious conditions the *National Strategy* describes might be unachievable if the interagency entities present in Iraq do not achieve unity of effort. To help achieve unity of effort, Multi-National Force–Iraq (MNF-I) and the Nation should consider adopting a CORDS-like approach to ensure integrated action and victory.

The Impediment

The lack of unity of effort is the principal impediment to operational-level interagency integration. Simply put, no one is in overall control of the efforts. Matthew F. Bogdanos writes: "According to *Joint Vision 2020,* 'the primary challenge of interagency operations is to achieve unity of effort despite the diverse cultures, competing interests, and differing priorities of participating organizations.'"[3] Joint doctrine suggests that the cause of our inability to achieve unity of effort is the wide-ranging backgrounds and values of the agencies involved. Joint Publication 3-08, *Interagency Coordination During Joint Operations,* states: "If the interagency process is to be successful, it should bring together the interests of multiple agencies, departments, and organizations. . . . *The essence of interagency coordination is the interplay of multiple agencies with individual agendas. . . . Each agency has core values that it will not compromise* (emphasis in the original)."[4]

Because of the agencies' different backgrounds, values, and agendas, unifying command appears to be the only approach to efforts at the operational level. Bathsheba Crocker says: "As with any mission . . . , the key question for post-conflict operations is who

is in charge. To date, true unity of command between civilians and the military in Iraq has so far proved elusive in American operations."[5] More so than the wide-ranging backgrounds of interagency entities, lack of unity of command at the operational level has been the most significant factor in failing to achieve unity of effort. Interagency coordination is centralized only at the strategic level. In Iraq, while unity of effort is a useful phrase, lack of an effective mechanism has thus far failed to solve the problem of lack of decisive authority. This causes a lack of cooperation by agencies across the U.S. Government and, ultimately, the absence of unity of effort in Iraq overall. The result is no accountability for integration of interagency efforts outside of Washington, D.C., and thus, no unity of command during their execution.

In remarks to the 2004 Eisenhower National Security Conference, General Peter J. Pace, now Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, noted that the overarching problem with interagency integration is found at the operational level: "The problem comes after [the President of the United States] makes the decision. The various parts of the government take their various pieces and go back to work on them. No one below the president has control over the totality of the process. And if there are disagreements among the various players, it has to go back to the president for resolution."[6] Strategic-level entities must resolve operational-level problems because current interagency organizations have no mechanisms to resolve issues at the operational level. The *National Strategy* describes the roles played by each of the eight working groups, but does not articulate how issues will be resolved in-theater.[7]

Achieving unity of effort in practice requires more than identifying common purposes and establishing working groups; instead, "unity of effort . . . refers to collapsing political and military authority in the same hands [and requires] a complete overhaul of the entire division of labor."[8] Unity of effort requires accountability, which is only achieved through unity of command. Michéle Flournoy says: "Perhaps the most significant determinant of success in interagency planning is the degree to which participants are held accountable for meeting U.S. objectives and for the roles they play in the process."[9] Therefore, unity of command at the operational level in Iraq is absolutely essential for achieving interagency unity of effort.

Counterinsurgent Warfare Principles

The concept of unity of effort is relevant today because counterinsurgent warfare requires coordinated interagency action. History indicates that separating insurgents from the population is the only meaningful method of pursuing a COIN strategy. To achieve this end, integrated interagency action is necessary. Early 20th-century British military author and theorist General Sir Charles Gwynn laid out these principles in *Imperial Policing*.[10] They include—

- The primacy of civil power.
- The use of minimum force.
- The need for firm and timely action.
- The need for cooperation between civil and military authorities.

When pursuing a counterinsurgency strategy, matters of policy must "remain vested in the civil Government" regardless of the degree to which military forces actually control the conduct of operations.[11] Similarly, the use of military force must be kept to an absolute minimum because "the military object is to reestablish the control of civil power and secure its acceptance without an aftermath of bitterness."[12] Interagency coordination, specifically the cooperation of civilian and military entities, is fundamental to success in the COIN campaign.

French military theorist David Galula describes similar challenges in his 1964 work *Counterinsurgency Warfare*.[13] Tasks required in counterinsurgent warfare require the combination of military, police and judicial, and political operations, whether destroying or expelling guerrilla forces; identifying, arresting, or interrogating noncompliant political agents; or doing "the constructive work needed to win the wholehearted support of the population."[14]

Integrating efforts and achieving results require consolidation of direction. Galula says: "Clearly, more than any other kind of warfare, counterinsurgency must respect the principle of a single direction. A single boss must direct the operations from the beginning to the end."[15] Galula offers five associated principles:

- The primacy of political over military power.
- The coordination of efforts.
- The primacy of territorial command.
- The adaptation of the armed forces to COIN warfare.
- The adaptation of minds to the special demands of this form of warfare.[16]

To adapt armed forces and minds as Galula suggests, military historian Andrew Birtle offers practical advice for military officers in *Counterinsurgency Doctrine, 1860-1941:* "The best preparation officers can have for such duty, barring personal experience, is to study previous historical situations to sensitize themselves to the kinds of dilemmas that counterguerrilla, civil affairs, and contingency operations typically pose."[17] The Vietnam-era CORDS program provides a relevant historical situation for study by today's student of COIN warfare.

Sir Charles Gwynn	David Galula
• The primacy of civil power. • The use of minimum force. • The need for firm and timely action. • The need for cooperation between civil and military authorities.	• The primacy of political over military power. • The coordination of efforts. • The primacy of territorial command. • The adaptation of the armed forces to COIN warfare. • The adaptation of minds to the special demands of this form of warfare.

The CORDS Program

The CORDS program partnered civilian entities with the U.S. Military Assistance Command–Vietnam (MACV). The program established the position of Deputy to Commander MACV (COMUSMACV) for CORDS and filled the position with a senior civilian. Similar partnerships existed at subordinate commands across the country. This arrangement, which contributed to stemming the Viet Cong insurgency and to helping pacify the countryside, addressed the principal impediment to integrated interagency action—lack of unity of effort—and addressed Gwynn's and Galula's principles of COIN warfare.

CORDS achievements. In its 4-year existence, CORDS contributed to the defeat of the Viet Cong by influencing the decline of popular support for the insurgency, by helping pacify rural provinces of Vietnam, and by strengthening South Vietnamese Regional and Popular Forces. The Viet Cong suffered after Allied counterattacks post-Tet and could not reassert itself. CORDS-enabled nationbuilding and pacification prevented effective recruiting efforts. In the Kien Hoa province in the Mekong Delta—the birthplace of the National Liberation Front—Viet Cong strength fell from more than 12,000 insurgents in 1967 to 9,000 in 1968 to less than 2,000 in 1971. The monthly rate of insurgent and criminal incidents in the province fell to 2 or 3 per 100,000 inhabitants by 1971, a crime rate that would be welcomed in any U.S. community today.[18]

Other observers concur. According to Thomas Thayer, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Systems Analysis–Southeast Asia, "there was widespread evidence and agreement that the government of Vietnam exercised a predominant influence over the vast majority of South Vietnamese people."[19] Raymond Davis, a U.S. Army noncommissioned officer assigned to the CORDS program made a similar, firsthand assessment: "CORDS, a thorn in the side of the Viet Cong, has been frequently denounced by the VC. Some officials in Saigon believe the program's progress since 1967 might have been a factor in North Vietnam's decision to launch major military operations in 1968 to halt joint pacification efforts in rural areas."[20]

The CORDS approach. The CORDS approach was initiated after years of other unsuccessful attempts to achieve unity of effort through mere coordination. The initial stages of the U.S. Government's pre-CORDS response are case studies in the lack of unity of command causing disunity of effort. In the early 1960s, no one agency in the government possessed the capability to oversee and discipline the entire, multipillared pacification mission. In its early stages of involvement in Vietnam, the United States did not provide its existing institutions the structure, the authority, or the incentives to adapt to the situation.[21]

At the outset of the Vietnam War, the government attempted to resolve the situation in Vietnam through its normal institutions and processes. The typical response was characterized by decentralized decisionmaking and delegation of authority to each individual agency with little accountability for results. U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Frederick E. Nolting conceded to participating agencies the

"full authority over their operations within agreed programs and policies—in effect, management by committee."[22] To complicate matters, the MACV nominally controlled civilian agencies, but, in reality, civilian agencies reported either directly to their superiors in Washington, D.C., or to the ambassador.[23]

There were scattered efforts to coordinate the response to the Vietnam situation in 1961-1962, but little centralized direction. Part of the problem was tied to the statutory obligations of each agency to remain responsible to its headquarters in Washington and to heed the expressed will of Congress.[24] This approach, later termed the Country Team, was typical of early attempts to achieve a balance between Washington-based direction and Vietnam-located execution.

The Country Team concept was a loose, poorly defined description of the relationship between the ambassador and the heads of the civilian agencies in-country. Although the ambassador remained technically in charge of all agencies in the country, in reality no one was in charge because each agency went its own way. President John F. Kennedy supported the concept throughout his administration, but the loose collection of agencies did not achieve the integration Kennedy desired. Furthermore, the Viet Cong insurgency continued to increase in size, influence, and effectiveness.[25]

The Country Team structure was modified when Maxwell Taylor became the Ambassador to Vietnam. President Lyndon B. Johnson empowered Taylor with "sweeping delegation of authority" to coordinate military and civilian activities.[26] However, he left military matters to the hands of General William Westmoreland, the COMUSMACV. Taylor renamed the structure the Mission Council and attempted to prepare a common agenda and a detailed follow-up of action.[27] However, each agency continued to retain separate responsibility for its operations, and, similar to previous integrative attempts, the Mission Council did not achieve effective interagency action. The Pentagon Papers describe the tensions and situation between the disparate civilian actors.[28] The unidentified author of the chapter titled "Re-emphasis on Pacification: 1965-1967" wrote: "Each agency had its own ideas on what had to be done, its own communications channels with Washington, and its own personnel and administrative structure."[29]

From late 1964 to early 1965, agencies began fielding their own structures for operations in the provinces. These agencies acted under wholly separate chains of command. Unified effort did not exist because the Americans in the provinces did not work together and received conflicting and overlapping guidance from Saigon and Washington.[30]

To better coordinate the civilian entities' nation-building activities, Robert W. Komer, the recently appointed Special Assistant to the President (for supervision of nonmilitary programs relating to Vietnam) argued for the creation of the Office of Civil Operations in Saigon.[31] The office would consist of functional divisions that he would organize along regional lines, including placing directors at regional and provincial levels.[32] When William Porter assumed duties as the Deputy Ambassador to the Saigon Mission, he became the second-ranking civilian in the U.S. hierarchy. His responsibility was to coordinate the civil side of the pacification effort, and he devoted himself to the task.[33] Under his control were three major agencies: the CIA, the Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Three field operating agencies (the Chieu Hoi Defector Program, Manpower, and Economic Warfare) reported directly to him.[34]

The military took parallel steps to centralize its pacification efforts by establishing a section in its headquarters, named Revolutionary Development

LBJ Library, photo by Yoichi R. Okamoto

President Lyndon B. Johnson meeting with Robert Komer in the Oval Office.

Support, to focus the attention of its subordinate echelons toward pacification. The military also emphasized the roles of military advisory units that had been assigned to territorial security sectors apart from regular Vietnamese Army formations.[35] However, these attempts, made in 1966, did not result in pacification, the defeat of the Viet Cong insurgency, or the withdrawal of its popular support. Splitting responsibilities between military and civilian entities to pursue pacification left the interagency entities with, in reality, no responsibility.[36]

In response, Komer continued to adamantly insist that Vietnam vitally needed a centralized authority to direct interagency pacification efforts. He asserted that a unified, integrated civilian-military structure would achieve decisive collective effects as opposed to the existing system of individual and unconnected efforts that were by themselves indecisive. In "Clear, Hold, and Rebuild," Komer states: "We realistically concluded that no one of these plans—relatively inefficient and wasteful in the chaotic, corrupted Vietnamese wartime context—could be decisive. But together they could hope to have a major cumulative effect."[37]

The energy Komer brought to his role as the president's special assistant precipitated the formation of CORDS. Consensus developed among the president, the secretary of defense, and the Joint Chiefs, that because the overall mission could not achieve integrative effects, unifying the pacification efforts (civil and military) was necessary.[38] Integrating the two efforts (the Office of Civilian Operations and the Revolutionary Development Support program) and establishing unity of command ultimately resulted in success.

To emphasize his personal interest in the combined pacification efforts, Johnson appointed Komer as the deputy to COMUSMACV for CORDS and gave him ambassadorial rank. On 1 May 1967, Komer pulled together all U.S. civilian and military pacification programs into CORDS under MACV control.[39] Komer now had status equivalent to a three-star general and ranked third in the MACV hierarchy behind Westmoreland and his military deputy, General Creighton Abrams.[40] Although Komer possessed ambassadorial rank, he was not a diplomat; he was a member of Westmoreland's military staff and enjoyed direct access to Westmoreland, an access enjoyed by only one other person, Abrams. In itself, Komer's position reflected the unique nature of CORDS as a civilian-military approach to integration.

CORDS-Partnered Civilian-Military Entities

The CORDS approach directly addressed the principal impediment of lack of unity of effort by partnering civilian and military entities. CORDS did so by placing one person in command of the combined entities and supporting him with appropriate civilian and military personnel under a consolidated staff directorate in MACV.[41] The ensuing organization "represented the formation of an ad hoc civil-military hybrid," not a military takeover of the pacification mission but, instead, an organization that maintained Gywnn's and Galula's "primacy of civil and political power and, thus, a civil as well as military process."[42]

The partnership in the MACV headquarters of a civilian CORDS deputy and the military commander was also replicated throughout subordinate echelons of the command; each of the four corps commanders partnered with a CORDS chief performing similar functions. Provincial and district military advisers were transferred to CORDS, and the appointment of personnel to CORDS positions was based on merit and experience without regard to either civilian or military status.[43]

To achieve unity of effort throughout Vietnam, CORDS also created unified civilian-military advisory teams down to district level. Eventually CORDS created teams in all 250 districts and 44 provinces in South Vietnam to ensure cooperation of military and civilian entities, a principle that both Gwynn and Galula articulated, and to recognize the "primacy of the Territorial Command" Galula had suggested.[44] Komer said: "Each U.S. corps senior adviser had a civilian deputy for CORDS and the province senior advisers were roughly half-and-half civilian and military."[45] At peak strength, military personnel comprised nearly 85 percent of personnel assigned to the CORDS program (6,500 military to 1,100 civilian).[46]

CORDS was the one program specifically tailored to the environment in Vietnam. No conventional organizations in the U.S. Government had the raison d'etre for or the political, military, and social capabilities to address counterinsurgency. The CORDS program filled the gap; it was a deliberate attempt to

DOD

As part of the village self-help program in Vietnam, civilian adviser Chuck Husick shows the people of a hamlet, located about 60 miles southwest of Saigon, how to construct a concrete span of a bridge with their own labor and materials.

break the mold of governmental form and function. In Komer's eyes it was the right thing to do at the time. He later wrote: "If institutional constraints . . . are such an impediment to adaptive response, then it would seem better to adapt the organizational structure to fit the need."[47]

The de facto subordination of pacification efforts to military control was unprecedented. However, Komer quickly recognized the value of its placement within MACV: "Since most available resources were in Vietnamese and U.S. military hands by 1967, since pacification first required the restoration of security in the countryside, and since what little GVN [Government of Vietnam] administration that existed outside Saigon had been military-dominated, it was also logical for the new pacification program to be put under military auspices."[48] Placement of the pacification programs under military command and control became necessary because the military controlled the practical resources.

Not surprisingly, the military was generally pleased with the arrangement. Westmoreland graciously accepted the "unprecedented grafting of a civilian/military hybrid onto his command" and supported Komer in his dealings with the MACV staff, even into strategic plans and policy matters where military advisers opposed civilian-led initiatives.[49] Westmoreland was both careful and politically savvy enough not to stand in the way of Komer's efforts. He did not want to be an obstacle to CORDS and thus be forced to face the prospect of its failure because of a lack of sufficient resources or support. His attitude was quickly replicated throughout the military and greatly enhanced CORDS' early effectiveness and the integration it aimed to achieve.

Initial Reservations

Many civilians, on the other hand, were initially less confident in the new command relationship. Ever fearful of being subsumed by military authority, civilian agencies had serious reservations about an arrangement that would reduce their autonomy.[50] Civilian reservations had some merit; thus far, the military had demonstrated little interest or enthusiasm for nationbuilding activities. Military operations to date had convinced civilians that they would be relegated to cleaning up the battlefield after poorly conceived search-and-destroy operations.

To address this initial uncertainty, Komer developed a clever compromise to the civilian-military cooperation problem and the reservations of civilian agencies. Understanding that a single manager was required, Komer established deputies for CORDS throughout the command with civilians as leads to reassure the civilian agencies.[51] This allied pacification and COIN operations under a single strategy and enabled the consolidation of authority for all aspects of pacification.

Unlike operations of the early 1960s, civilian programs could not be subordinated to military operations to seek out and destroy the enemy, thus realizing Gwynn's primacy of civil power and use of minimum force and Galula's primacy of the political over the military power. Similarly, the military penchant for unity of command could not be breached because programs and problems could be addressed in Vietnam instead of in Washington. The CORDS organization retained civilian attributes and control from within the military structure without being subsumed by it.[52] The structural "takeover" of the pacification effort by the U.S. military had little effect on civilian agencies' individual identities or

Providing resources, manpower, and organization to civilian entities enabled them to make progress by improving cooperation between civilian-military entities and combining the function of civilian policymaking with the military's overwhelming people, money, and resources.

any real control over civilian programs. Aggressive civilian leadership, bureaucratic skill, and presidential interest ensured that the disparate U.S. civilian foreign policy agencies could achieve a remarkable degree of harmony.[53]

Subordinating civilian capabilities to the military chain of command actually realized the principle of the primacy of civil power. This unique placement gave civilian entities greater influence than they ever had before because it provided resources they did not previously have. According to Komer: *"Paradoxically, this [partnership] resulted in even greater U.S. civilian influence over pacification than had ever existed before;* it also powerfully [reinforced] pacification's claim on U.S. and GVN military resources, which constituted the bulk of the inputs during 1967-1971 (emphasis in original)."[54] He goes on to say: "If you are ever going to get a program going, you are only going to be able to do it by stealing from the military. They have all the trucks, they have all the planes, they have all the people, they have all the money—and what they did not have locked up, they had a lien on."[55]

Providing resources, manpower, and organization to civilian entities enabled them to make progress by improving cooperation between civilian-military entities and combining the function of civilian policymaking with the military's overwhelming people, money, and resources. CORDS gave civilians direct access to resources like transportation, military engineers for horizontal construction (roads, for example) and vertical construction (such as buildings), and Department of Defense (DOD)-allocated funds, enabling firm and timely action and coordination of efforts.[56] Much of DOD's monetary contribution went to support Regional and Popular Forces, but the U.S. Department of State and the CIA no longer needed to support U.S. civilians assigned to GVN military development out of their relatively small budgets.[57] As evidence of the new cooperation the civilian-military interagency community achieved, the terms "other war" and "nonmilitary actions" fell out of the lexicon, another example of adherence to Gwynn's principle of the primacy of civil power.[58]

CORDS Contributions

Like the *National Strategy,* the CORDS approach addressed the political, security, and economic tracks. The CORDS program's principal contribution was how it complemented allied security operations.[59] Davis noted: "The key to CORDS [was clearly] protection [of the populace]."[60] By denying villages and hamlets to the Viet Cong, civil-military operations enabled the U.S. Army and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) military forces to concentrate on North Vietnamese main forces. Also, CORDS fostered the creation of an organized People's Self-Defense Force composed of local inhabitants who could defend their villages and hamlets. Furthermore, CORDS created a grassroots political support mechanism for the government and, as a matter of routine, helped with community development.[61]

Regional Force units, equivalent to federalized U.S. Army National Guard forces, deployed throughout the country to deny sanctuary to North Vietnamese Army units or known VC sympathizers. Once Regional Force units forced the withdrawal of VC units, Regional and Popular Forces, advised by the CORDS program, maintained continual security while other CORDS advisory teams fostered development of villages and hamlets, thereby denying the insurgents a recruiting base.[62]

CORDS also affected political and economic progress, attempting to touch "the lives of the Vietnamese on every social level."[63] CORDS enhanced local protection and area security and fostered significant gains in nationbuilding. Other major CORDS achievements included the revival of a functioning rural administration; an economic revival to parallel USAID land reform programs; and health and human services functions, including medicine, education, and refugee care.[64] CORDS also facilitated the rebuilding of roads and waterways, which military forces had ignored during the early years of the war.[65]

The results of this multitracked approach appeared almost immediately. By 1969 CORDS had accelerated the pacification of the country, and by 1970,

DOD

Black smoke covers areas of Saigon in 1968 as fire trucks rush to the scenes of fires set by the Viet Cong during the Tet holiday.

CORDS contributed to the departure of an estimated 300,000 foreign troops and the prevention of South Vietnamese capitulation even as the North increased its pressure at every attempt.[66]

Programs to destroy the VC infrastructure achieved great success. David R. Palmer said: "An enhanced security situation, along with increased peasant ownership of property and steadily increasing economic conditions, certainly constituted major dampeners to communist appeal, while plainly diminishing chances of success likewise abetted defections in insurgent ranks."[67] The VC insurgency that had battled the MACV during Tet in 1968 was virtually eliminated by 1971.[68]

CORDS' Success

The North Vietnamese's decision to rely on conventional means to conquer South Vietnam suggests that CORDS and the pacification program were successful. With the help of U.S. forces and air and logistics support, South Vietnamese forces were able to repulse the 1972 North Vietnamese ground offensives. Former CORDS adviser to Abrams and later director of the CIA William Colby said: "The attack of 1972 and the final attack of 1975 were pure North Vietnamese military attacks. There were no guerrillas in those operations because in the interim our program actually won the guerrilla war by winning the guerrilla to the government. They were all on the government side."[69]

Curiously, the Viet Cong shared Colby's viewpoint. A VC official, who out of frustration and dejection, surrendered to the CORDS-strengthened Regional and Popular Forces in 1971, reported that recruiting became nearly impossible in his region after the pacification program reached full operating capacity in 1969.[70] In his private notebook, another VC colonel wrote: "If we are winning while the enemy is being defeated, why have we encountered increasing difficulties? Last year we could attack United States forces. This year we find it difficult to attack even puppet forces. . . . We failed to win the support of the people and keep them from moving back to enemy controlled areas. . . . At present, the [South Vietnamese and U.S. forces are] weakened while we are exhausted."[71] By the early 1970s, adopting a pacification strategy had enabled the defeat of the Viet Cong insurgency.[72]

The interrelationship of U.S. civilian and military functions and South Vietnamese counterpart functions permitted a more efficient application of resources, enabling firm and timely action.[73] The interrelationship was far more cost-effective than other parts of the war effort. It entailed "only a modest fraction of the enormous costs of the Vietnam war" and was tailored directly to the needs of the environment.[74]

Observers suggest that CORDS was a successful program: "By the time Komer left [in the late 1960s], CORDS did seem to be pacifying the South Vietnamese countryside."[75] U.S. "Ambassador [to South Vietnam] Ellsworth Bunker [insisted] that this essential and integral part of the war [the counterinsurgency campaign] had been won by 1971."[76] Evidence suggests that CORDS worked better than even its advocates expected because of two things. First, CORDS ensured unity of effort among both

military and civilian entities because it unified command. Second, it adhered to both Gwynn's and Galula's principles for counterinsurgent warfare.

Criticism of the CORDS program is generally founded on its limited duration and scope. Komer attributes its failure to have greater effect on the overall Vietnam situation to too little, too late.[77] For example, the CORDS program could not affect the capabilities of regular forces the North Vietnamese defeated in 1975. According to Komer: "Even after 1967, pacification remained a small tail to the very large conventional military dog. It was never tried on a large enough scale until too late. . . ."[78]

The scope of the CORDS program did not allow it to address the ineffectiveness of the South Vietnamese Government. Focused on defeating the VC insurgency, CORDS did not possess the personnel, organization, or structure to enhance the legitimacy and thus the popularity of the South Vietnamese government. A former CORDS analyst stated: "CORDS was a great program and a good model—with one caveat. Under the Hamlet Evaluation System, we collected lots of data indicating the security of the regions and provinces but nowhere did we find any evidence or indication of popular support of the [national-level] government."[79] This perspective implies that future CORDS-like approaches should include governmental legitimacy as an objective. This coincides with Komer's assessment of the program: "Perhaps the most important single reason why the U.S. achieved so little for so long was that it could not sufficiently revamp, or adequately substitute for, a South Vietnamese leadership, administration, and armed forces inadequate to the task."[80]

Lessons for Iraq

The formation of CORDS enabled unity of effort among the civilian and military entities in Vietnam and provides a model for achieving unity of effort in Iraq. Commenting on command and control in Vietnam, Major General George S. Eckhardt stated that a prerequisite for command and control "will be unity of command, to ensure both tight control of the overall U.S. effort by American political authorities and effectiveness of military and advisory activities."[81] He recognized the value of this approach in counterinsurgent warfare: "An organization like CORDS should be established as soon as possible."[82] He explicitly stated that civil affairs, counterinsurgency, and pacification could not be adequately coordinated without doing so.

The Nation is once again attempting to achieve unity of effort in its counterinsurgent campaign in Iraq. Therefore, MNF-I should consider adopting a CORDS-like approach to ensure integrated action to achieve victory in Iraq. In addition to adhering to time-tested principles of counterinsurgent warfare and addressing the lack of unity of effort, this approach would also provide an organizational model to implement the *National Strategy,* which articulates three broad tracks: political, security, and economic.

The objective of the political track is "to help the Iraqi people forge a broadly supported national compact for democratic government, thereby isolating enemy elements from the broader public."[83] Along the political track, the government aims to isolate hardened enemy elements, engage those outside the political process, and build stable, pluralistic, and effective national institutions.

The security track's objective is to develop "the Iraqis' capacity to secure their country while carrying out a campaign to defeat the terrorists and neutralize the insurgency."[84] Three associated actions are clearing areas of enemy control, holding areas freed from enemy control, and building Iraqi Security Forces.

The economic track's objective is to provide assistance to "the Iraqi government in establishing the foundations for a sound economy with the capacity to deliver essential services."[85] The *National Strategy* aims to restore Iraq's neglected infrastructure, reform Iraq's economy, and build the capacity of Iraqi institutions.

As indicated, a program similar to the CORDS program, which principally affected security of rural areas, could enable the interagency community in Iraq to achieve security and enhance already existing institutions and commands such as the Multi-National Security Transition Command–Iraq (MNSTC-I). Clearing, holding, and building, as articulated in the *National Strategy,* requires coordinated action from civilian and military entities. Adopting a CORDS-like approach would also enable MNF-I to resolve interagency issues in-theater instead of requiring resolution at the national level.

"[CORDS] was a better way then, but it came too late for the American people, whatever its successes on the ground. We cannot afford to stumble again before some new challenge." —William Colby

The CORDS program also affected economic progress. By reviving rural administrations, implementing land reform, and rebuilding public infrastructure, the CORDS program enhanced the rural populace's economic well-being. Like the *National Strategy's* security track, the economic track also requires coordinated civilian-military action. Military forces are not well-suited to reforming Iraq's economy or building the capacity of Iraqi institutions, but the military possesses resources that can aid in restoring Iraq's infrastructure. A CORDS-like approach adopted by the MNF–I would ensure the primacy of civil power, firm and timely action, and the coordination of civil-military actions along the economic track.

Last, the CORDS program enhanced political progress, although only in rural areas. The scope of a CORDS-like approach in Iraq would need to be expanded to effect political progress and contribute to the appropriate isolation, engagement, and building of Iraqi entities. The promising voter turnout in recent Iraqi elections indicates that this track is well along toward the political benchmarks the *National Strategy* describes; a CORDS-like approach could further that progress along with progress in the other two tracks. As the Coalition eventually pacifies the four remaining noncompliant provinces in Iraq, a future CORDS-like organization should focus on national-level governmental legitimacy so Iraqi political structures can maintain the security that military, police, and border control forces have established.

Implementing a CORDS-like approach in Iraq, however, might not directly mirror the approach adapted to Vietnam. For example, subordinate CORDs-like organizations in Iraq must reflect the nature of MNF-I's major subordinate commands because one command—the Multi-National Corps-Iraq—controls the majority of the spatial battlespace as compared to MACV's four subordinate corps, each of which controlled a quarter of Vietnam. Nevertheless, subordinate CORDS-like organizations in functional commands like MNSTC-I, which require the capabilities of civilian judicial and border control institutions, will also benefit from the unity of effort achieved by adopting a CORDS-like approach.

Implementing this approach in Iraq also requires a historical perspective of two other topics. First, personal contributions by key figures and personnel are paramount.[86] Accordingly, implementing such a program in Iraq will require identifying and appointing the right people to the program. Second, recognizing that CORDS required a presidential decision for implementation is important. As a "field experiment directly tailored to the need," CORDS had little legislative authority in terms of appropriations or authorizations.[87] Adopting this approach requires decision by the appropriate entity—either executive or legislative—and the provision of accurate public information to decisionmakers and the American people.

The *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq* is intended to help "the Iraqi people defeat the terrorists and build an inclusive democratic state."[88] These two aims also enhance our own national security, and they will influence the Middle East and the global community. To achieve the victorious conditions the *National Strategy* describes, the MNF-I and the U.S. Government should consider adopting a CORDS-like approach to achieve unity of effort. As William Colby, the program's second director said: "[CORDS] was a better way then, but it came too late for the American people, whatever its successes on the ground. We cannot afford to stumble again before some new challenge."[89] Iraq is just that challenge. ***MR***

NOTES

1. U.S. National Security Council, *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq,* November 2005, on-line at <www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/ iraq/iraq_national_strategy_20051130.pdf>, accessed 9 February 2006.

2. Ibid.

3. Matthew F. Bogdanos, "Joint Interagency Cooperation—the First Step," *Joint Force Quarterly* (issue thirty-seven): 11, on-line at <www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/jfq_pubs/0437.pdf>, accessed 30 October 2005.

4. U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 3-08. *Interagency Coordination During Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 9 October 1996.)

5. Bathsheba Crocker, John Ewers, and Craig Cohen, "Rethinking and Rebuilding the Relationship between War and Policy," in *Rethinking the Principles of War,* ed. Anthony D. McIvor (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2005), 368.

6. Jim Garamone, "Agencies Must Coordinate to Win Terror War, Pace Says," on-line at <www.armedforces.net/Detailed/2295.html>, accessed 29 August 2005. The dynamic that General Peter J. Pace describes is not significantly different from the interagency integration challenges of 1967. During an 18 August 1970 interview with Robert W. Komer, Joe P. Frantz asked: "Was there a line of demarcation between the military and the various civilian agencies that were there?" Komer replied: "No. It was very fuzzy, and that was one of the basic problems in the field. You are on to

what I regard as an extremely important problem area. The 'other war'—it was all one war, as [General Creighton] Abrams used to say, but it was being run by all sorts of different agencies. There was no unified management of the whole war." Frantz asked: "You had a dozen or more quarterbacks, huh?" Komer said: "Exactly. And that made it very difficult. The only guy fully in charge was the President, and that is not the optimum way to do things" (interview AC 94-2, transcript, Oral History Collection, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas, 26-7).

7. *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq*.

8. Anna Simons, "Seeing the Enemy (or Not)," in *Rethinking the Principles of War,* ed. Anthony D. McIvor (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2005), 339.

9. Michéle Flournoy, "Interagency Strategy and Planning for Post-Conflict Reconstruction," in *Winning the Peace*, ed. Robert C. Orr (Washington, DC: The Center for Strategic and International Studies Press, 2004), 108.

10. Sir Charles W. Gwynn, *Imperial Policing* (London: MacMillan and Company, 1934), 13.

11. Ibid., 14.

12. Ibid., 15.

13. David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: From Theory to Practice* (St. Petersburg, FL: Hailer Publishing, 1964, reprint, Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), 87.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 89–96.

17. Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1860–1941* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2001), 280.

18. David R. Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), 286-87.

19. Richard A. Hunt and Richard H. Schultz, Jr., eds., *Lessons from an Unconventional War: Reassessing U.S. Strategies for Future Conflicts* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1982), 63.

20. Raymond Davis, "CORDS: Key to Vietnamization," *Soldiers* (July 1971): 33-34.

21. John A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning To Eat Soup With A Knife* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), 164.

22. Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: US Doctrine and Performance, 1950 to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 117.

23. Ian F.W. Beckett, *Modern Insurgencies and Counterinsurgencies: Guerrillas and Their Opponents Since 1750* (London: Routledge, Taylor, and Francis Group, 2001).

24. Blaufarb, 117.

25. Robert W. Komer, *Bureaucracy at War: U.S. Performance in Vietnam* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986), 169.

26. Blaufarb, 233.

27. Ibid.

28. The Pentagon Papers is the term used for a study by the U.S. Department of Defense, titled *United States Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967,* which details the history of political and military involvement in Vietnam. The study was leaked to the *New York Times,* and all available information was eventually published under the title *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1971).

29. Blaufarb, 233.

30. Ibid.

31. Nagl, 165.

32. Thomas W. Scoville, *Reorganizing for Pacification Support* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, 1982), 57.

33. Blaufarb, 234.

34. Records of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), part 3, University Press of America, Lanham, Maryland, 11.

35. William E. Colby, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989), 206.

36. Blaufarb, 237.

37. Robert W. Komer, "Clear, Hold, and Rebuild," *Army* (May 1970): 19.

38. Blaufarb, 238.

39. Nagl, 165.

40. Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 656.

41. Scoville, 58.

42. Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 217; Willard S. Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell, *The Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Crane, Russak, 1977), 214.

43. Blaufarb, 240.

44. Gwynn, Galula.

45. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, R-967-ARPA, 1972), 115.

46. Krepinevich, 218.

47. Komer, *Bureaucracy at War*, 168.

48. Thompson, 214-15.

49. Blaufarb, 240.

50. Colby, 207.

51. Ibid.

52. Blaufarb, 239.

53. Krepinevich, 217.

54. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing*, 114.

55. Nagl, 165.

56. For the military, the formation of CORDS was innovative. U.S. Army commanders, who in 1965 would have organized for combat with military forces to the exclusion of all else, began to cross-assign forces to the U.S. Department of State, USAID, CIA, and the U.S. Information Service (USIS) beginning in June 1967 with the establishment of CORDS. (See James K. McCollum, "CORDS: Matrix for Peace in Vietnam," *Army* [July 1982]: 49.) Similarly, military commanders received cross-assignment of civilian agency personnel for conducting their operations, which was a sharp contrast to military-only search-and-destroy operations like those conducted by the 1st Cavalry Division and the 25th Infantry Division in 1966 and 1967. (See Krepinevich, 222-23.)

57. Scoville, 80-81.

58. Ibid., 80.

59. Headquarters, Military Assistance Command Vietnam, "Speaker Notes," Command Briefing, March 1972, Records of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam, part 1, microfilm, reel 2, frames 578-79.

60. Davis, 34.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

63. Ibid.

64. Hunt and Schultz, 57.

65. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing*, 116.

66. Palmer, 285.

67. Ibid., 287.

68. Ibid.

69. Paul Seidenmann, "Pacification: A Winning Combination that Came too Late?" *Armed Forces Journal International* 114 (January 1977): 25.

70. Palmer, 286-87.

71. Ibid., 288.

72. Note that for all of its success, CORDS could not contribute to the defeat of the main North Vietnamese invasion force. In 1982, McCollum wrote: "CORDS defeated the insurgency in Vietnam, but it could not defeat the main-force invasion. Since nations in the Western Hemisphere are not likely to be threatened by outside invasion, the defeat of the insurgency should therefore be the primary concern. In subsequent attempts at pacification in any nation threatened by insurgency, it seems essential that a matrix organization [such as CORDS] be set up to ensure the local efforts are properly directed and coordinated" (53). Establishing the Multi-National Security Transition Command–Iraq appears to have addressed this deficiency.

73. Headquarters, MACV, frame 579.

74. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing*, 118.

75. Sheehan, 731.

76. Bruce Palmer, *The 25 Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 116.

77. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing*.

78. Komer, quoted in Palmer, 164.

79. Ambassador David Passage, interview by author, 18 January 2006.

80. Komer, *Bureaucracy at War*, 160.

81. George S. Eckhardt, *Vietnam Studies: Command and Control, 1950-1969* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1974), 86.

82. Ibid.

83. *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq*.

84. Ibid.

85. Ibid.

86. Key figures and personnel included Robert W. Komer; General Creighton Abrams, General William Westmoreland's successor as COMUSMACV; Ellsworth Bunker, U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam; William Colby, Komer's successor; and the personnel of the CORDS organization.

87. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing*.

88. *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq*.

89. Colby, 373.

Major Ross Coffey, U.S. Army, is a student at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC) School of Advanced Military Studies, Fort Leavenworth. He received a B.S. from the U.S. Military Academy, an M.S. from Central Michigan University, and is a graduate of CGSC. He has served in various command and staff positions in the continental United States and Kosovo.