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TEACHING NOTES

The Conduct of Pacification in Vietnam-Case Study

By Rufus Phillips*

The purpose of this case as a teaching tool is to familiarize students with issues related to assisting other countries in stability operations, in meeting the challenges of coordinating between military and civilian personnel, and in creating interagency teams across the military and civilian government spectrum. It is also useful in fleshing out some of the issues associated with force of personality in cooperative leadership and decision-making.

CORDS unified the American pacification effort from top to bottom. The civil-military advisory teams CORDS created were essential to the success, albeit temporary, of pacification in Vietnam. So too were two other factors: getting counterinsurgency doctrine right and having it guide all significant military and civil operations; and having the Vietnamese organized and fully committed to implementing the theory on the ground. If there was a fault, it concerned not giving more time and attention to getting the South Vietnamese ready to take over. That, of course, required a longer period than American domestic politics allowed. The really hard work for the U.S. in stability and counterinsurgency operations is the transition to full host government responsibility. This will require the U.S. to keep in mind T. E. Lawrence's guidance that, "Better your allies do it tolerably than you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not to do it for them."¹ Or as General Abrams put it in 1970, "Sooner or later the Vietnamese themselves have got to settle this thing. We can only help and we can only help so much."²

Background

After the fall of Dien Bien Phu in April 1954, the Geneva Accords divided Vietnam at the 17th Parallel. While the Communist Vietminh consolidated their power over the North,

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French forces evacuated the South. At the same time, the South struggled to survive in the face of resettling a million refugees fleeing the North, rival religious and gangster sect forces contending for power, and no control over large swaths of southern territory which had been under Vietminh rule for over nine years. These territories, along with active combat against sect forces in Saigon and the Mekong Delta, posed a significant counterinsurgency or pacification³ challenge as the South emerged as an independent republic by the end of 1955. The American military advisory mission (MAAG), instead of being limited to advising the French, now began giving direct assistance and advice to the Vietnamese army. The pacification campaign – an early exercise in civilian-military coordinated counterinsurgency with local government lead – reveals challenges and lessons for current and future complex operations. Out of the pacification experience in Vietnam culminating in CORDS lessons can be drawn which are relevant to Afghanistan and future conflicts.

These lessons include the following. One, it is important to understand and be sensitive to the critical psychological and political aspects of the struggle, particularly concerning the standing in the eyes of its own people of the government we are trying to help, and to integrate U.S. advisory efforts unobtrusively as possible with those of the host government in a joint approach. (This presents obvious difficulties if we are intervening directly with our own troops rather than acting as advisors). Two, high quality top American civil and military leadership must apply a cooperative top to bottom team approach based on a realistic understanding of the host country's political vulnerabilities and underlying security and governance problems. Three, the US and the host government must jointly share the same coherent and coordinated counterinsurgency doctrine, combined with effective civil-military operations in the field. Fourth, if U.S. troops are directly involved transition to host country control needs to be considered from the very beginning. Finally, estimates of progress in stability operations should rely more on intangible indicators rather than statistical measurements.

TEACHING OBJECTIVES:

1. To understand that strategies and decisions related to counterinsurgency (stability) operations are not necessarily made in a linear manner.
2. To understand better the complex challenges of effectively helping another country in conducting counterinsurgency

3. To appreciate the importance of civil-military coordination in implementing counterinsurgency and other complex operations.
4. To highlight the importance of learning lessons from past operations.
5. To demonstrate the best practice – and pitfalls – in helping develop effective local leadership of the process/ program.
6. To understand the challenges of interagency and civilian-military coordination.

TARGET AUDIENCES:

Graduate and post-graduate students in national security affairs, international affairs, international law, and international development

U.S. government agency officials with national security responsibilities:

- U.S. Department of State
- U.S. Agency for International Development
- U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense
- Central Intelligence Agency
- High-level U.S. military staffs (Joint Staff, regional commands) Civil Affairs Military Officers
- Civilian-Military Planners
- Army Reserves planning and employment in support of operations

ISSUES to CONSIDER AND QUESTIONS TO ASK:

1. How would you define the problems faced by decision makers in this case – what are the nuances of the problems of insurgency that the pacification campaign sought to address?
2. Could early USG policy and decision makers have more adequately addressed South Vietnam's insurgency struggle had they had a better understanding of its underlying nature and what does that tell us about facing similar problems in other countries?
3. How important to success was the unified advisory approach developed by CORDS and did it address existing problems? What were the roles of the military and of the civilian USG experts?

4. Based on the counterinsurgency experience in Vietnam and the ultimate formation of CORDS, what lessons may be drawn to frame recommendations for policy and decision-making applicable to current and future conflict situations
 - The importance of understanding and being sensitive to the critical psychological and political aspects of counterinsurgency and stability operations.
 - The value of understanding from the very beginning the importance of host country sustainability.
 - The importance of integrating U.S. advisory efforts with those of the host government in a joint approach.
 - The value of a cooperative USG team approach – integrating military and civilian assets.

EXERCISES:

1. Assign groups of three to five students to role play and discuss the views of the individual and organization assigned to him or her.:

- Edward G. Lansdale (in his early and later roles)
- General William Westmoreland
- General Creighton Abrams
- Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge
 - The U.S. Embassy Deputy Chief of Mission (may be more than one to represent each period)
 - Robert Komer
- William Colby
- A senior representative of the South Vietnam government responsible for counterinsurgency
- A senior representative of the South Vietnam military
- A representative of the Vietcong insurgency

2. Task the student groups to answer the following questions:

- What authority did you or your organization have in this situation? Was it properly framed, or were you marginalized, left out, or ill-used?

- What organizational prerogatives did you believe were important for you or your organization to protect in the interagency process?
- With which organizations was it necessary or advantageous to cooperate and/or coordinate? What was or would have been the most effective means for coordinating?

What would you have done differently from the real case study?

3. Allow the student teams a period of time to develop answers to these questions, then have one of the group answer the questions in such a way that they can be presented to the class. Do not allow any critique or discussion at this point—just capture the responses.
4. Now reassign the roles, this time assigning students to organizations to which they showed the greatest disdain or negativism during the first round. Give the new groups ten minutes to develop answers to the same questions, and have those answers posted directly under the comments of the first group for the same organization.

CLASS DISCUSSION

- Review all sets of comments for each organization, and pull out consistencies/discrepancies between the different student groups.
- Develop consensus on what were effective and ineffective actions of each group (including acts of omission and commission).
- Discuss whether difficulties arising from these actions and methods of operation years ago have been remedied, remain the same, or have grown worse.

Allow students to opine about the best ways to assure adequate implementation of policy guidance and interagency coordination.

REFERENCES

In addition to the case manuscript, instructors may also want to assign supplementary background readings. The following sources work well as reference materials for this case and are easily available online or through a library:

Why Vietnam Matters: An Eyewitness Account of Lessons Not Learned

Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam

A Better War

¹ T.E. Lawrence, Cairo, Arab Bulletin, August 1917

² Sorley, *A Better War*, 190

³ “Pacification” in Vietnam was the term used for counterinsurgency operations.