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title BUREAUCRACY DOES ITS THING: INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS ON U.S.-GVN PERFORMANCE IN VIETNAM

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This Report is one of several studies on the organization and management of "counterinsurgency" responses in Southeast Asia funded by the Advanced Research Projects Agency in an effort to learn what practical lessons they can teach. Four major real-life cases — Malaya, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam — have been analyzed. It was considered that such lessons would be of particular value to the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the military services, and other Defense Department agencies concerned with planning, service education and training, and military assistance and advice.

It should be emphasized that this Report makes no pretense of being a comprehensive study of the Vietnam war. In seeking to analyze why the U.S. and GVN performed as they did, it addresses primarily an as yet neglected dimension of the Vietnam conflict — the impact of institutional factors on the U.S./GVN response, especially since direct U.S. intervention in 1965. It shows how both governments attempted to cope with a highly atypical conflict situation via institutions designed for quite different purposes. Such institutional constraints as the typical behavior patterns of the organizations involved influenced not only the decisions made but what was actually done in the field. Similarly, the very way in which the counterinsurgency response was organized and managed greatly influenced how it was carried out and even led to reshaping the response itself from what was originally intended. This dimension of the Vietnam war has not yet been systematically analyzed; yet it does much to help explain why, whatever U.S. and GVN policy called for, the two governments actually responded the way they did.

Since this study draws heavily on the author's own experience, and was largely completed by 1971, it provides only limited coverage of the period of U.S. disengagement. Moreover, the author, writing not only as an analyst but as one who was involved in Vietnam during 1966-1968, can hardly escape a somewhat parochial view. It is doubly difficult to be objective about what is partly one's own performance. On the other hand, a participant can bring some special insights to bear; actual experience
at the top management level -- both in Washington and in the field -- helps him to grasp the operational and bureaucratic difficulties in framing and executing policies and programs. He is more aware of the constraints imposed by real life (though he may also attach undue weight to them).

In any case, the intent of this study is neither to criticize nor to defend U.S./GVN performance in Vietnam but rather to help explain why this performance, despite our immense input of resources, has had such ambiguous results. Many critics of the war no doubt will find the discussion herein insufficiently critical, while many of the author's former colleagues will doubtless find it unduly so. The author can only assert that he labors under few illusions as to the mistakes and tragic consequences which marred U.S. involvement in Vietnam. All senior officials, himself included, must bear their measure of responsibility. If anything, the mistakes were even greater on the GVN side. But it bears repeating that the scope of this study is limited to analyzing certain important institutional determinants of how the U.S. and GVN actually performed in the Vietnam war.
In analyzing the long and costly U.S. entanglement in Vietnam, with its many tragic consequences, it is important to look at performance as well as policy. Whatever the wisdom of U.S. intervention on the side of South Vietnam, the resulting immense disparity in strength and resources between the two sides would have suggested a different outcome -- as indeed it did to successive U.S. administrations. Yet why has a cumulatively enormous U.S. contribution -- on top of South Vietnam's own great effort -- had such limited impact for so long? Why, almost regardless of the ultimate outcome, has U.S. intervention entailed such disproportionate costs and tragic side effects?

The reasons are many, complex, and interrelated. They include the unique and unfamiliar -- at least in U.S. experience -- conflict environment in which we became enmeshed. Particularly constraining was the sharp contrast between the adversary we faced and the ally we were supporting -- a highly motivated and ideologically disciplined regime in Hanoi and revolutionary Viet Cong apparatus versus a weak, half-formed, traditionalist regime in Saigon. We repeatedly misjudged the enemy, especially his ability to frustrate our aims by his tactics and to counterescalate at every stage -- right up to 1972. Another constraint was implicit in the incremental nature of our response, doing only what we believed minimally necessary at each stage.

But even these reasons are insufficient to explain why we did so poorly for so long. The Pentagon Papers show that, to a greater extent than is often realized, we recognized the nature of the operational problems we confronted in Vietnam, and that our policy was designed to overcome them. And whatever the gradualism of our response, we ended up making a cumulatively massive investment of U.S. blood and treasure in the attempt to achieve a satisfactory outcome. Yet the U.S. grossly misjudged what it could actually accomplish with the huge effort it eventually made, and thus became more and more wound up in a war it couldn't "win" the way it fought it. In this sense at least, the U.S. did stumble into a "quagmire" in Vietnam.
What must be added is how another set of real-life constraints -- largely inherent in the typical behavior patterns of the GVN and U.S. institutions involved in the conflict -- made it difficult for them to cope with an unfamiliar conflict environment and greatly influenced what they could and could not, or would and would not, do. Though by no means the whole answer, these institutional constraints helped render the U.S./GVN response to an atypical insurgency conflict unduly conventional, expensive, and slow to adapt. This added perspective -- so often missing from critical analyses of our Vietnam experience -- is essential to an understanding of why we fought the war the way we did in Vietnam. It is what is primarily addressed in this study.

The GVN's performance was even more constrained by its built-in limitations than that of the U.S. In the last analysis, perhaps the most important single reason why the U.S. achieved so little for so long in Vietnam was that it could not sufficiently revamp, or adequately substitute for, a South Vietnamese leadership, administration, and armed forces inadequate to the task. The sheer incapacity of the regimes we backed, which largely frittered away the enormous resources we gave them, may well have been the greatest single constraint on our ability to achieve the aims we set ourselves at acceptable cost.

But to a great extent the GVN's failure was a U.S. failure too. Even in hindsight it is difficult to evaluate how much our inability to move the GVN was owing to the intractable nature of the problem and how much to the way we went about it. The record shows that U.S. officials tried harder than is often realized to get Diem and his successors to deal more effectively with the threat they faced. But for many reasons we did not use vigorously the leverage over the Vietnamese leaders that our contributions gave us. We became their prisoners rather than they ours; the GVN used its weakness far more effectively as leverage on us than we used our strength to lever it.

Equally striking is the sharp discontinuity between the mixed counterinsurgency strategy which U.S. and GVN policy called for from the outset, and the overwhelmingly conventional and militarized nature of our actual response. The impact of institutional constraints is nowhere more evident than in the GVN and U.S. approach to Vietnam's
military aspects, both before and after 1965. From the outset the preponderant weight of the U.S. and GVN military in the Vietnam picture tended to dictate an overly militarized response. The institutional background of U.S. and GVN military leaders helped shape the nature of that response. Molding conventional Vietnamese armed forces in the "mirror image" of the U.S. forces which were supplying them was a natural institutional reaction. We organized, equipped, and trained the RVNAF to fight American style, the only way we knew how.

Then, when the GVN and ARVN buckled, the U.S. in effect took over the "anti-main-force war" and sought to do directly what the South Vietnamese had failed to do. In the process, as might be expected, it further Americanized the war -- on an even grander scale. Trained, equipped, and organized primarily to fight the Russians in Central Europe, U.S. forces played out this military repertoire. Instead of adapting our response to the unique circumstances of Vietnam, we fought the enemy our way -- at horrendous cost and with tragic side effects -- because we lacked the incentive and much existing capability to do otherwise.

Our costly "search-and-destroy" (or attrition) strategy -- ground and air -- was also an outgrowth of these factors. It was a natural response of American commanders deploying forces hugely superior in mobility and firepower against an elusive enemy who could not be brought to decisive battle. But his ability to control his own losses by such means as evading contact and using sanctuaries frustrated our aims, as did his ability to replace much of his losses by further recruitment and, increasingly, by infiltration from the North.

The 1965-1968 U.S. air campaign against North Vietnam, though the outgrowth of many factors, also reflects the way in which an institution will tend to play out its preferred repertoire. Airmen were eager to demonstrate that strategic bombing and interdiction would work even in a war of the Vietnam type. It was also a classic case of the availability of a capability driving us to use it -- even though we soon recognized this use as having less than optimum effect.

The critical intelligence inadequacies which have plagued the GVN/U.S. effort despite the huge resources invested in overcoming them
are another product largely of institutional factors. The massive U.S. and ARVN military intelligence empires focused mostly on that with which they were most familiar, the size and location of enemy main-force units, to the neglect of such other vital targets as the opponent's politico-military control structure. We tended to see the enemy in our own image, one reason why we repeatedly thought we were doing better than we actually were.

On the civilian side the same tendency existed for the chief U.S. agencies involved to focus primarily on that with which they were most familiar. The State Department did not often deviate from its concept of normal diplomatic dealings with a sovereign allied government, not even when that government was falling apart. Similarly, State clung to a traditionalist view of civil-military relationships, and made little effort to assert control over our military effort on political grounds -- except with respect to limits on out-of-country military operations. State's concept of institution-building in Vietnam turned largely on encouragement of American democratic forms, a kind of mirror-imaging which proved hard to apply to the conditions of Vietnam. As for the Agency for International Development, though its operations were for the most part also quite conventional, the bulk of its resources went properly into a largely successful effort to prevent the inflationary consequences of the conflict from getting out of hand.

If it is understandable why our initial Vietnam responses were ill-suited to the atypical problems we confronted, why have they changed so little over years of bitter experience? Again it seems that institutional factors play a major role. Especially significant has been institutional inertia -- the built-in reluctance of organizations to change preferred ways of functioning except slowly and incrementally. Another such factor has been the shocking lack of institutional memory, largely because of short tours for U.S. personnel. Skewed incentive patterns also increased the pressures for conformity and tended to penalize adaptive response. And there was a notable dearth of systematic analysis of performance, again mainly because of the inherent reluctance of organizations to indulge in self-examination.
In sum, in an atypical situation that cried out for innovation and adaptation, a series of institutional constraints militated against them. For the most part, as Herman Kahn has aptly put it, Vietnam has reflected a "business as usual" approach. Bureaucratic inertia and other factors powerfully inhibited the learning process. In true bureaucratic fashion, each U.S. and GVN agency preferred doing more of what it was already used to doing, rather than change accepted patterns of organization or operation. All this contributed to the failure of the huge U.S. support and advisory effort to generate an adequate GVN and RVNAF response to the challenges faced. It also helps explain why the enormous direct U.S. contribution to the war -- almost 550,000 troops at peak, thousands of aircraft, and over $150 billion -- had such limited impact for so long.

Nor was there any integrated conflict management to pull together all the disparate aspects of the GVN/U.S. effort. By and large, the U.S. and the GVN each ran their share of the war with essentially a peacetime management structure -- in largely separate bureaucratic compartments. This had a significantly adverse impact on the prosecution of the war. Lack of any overall management structure contributed to its overmilitarization by facilitating the predominance of the GVN and U.S. military. It also contributed to the proliferation of overlapping GVN and U.S. programs -- to the point where they competed excessively for scarce resources and even got in each other's way. Meanwhile, counterinsurgency -- or pacification -- fell between stools; it was everybody's business and nobody's. Though many correctly analyzed the need for it, and it was from the outset a major component of GVN/U.S. declaratory strategy, the absence of a single agency or directing body charged with it contributed greatly to the prolonged failure to carry it out on any commensurate scale.

Last but not least, the lack of any combined command or management machinery seriously limited the ability of the Americans to exact better performance from the South Vietnamese. It deprived the U.S. of an institutional framework for exerting influence toward the solution of problems which it recognized as critical from the outset. In retrospect, the diffusion of authority and fragmentation of command that characterized
the efforts of both the GVN and the U.S. (and their interrelationship) provide yet other major reasons why it proved so hard to translate policy into practice or to convert our overwhelming superiority in men and resources into the results we sought.

Why did the U.S. and GVN settle for such conventional, diffuse, and fragmented management structures -- in strong contrast to an enemy who exerted centralized control over every facet of his activities? Institutional constraints again bulk large, including bureaucratic inertia, agency reluctance to violate the conventional dividing lines between their responsibilities, and hesitation to change the traditional relationship of civilian to military leadership. Whenever combined command was considered, the chief argument against it was essentially political -- that it would smack of colonialism. But also at issue was the natural preference of any institution to operate as an autonomous, homogeneous unit.

While U.S. performance in Vietnam is most notable for its sheer conventionality, some adaptive solutions tailored to specific problems were attempted -- and proved their utility more often than not. Unsurprisingly, such military adaptation as occurred tended to be either technological or in tactical means of utilizing new technology, e.g., helicopters or the sensors for the so-called "McNamara barrier."

Perhaps the chief example of large-scale institutional innovation has been the major GVN pacification program begun belatedly in 1967. To back it, the U.S. created an integrated civil-military advisory and support organization, almost unique in the Vietnam war. The gradual expansion of the overall U.S. advisory effort was another attempt at adaptive response. Compared to any previous such U.S. effort, that in Vietnam has been unprecedented in duration, extent, and comprehensiveness.

In assessing U.S. performance in Vietnam, it is also useful to pose the question of whether there was, within the political constraints imposed by the decisionmakers, a viable alternative approach to what we actually did. One such alternative approach -- which might be termed primary emphasis on a counterinsurgency strategy -- was repeatedly advocated, and indeed was given prominence in our Vietnam policy as early as 1955. Moreover, every program that might logically be regarded
as part of a counterinsurgency-oriented strategy was experimented with at one time or another.

But there was an immense gap between this policy emphasis and what was actually done in Vietnam. Counterinsurgency (or pacification) did not fail in Vietnam. Whatever policy called for, it simply was never tried on any major scale until 1967-1971. Before 1967 the U.S. and GVN devoted very little effort and resources to pacification-type programs; these were always dwarfed by the conventional military effort. For example, the U.S. input to the highly publicized Strategic Hamlet Program was farcically small. Even after 1967, pacification remained a small tail to the very large conventional military dog.

It was never tried on a large enough scale mainly because it was not part of the institutional repertoire of the major GVN and U.S. agencies involved in Vietnam. In effect, the GVN and U.S. lacked an institutional capability to carry it out. Having no major vested interest speaking for them, pacification-type programs were overshadowed from the outset by more conventional approaches. Another constraint was the lack, for too long, of any GVN or U.S. management structure to pull together the many facets of counterinsurgency and give them proper stress.

A predominantly counterinsurgency-oriented effort would have had its best chance for success before 1964-1965, when the insurgency escalated into quasiconventional war. Paradoxically, however, a reasonably effective pacification effort did not get under way until 1967-1968, when it belatedly became a modest complement to the raging big-unit war. Indeed, it is on the role which pacification played in the Vietnam turnaround of 1969-1971 that the case for a counterinsurgency-oriented strategy must chiefly rest. Even allowing for many other contributory factors, it demonstrates that vigorous emphasis on pacification was feasible and might have led to a more satisfactory outcome -- especially if undertaken much earlier. At the least, it is hard to see how it would have worked less well, cost nearly as much, or had such tragic side effects. But in the last analysis this must remain a historical "if."
If the preceding analysis of how institutional constraints impeded adaptive response is broadly valid, then many useful lessons can be drawn from it. Among the most important is that atypical problems demand specially tailored solutions, not just the playing out of existing institutional repertoires. The policymaker must take fully into account the ability of the institutions carrying out the policy to execute it as intended. Adequate follow-through machinery at all levels is also needed, to force adaptation if necessary. Where the U.S. is supporting an enfeebled ally, effective means of stimulating optimum indigenous performance are essential.

But our Vietnam experience also shows how difficult it is to translate such general -- and in hindsight obvious -- lessons into the requisite performance. This demands a consistent, deliberate effort to offset the inevitable tendency of bureaucracies to keep doing the familiar and to adapt only slowly and incrementally. In particular, such an effort requires: (1) specially selecting flexible and imaginative conflict managers at all levels; (2) revising training and incentive systems to place a higher premium on adaptiveness instead of the "school solution"; (3) setting up autonomous ad hoc organizations to manage specially tailored programs which are not in conventional organizational repertoires; (4) creating unified management at each level where multidimensional conflict situations dictate integrated multifaceted responses; (5) assigning adequate staffs to single managers; and (6) providing them with a capability for thorough evaluation and analysis.

Vietnam also suggests a series of practical guidelines if the U.S. is to get better performance from allies it is supporting than it managed to get in Vietnam. The United States must: (1) realize that such support, however massive, cannot be effectively utilized without viable indigenous institutions capable of carrying out the programs supported; (2) avoid "mirror-imaging" as a routine response; (3) where necessary, use the leverage provided by this support to ensure that it is optimally used; (4) specially tailor any U.S. advisory effort to the needs of the situation; (5) press the local government to create whatever special interagency machinery is required to manage multifaceted programs that
cut across normal agency lines; and (6) insist on some suitable form of combined management in the event -- unlikely under the Nixon Doctrine -- that the U.S. intervenes directly in a military conflict.

If these rather generalized lessons seem like restating the obvious, one need only recall how little we actually practiced them in Vietnam. Though by no means the whole answer, our failure to take adequately into account the many institutional constraints discussed in this study helps explain why, despite such a massive effort, the U.S. and GVN achieved so little for so long. Overcoming these constraints will be no easy matter, but perhaps our bitter Vietnam experience will lead us to face up to the potential costs of failing to make the effort entailed.
# CONTENTS

**PREFACE** ................................................................. iii

**SUMMARY** ........................................................................ v

**GLOSSARY** ................................................................. xvii

Chapter

1. **VIETNAM WAS DIFFERENT -- AND WE KNEW IT** ............. 1

2. **WHY DID WE DO SO POORLY?** .................................. 7
   - The Gap Between Policy and Performance .................. 7
   - The Incapacity of the Saigon Regime ...................... 10
   - The Incremental Nature of Our Approach .................. 11
   - The Role of Institutional Constraints ...................... 14

3. **THE FLAWED NATURE OF OUR CHOSEN INSTRUMENT** ....... 18
   - U.S. Failure To Move the GVN ............................. 21
   - The Issue of Leverage ........................................ 30

4. **INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS ON U.S. PERFORMANCE** .... 37
   - Overmilitarization of the War ............................... 38
   - Mirror-Imaging and Conventional Response -- 1954-1964 .. 41
   - The Military Play Out Their Institutional Repertoires .... 45
   - The Air War Against the North ............................. 49
   - The Strategy of Attrition ................................... 54
   - Intelligence Inadequacies .................................... 59
   - U.S. Civilian Agencies Also Play Out Their Institutional Repertoires ........................................ 60

5. **INSTITUTIONAL OBSTACLES TO THE LEARNING PROCESS** ... 64
   - Institutional Inertia ........................................... 65
   - Lack of Institutional Memory ............................... 67
   - Skewed Incentive Patterns ................................. 69
   - Inadequate Analysis of Performance ...................... 70

6. **LACK OF UNIFIED MANAGEMENT** ............................. 75
   - U.S. Conflict Management -- Who Ran the Store in Washington? ........................................ 79
   - Who Was in Charge in Saigon? ............................. 84
   - Weakness of GVN Conflict Management .................. 88
   - Why Such Fragmented Conflict Management? ............. 90
   - U.S. and GVN Fight Two Separate Wars .................. 94
   - Lack of Adequate Overall Plans ............................ 102

7. **ATTEMPTS AT ADAPTIVE RESPONSE** ........................ 106
   - Technological Innovation .................................... 107
   - Institutional Adaptation .................................... 108
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AID</td>
<td>Agency for International Development (also USAID)</td>
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<td>APC</td>
<td>Accelerated Pacification Campaign</td>
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<td>ARVN</td>
<td>Army of the Republic of Vietnam</td>
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<td>BAM</td>
<td>British Advisory Mission</td>
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<td>CAP</td>
<td>Combined Action Platoon</td>
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<td>CC</td>
<td>Civil Guard</td>
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<td>CIDG</td>
<td>Civilian Irregular Defense Group(s)</td>
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<td>CINCPAC</td>
<td>Commander-in-Chief, Pacific</td>
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<td>CIP</td>
<td>Counter-Insurgency Plan</td>
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<td>COMUSMACV</td>
<td>Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam</td>
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<td>CORDS</td>
<td>Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support</td>
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<td>DCFP</td>
<td>Defense Communications Planning Group</td>
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<td>DMZ</td>
<td>Demilitarized Zone</td>
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<td>DPM</td>
<td>Draft Presidential Memorandum</td>
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<td>DRV</td>
<td>Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam</td>
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<td>GVN</td>
<td>Government of (South) Vietnam</td>
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<td>JCS</td>
<td>Joint Chiefs of Staff</td>
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<td>JGS</td>
<td>Joint General Staff</td>
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<td>JUSMAG</td>
<td>Joint U.S. Military Advisory and Planning Group</td>
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<td>JUSPAO</td>
<td>Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office</td>
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<td>KMAG</td>
<td>Korean Military Advisory Group</td>
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<td>LOC</td>
<td>Line of Communication</td>
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<td>MAAG</td>
<td>Military Assistance Advisory Group</td>
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<td>MACV</td>
<td>Military Assistance Command, Vietnam</td>
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<td>MALT</td>
<td>Mobile Advisory Logistics Team</td>
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<td>MAP</td>
<td>Military Assistance Program</td>
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<td>MAT</td>
<td>Mobile Advisory Team</td>
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<td>MSUG</td>
<td>Michigan State University Advisory Group</td>
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<td>NLF</td>
<td>National Liberation Front</td>
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<td>NSAM</td>
<td>National Security Action Memorandum</td>
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<td>NSC</td>
<td>National Security Council</td>
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<td>NVA</td>
<td>North Vietnamese Army</td>
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<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Full Form</td>
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<tr>
<td>OCO</td>
<td>Office of Civil Operations</td>
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<td>OSD/SA</td>
<td>Office of the Secretary of Defense/Systems Analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>PF</td>
<td>Popular Forces</td>
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<td>PFF</td>
<td>Police Field Force</td>
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<td>POL</td>
<td>Petroleum, Oil, and Lubricants</td>
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<td>PROVN</td>
<td>Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam</td>
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<td>PSDF</td>
<td>People's Self-Defense Forces</td>
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<td>RD</td>
<td>Rural Development</td>
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<td>RF</td>
<td>Regional Forces</td>
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<td>RUSI</td>
<td>Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>RVNAF</td>
<td>Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces</td>
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<tr>
<td>SEA</td>
<td>Southeast Asia</td>
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<tr>
<td>SEATO</td>
<td>Southeast Asia Treaty Organization</td>
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<td>SDC</td>
<td>Self Defense Corps</td>
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<tr>
<td>SVN</td>
<td>South Vietnam</td>
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<tr>
<td>USAID</td>
<td>U.S. Agency for International Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>USG</td>
<td>U.S. Government</td>
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<tr>
<td>USOM</td>
<td>U.S. Operations Mission</td>
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<td>VC</td>
<td>Viet Cong</td>
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<td>VCI</td>
<td>Viet Cong Infrastructure</td>
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Any serious analysis of U.S. performance in the Vietnam war must start from explicit recognition of how different it was from any major conflict in previous U.S. experience. Each war is different from the last, but most will concede that Vietnam was much more different from Korea than, say, Korea was from World War II. By almost any standard, Vietnam presented a highly atypical conflict environment to the U.S. and its allies. As Samuel Huntington has pointed out, the situational characteristics of our Vietnamese entanglement were in many respects quite unique. The Vietnam problem was a legacy of Western colonial rule, which has just about disappeared from world politics. Vietnam was, in addition, the one European colony in which, for a variety of complex and unique historical factors, communist groups established an early ascendancy in the nationalist movement. In no other European colony — much less any American one — have communism and nationalism been more closely linked. The resulting problems were compounded by a combined heritage of Chinese and French cultural primacy which reinforced each other in emphasizing rule by an intellectual-administrative elite culturally and socially divorced from the mass of the population. The struggle for independence led to a divided country, again a sequence of events which seems unlikely to be duplicated in the future. Finally, the American involvement in Vietnam came at the end of a cycle of active American concern with foreign affairs which seems unlikely to be repeated for some time in the future.

Much more could be said about these many special circumstances — unique at least in U.S. experience — which made Vietnam so prickly a nettle. Not least among them were all the sheer practical problems of coping with an unfamiliar conflict environment, strange culture patterns, and the like. Almost as unfamiliar — at least in U.S. experience — was the very nature of the revolutionary conflict in which we became enmeshed: a largely political insurgency war. General Lewis Walt is a refreshingly candid witness on this score: "Soon after I arrived in Vietnam it became obvious to me that I had neither a real understanding
of the nature of the war nor any clear idea as to how to win it."2

We and the Government of South Vietnam (GVN), as heirs to the French, inherited their colonialist mantle—a disadvantage which Hanoi and the National Liberation Front (NLF) vigorously exploited. We suffered even more from the sharp contrast between the adversary we faced and the ally we supported—a tightly-controlled, ideologically disciplined regime in Hanoi and revolutionary Viet Cong apparatus versus a weak traditionalist regime barely governing a still half-formed nation in the South.3

Such unique circumstances do much to explain why the GVN, and later the United States, had such difficulty in coping with the threats which they confronted. They posed a whole series of real-life constraints, which largely determined what realistically could and could not be accomplished in Vietnam. Huntington concludes that they also may make Vietnam "irrelevant" as a source of lessons for the future. He warns about the danger of drawing "mislessons" from it.

It is true, of course, that "every historical event or confluence of events is unique," and its situational characteristics hardly likely to be precisely duplicated elsewhere.4 But even these unique circumstances are insufficient to explain why the U.S. and the GVN did so poorly for so long. Why is it that over sixteen years, with a massive investment of over $150 billion and direct intervention with over a half-million troops at peak, the U.S. has still been unable to devise a more successful response? Herein may lie some useful lessons of wider application, to which this study is addressed.

Moreover, the author is one of those who contend that to a great extent U.S. policymakers realized how different Vietnam was and what difficulties we faced. Under Secretary of State Ball was one well-known Cassandra, but there were many others. "There were all kinds of warnings that were heard and even listened to at the highest levels of government. At no point could anyone properly say, 'We didn't know it was loaded.'"5

Other analysts have also developed the thesis that the U.S. Government knew what it was getting into, although more with respect to how
the U.S. got progressively more enmeshed in Vietnam than with respect to its performance in the field. Take Leslie Gelb's fascinating "third hypothesis" that four Presidents and many of their advisers realized that the "minimal" steps they took were not adequate to solve the Vietnam problem, and that "perseverance more than optimism was the touchstone of each new step." Daniel Ellsberg makes a similar argument, though he carries it to strange lengths. The extensive documents cited in the so-called Pentagon Papers provide ample evidence that decisionmakers generally acted with their eyes open at each stage, with no lack of pessimistic advice that the measures decided upon were "long shots," which might not suffice. Even the Nixon Administration's subsequent Vietnam policy during 1969-1972 seems to fit into this mold.

We may have looked on Vietnam too much as an exercise in containing global Communist expansionism, but much evidence exists of realistic analysis and high-level grasp of the nature of the problem we confronted in Vietnam itself. After all, we had plenty of time to learn — including some twenty years between 1945 and our direct intervention in 1965. As far back as the French days, many were pointing out the essentially political nature of what began as an anticolonial struggle, became a revolutionary war, and evolved into more of an outside invasion as the revolution failed. Even in the early Fifties, the United States persistently urged France to build a legitimized and viable indigenous government as the key to the viability of a non-Communist Vietnam. From 1955 on, American stress on building such a government in Saigon is another case in point. By the late Fifties it was official doctrine that a major threat to Southeast Asia (SEA) was from externally supported insurgency. SEATO's second Annual Report, in 1957, stated that "subversion which has always been a major problem is the main threat we now face."8

The Pentagon Papers also amply document "the persistent pessimism about non-Communist prospects and about proposals for improving them, almost unrelieved, often stark — and in retrospect, creditably realistic, frank, cogent — that runs through the intelligence estimates and analyses from 1950 through 1961."9 The weakness of the Diem regime and its growing estrangement from the people were repeatedly pointed
out. The record is full of perceptive insights, not just from intelligence or outside sources but from inside the U.S. and GVN operating agencies as well. That by March 1964 this realism had permeated the highest echelons in Washington is evident from such somber analyses as that in National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 288.¹⁰

Nor was there any dearth of advice on how to fight insurgency through land reform, rural development programs, paramilitary and police techniques, resettlement (as in Malaya), or other unconventional means. For example, in early 1961, Kennedy saw a report from Brigadier General Edward Lansdale which dissented with vigor from both the strategy of the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) and its complacency. "Lansdale thought that it was essentially a guerrilla war and that it was going very badly."¹¹ He was a recurrent source of such advice, as were Rufus Phillips and George Tanham, who headed AID's rural programs in the early Sixties. Sir Robert Thompson and Dennis Duncanson, who for four years (1961-1965) headed a British Advisory Mission (BAM) in Saigon, gave operational advice based on Malayan experience to both the U.S. and the GVN. Even earlier (during 1956-1961) the Michigan State University Advisory Group was making similar suggestions.

The chief actors too -- Vietnamese and American -- were hardly unaware of the atypical nature of the conflict, the fact that it was not just another conventional limited war. John Kennedy with "counter-insurgency," Lyndon Johnson with his "other war," Robert McNamara in his trip reports, and many others sought broader focus. Harriman, Forrestal, and Hilsman in the early Sixties argued for a more rounded politico-military approach. According to Schlesinger, the doubters feared that "the more elaborate the American military establishment... the more it would be overwhelmed by brass, channels and paperwork, the more it would rely on conventional tactics, and the more it would compromise the Vietnamese nationalism of Diem's cause. Worse, the growth of the military commitment would confirm the policy of trying to win a political war by military means."¹² Ambassadors Durbrow, Taylor, Lodge, and Bunker were strong advocates of political reform and pacification, of strengthening GVN administration, or of going after the Viet Cong political
infrastructure. Lodge called the latter the "heart of the matter." All this was more than lip service. It was reflected in the policy documents and message traffic.

Of course, one can carry too far assertions about our broad perceptions. Certainly, some were far more perceptive than others, civilians perhaps more so than soldiers, as is hardly surprising in a basically political struggle. But almost from the outset, the civilians let Vietnam be looked at too much as a military problem, which unbalanced our response. While many perceived the essentially political and revolutionary nature of the conflict, we miscalculated both its full implications and what coping with it required. We consistently underestimated the strengths of the enemy and overestimated those of our GVN allies.

Politically, we failed to give due weight to the revolutionary dynamics of the situation, the popular appeal of the Viet Cong, the feebleness of the Diem regime, or the depth of factionalism among traditional Vietnamese elites. We only grasped belatedly the significance of the steady attrition of GVN authority and cadres in the countryside, an enfeeblement of political authority which was directly linked to how the Viet Cong conducted the war. Thus there were serious perceptual delays in our recognition of the extent of the threat. Administratively, neither the fledgling GVN nor its U.S. ally fully realized the crucial importance of effective civil administration to a viable counterinsurgency effort. Militarily, we underestimated the enemy's guerrilla and terror potential, Hanoi's ability to escalate, and the ability of the Viet Cong (VC) and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) to frustrate a much larger and better-equipped force by hit-and-run tactics stressing economy of force and evasion. One of our greatest military frustrations in Vietnam was the difficulty of pinning down an elusive enemy. And however well we perceived the key role of the Viet Cong political infrastructure, our detailed intelligence on it was exceedingly poor.

But the point here is that — however flawed our understanding of many crucial aspects of the problem we confronted may have been — we grasped the overall nature of the problem itself far better than our
accomplishments in dealing with it would suggest. Yet if, by 1960 at
any rate, we at least broadly perceived the atypical nature of the
Vietnam problem, why were we so slow to give adequate weight to it,
to enrich our operational understanding, and to translate this into
more responsive efforts of a type and on a scale more commensurate
with the need?
Hence, in analyzing our long and costly entanglement in Vietnam, it is important to look beyond why we intervened to the way we went about it. Whatever the wisdom of our intervention, why did we then proceed to deal with the problem so poorly for so long, first as adviser and banker to the French and then the South Vietnamese, and finally as the latter's senior partner? Even the severest critics of the Vietnam war should be interested in why the way in which we sought to cope with it had such limited impact while entailing such disproportionate costs and tragic side effects.

Surely it wasn't for lack of resources -- in money, machines, and men. Even allowing for many miscalculations, the disparity in strength and resources between the two contending sides would have suggested a different outcome, as indeed it did to successive U.S. administrations. Yet there emerged instead an equally great disparity between the cumulatively enormous U.S. input -- 550,000 troops at peak, thousands of aircraft, and $150 billion on top of South Vietnam's own great effort -- and the ambiguous results achieved. To cite General Taylor, "When one considers the vast resources committed to carrying out our Vietnam policy, the effective power generated therefrom seems to have been relatively small."¹

THE GAP BETWEEN POLICY AND PERFORMANCE

Regardless of what one thinks of U.S. policy in Vietnam, there has also been a yawning gap between this policy and its execution in the field. To read the rhetoric enshrined in official statements you might think that those who drafted them were often talking about a different war from the one we know. But more than rhetoric was involved. It is too simple to conclude that the answer lies mostly in politically motivated or deceptive public statements designed to cloak our real purposes. We now know enough of the classified documents and message traffic to realize that we meant what we said. Instead, what comes out
so strongly in the Pentagon Papers is the immense contrast between what high policy called for and what we actually did in Vietnam.

As General Taylor put it from his long Vietnam experience, "One of the facts of life about Vietnam was that it was never difficult to decide what should be done but it was almost impossible to get it done, at least in an acceptable period of time." What high policymakers in Washington and Saigon advocated or directed was often imperfectly executed, or not carried out at all. For example, U.S. policymakers saw very early how the paramount importance of "political" considerations meant that military "solutions" alone could not suffice. But the resultant U.S. policy stress on such counterinsurgency measures as political and socioeconomic reform, land distribution, pacification, and the like called for far greater GVN/U.S. emphasis on such efforts than was ever set in train -- at least until very late. This was perhaps the greatest gap between policy and performance; it is examined in Chapter VIII.

In these respects at least, Vietnam did prove a "quagmire" into which we floundered. Those who argue otherwise are talking about the policy aims that drove us rather than our performance in the field. It may well be that "our Presidents and most of those who influenced their decisions did not stumble step-by-step into Vietnam, unaware of the quagmire. U.S. involvement did not stem from a failure to foresee consequences." While we may have been aware of what we were getting into, however, we did sadly miscalculate our capability at each stage to achieve even the limited results expected from the limited steps we took. We grossly misjudged what we could actually accomplish with the huge resources we eventually invested, and thus became more and more caught up in a war we couldn't "win" the way we fought it. And instead of adapting our response to the atypical situation we confronted, we responded quite conventionally. When this response did not suffice, we escalated and counterescalated with more of the same -- right up to 1968. Hence our actual performance in Vietnam does indeed seem "marked much more by ignorance, misjudgement, and muddle than by foresight, awareness, and calculation." The "system" may have worked, but in terms of performance at any rate it worked poorly indeed.
Why was it so difficult for both the GVN and the U.S. to carry out effectively real-life programs which would meet the needs that were foreseen? As a perceptive reporter wrote in 1966, "experience has shown that the crucial matter is always execution rather than planning."\(^5\) Hilsman, addressing this question circa 1966, also contends that "If Vietnam does represent a failure of the Kennedy Administration, it was a failure in implementation." He sees the reasons why mostly in terms of the predilections of the chief Presidential advisers and field commanders, and of the bureaucratic politics involved:

A strategic concept of great promise for meeting guerrilla warfare was developed under President Kennedy -- a concept that has looked more and more appropriate in the light of subsequent events. But although many people in the Pentagon, in the Special Forces, and elsewhere in the armed services -- especially among company and field-grade officers -- became enthusiastic believers in the concept as a result of their personal experiences in the field, Secretary McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and many general officers were never more than lukewarm. General Harkins, for example, the commander in Vietnam, always acknowledged the importance of winning the allegiance of the people. But he never saw that the central principle of the concept was the need to subordinate military measures to a political and social program. What he apparently believed was not only that a regular war should be fought in Vietnam, but that it could be fought parallel to the necessary political and social program without destroying that program -- which was probably a mistake.

In any case, General Harkins was content to leave to someone else both the problem of pursuing the political and social struggle and the problem of seeing that military measures did not destroy it. As a result, the strategic concept was never fully implemented and military factors were emphasized over political.\(^6\)

But Hilsman's explanation too seems incomplete. Among other things, it puts excessive emphasis on the existence of a clear counterinsurgency concept easily translatable into program (see Chapter VIII), and leaves out the issue of whether any U.S. strategy, however well conceived and vigorously implemented, could have been effectively carried out by the South Vietnamese (see Chapter III). It also focuses too heavily on personalities.
Granted that many failures of leadership at various times and at various levels marred the checkered history of our involvement in Vietnam. But it is too simple to ascribe our Vietnam travail primarily to bad leadership that failed to come to grips with the unique "situational characteristics" already mentioned. There were yet other factors, which created obstacles difficult for even the most enlightened U.S. leadership to have overcome. Hence we need to probe further to find out why it proved so difficult to translate perception into policy, policy into program, and program into practice in a manner commensurate with felt needs.

The reasons are many, complex, and interacting. Much has already been written about them, none of it sufficiently comprehensive. In seeking to add a new dimension to Vietnam critiques, this paper too will essay only partial explanations. They lie in the realm of various built-in constraints which greatly inhibited the translation of perception into policy, policy into program, and program into performance.

**THE INCAPACITY OF THE SAIGON REGIME**

In retrospect, perhaps the greatest single constraint on the United States' ability to achieve its aims in Vietnam was the sheer incapacity of the regimes we backed -- at least up to 1968. Few critics seem to give enough prominence to the feebleness of the instrument through which the U.S. would have to achieve these aims -- and to its consequent vulnerability to insurgent attack. Moreover, the insurgents could concentrate singlemindedly on disrupting and destroying the GVN's authority, while that government and its U.S. ally had to pursue dual and often conflicting purposes: defeating the insurgency and simultaneously building a viable modern state. This dualism confronted the GVN and U.S. with a series of painful counterinsurgency dilemmas, as aptly pointed out by Tanham and Duncanson. The constraints imposed by the inability or unwillingness of the GVN to rise to these challenges, and the inability or reluctance of the U.S. to force the GVN to face up to them, are discussed in Chapter III.
In another category lie the wide range of political, financial, and resource constraints — usually arising from deliberate policy choice — which set limits from the outset on how the U.S. chose to deal with the Vietnam problem. They include the many careful limits imposed on out-of-country bombing and other operations, force-level decisions, financial ceilings, and the like. Though crucially important, they are not the subject of this paper, and hence will be mentioned only briefly. Whether or not this policy of gradualism was sound is not at issue either, though many critics — particularly among the military — argue that it seriously constricted our Vietnam performance. They contend that had we done more sooner (and called up the reserves, as the Joint Chiefs repeatedly suggested), we would have broken the enemy's back. Other critics counter that quicker escalation would have availed us little and would only have escalated the costs.

Whatever the merits of these arguments, there is little doubt that such policy constraints led to a cautious and deliberate incrementalism in the U.S. approach to the Vietnam problem. The myth of reckless escalation does not square with the facts. Even up to the present, gradualism has been the order of the day, with each step usually long agonized over beforehand. And it is mostly in retrospect that this appears so costly. As a result, Vietnam hardly appears as a "crusade." An "orphan war," as Phil Geyelin called it, seems more apt. Despite all the defensive rhetoric, it was precisely the opposite of a "great patriotic war" (to borrow the Soviet term). Instead of mobilizing, calling up reserves, whipping up patriotic zeal, successive U.S. administrations took a quite different course.

Gelb has documented the compelling hypothesis that each U.S. President involved "essentially played the role of brakeman... Each did only what was minimally necessary at each stage to keep Vietnam and later South Vietnam out of Communist hands." Hence direct U.S. military intervention in 1965 was not an early choice but a late desperate rescue effort. For eighteen years, 1948 to 1965, it had been U.S. policy not to intervene directly, but rather to use the French and then
the fledgling Republic of Vietnam as proxies. We tried for a "Vietnamized" solution under Diem and his successors for an entire decade, placing main reliance on an effort to build a viable South Vietnam able to defend itself. This effort too was marked by gradualism, expanding slowly, step by step. Direct intervention came only as a last resort when this effort seemed on the brink of collapse and when the NVA was infiltrating to administer the coup de grace. By that time, the U.S. had little choice but to intervene or permit the GVN to collapse.

After we intervened, the policy of gradualism continued, reinforced by our conscious acceptance of limited war constraints in a nuclear age. Every U.S. administration was agreed on one thing -- minimizing any risk of a direct confrontation with Peking or Moscow which might escalate out of all proportion to the stakes in Southeast Asia. This dilemma still persists. Our understandable reluctance to risk a widening of the war led to great care in avoiding precipitate escalation outside South Vietnam, but also long allowed the enemy the great advantage of safe external sanctuaries. The restrictions on bombing, mining, and blockade in the North and on attacking sanctuaries in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia severely constrained the military strategy the generals preferred.

There are numerous other examples of incrementalism -- of doing only what was believed minimally necessary at each stage. Witness the slow and carefully measured expansion of the bombing targets in the North, or the careful doling out of each new increment of U.S. troops over a four-year period. Though President Johnson has been severely criticized for escalating the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, it must be recognized that at every stage he and Secretary McNamara carefully pruned the military's requests.

Their policy of gradualism sprang from many motives -- a U.S. Government reluctantly opting for direct intervention only after all else had failed, a President striving to balance the domestic demands of a "Great Society" against what he initially hoped would be a modest military commitment and thus anxious not to arouse undue Congressional or public alarm, an Administration careful to avoid risky confrontation with Peking or Moscow, a Secretary of Defense determined to fight a
cost-effective war and concerned (as were the Joint Chiefs of Staff -- JCS) by the distortions of our global strategic posture forced by a growing conflict in Southeast Asia, principals and advisers at all levels hopeful that yet another tranche of U.S. forces or step-up in bombing would turn the tide. At the least, it was wishfully thought that the other side would be intimidated and deterred by each succeeding demonstration of our resolve.

Have we here another institutional characteristic, the oft-remarked tendency of both professional analysts and policymakers to assume what has been called a "rational process model" of the adversary's behavior? Didn't we tend to assume that no sensible enemy would continue the unequal battle once the U.S. had committed its enormous power and shown its willingness to escalate? We believed that the enemy would react as we would have if confronted with similarly overwhelming strength. In a sense this did reflect a form of arrogance of power -- an implicit conviction, born of our misconceptions, that throwing so much U.S. weight into the balance could not help but make the difference. Stanley Hoffmann has commented tellingly on how many forms of hubris affected our policies and perceptions vis-à-vis Vietnam.12

The GVN's approach to the war was almost as much characterized by gradualism as that of the U.S. Aside from its feeble administrative capabilities, the fledgling GVN also operated under a series of political constraints. Diem's sense of insecurity made him highly reluctant to delegate power. He proved consistently unwilling to take steps to improve GVN war-winning capabilities that would interfere with maintenance of his domestic political stance. Xenophobic nationalism also influenced the policy of Saigon (as it did that of Hanoi), and often spurred rejection of U.S. proposals. The GVN was reluctant to antagonize such backers as the landlords and merchants by vigorous land reform, anticorruption campaigns, or stiff tax and monetary measures. It also regularly advanced political concerns in stalling U.S. suggestions for full manpower mobilization, until after the shock of Tet 1968.
THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS

The cautious incrementalism of both GVN and U.S. responses is but one example of how both governments seem all too often to have taken the line of least resistance in dealing with the threat they faced. Looking back, one is struck by how often we Americans in particular did the thing that we had the most readily available capability to do, whether or not it was the most relevant. Whatever overall policy called for, the means available tended to dictate what we actually did. All this is quite understandable (see Chapter IV), but it meant that we often failed to face up to the hard choices until very late in the day.

To oversimplify, our policy called for creating a viable, effective GVN, but when frustrated in this aim we settled for living with what we could get, rather than try harder. Or, while initial U.S. policy was to create a GVN internal security capability, this became distorted in practice into building a conventional Vietnamese army (see Chapter VIII). When the GVN and ARVN failed miserably in coping with insurgency, we came to their rescue and tried to do the job for them. But we too responded conventionally, and helped convert an insurgency conflict into a quasiconventional war. We employed U.S. air and ground power massively, largely because we had the capability readily available.

Again we must search further for the reasons why. Not even all the mistakes in leadership nor the panoply of constraints already mentioned -- the atypical conflict environment of Vietnam, the flawed nature of the regimes we backed, the gradualist approach we took -- quite suffice in themselves to explain fully the gap between what we saw was needed and what we did about it. There was still great room to maneuver -- to adapt our responses more quickly to the needs we claimed to see. But somehow we did not. What else helped make our responses so conventional, so slow to evolve, and so ineffective for so long?

There needs to be added yet another set of real-life constraints which made it doubly difficult to adjust to the practical problems of coping with an unfamiliar conflict environment, and greatly influenced
what we could and could not, or would and would not, do. While by no means the whole answer, these constraints reflected patterns of organizational behavior which did much to make our approaches ill-suited to the needs, impeded the translation of policy into practice, and inhibited innovation and adaptation. They helped render the U.S./GVN response to an unconventional insurgency/guerrilla war unduly conventional, expensive, and slow to adapt.

This added perspective -- so often missing from critical analyses of U.S. performance -- is essential to understanding what was done and why it failed, or succeeded, in Vietnam. It is what is primarily addressed in this study. But the role of institutional constraints in how we dealt with the Vietnam problem so conventionally should not be overdramatized. It was only one of many factors. Nor should the following observations on various institutional aspects of the GVN/U.S. performance be taken as advancing any theory of bureaucratic determinism as the prime explanation of our failures in Vietnam. Their purpose is rather to set in train another line of pragmatic inquiry into a so far neglected dimension of the Vietnam war.

Moreover, the institutional constraints discussed herein are by no means peculiar to our Vietnam experience. They are characteristics inherent to a greater or lesser degree in the behavior patterns of large hierarchically organized institutions -- private or public, civilian or military, American or foreign. If we are to understand their import, we must recognize them for what they are. Though calling such institutions "bureaucracies," their personnel "bureaucrats," and their processes "bureaucratic" often has pejorative implications, this is not intended here. Instead such terms are simply used herein to describe organizations that are organized hierarchically -- as most inevitably are -- and the way in which they typically behave.

Such institutional behavior patterns are naturally least constraining when organizations are performing familiar roles and missions for which they were designed. They are far more constraining when such organizations confront atypical situations with which they are not designed or equipped to cope. This is what happened in Vietnam. Each organization inevitably tended to make policy conform in practice to
that with which it was most familiar -- to play out its standard, organizational repertoire. Each reflected that fact of institutional life cited by an anonymous White House aide who wrote that "bureaucracy as a form of organization tends to contort policy to existing structures rather than adjusting structures to reflect change in policy." Vietnam further demonstrates that the way in which an organization will use its existing capabilities is governed largely by its own internal goals, performance standards, and measurement and incentive systems -- even when these conflict with the role it is assigned.

The Vietnam experience is also a prime example of how, other things being equal, the larger and/or most dynamic of several institutions will tend to dominate the others, to crowd them to one side; in Vietnam, the U.S. and GVN military were both the largest and the most "can do" organizations involved. Moreover, it reflects yet another hallmark of bureaucracy -- resistance to change -- and, of course, the larger the institution the greater this inertial force. These constraints are discussed in Chapters IV-V below.

Lastly, the institutional constraints created by the way the U.S. Government dealt with the war in largely separate bureaucratic compartments, with little attention to unified management, diluted managerial focus and impeded adaptation to the special circumstances of Vietnam. As Stanley Hoffmann has commented tellingly, such diffusion of responsibility in Washington and the field often leaves the impression of Washington "being in the same position President Truman uncharitably predicted his successor would find himself in -- giving instructions, thinking that the policy is being carried out, and then discovering that little is happening." As is illustrated in Chapters VI and VIII, this was unfortunately all too often the case in Vietnam.

Nor were all these problems peculiar to the Americans. Most of the same institutional constraints were also at work on the GVN side -- civil and military. Underlying them all, of course, were the fundamental GVN inadequacies earlier discussed. If anything, the Vietnamese response to a growing insurgency challenge was even more institutionally hidebound than that of the U.S. Militarily, most ARVN commanders seem to have been even less flexible than their American advisers or, since
1965, than their U.S. counterparts -- in strong contrast to an enemy also Vietnamese. In this respect they were powerfully influenced by French and then American training, equipment, and advice. So they too played out the institutional repertoires we gave them, rather than adapting themselves to meeting insurgency in Vietnam.

All this is what Henry Kissinger seems to be getting at in assessing our failures in Vietnam:

It seems to me that many of our difficulties in Vietnam have turned out to be conceptual failures; and almost all of our concepts, the military ones as well as some of the traditional liberal ones, have really failed, and failed for two reasons.

One of these reasons is that many of them were irrelevant to the situation. Secondly, they failed for a reason that requires careful study: the degree to which our heavy, bureaucratic, and modern government creates a sort of blindness in which bureaucracies run a competition with their own programs and measure success by the degree to which they fulfill their own norms, without being in a position to judge whether the norms made any sense to begin with.16
If any generalization can be made about the war in South Vietnam it is that the U.S. effort, both military and political, prospered to the extent that the government of Vietnam was strong, coherent, and active. The corollary, of course, is that none of our efforts had any chance of success in the periods during which the government was weak, divided, and thus ineffective.\textsuperscript{1}

Though these prefatory words to General Westmoreland’s final report may smack to some of an apologia, they suggest how Vietnam’s recurrent coups and other political problems "were as important and in some cases more important than the unfolding of the tactical situation on the ground."\textsuperscript{2} In the last analysis, the U.S. effort in Vietnam -- at least through 1967 -- failed largely because it could not sufficiently revamp or adequately substitute for a South Vietnamese leadership, administration, and armed forces inadequate to the task. Nor is it to excuse our own errors to point out that, despite all the help provided, the regimes we backed proved -- at least up to the 1968 Tet shock -- incapable of coping with the threat they faced. In retrospect, this has been perhaps the greatest single constraint on the ability of the United States to achieve its aims. As George Ball put it in his well-known June 1965 memorandum on "Cutting Our Losses in South Vietnam," "Hanoi has a government and a purpose and a discipline. The 'government' in Saigon is a travesty. In a very real sense, South Vietnam is a country with an army and no government."\textsuperscript{3}

Though historical analogies are always imperfect, Stilwell and the American Experience in China, 1911-1945 recounts the similar frustrations we confronted at an earlier point in time.\textsuperscript{4} Presumed U.S. responsibility for the "loss" of China has also occasioned vicious controversy. But one cannot read Barbara Tuchman’s book without realizing that a key reason for "the waste of an immense American effort" was the nonviability of the inept and faction-ridden regime of Chiang Kai-shek. Like Diem and his early successors, Chiang was far more concerned over his position vis-à-vis other Chinese factions than he was
intent on defeating the Japanese. Much as later in Vietnam, there was no dearth of official U.S. reporting of mounting deterioration and dissidence. Again as in Vietnam, "China's misgovernment was not so much a case of absolute as of ineffective rule." Tuchman concludes that Stilwell's mission failed in its ultimate purpose because the goal was unachievable. The impulse was not Chinese. . . . China was a problem for which there was no American solution. The American effort to sustain the status quo could not supply an outworn government with strength and stability or popular support. It could not hold up a husk nor long delay the cyclical passing of the mandate of heaven. In the end China went her own way as if the Americans had never come.

Will the same hold true of Vietnam, even though the American input has been far greater and the immensity of the obstacles far less? It remains to be seen whether even the present Saigon government can long survive U.S. disengagement. In the China case, of course, a war-weary America balked at bailing out Chiang via massive military intervention. But neither in China nor in Vietnam did U.S. leaders (Stilwell being a major exception) make sufficient effort to come to grips with these key problems instead of trying to go around them in some way.

These problems go far deeper than the weaknesses of charismatic leaders, important as these may be. They seem largely endemic in traditional preindustrial societies struggling to enter the modern age. True, they can be solved. Both the Peking and Hanoi regimes appear to have done so, if at a staggering human price. The British also solved them in Malaya, though under much more favorable circumstances than the U.S. faced in Vietnam. Moreover, in Vietnam the U.S. was plagued from the outset of its ill-starred entanglement by a factionalism which a knowledgeable firsthand observer has called "the most constant characteristic of Vietnamese society."

Lack of much effectively functioning administrative machinery was also a major handicap. A truncated new nation just created by compromise at the 1954 Geneva Conference, South Vietnam would have faced a host of problems even if no VC challenge had arisen. Its feeble
institutions mostly were left over from the French colonial regime, but without the French administrators who had managed them. After a hopeful start in 1954-1957, the new and untried government of Ngo Dinh Diem proved increasingly incapable of governing effectively, much less of simultaneously meeting a growing insurgent challenge. The tangled story of the Diem regime's failure is well known. Indeed, given its weaknesses, it probably only lasted as long as it did because it was "one of the largest recipients of U.S. economic and military assistance in the world."\(^9\)

If the fledgling GVN under Diem gradually came to take the mounting insurgency seriously, it did so more slowly than the Americans. Despite U.S. urging, it failed to gear up politically, militarily, economically, or administratively to meet the needs it increasingly recognized. Duncanson vividly describes the weaknesses and inadequacies of the Diem regime's early halting efforts.\(^11\) The feeble administrative structure outside the cities was allowed to erode further. The GVN launched a plethora of programs, but built no adequate administrative machinery to carry them out. It made all too little effort to compete with the Viet Cong in the vital countryside, until the belated Strategic Hamlet Program of 1962-1963. And this too failed largely for administrative reasons; all too much of it remained on paper.

The Pentagon Papers convey an overwhelming impression of growing American frustration and eventual disillusionment with Diem. Though eager for U.S. aid, he proved basically resistant to advice on how to use it from either his own Vietnamese advisers or U.S. and British advisers on the scene. While the U.S. eventually acquiesced in the fall of Diem, its trials did not end there. The generals who succeeded him -- at least till June 1965 -- were certainly no more competent. Nor can one ignore the destabilizing impact of the Diem regime's demise and the recurrent coups of 1963-1965. The resulting turmoil further undermined South Vietnam's ability to combat the VC, and to a considerable extent forced the U.S. to choose between intervening and largely Americanizing the war, and seeing the GVN collapse. Not until the end of the Buddhist affair in Central Vietnam, in May 1966, did even relative GVN stability return.
Some of the most telling practical Vietnam critiques have been written by what one of its chief exponents calls the "administrative" school of counterinsurgency: mostly Britons with long field experience in Malaya as well as Vietnam. One of them argues that "the decisive factor" which brought about Diem's demise was "his ignorance [of] how to administer the ordinary machinery of government over which he presided..." In retrospect, it is hard to fault their conclusion that, despite all the massive help which the U.S. provided, the lack of a sufficiently viable, functioning government was a crucial handicap. Nor, throughout our long involvement in Vietnam, do we Americans seem to have made an adequate effort to remedy this vital flaw.

U.S. FAILURE TO MOVE THE GVN

To what extent was GVN failure a U.S. failure too? The ambiguous record of sixteen years of U.S. dealings with the Saigon regime as its protector, banker, supplier, adviser, and finally wartime partner is largely known. But even in hindsight it is difficult to evaluate how much our failure to move the GVN was owing to the intractable nature of the problem, and how much to the way we went about it. Nor is it at all clear that what aid and advice the GVN did accept from us was wisely given in the first place; this issue is addressed in Chapter IV below. (Some of the successes and failures of the unprecedented U.S. field advisory effort are discussed in Chapter VII.)

In analyzing such questions, three separable periods must be considered. The first of these was 1954-1964, ten years in which we tried to build up a GVN and an ARVN that could stand on their own feet. Second was the 1965-1968 period of direct U.S. intervention and escalation, in which we largely pushed the South Vietnamese to one side and tried to win the war for them. Last is the period of U.S. disengagement beginning with the partial halt of bombing in the North, during which we have again placed great emphasis on "Vietnamization." The first period ended in clear failure, the second was more mixed, on the third the verdict is not yet in; and we seem to have entered a fourth period in which, subsequent
to U.S. ground disengagement but with continued U.S. air and logistic backing, the GVN's ability to survive on its own is again being tested.

The *Pentagon Papers* reveal how U.S. officials tried harder than is often realized to get Diem and his successors to deal more effectively with the threat they faced. This effort began with Diem's accession to power in 1954, and involved a series of advisory efforts, not just by the official U.S. Mission, but the Michigan State University Group in 1956-1961 and a talented British Advisory Mission under Sir Robert Thompson and Dennis Duncanson during 1961-1965.

Some U.S. officials tried harder than others. Ambassador Durbrow (1957-1961) pressed Diem so hard on corruption, reform, and other issues that he was almost declared *persona non grata*. By late 1960, when his repeated efforts proved mostly unavailing, Durbrow began urging pressure on Diem and warning that alternative leadership might be needed. In early 1961, the new Kennedy Administration tried to tie reforms to increased aid under the Counter-Insurgency Plan (CIP) worked out by U.S. agencies during 1960. But the U.S. got almost nowhere, though it held up the new aid for some months in an effort to get Diem to act. So, in May, the U.S. decided to stop pressuring Diem and instead try to "coax him into reforming by winning his confidence." In effect, we decided to "sink or swim with Ngo Dinh Diem," believing that no viable alternative existed. Despite his continued obduracy and declining grip, we redoubled our assistance. This, and Durbrow's replacement by Ambassador Frederick Nolting in 1961 to carry out the new policy, convinced Diem and Nhu that the U.S. had no other option, which cost us heavily in 1961-1963.

When the crisis deepened, Kennedy sent the Taylor-Rostow Mission to Vietnam in October 1961. It made many recommendations for greater U.S. aid, which Washington again decided to "make contingent on Diem's acceptance of a list of reforms; further Diem was to be informed that if he accepted the program the U.S. would expect to 'share in decision-making ... rather than advise only.'" General Taylor proposed that, along with increased U.S. aid, there should be "a shift in the American relation to the Vietnamese effort from advice to limited
partnership," but a shift to be brought about via persuasion rather than pressure. Even so the President decided to ask for quid pro quos, on the recommendation of Rusk and McNamara. Greater U.S. support was to be conditioned on GVN "undertakings" to (a) put the GVN "on a wartime footing to mobilize its entire resources"; (b) establish "appropriate governmental wartime agencies with adequate authority to perform their functions effectively"; and (c) overhaul "the military establishment and command structure so as to create an effective military organization for the prosecution of the war." Here was the culmination of all the reform recommendations that the U.S. had been making for the previous two years.

But the result was even then predicted by Ambassador J. K. Galbraith, whom Kennedy had asked to stop off in Vietnam. He quickly wired back that, as indispensable as these changes were to GVN success in coping with the insurgency, there was scarcely any chance of getting them in fact:

We have just proposed to help Diem in various ways in return for a promise of administrative and political reforms. Since the administrative (and possibly political) ineffectuality are the strategic factors for success, the ability to get reforms is decisive. With them the new aid and gadgetry will be useful. Without them the helicopters, planes and advisers won't make appreciable difference.

In my completely considered view ... Diem will not reform either administratively or politically in any effective way. That is because he cannot. It is politically naive to expect it. He senses that he cannot let power go because he would be thrown out. He may disguise this even from himself with the statement that he lacks effective subordinates but the circumstance remains unchanged.

Galbraith was prescient. He clearly favored getting rid of Diem, and found even military leadership a preferable alternative (we were not to get around to acquiescing in this until late 1963). He correctly predicted that Diem would not do what the U.S. thought was necessary. And indeed "it did not take long for Washington to back away from any hard demands on Diem." Thus ended another futile episode in the U.S. attempt to get the GVN to gear up for a conflict which, we concluded at that time, only the GVN itself could win.
Only in late 1963, after Nolting had in turn been replaced by Lodge, did the growing deterioration of the situation lead the U.S. to decide finally "to coerce Diem into a compliance with U.S. wishes."

"Thus, the Kennedy Administration . . . had made a far-reaching decision. . . . It had chosen to take the difficult and risky path of positive pressures against an ally to obtain from him compliance with our policies." In October 1963, while McNamara and Taylor were in Saigon, they and Lodge vetoed the draft of a tough Presidential letter to Diem that in effect laid down an ultimatum -- either the Diem regime must change its repressive policies, or the U.S. might have to consider pulling out, or at least disassociating itself from Diem. Instead, they proposed a series of lesser measures to "coerce" Diem, including a "selective suspension of economic aid." Lodge did withhold such aid, and saw signs that it was bringing Diem around. Before this effort reached fruition, however, it helped trigger the army coup brewing against Diem, which led to his death.

The U.S. hoped that the generals who succeeded Diem would be able to strengthen the GVN and make it more united and effective. What happened instead was six changes of government up to June 1965, which only hastened the deterioration:

In 1964 the U.S. tried to make GVN strong, effective, and stable, and it failed. When the U.S. offered more aid, GVN accepted it without improving; they promised to mobilize, but failed to speed up the slow buildup of their forces. When the U.S. offered a firmer commitment to encourage them, including possible later bombing of North Vietnam, the GVN tried to pressure us to do it sooner. When the U.S. endorsed Khanh, he overplayed his hand, provoked mob violence, and had to back down to a weaker position than before. When Taylor lectured them and threatened them, the ruling generals of GVN defied him, and allied themselves with the street rioters. After several changes of government in Vietnam, the U.S. could set no higher goal than GVN stability. During this period, the USG was already starting to think about doing the job ourselves if our Vietnamese ally did not perform.

. . . the generals proved to he less than perfectly united. They found they had to bow to the power of student and Buddhist street mobs, and they lacked the will and the ability to compel the civil government to perform. Yet, the U.S. saw no alternative but to back them -- to put up
with Vietnamese hypersensitivity, their easy compliance combined with non-performance, and their occasional defiance. Moreover, MACV was even less ready to pressure the generals than was the Embassy and the Embassy less willing than Washington.25

Throughout 1964 various Washington civilian officials raised ways of pushing the CVN harder, such as seeking a greater U.S. role in the CVN machinery and tying U.S. aid to CVN commitments. But the U.S. Mission in Saigon generally adopted a go-slow response.26 Junta chief General Minh himself proposed a "brain trust" of high level U.S. advisers, but this was stalled when Khanh ousted Minh.27 When McNamara urged manpower mobilization, Khanh signed a decree, but it was never implemented.28 In May 1964 Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Sullivan urged integrating Americans into the CVN civil and military structure at all levels instead of having them operate as advisers, but this was soon watered down.29 At the June 1964 Honolulu Conference, Lodge and Westmoreland opposed "a more formal joint USG/CVN organization at the top" or "'encadrement' which would move U.S. personnel directly into decisionmaking roles."30 In any case, what the Mission did propose in 1964 met with general CVN agreement in principle but little if any response in practice.

Though increasingly frustrated by chaos in the CVN, the Americans feared that pressure tactics might only backfire and hasten its collapse. Their concern was heightened by reports of infiltration from the North. The tone of policy assessments in 1964-1965 is one of growing fear that a feeble CVN and ARVN were increasingly unable to defend themselves and that the U.S. would have to find some other means of checking Hanoi.31 The JCS solution was to recommend "strong military actions."32 But once more, at Ambassador Taylor's urging, the U.S. (as in 1961) sought to use any direct U.S. actions as bargaining leverage for CVN reforms.33 He was warmly supported by President Johnson, who "made it clear that he considered that pulling the South Vietnamese together was basic to anything else the United States might do." The President asked Taylor whether we could not tell them "we just can't go on" unless they did pull together.34 Taylor was instructed to impress on the CVN that U.S.
actions against North Vietnam (which were quite modest at this point) could not be taken until certain GVN steps to increase its effectiveness occurred. Taylor carefully explained this to the new civilian Premier (Tran Van Huong) in December 1964, requesting "nine specific GVN actions." The Pentagon Papers' comment is that "this was the last time the USG tried to set GVN performance preconditions for U.S. force use and deployments. Its effect, if any, was the opposite of that intended."35

The exercise was short-circuited by a military move to take power back from Huong's civilian cabinet, thus directly flouting the U.S. position that the GVN should preserve unity. When Taylor sternly admonished Khanh and the generals, he was publicly repudiated by Khanh and almost declared persona non grata. The U.S. suspended joint talks and planning, which apparently made the generals back down.36 But in January 1965 the generals did oust Huong, and the U.S., fearing collapse or neutralism in Saigon, let it happen.37 Thus on yet another occasion U.S. "insistence on an effective GVN along lines specified by the United States had been eroded."38

Duncanson, retrospectively assessing U.S. failure to move the GVN during the decade before we intervened directly, includes as reasons the lack of a specific intergovernmental agreement tying U.S. aid to GVN performance, U.S. misperception of the reforms needed as political rather than administrative, and the lack of administrative knowhow on the part of U.S. advisers. But to him "the crux of the failure" was

... want of coordination and want of direction in the application of aid and advice... What the Vietnamese Government was most in need of after independence was minds able to grasp its structure and machinery as a working whole and to see the separate functions of its parts in relation to each other, not in laboratory isolation. Diem and Nhu were not of that calibre; the U.S. felt no duty to seek a way of making good the deficiency -- felt rather a duty not to interfere, but to treat "defense of freedom" as a problem separate from that of governing Vietnam.39
He concludes that

... aid and advice without any formal agreement to ensure consistent policy, coordination, and guidance, which ill-wishers might have condemned as "colonialism," tended to harden the defects of the Diem regime rather than to correct them, and to reinforce its defeats.40

In lieu of further pressures on a feeble, unresponsive, and now coup-ridden GVN, the U.S. felt compelled by the deteriorating situation to step in and take over the war. The first ROLLING THUNDER air strike against North Vietnam ushered in the new period of direct U.S. intervention. When the U.S. intervened, the nature of its concern over GVN effectiveness changed too:

As the U.S. role increased and then predominated, the need for GVN effectiveness in the now and short run received less attention. The U.S. would take care of the war now -- defeat the enemy main forces and destroy Hanoi's will to persist -- then, the GVN could and would reform and resuscitate itself. . . .

This view -- a massive U.S. effort in the short-run leading to and enabling a GVN effort in the long-run -- set the tone and content of U.S.-GVN relations. In policy terms, it meant caution in the use of U.S. leverage. There seemed to be no compelling requirement to be tough with Saigon; it would only prematurely rock the boat. To press for efficiency would be likely, it was reasoned, to generate instability. Our objective became simple: if we could not expect more GVN efficiency, we could at least get a more stable and legitimate GVN.41

In this limited sense, U.S. policy toward the GVN may be said to have worked. There was a return to at least relative political stability after June 1965 under the Ky/Thieu regime, marred only by the abortive Buddhist troubles in I Corps in the spring of 1966. The U.S. was successful in promoting the 1966 election of a constituent assembly. It drafted a new constitution, which led in turn to the election of Thieu/Ky and a new National Assembly in September 1967. Also reasonably successful were the U.S.-sponsored economic stabilization measures (especially the June 1966 devaluation) rendered essential by the inflationary impact of a burgeoning U.S. military presence. Through
its control of aid allocations, and by requiring joint planning and approval of GVN programs before it would provide indispensable aid and advisory support, the U.S. exerted considerable influence over their design. It was even possible in 1967 to get a new GVN pacification program belatedly under way (see Chapter VII).

Yet even in 1965-1967 many of the reformist measures that the U.S. got the GVN to undertake proved more promise than performance. Nor did the U.S. during this period ever use the full weight of the leverage provided by its massive aid to impel the GVN to better performance. Instead, the U.S. took over the main burden of prosecuting the war, relegating the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) to a secondary role and devoting comparatively less policy emphasis to GVN or RVNAF improvement than during 1954-1964 (although the actual resources that went into this were much greater than before). We also, in our frustration, tended to push the GVN to one side. Perhaps typical was the thought expressed in Assistant Secretary McNaughton's July 1965 memorandum to a special JCS study group tasked to study what was needed to win in Vietnam: "Is it necessary for us to make some assumption with respect to the nature of the Saigon government? ... My own thought is that almost anything within the realm of likelihood can happen in the Saigon government, short of the formation of a government which goes neutral or asks us out, without appreciably affecting the conduct of the war." 42

On the other hand, most experienced observers on the scene have noted a marked improvement in overall GVN administrative performance beginning with Tet 1968. In part this is attributable to increased U.S. advisory influence and, occasionally, pressure. In part it is simply that the earlier efforts, of 1965-1967, began to bear more fruit over time. But even greater influences on GVN behavior were the twin shocks of Hanoi's Tet and post-Tet offensives and the resultant clear beginning of U.S. deescalation.

Thus in a way Tet 1968 marks a watershed for the GVN as well as for the U.S. effort in Vietnam. GVN realization that a far greater effort on its part would be required to survive finally led to actual national manpower mobilization, extensive training programs for local officials,
a major acceleration of pacification efforts, several economic reforms, and the like. After years of futile U.S. urging, the GVN in 1970 passed a radical land reform law, which is being vigorously carried out. Though grave weaknesses still exist, most professional observers agree that GVN leadership, performance, and administrative capabilities have greatly improved since the 1963-1966 nadir. The U.S. also quietly laid down the law that coups by the generals were not to be tolerated. As U.S. forces gradually withdrew, beginning in mid-1969, the so-called "Vietnamization" program resulted in some distinct improvements in RVNAF capabilities. Largely as a result, despite accelerating U.S. withdrawal, the GVN managed during 1969-1971 to increase substantially its hold over the countryside and to keep the VC/NVA in check. (Of course, this was also owing partly to Hanoi's reversion to protracted war tactics and to the diversion of fighting to Cambodia and Laos, which relieved the pressure on South Vietnam.)

Though U.S. influence on the GVN after 1968 was perhaps greater than in any previous period, it still fell short in many significant respects. Perhaps the greatest single U.S. failure was when the 1971 national election campaign, expected to further legitimize the GVN as a government elected by a popular majority, ended up instead as a one-man referendum leading to an almost certainly inflated popular vote for Thieu. And as we enter yet a new period, in which the U.S. reverts mostly to the role of aid supplier, whether U.S. influence has strengthened the GVN's own survival capabilities sufficiently remains a large question mark.

Thus, the verdict on whether the U.S. exerted optimum influence on the GVN, even assuming that the goals we sought were sound ones, is at best mixed. We certainly failed miserably in both respects during the period before direct U.S. intervention. Duncanson, who was on the scene much of that time, finds that our mistake -- and that of the GVN -- lay in seeking solutions primarily in military and political rather than administrative terms:

The misjudgement of the US was to decide that Diem's greatest needs were money and a big army, when what he really required was an efficient civil service; the failure of the
agroville experiment was due in the main to administrative incompetence, only rectified to a very limited extent in the strategic hamlets; the colossal dishonesty rampant since Diem’s death and the success of Vietcong symbiotic insurgency are a product of administrative inefficiency. Diem believed the problem could not be solved -- he understood it imperfectly himself -- and so, like the metaphorical grass of China, he bent before the east wind and tried to govern by manipulating factionalism and imitating the Communists, which compounded the disaster.43

THE ISSUE OF LEVERAGE

Aside from whether the nature of our advice was sound, did we press it hard enough on the GVN, using fully the leverage which our massive backing provided? The Pentagon Papers are quite critical of U.S. reluctance to compel better GVN performance. They show how this issue was recurrently debated between Washington and Saigon from about 1955 on.44

In fact the U.S. occasionally did try to employ various forms of leverage on the GVN, perhaps more often than generally realized, though with rather spotty results. We have already noted a number of instances in which the U.S. made a high level effort to tie its aid to GVN reforms of one kind or another -- in 1961, late 1963, and late 1964. Washington also exercised considerable indirect leverage through its various aid programs, largely by funding those it favored and not funding those it opposed, or by insisting on various changes before funding or materials were provided. This bargaining process gave us considerable influence. It must also be granted that top U.S. leaders in the field have on occasion discreetly pressured the GVN at various levels for removal of poor officers and officials or other measures, especially since 1966. The author can attest to instances in which both Bunker and Westmoreland used this technique. The author himself used it frequently in 1966-1968.

The planning exercise for phased withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam which took place from July 1962 to March 1964 is also seen in the Pentagon Papers as in part an effort "To increase the pressure on the GVN to make the necessary reforms and to make RVNAF fight harder by making the extent and future of U.S. support a little more tenuous."45
But it seems to have had no significant effect along these lines, being overtaken by the deterioration of the situation in late 1963 and 1964.46

At one point AID required a "joint sign-off" by its province advisers as well as GVN officials for the release of aid. This veto was agreed on in late 1963, and further extended in 1964.47 It was highly favored by field advisers, but abandoned by the new USAID director in June 1965. His decision was soon regretted, and the issue was reopened with the GVN, only to be dropped "when the State Department objected to the idea, insisting that it would undermine our efforts to make the Vietnamese more independent and effective."48

A modest USAID province advisers fund to increase U.S. leverage was set up in mid-1964.49 In 1964-1965 MACV gave its advisers a similar fund, but dropped it after four months because Rural Development (RD) Minister Thong felt that it permitted bypassing his ministry.50

However, such province and district pacification funds were revived on a far larger scale in 1967-1968, using piasters supplied by the GVN. Field advisers have since made extensive use of these funds.

In several cases AID did cut off rural program funds to provinces as a means of pressure. In September 1965 it withdrew its people and support from Binh Tuy on the grounds that the province chief was misusing AID funds. He was soon removed, but the incident received press attention, and Ambassador Lodge told USAID not to do it again. In June 1966 USAID briefly cut off shipments to Kontum to force proper accounting for aid supplies. Then, in August 1967, the new CORDS organization (see Chapter VII) successfully cut off aid to Bien Hoa for eleven weeks for similar reasons. In contrast, "MACV scrupulously avoided withholding MAP support from military units, regardless of circumstances."51 Withdrawing such support was recommended as a last resort by the staff of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) in April 1966, but rejected by General Westmoreland.52

Significantly, those concerned with pacification analyzed the leverage problem more systematically than any others, and sought to use leverage most consistently. The 1966 PROVN and "Roles and Missions" studies, CORDS' Project TAKEOFF of May 1967, and the Warner-Heymann study, all favoring greater use of leverage, were pacification-oriented.53
Since the Pentagon Papers end with 1967, they don't cover most of CORDS' use of leverage. In late 1967 it designed a program to force removal of the incompetent Co Cong province chief. It worked. A similar program was used for Kien Giang, and in early 1968 CORDS approved an SOP for use of leverage in such cases. CORDS also systematically collected dossiers on incompetent or venal province and district chiefs and pressed the GVN consistently for their removal. It didn't always work, but CORDS' batting average during 1967-1972 has been respectable. Withdrawing support from numerous Police Field Force companies being misused or maldeployed also forced corrective action. The Hamlet Evaluation System and other periodic "report cards" prepared by CORDS advisers also turned out to be valuable levers to get better GVN performance. Such measures, based on CORDS rapport with high GVN officials and the latter's confidence in CORDS reporting, had a marked effect on GVN pacification operations.

But even these examples hardly add up to consistent U.S. use of leverage as a policy tool over many years. It was certainly more talked about than practiced. The issue was frequently raised, with Washington usually pressing for greater use of leverage and the U.S. Mission (which had to do the dirty work) usually shying away from it. McNamara in particular became an advocate of leverage-oriented mechanisms by 1965, "but [his] views did not prevail." But even these examples hardly add up to consistent U.S. use of leverage as a policy tool over many years. It was certainly more talked about than practiced. The issue was frequently raised, with Washington usually pressing for greater use of leverage and the U.S. Mission (which had to do the dirty work) usually shying away from it. McNamara in particular became an advocate of leverage-oriented mechanisms by 1965, "but [his] views did not prevail."

In assessing the issue of leverage, however, one must bear in mind the dilemmas which the U.S. faced. Perhaps the most acute was the perennial question of stability vs. potentially destabilizing change. The more we became entangled in Vietnam, the more concerned we were over the risks to our growing investment if the regime we were supporting should collapse. Constantly facing top U.S. policymakers was the dilemma of whether, if we pushed too hard, we would end up collapsing the very structure we were trying to shore up. The GVN was so weak, and the available alternative leadership so unprepossessing, that the alternative to Diem or Khanh or Quat was frequently seen as chaos. The destabilizing consequences when we did acquiesce in Diem's ouster made us doubly cautious, while a stable political environment became doubly important as our troop commitment grew.
After massive U.S. intervention staved off GVN defeat, these arguments against the use of leverage became less compelling. On the other hand, the very massiveness of our intervention actually reduced our leverage. So long as we were willing to use U.S. resources and manpower as a substitute for Vietnamese, their incentive for doing more was compromised. As Ambassador Taylor presciently foresaw when questioning the initial dispatch of U.S. Marines to Danang in February 1965, "once it becomes evident that we are willing to assume such new responsibilities, one may be sure that GVN will seek to unload other ground force tasks upon us." Cooper points out how Washington's ultimate sanction was U.S. withdrawal "And as the size of our forces, and therefore the extent of our commitment to our commitment, increased, this sanction became less and less credible. In short, our leverage declined as our involvement deepened." This hypothesis is also validated by the way that the start of the U.S. phasing down, when President Johnson suspended bombing north of the 19th Parallel in 1968 right on top of the Tet shock, finally forced the GVN to mobilize fully and take many other steps. The continuing U.S. disengagement since has had similar impact in forcing the GVN to do more for itself.

Another constraint on use of leverage was that, no matter how deeply it became committed, the U.S. almost always saw itself as in an advisory and supporting role vis-à-vis a sovereign GVN. All U.S. agencies -- civil and military -- operated for the most part as if they were dealing not only with a sovereign but with an effective government, one that could carry out what it agreed should be done. We were deeply conscious of the dilemma created by our policy of shoring up a free government; to take over from the GVN -- even in minor ways -- would be inconsistent with the very purpose of our support. However generously we supported it, we always saw it as up to the GVN to choose.

We were also acutely sensitive to the nationalistic and often xenophobic tendencies of the GVN. Diem was particularly insistent that neither Vietnamese sovereignty nor his personal authority be compromised, lest any diminution of his power play into the hands of his domestic opponents -- non-Communist as well as Communist. This lay behind his
1961 rejection of "the limited partnership" proposed by the U.S.\textsuperscript{58}

As will be seen in Chapter VI, concern over Vietnamese sensitivities also was a major reason why the U.S. did not propose a combined military command.

General Taylor reflects the dominant view of those senior officers operationally involved:

In retrospect I have often asked myself whether, during this period, my colleagues and I were too reluctant to intervene in Vietnamese internal affairs in order to stabilize the political situation. Personally I avoided excessive interventionist zeal for two reasons. From my Korean experience I knew how sensitive Asian allies were to the charge of being American puppets, and how favorably they responded to treatment as respected coequals. Next, I was thoroughly aware of the limits of our knowledge of the true character of most of the Vietnamese with whom we worked. We were particularly ignorant of the complex relationships which linked individuals and groups within the heterogeneous society. However, such considerations did not deter us from expressing candid views to appropriate Vietnamese officials regarding the performance of duty of military and civilian officers within our range of observation. I had certainly done so in the case of the generals who overthrew the High National Council. After all, the parties to an alliance have pooled their resources in a common cause and have yielded to each other some of their own independence of action. Each has a right and a duty to urge actions on the other conducive to the success of the partnership. So I felt completely justified in pressing for such things as greater use of American advisers, unimpeded access to Vietnamese governmental data, and joint U.S.-Vietnamese supervision of activities in the provinces.\textsuperscript{59}

Such real dilemmas, which persisted long after the U.S. became an active partner in the war, greatly inhibited the use of leverage on the GVN. It is also essential to remember how little there was to lever, especially before 1966 or so. The GVN administration frequently proved too feeble to carry out effectively many of the measures we were pressing on it, even where it agreed to them. Moreover, the myth that Diem and Nhu, Khanh, Ky, Thieu, and their colleagues were mere U.S. puppets eager to do our bidding has a hollow ring to anyone who had to deal with them face to face.