But a form of institutional constraint also seems to have been at work. The notable reluctance of U.S. bureaucracies -- civil and military -- to press their views on the bureaucracies of U.S. aid recipients is almost a fixed feature of U.S. relations with other countries. However much policy may call for helping those who help themselves or tying aid to performance, such policies tend to become eroded in execution by the U.S. agencies concerned. This certainly occurred frequently in Vietnam. Another serious constraint was the lack of any combined GVN/U.S. machinery through which the U.S. could exercise consistent influence (see Chapter VI).

Debate over how hard the U.S. should have pressed its Vietnamese ally will long continue. But the long record of our failures to move the GVN in directions which in retrospect would clearly have been desirable suggests that we would have had little to lose and much to gain by using more vigorously the power over the GVN that our contributions gave us. We became their prisoners rather than they ours -- the classic trap into which great powers have so often fallen in their relationships with weak allies. The GVN used its weakness as leverage on us far more effectively than we used our strength to lever it.

Perhaps most grievous was our failure to insist on replacement at all levels of political leaders and military commanders whom we knew to be incompetent. We stuck too long with Saigon regimes we realized were incapable, seeing little alternative to backing them. But in the event alternatives did emerge. Looking back, for example, wouldn't it have been better to allow Diem to fall in 1960, when the situation had not yet deteriorated so badly as it had by 1963?

Nor did the U.S. ever exert much conscious, systematic leverage via the U.S. advisory network -- civilian or military -- on the crucial issue of securing better GVN and RVNAF middle-level leadership. Though U.S. advisers were generally able to identify weak or capable leaders, little consistent effort was made -- at least till 1967 -- to press for weeding out the incompetent and promoting the competent. The U.S. advisory effort "never deviated . . . from the belief that the conscious and continuing use of leverage at many levels would undercut Vietnamese sovereignty and stultify the development of Vietnamese leadership."60
On the latter count, however, it had more the opposite result. Similar reasoning led to the repeated rejection of leverage-oriented proposals for integrating U.S. and GVN forces or for various forms of joint command (see Chapter VI).

We also gave the GVN and RVNAF massive aid without tying it sufficiently to internal reforms and required performance standards to optimize its effective use. Using the leverage provided by our aid was usually rejected as too risky, even though when we did use it it usually proved its value. Instead, by 1965 we intervened and did things largely for the Vietnamese, spending U.S. money and U.S. lives to make up for their deficiencies. While our record since 1966 looks rather better than that before, and though the GVN of 1972 looks quite different from its predecessors, our will and ability to influence it optimally even today remain a question mark.

On the other hand, it could be argued -- as indeed it was at various times -- that full U.S. use of all available instruments of influence would have been tantamount to a U.S. "takeover" of the GVN, with all the unfortunate colonialist overtones and difficulties of subsequent disengagement that this implied. But such potential costs seem modest in retrospect compared to those which the U.S. actually did incur when impending GVN collapse led instead to our taking over the lion's share of the shooting war. To the extent that U.S. efforts to compel better South Vietnamese performance produced a more capable and self-reliant GVN and RVNAF, the need for such massive U.S. intervention would presumably have been correspondingly reduced. The at least partial success of the Nixon Administration's "Vietnamization" program during 1969-1972 is suggestive along these lines, though its feasibility rested largely on the extent to which prior U.S. intervention had stabilized the situation and bought time for the GVN and RVNAF to rebuild. Thus, in the event, the real-life alternative to greater U.S. efforts to move the GVN turned out to be an even greater U.S. "takeover" of the war than might otherwise have occurred.
IV. INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS ON U.S. PERFORMANCE

In any assessment of why the U.S. found it so difficult to cope with the special circumstances of Vietnam, the role of institutional constraints looms large. Why we fought the war the way we did is largely explicable in these terms. This is nowhere more evident than in our approach to its military aspects, both before and after 1965.

The great weight of the U.S. and GVN military in the post-1954 Vietnam picture in itself tended to dictate a predominantly military response. The institutional background of U.S. and GVN military leaders helped shape the nature of that response. "Mirror-imaging" was a natural concomitant of U.S. military aid. We organized, equipped, and trained the RVNAF to fight American style, the only way we knew how.

Then, when the U.S. in effect took over the war, we further "Americanized" it -- on an even grander scale -- by playing out our military repertoire. Instead of adapting our response to the enemy's way of fighting, we fought him our way -- at horrendous cost -- because we lacked the institutional incentive and much existing capability to do otherwise. The enormously costly "search and destroy" or attrition strategy 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 in classic military style.

Was there another way to fight the war? In theory at least there was, and high policy always called for greater emphasis on a "mixed" approach, as described in Chapter VIII. But we had no readily available alternative military capability. Though many were advocating a more sophisticated counterguerrilla strategy, and many interesting experiments were tried, neither the U.S. nor the South Vietnamese developed tailored counterinsurgency capabilities on any major scale until very late in the day (see Chapter VIII).
OVERMILITARIZATION OF THE WAR

What has been termed the "overmilitarization" of the war can be traced partly to such institutional factors as the dominant role of the military in the U.S. aid and advisory structure and, over time, in the GVN. Military men are naturally going to give primary emphasis to the military aspect of any conflict. Yarmolinsky notes: "It is in the nature of military bureaucracy, as of any bureaucracy, that it tends to offer solutions to problems in its own terms. . . ."1 Or as Schlesinger put it, "The Joint Chiefs of Staff, of course, by definition argue for military solutions . . . that is their business, and no one should be surprised that generals behave like generals."2

When, moreover, the military controlled the vast bulk of the resources going into the war effort, it is hardly surprising that military considerations became predominant. The simple fact that most of the war effort was financed by relatively unfungible U.S. defense appropriations reinforced this predominance, though Secretary McNamara was ingenious (as the author can attest) in finding ways in which DOD funds could do double duty by also supporting pacification and anti-inflation measures. Moreover, the military field was about the only major area where we could get results which seemed commensurate with our investment, because we were providing so much that Diem and his generals wanted. Thus, military aid proved the line of least resistance, which contributed to the overmilitarization of the GVN/U.S. counterinsurgency response.

This overmilitarization was not a late bloomer, but dated almost from the outset of U.S. involvement. From 1950 on, the bulk of our aid to the French and then the GVN was military assistance, administered first by a MAAG and later MACV. Vietnam became one of our largest military aid clients well before 1961. "In the years 1955 through 1960, more than $2 billion in aid flowed into Vietnam, and more than 80% of that assistance went toward providing security for the Government of Vietnam."3 That the MAAG was the only one commanded by a lieutenant general is also significant.

The first U.S.-approved force ceiling for ARVN in November 1954 was only 88,000, but General Lawton Collins recommended that even this
be given a divisional structure. Soon MAAG recommended and DOD approved a 150,000-man force structure, to be reorganized "according to American concepts" into four field divisions, six light divisions, and thirteen territorial regiments. In 1959 they were reorganized into seven standard divisions under three corps headquarters and a GHQ.

By 1960, growing insurgency in the rural areas led to renewed U.S. focus on counterefforts, but in the 1961 Kennedy commitments and after they were even further militarized. Though there was much high policy discussion of the need to strengthen GVN paramilitary and civil programs (see Chapter VIII), it is important to look at the figures rather than the phrases. Military aid exceeded economic assistance during 1960-1964, and much of the latter was designed primarily to support the GVN military budget.

One of the new President's first actions was to authorize aid for a 20,000-man increase in ARVN, from 150,000 to 170,000. Then, in August 1961, after Diem had requested a further increase to 270,000, the U.S. accepted 200,000 -- including two more divisions. In March 1964 the U.S. approved another 50,000-man increase, mostly paramilitary. A further modest increase of 20,000 -- including a tenth ARVN division -- was approved in spring 1965. But actual RVNAF strength kept running so far below authorized strength that in June 1965 General Westmoreland finally had to impose a moratorium on further ARVN buildup, because combat losses and desertions made it difficult even to maintain the strength of existing units. At this time the regular forces stood at about 262,000; the Regional Forces (RF, formerly Civil Guard) at 108,000; and the Popular Forces (PF, formerly Self Defense Corps) at 149,000 (the latter partly on paper), for a total of 519,000.

Then, as the GVN and ARVN buckled, we further "militarized" the war by intervening with massive U.S. forces, and repeating much of the same conventional wisdom on a grander scale. By mid-1967 the U.S. had almost half a million troops in-country, while all of RVNAF had risen only to slightly over 600,000. True, these developments were responsive to a situation which had so deteriorated that U.S. military intervention was the only viable alternative to defeat. Our intervention also
was partly precipitated by Hanoi's infiltration of regular units into South Vietnam and by the VC/NVA shift to Mao's third phase of overt, semiconventional warfare. In the ensuing years Hanoi and Washington proceeded to escalate and counterescalate their conventional force buildups, both focusing increasingly on the so-called "main force" war. By 1969 U.S. troop strength in South Vietnam had risen to a peak of almost 550,000 plus many thousands more offshore or in adjacent areas, while RVNAF strength had reached over a million men.

The overwhelmingly military nature of our Vietnam response comes out even more clearly in comparisons of total manpower and financial allocations. While the program budgets prepared by the Systems Analysis office in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD/SA) are still classified, they show that most of the GVN budget goes for conventional military purposes, as has the vast bulk of U.S. war costs. For example, Enthoven and Smith reveal that in FY 1968 the U.S. spent almost $14 billion for bombing and offensive operations, but only $850 million for pacification and socioeconomic programs. 10

As military considerations became ever more predominant, the GVN and U.S. military largely took over the reins of power in Vietnam. After Diem's death, the ARVN generals ran the GVN and were able to give themselves full rein. 11 On the U.S. side, MACV overshadowed the civilian agencies, just as the military effort dwarfed the civil effort. Civilian officials in Saigon played little role in military decision-making, despite recognition that political and military factors were wholly intertwined in this type of conflict. One observer notes:

Where the military bureaucracy is more likely to impose limits on the civilian desire for flexibility is in the conduct of military operations. The analytical review of military development, procurement, and organizational policies and practices simply has not been extended to military operations. Perhaps in the nature of things it cannot be extended. But in its absence the political authorities find it more difficult, as perhaps they should, to assert control over specific military operations -- the choice, for example, between search-and-destroy and clear-and-hold -- in order to avoid deepening political commitments. 12
Nor were there adequate mechanisms for assessing the proper balance between the various aspects of the allied war effort and forcing reallocation of resources (see Chapter VI).

MIRROR-IMAGING AND CONVENTIONAL RESPONSE -- 1954-1964

Aside from overmilitarization of the U.S./GVN response, the institutional background of the GVN and U.S. military shaped the very nature of that military response. During the decade before direct U.S. intervention, all too little military attention was paid to the special circumstances of Vietnam. Overinfluenced by the Korean War (and largely neglecting both French experience in Indochina and British experience in Malaya), the U.S. put the bulk of its military aid and advice into building a conventional ARVN ill-suited to the challenges it faced. The French-trained ARVN officers, equally conventional-minded, were eager to go the same route.

That this occurred almost in spite of high-level policy directives to the contrary is a tribute to the vigor of the institutional pressures involved. The initial policy direction given the MAAG when the U.S. took over the military aid role from the French clearly emphasized internal security as the principal mission. But under a series of MAAG chiefs (O'Daniel, Williams, McGarr) of conventional bent and experience, who were encouraged by the Diem regime, MAAG concentrated instead on preparing ARVN for a conventional delaying action against what it regarded as the most serious threat: a conventional, Korea-style NVA attack across the DMZ. Though high U.S. policy directives kept reemphasizing the internal security mission, it almost inevitably took a back seat after 1955.

Analyzing what little was accomplished during 1954-1959, the Pentagon Papers eloquently conclude:

U.S. efforts . . . failed to produce an effective Vietnamese counterinsurgent force due to contemporary perceptions of and reactions to the threat, to exaggerated estimates of the value and relevance of American military standards in responding to that threat, to lack of effective bargaining techniques vis-a-vis the Government of Vietnam, and to fragmentation and other inadequacies in the American system of
determining and administering the overall program of assistance to Vietnam.

... A strong desire to correct French mistakes generated considerable bureaucratic momentum; preoccupation with the perceived inadequacies of French practices led to underestimation of the problems the French had to overcome in developing an effective Vietnamese army, and to overcorrection of French mistakes by the creation of a conventional military force. That Vietnamese army came to be organized in divisions -- as the U.S. had so often and so unsuccessfully urged the French to do.

... although it was consistently estimated that the DRV had the capability to overrun South Vietnam, it was just as consistently estimated that the DRV neither needed nor intended to do so. Nonetheless, U.S. doctrine regarding estimates of capability as opposed to estimates of intention with its characteristic emphasis on Order of Battle data (so small a part of the real intelligence problem in counterinsurgency) led to fixation upon the more massive, but less likely, threat of overt invasion.

... Given the state of U.S. strategic thinking in the 1950's, the nature of SEATO, the withdrawal of the FEC, the pressures exerted by Diem, and the background of the U.S. MAAG, rooted in the recent Korean experience, it was virtually certain to lead to a conventional military establishment designed to counter a conventional threat. It did. In fact, given the strength of these influences and the lack of U.S. familiarity with effective counterinsurgent techniques, it is questionable whether assignment of a single mission related exclusively to internal security would have made any difference in the type of military establishment that resulted. 16

Nor were high U.S. officers unaware of "allegations that the United States is overtraining the Vietnamese Army for a Korea-type war with little or nothing being done to meet the terrorist problem in Vietnam," as is evident from a fascinating memorandum by General Lemnitzer (then Chairman of the JCS) in October 1961. Apparently concerned that the forthcoming Thompson Mission might "try to sell the Malayan concept of police control," he decried analogizing from the Malayan experience and came down heavily in favor of the U.S. military approach. 17

Thompson regards "the creation of a large conventional army inside South Vietnam as the basic cause of the failure to defeat communist insurgency there." 18 In his classic Defeating Communist Insurgency he describes the many political and economic as well as military costs
entailed. Among other things, "The conventional organization of the army led naturally to operations of a conventional type." A "further side-effect" was that conventional weapons "not suitable for anti-guerrilla operations" were nonetheless used. Most observers agree that the MAP-sponsored ARVN performed poorly indeed against the insurgents in 1960-1964, though this was owing to much else besides organization, training, and equipment ill-adapted to the task.

These tendencies were reinforced by a bureaucratic characteristic typical of U.S. military aid programs -- designing U.S.-supported allied forces more in the U.S. image than tailoring them for unique local conditions.

The result of the U.S. efforts was more a reflection of the U.S. military establishment than of the type of threat or terrain. With regard to the overall effectiveness of U.S. aid, it seems to have had, unfortunately, all of the depth the term "mirror image" implies.

Proposals that greater MAP resources be devoted to building up the Civil Guard, police, or other local security forces were often rejected in the 1950s on such grounds as that this was civilian agency business and not a proper function of the MAP program.

Mirror-imaging extended to our advisory effort too. As General Stilwell had found in reflecting on American World War II experience in China, our advisers "knew how to deal only in the American way and when this failed to bring results they became confused and lost patience." The Pentagon Papers make a similar assessment of the MAAG reaction to the Strategic Hamlet Program of 1962-1963:

The U.S. military advisors mistrusted arguments which stressed the Vietnamese struggle as essentially political rather than military. They were quite willing to concede that the struggle was multi-dimensional but they feared instinctively any line of reasoning which might appear to argue that military considerations were relatively unimportant in Vietnam. So too, they were wary of schemes which might lead ARVN to perpetuate its defensive tactical stance. Both dangers were present in the strategic hamlet program. . . . Their creed, developed through years of experience and training (or vicarious experience) was to "close
with and destroy the enemy." One could expect them, then, to be more than willing to turn over the job of static defense to the CDC [sic] and CG at the earliest opportunity, to keep a weather eye out for opportunities to engage major VC formations in decisive battle, and to chafe under the painfully slow evolutionary process which was implicit even in their own 1961 geographically phased plan.24

Yet U.S. and GVN neglect of the paramilitary forces, which continued up to 1967, seems in hindsight one of the great operational mistakes of the conflict. Diem created a small Civil Guard (CG) in 1955, and in 1956 organized a village militia called the Self Defense Corps (SDC). The MAAG early regarded them as the primary internal security forces, and wanted them to relieve ARVN of the static security role to which it was then largely committed, so it might concentrate on external defense. But this never happened.25 They became a victim of "U.S. interagency competition" among other things. Police experts in the Michigan State University Advisory Group (MSUG) recommended that the CG be converted into a lightly armed, village-based rural constabulary under civilian control to combat subversion. Diem wanted a strong, well-armed, militarized CG under the province chiefs, and MAAG bought his view. At MAAG urging, it was put under the Defense Ministry in 1960, and support and advice passed under MAAG control.26 In hindsight this may have been a mistake, because MAAG as well as the ARVN staff tended to focus on the regular forces to the neglect of the territorials. True, for 1963-1964 MACV did call for a substantial increase in CG/SDC, while regular forces were to grow only slightly.27 But the latter continued to get the vast bulk of the resources, and the CG/SDC were not upgraded into the force that U.S. plans called for.28 No MAP aid was allocated to them before FY 1962, and then only 3.7 percent, followed by 4 percent in FY 1963, 12.6 percent in FY 1964, 7.8 percent in FY 1965, and 9.8 percent in FY 1966. Indeed, less than 20 percent of the total expenditures on RVNAF during FYs 1958-1965, from both U.S. and GVN resources, went to the territorial forces.29 Similarly, until 1964 almost no U.S. advisers were assigned to province, district, or directly to RF/PF units; even by 1966 less than one-third of U.S. field advisers were so assigned.29
The weaknesses of conventional military thinking in counterinsurgency situations are also apparent in the early MAAG pressure, during 1959-1962, for a single chain of command that would put under ARVN the territorial forces which were then under the province chiefs. MAAG kept arguing for unity of effort, and finally got it in 1964-1967, after Diem's demise. But the net result was that pacification-type security forces were neglected in favor of the regulars. In fact, MAAG and then MACV did relatively little during 1955-1966 to upgrade and strengthen the territorials. Not until 1967, when the new pacification program led to emphasis on rapid expansion and upgrading of the RF/PF, and when these forces were put back under province control and province was taken out from under division, did the territorials finally come into their own (see Chapter VII).

THE MILITARY PLAY OUT THEIR INSTITUTIONAL REPERTOIRES

What we did in Vietnam cannot be fully understood unless it is seen as a function of our playing out our military repertoire -- doing what we were most capable and experienced at doing. Such institutional constraints as the very way our general purpose forces were trained, equipped, and structured largely dictated our response. The fact that U.S. military doctrine, tactics, equipment, and organization were designed primarily for NATO or Korean War-type contingencies -- intensive conventional conflict in a relatively sophisticated military environment -- made it difficult to do anything else. The U.S. Army's force structure, its choice of equipment, its logistic support, its whole style of warfare evolved after World War II with combat against sophisticated Soviet forces primarily in mind. So too did the U.S. Air Force. Since these ground and air forces were primarily designed for coping with such an enemy, it is unsurprising that they proved so expensively ill-suited to meeting the VC/NVA in Vietnam.

Was it so foolish that U.S. plans and force postures were primarily aimed at forcing a conventional pause on the NATO central front and secondarily at defeating another North Korean thrust? Since nobody contemplated so massive a U.S. commitment in Southeast Asia as eventuated, they didn't prepare for it. But even if they had, the higher priority
given to NATO and Korean contingencies would have limited what special preparations could be made. General purpose does mean multipurpose, after all: forces designed to meet a variety of contingencies rather than tailored to suit one. But as it turned out, they weren't very "general purpose." Nor did the prevailing concept that conventional forces designed to meet the worst-case contingency -- high intensity nonnuclear conflict -- would also be suitable for lesser contingencies prove to be as valid as expected.

On the other hand, the Kennedy/Johnson Administration buildup of nonnuclear general purpose forces did facilitate the kind of U.S. military intervention undertaken in Vietnam. Capabilities naturally shape strategy and tactics, as well as vice versa. As a DOD official said in the Sixties, "If McNamara hadn't increased our conventional capability all along the line, we probably wouldn't have gone into Vietnam because we couldn't." 32

That from the very outset of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam we focused first the RVNAF and then our own forces primarily upon the enemy "main force" threat is also largely attributable to institutional preferences. Armies like to fight other armies. It is what they are supposed to do. The object of warfare in U.S. military doctrine is to defeat the enemy's forces as the means of imposing our will upon his. Hence MACV and the Joint General Staff (JGS) tended to focus all the more on the "big unit" war to the neglect of other facets of the conflict. We have seen how as early as 1955 MAAG was helping design ARVN chiefly against an NVA conventional threat. This focus continued through the Sixties.

However, it must be granted that the gradual superimposing of a quasicontventional war on rural insurgency through the creation of VC "main force" units and then NVA unit infiltration in the mid-Sixties required some degree of conventional response. A "big unit" shield was needed behind which pacification could proceed. But this tended to become an end in itself, drawing the attention of MACV and the JGS further away from support of pacification as an essential corollary to going after the main-force units.
Soon after U.S. troop intervention, it became accepted in MACV and in the Pentagon that U.S. forces were not to be used, except incidentally, in the clear and secure (pacification) role. This would be left to the Vietnamese. Indeed, it would help free them for this purpose. Implicit in this concept was the low U.S. opinion of the estate to which RVNAF had fallen at this time, and an institutional reluctance to employ highly mobile U.S. units with their great firepower in a more static role. The Pentagon Papers describe this trend, which culminated in the GVN decision, announced at the October 1966 Manila Conference, to allocate over half of ARVN regular infantry battalions to support of RD.

But the problems in relying on conventional ARVN forces to support pacification were early recognized. A December 1966 State Department analysis pointed out that, while our strategy called for fighting two interdependent wars -- a conventional war and a counterinsurgency-cum-pacification war -- in fact U.S. combat forces remain essentially oriented toward conventional warfare. ARVN meanwhile is also fighting essentially conventional war whether in sparsely settled areas or in populated ones such as the Mekong delta. Its commitment to pacification is negligible, and it continues to regard its mission essentially in conventional military terms.

The claims of top US and GVN military officials notwithstanding, the waging of a conventional war has overriding priority, perhaps as much as 9 to 1, according to the personal judgments of some US advisors.

State went on to predict that the shift of ARVN divisions to the pacification support role would not work very well, largely because of the same weaknesses which had undermined its conventional effectiveness. This proved to be the case. In the new pacification program which began in 1967 primary reliance was finally placed on improvement and expansion of territorial forces for the "clear and secure" role of pacification support.

Another facet of our playing out our institutional repertoires was our introduction to Indochina of what some have called "the American style of war." As we have seen, we first organized and trained the
Vietnamese to fight our way with our equipment. Then, as they buckled, we brought in massive U.S. forces and practiced war American style on a much grander scale. We sought to minimize U.S. casualties by massive use of sophisticated firepower, and further trained and equipped the RVNAF to do the same. Brigadier W.F.K. Thompson, military correspondent of the Daily Telegraph, remarks: "The national style of the Americans springs from their being the leading technological country, and their natural reaction to any problem is to look for a technological answer. We saw it in Korea with their firepower." He also comments on it in Vietnam. 38

Take our extensive use of technology and machines to extend the destructive reach of men. Great reliance on firepower to pave the way for the infantry or tanks and minimize casualties had been successful in World War II and in Korea. Therefore why not in Vietnam? Didn't our Army use tanks in Vietnam partly because it had them and was experienced in their use? Didn't its extensive use of artillery of all calibers spring at least in part from its availability and because American military doctrine was to use it lavishly, even though observable targets in Vietnam were far sparser than they would presumably have been in a European conflict? Didn't the Air Force use expensive high-performance jets to perform missions that other types of aircraft could have performed less expensively partly because these jets were what we had in our inventory? Understandably, it made little sense to air planners to develop too much of a separately tailored air capability for Vietnam when this would probably have had to be at the expense of buying aircraft also capable of coping with the Soviet threat.

We imported into a small, undeveloped country all the enormous array of sophisticated technological means that the world's most advanced industrial nation thought might be useful, and used them to oppose an army that walked, that used mortars as its chief form of artillery, that used almost no armor until 1972, and that was near-totally lacking in air support. Yet at the least, many of our military techniques were not very cost-effective, and in some respects proved to be seriously counterproductive in terms of "winning hearts and minds."
Also in the American style was the extent to which our R&D effort was technologically oriented. Its chief focus, even in a low-intensity insurgency war, was on better machines or new technology. Much of it was highly useful (see Chapter VII), but would it not have been better to have devoted a more significant portion of our research to the nature of the conflict and the enemy, his patterns of operation, and better counterinsurgency techniques? Altogether, this type of research received only a tiny fraction of the total R&D effort attributable to Vietnam.

Even as the U.S. disengages, we are still putting the great bulk of our aid into conventional regular Vietnamese forces. We are also further remaking RVNAF in our image — training and equipping it to continue practicing the very style of warfare that proved so costly and destructive in our hands. Ironically, however, the attrition which it and other factors cumulatively imposed on our opponents, especially on the southern Viet Cong, at long last led Hanoi to fall back on largely similar conventional warfare in its 1972 offensive. In its latest phase, therefore, the conflict has become a more conventional one on the part of both sides.

**THE AIR WAR AGAINST THE NORTH**

Though the air campaign against North Vietnam beginning in 1965 was the outgrowth of many factors, it also reflects the way in which an institution will tend to play out its preferred institutional repertoire. Fascinated with using airpower carefully and selectively to signal Hanoi to desist from war in the South, our civilian leaders seem not to have taken adequately into account the institutional pressures thus released. The fact that flexible U.S. airpower was readily available and could be used for counterpressures against North Vietnam — especially for quick retaliation — almost inevitably led to its use. The air forces also pressed to do what they knew best: to mount massive bombing campaigns both in the South and against the North. And the way in which these campaigns were conducted strongly reflected U.S. military doctrine about how airpower should be employed. Indeed, the conflict
between this doctrine and civilian preoccupations over its political impact helped foster some of the sharpest in-house debates of the Vietnam war.

Early planning of air operations against the North focused primarily on the political objectives to be achieved through such pressures. The chief advocates were the U.S. military. By February 1964 the JCS were beginning to advocate bombing of the North. They based their case largely on the unlikelihood of arresting the deteriorating situation in the South in any other way. But the Pentagon Papers indicate how quickly the JCS and CINCPAC began shifting the weight of their argument to the military effectiveness of what could be achieved with airpower, and how consistently they advocated a "massive bombing campaign." Following the first reprisal strikes in early 1965, "gradual [top level] acceptance . . . of the need for a militarily more significant, sustained bombing program" led to a shift of focus from reprisal toward interdiction of North Vietnamese lines of communication.

In contrast to the ground attrition strategy (see below), the air interdiction campaign soon became a controversial issue. Aside from sharp debate over whether it was achieving its political objectives vis-à-vis Hanoi, military and civilian officials also recurrently clashed over how militarily effective interdiction was in limiting Hanoi's intervention in the South (the Pentagon Papers hardly mention the much larger air effort in the South and along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which was apparently not seriously questioned). CINCPAC, the JCS, and MACV consistently made the case that bombing the North was exacting a worthwhile price, and saw the chief problem as civilian reluctance to unleash a sufficient air effort. They fought the gradualism imposed by civilian decisionmakers for essentially political reasons, and blamed it for preventing the optimum weight and timing of attack. Most senior officers also favored mining the ports and hitting the "lucrative" targets in the Hanoi/Haiphong area as most consistent with the doctrine of strategic bombing, while the civilians tended to favor less politically risky strikes at infiltration routes to put a "ceiling" on what Hanoi could send south.
The one strategic target system finally singled out for full-scale attack was POL. As early as November 1965, the JCS advocated such attacks as "more damaging to the DRV capability to move war-supporting resources... than an attack against any other single target system." After intense debate lasting over six months, and revolving as much around political issues as estimates of military results, attacks were authorized on seven of the nine POL targets in June 1966. All targets were hit and North Vietnam's storage capacity was sharply curtailed. But the campaign failed to produce any significant decrease in Hanoi's ability to support the war in the South. It was "the last major escalation of the air war recommended by Secretary McNamara."

A powerful case against the air campaign was made in the Jason Summer Study Report by a panel of civilian scientists in September 1966. The report concluded that it "had had no measurable direct effect on Hanoi's ability to mount and support military operations in the South at the current level." In November McNamara recommended stabilizing the campaign against the North, and pressed instead for the anti-infiltration barrier proposed in the Jason study. OSD/SA estimated the cost of the air campaign at over $250 million a month in late 1966, but with "no significant impact on the war in South Vietnam..." Some 148,000 sorties were flown in 1966, compared with 55,000 in the ten months of bombing in 1965.

Intense debate continued during 1967. CINCPAC, arguing that the chief reason for failure in 1966 had been that much of the military plan had not been approved, favored a major escalation. In May McNamara proposed de-escalating the air campaign and concentrating on the infiltration "funnel" south of the 20th Parallel. The JCS countered with their previous proposals to close North Vietnamese ports, especially Haiphong. In July a compromise decision was made to do neither, but to continue more of the same. However, the approved target list was cautiously expanded in late 1967. Meanwhile, another study by the Jason Group, several CIA analyses, and an OSD/SA study all cast serious doubt on the air campaign's effectiveness in deterring or even impeding Hanoi from prosecuting the war in the South. All the damage done certainly made the war more costly to North Vietnam, as
pointed out by COMUSMACV and CINCPAC, but these losses were largely
made up by increased Soviet and Chinese aid.53

Hanoi's ability to mount the 1968 Tet Offensive was seen by the
civilian critics as final proof that attacking the North by air was
not worth the cost. This led to yet another civil-military confronta-
tion, in which all the old arguments were rehearsed. The impact of the
civilian critiques is apparent in President Johnson's decision of
March 30, 1968, to suspend bombing north of the 20th Parallel.

However, this study is not directed at analyzing the merits of
the air war against the North. Much of the evidence as to its impact
is unavailable in any case until we hear (if ever) from the North
Vietnamese. Moreover, the recent U.S. bombing campaign in response
to Hanoi's 1972 offensive, which is using "smart" ordnance and is
being conducted under fewer constraints than the previous bombing of
the North, may prove militarily more effective.

The intent here is rather to bring out some of the institutional
reasons why we conducted the air campaign as we did. The extensive
coverage of the 1964-1968 policy debates in the Pentagon Papers sug-
gests a consistent underlying doctrinal conviction among its military
advocates that a major air effort could not help but have significant
results. While the air campaign was never carried out the way its
advocates wished, it nonetheless represented a very high level of
effort against a country so small and poorly developed as North Vietnam.
But here too may have been the chief flaw in the strategy. Such a society
and economy, and the kind of war it conducted, were simply not as vulner-
able to air attack as our previous military experience tended to sug-
gest. Instead of taking this fully into account, however, our air forces
played out their institutional repertoires. They did what their doc-
trine called for, what they were trained and equipped to do, rather than
tailor their response to the atypical situation they confronted. While
this does not come through explicitly in the Pentagon Papers, it is
powerfully implied in the way the airmen argued their case.

Wasn't still another factor at play? Didn't we also mount a major
bombing campaign because we had in existence a major capability to do
so? It was a classic case of how having such a capability drove us to
use it — even though it was soon recognized as less than optimum. Moreover, is it surprising that the JCS and DOD wanted to use all major components of our existing general-purpose capability rather than expand the ground forces even more? No doubt the Army also was happy to have the Air Force and Navy share the budgetary and resource burden, while the latter two were eager to play a self-justifying role in "our only war" instead of leaving it all to the Army and Marines. "Assorted military constituencies, once involved in Vietnam, have had a series of cases to prove: for instance, the utility not only of airpower (the Air Force) but of supercarrier-based air power (the Navy)." 

Was something analogous to Parkinson's law at work? Did the need tend to expand to the limits of the capability to fulfill it? Gar Alperovitz elevates it to what he calls "Parknamara's law," as it applied to Vietnam: "The more you increase the options and guns available, the more someone will find reason to use them; the more you use the options, the more your response becomes inflexibly military; the more you become inflexibly military, the more you lose your options." 

In the Besson Board report on Vietnam logistics there is a revealing statement that "the extraordinary increase in expenditure of air munitions over any previous experience stemmed from the employment of modern high performance aircraft capable of delivering large quantities of munitions at high sortie rates." Since one of the key problems we confronted in South Vietnam was that of finding and fixing a highly elusive enemy, there is great room for doubt as to how many lucrative targets were available. This suggests that our immense air ordnance expenditure was at least as much a function of its availability as of need. What commander isn't going to use all the air support he has? No doubt the same could be said of artillery ammunition outlays, which also were immense. This tendency was further reinforced by organizational incentives. In the absence of sufficient hard intelligence on the results of their activities, artillery and air unit commanders tended to be evaluated largely on the ammo expenditures or sortie rates of their units. One analyst has pointed out that the growing use of
herbicides up through 1969 was also governed partly by "the availability of agents and delivery systems..."57

THE STRATEGY OF ATTRITION

While no single term suffices to encompass the mixed strategies that we employed in South Vietnam, it became mostly a ground-air attrition campaign on the military side. General Westmoreland himself quite honestly termed it as such, for example telling President Johnson on April 27, 1967, that "In the final analysis we are fighting a war of attrition in Southeast Asia."58 The very nature of the conflict deprived the GVN/U.S. side of such classic military options as bringing the main enemy forces to a decisive battle or seizing key territorial objectives like the enemy's capital or his chief logistic base areas. To the contrary, the very elusiveness of the enemy, his ability to hide among the population or in remote jungle and mountain areas, the difficulty of bringing him to battle when he desired to evade, his ability to retreat to sanctuary, and a host of other factors led us into trying to grind down enemy strength over time by all means available while clamping down on his LOCs. As it evolved during 1965-1966, General Westmoreland's strategy based upon exploitation of our inherent superior mobility and firepower was designed to simultaneously attrite [sic] the enemy and retain the initiative by disrupting VC/NVA operations before they completely materialized. This led to seeking engagement with enemy main force units well out into the border regions, where they literally could be held at distance before jumping off in operations. Related to this was the notion that the important thing was to fight -- to engage the enemy and create casualties. It mattered little that you accepted combat in regions with certain advantages for the enemy -- the prime objective was to engage and to kill him.59

But this war of attrition also seemed a natural role for an immensely superior conventional allied force, rich in mobility and firepower. We thought we had ample resources to fight a war of attrition against such an impoverished foe.60

It was also easier institutionally than trying to beat the enemy at his own game. "Search-and-destroy" was far more in accord with the
The military strategy of attrition as pursued in Vietnam deserves far more thorough analysis than it has received to date. That facet directed against the opponent's base areas, logistic support, and LOCs did achieve considerable impact, though not enough -- at least up to its new 1972 escalation -- to force the enemy to give in. The naval "blockade" of the South Vietnamese coastline was perhaps its most successful aspect, forcing Hanoi to switch from a primarily seaborne LOC to the Ho Chi Minh Trail and Cambodia. The enemy's main force units were also ground down over time. This, plus MACV's preemptive tactics of attempting to spoil the enemy's preparations before he could attack, largely frustrated the Communists' repeated attempts, except during Tet 1968 and in spring 1972, to launch multifront offensives. Moreover, it did over time provide a "shield" behind which a serious pacification effort could finally get under way. Finally, it contributed to the gradual attrition of the southern VC "main forces," which were not able to replace their losses as easily as were the NVA. Hanoi found it increasingly necessary to replace VC losses by putting NVA fillers into VC main force units, and has finally felt compelled to rely predominantly on its own regular forces, heavily reinforced by almost all that had remained in the North, for its largely conventional 1972 offensive.

On the other hand, the attrition strategy did not succeed even over several years in its primary objective of grinding down the enemy main forces to the point where they were no longer a major threat, not even after the 1970 Cambodian coup permitted incursions into many sanctuaries. By focusing on the main force units as the chief attrition target we were taking on the enemy forces hardest to attrit. More often than not, we were unable to find and fix the enemy and make him fight on our terms. Indeed, the chief military flaw in the attrition strategy was the enemy's doctrinal offensive-mindedness of the U.S. military than "clear-and-hold" or enclave strategies. "Probably the single most disturbing factor in the enclave approach was the implicit failure to try and seize the initiative from the enemy." Hence "the preferred military doctrine dictated the strategy and the strategy determined the policy."
ability to control his own losses, both by evading contact and by replacing his losses via VC recruitment and further infiltration from North Vietnam. (He actually increased his main force strength right up through Tet 1968.)

By November 1966, when a military request for an increase to 570,000-odd U.S. troops was pending, Secretary McNamara was telling the President that, despite our buildup and the large number of enemy we were killing, he saw no reasonable way to bring the war to an end soon because the other side apparently was able to replace its losses. He therefore opposed continuing in 1967 to increase friendly forces as rapidly as possible and to use them primarily in "search-and-destroy" operations against enemy main force units. While he favored continuation of search-and-destroy, he wanted to "build friendly forces only to that level required to neutralize the large enemy units and prevent them from interfering with the pacification program." McNamara won his case, and the new troop ceiling was held to 470,000 (to be achieved by June 1968). Even MACV later granted that net enemy strength had actually increased by 42,000 in 1966.

But not until 1967-1968 were the limitations of the attrition strategy -- in the air as well as on the ground -- fully analyzed, in response to renewed military requests for yet more U.S. troops. In spring 1967 MACV, CINCPAC, and JCS proposed a major increase of up to 210,000 in U.S. troop levels for FY 1968 to counter increased NVA infiltration, retain the strategic initiative, and shorten the war by accelerating the attrition of VC/NVA forces. This precipitated a major debate, which foreshadowed the later and better known one after Tet 1968.

Here the Systems Analysis Office of the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD/SA) played a major role in questioning whether MACV's attrition strategy could succeed in the light of continuing NVA infiltration. It brought out for the first time how the enemy had considerable control over his own losses, almost regardless of what U.S. force levels were. Nor would added U.S. forces help much in pacification. Based on a study of small-unit engagements in 1966, OSD/SA concluded in May 1967 that "the size of the force we deploy has little
effect on the rate of attrition of enemy forces. It also pointed out that the military had made no comparable analysis to justify their requested increases. It is surprising that this critique of the attrition strategy was so little reflected in the flood of military and civilian memoranda cited in the Pentagon Papers on the spring 1967 force-level debate. Instead, the issue apparently turned on "political" and economic considerations, especially the domestic U.S. political cost of having to call up the reserves. In July 1967 agreement was finally reached on a new U.S. troop ceiling of 525,000 for FY 1968--a very modest increase compared to what had been requested.

By the time of the post-Tet 1968 debate over another major troop increase, others in Washington besides OSD/SA had begun to argue that the attrition strategy was not working and that the enemy could match each U.S. escalation. Again the issue was whether to keep the same strategy and simply increase our forces, as the military advocated, or to seek an alternative strategy. Again OSD/SA pointed out that the enemy's ability to control his losses within a wide range would permit him to continue fighting indefinitely even if his losses substantially increased. The outcome is well known; President Johnson again decided on only a modest increase, to 549,000; this became the peak of our commitment. Significantly, however, the strategic debate over the attrition strategy was not resolved. No new directive was issued to the field, and U.S. forces continued to pursue essentially an attrition strategy.

As it turned out, the attrition strategy proved more successful in 1968 than in any year before or since, because the enemy temporarily abandoned his previous strategy and attacked us rather than we him; in his three major attempts at a multfront offensive--at Tet, in May, and again in August-September (together with his costly "siege" of Khesanh)--he incurred his peak losses in the Vietnam war. But this and other factors led him to revert in 1969 to a "protracted war" strategy, which again confronted the U.S. and GVN with the same old problem.
To the other flaws of the attrition strategy must be added its enormous costs — easily the bulk of the well over $150 billion the U.S. has spent on the war. Beyond these are the adverse side effects of primary focus on the big-unit war: increased civilian casualties, economic damage, creation of refugees, and the like. In their concentration on defeating the enemy in battle, the U.S. and GVN military gave wholly inadequate weight to the alienating impact of these side effects on the population whose control, if not support, was presumably the ultimate objective of the counterinsurgency effort.

Throughout the Pentagon Papers one finds little indication that this factor was taken sufficiently into account in military planning through 1967. It suggests, however, that even success in attriting the enemy militarily may prove transitory if not irrelevant in a "people's war." As the French found in Algeria, "to win the military battle but to lose the political struggle" is to fail — a point made eloquently by Bernard Fall.73

The overall reliance on attrition helped spawn the quantitative measurement systems devised in an attempt to measure military "progress" in this strange war. If cutting the enemy down to size was the name of the game, then the "body count," comparative kill ratios, and weapons-captured-to-weapons-lost ratios were key indicators of progress — if valid, of course. Since it was even harder to measure the impact of indirect firepower such as air and artillery, the usual measurement of their effectiveness was one of output, not impact: how many sorties flown, how much ordnance dropped, how many rounds fired. Since so much destructive power was available, the pressures to use it up to capacity were strong. Again a case of capabilities dictating performance: We measured the measurable; how relevant it was is another matter.

Kissinger, discussing our "conceptual" failures in Vietnam, cites as one reason for them "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. . . ."74
INTELLIGENCE INADEQUACIES

Though overall intelligence estimates at the Washington level were often realistic, what might be called tactical intelligence in the field was for long critically weak. General Taylor noted its many inadequacies as early as his visit in October 1961, and gave its improvement a high priority. But all too little was done. Critical information gaps continued to cloud our perceptions as to what was really happening in Vietnam. To take one case, there was a notable lack of adequate intelligence on the full extent of VC activities in the countryside from 1958 through 1965. While the VC concentrated on guerrilla warfare in the rural areas, our focus was on the GVN in Saigon and on the conventional military balance. Even after 1965 these gaps persisted, though to a gradually diminishing extent.

Since the U.S. and GVN resources invested in intelligence were enormous in the aggregate, we must look elsewhere for the reasons behind its failures. Again, typical organizational behavior severely hampered achievement of optimum results. The kinds of intelligence most needed in Vietnam were simply alien to the standard institutional repertoires of most U.S. and GVN intelligence services involved. The U.S. and GVN military intelligence empires, which dwarfed their civilian counterparts, were focused in classic style mostly on order of battle. Identifying and locating enemy main force units and movements (or targets) was the order of the day, to the neglect of such other key elements of a highly unconventional enemy establishment as local guerrillas or the Viet Cong infrastructure.

As a result, we tended to underestimate real enemy strength—a tendency reinforced by lack of much firm intelligence on VC recruiting in the countryside. Many military intelligence officers (with some notable exceptions) seemed to have closed minds to such other facets of the war. It was not their job, after all. So all too little attention was paid to the operational code or tactical style of the enemy, to the fact that his tactics as well as his goals were as much political as military. We saw the enemy in our own image, one reason why we repeatedly thought we were doing so much better than we actually were. "Intelligence was oriented on the [enemy] combat units, so were the
operations. Nor was there ever an adequate effort to combine and rationalize the plethora of U.S. and GVN intelligence agencies, which overlapped and often got in each other's way. Institutional autonomy was more important than optimum results. This also contributed to the inadequacy of our intelligence despite all the enormous resources invested.

Nowhere was GVN/U.S. intelligence failure so marked (the Vietnamese were even worse than the Americans) as in meeting the crucial need to identify and neutralize the so-called Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI), the politico-administrative apparatus which ran the insurgency. As early as 1957 the MSUG was suggesting greater activity along these lines, to be carried out by a national police force. Then, in 1961-1962, the British Advisory Mission urged that high priority be given to building up the police, especially a good Special Branch, for this purpose. Among others, the author agitated this issue vigorously from the White House in 1966-1967. The PROVN and "Roles and Missions" studies both highlighted it. From an unexpected source, Assistant Secretary Enthoven urged McNamara prior to his July 1967 Vietnam trip to focus on how to get at the VCI. As it turned out, Westmoreland had already agreed to the first major U.S. advisory effort designed to get the GVN moving in this key area. It evolved into the GVN's Phung Hoang program, begun in 1968 but even today -- four years later -- one of the weakest links in the GVN counterinsurgency effort.

U.S. CIVILIAN AGENCIES ALSO PLAY OUT THEIR INSTITUTIONAL REPERTOIRES

On the civilian side we find the same tendency for the U.S. agencies involved to focus primarily on that with which they were most familiar. The civilian agencies may have been more perceptive of the political dimensions of the conflict, but they were also slow to adapt to the exigencies of insurgency conflict and then major war. Perhaps the civilian agencies were more imaginative than the military; they mounted a number of interesting experiments (see Chapter VII) but none was supported and funded on a large enough scale to make much of a dent. For the most part, just like the U.S. military, the U.S. civilian agencies unsurprisingly "did their thing."
State's concept of its role in Vietnam -- and that of our Embassy in Saigon -- were quite conventional from the outset and have remained so. As we saw in Chapter III, they did not often deviate from the concept of normal diplomatic dealings with a sovereign allied government, even when that government was falling apart. Similarly, State always carefully confined itself to its traditional role of *primus inter pares* in relation to the other U.S. agencies involved in Vietnam. It made no effort to assert managerial primacy, to control our military effort on political grounds. The *Pentagon Papers* paint a picture of recurrent State Department concern over what the U.S. was doing in Vietnam, but near-abdication of any executive responsibility for the U.S. effort except when it bore on the limits to which our out-of-country operations were subject.

The State Department's approach to institution-building in Vietnam turned largely on the encouragement of democratic institutions on the American model. Elections would legitimize the government, while a tripartite form of government with executive, legislative, and judicial checks and balances would prevent the growth of dictatorial power. However well meant, was this the right answer? Was it a form of political mirror-imaging comparable to what we did in the military field? Duncanson comments that

> too much weight was given to the political side of government and what American officials liked to call "the realities of power," by extension from the US constitution, regarded as a norm of the human political condition which only the aberration of colonialism had temporarily obscured in Vietnam. Any abatement of the principles underlying American democracy -- of the pyramid of balanced vested interests at various political levels -- would be wrong, would provide material for Communist propaganda, and therefore would make the Communist hold over the people stronger. With concentration of American support on the leader as the rallying point for vested interests harnessed to a national endeavour went disregard for the impersonal institutions of the state and underestimation of the value of the civil service.

AID's role in Vietnam, on the other hand, has probably received more criticism than it deserves. While institutionally no more capable
of gearing itself to counterinsurgency than other U.S. agencies, AID at least put the bulk of its resources into an essential corollary to that effort:

The fundamental task which fell on USAID during the decade of 1962-1971 was to offset the budgetary cost of the war and to control as well as possible, the inflation. Therefore some two-thirds of the economic assistance provided by AID (including Food For Peace) took the form of commercial import financing, that is supply of goods to the marketplace.79

This Commercial Import Program had also been used in the mid-Fifties to combat inflation, and was similar to budget support techniques used to shore up the economies of such other U.S. aid clients bearing heavy military burdens as South Korea and Taiwan.80 It was restarted in 1963, and was at its largest during the years of a major U.S. troop presence. Although wartime inflation became severe after 1964, and averaged 25 to 30 percent per year during 1965-1969, it never got out of control -- quite an unusual fact in a country at war like Vietnam. In 1971 prices rose only 15 percent. By contrast, in the first year of the Korean War retail prices rose 750%, and by the time the war ended three years later had risen to 2400%. Better Vietnam inflation control via sensible economic policies, backed by U.S. aid, owed much to the role played by a handful of able U.S. officials -- chiefly Leroy Wehrle, Charles Cooper, Richard Cooper, Rutherford Poats, and James Grant -- who enjoyed unusual access to receptive policymakers in Washington and Saigon.

But AID's other programs were for the most part less successful, especially before 1968. Its normal concept of how to work through the existing local government, and of providing funding and technical assistance mostly at the central government level, did not fit the situation in Vietnam. Though AID decided, as part of the 1961 emphasis on counterinsurgency, to shift its focus to rural programs, this occurred in fact on only a very modest scale. USOM representatives were assigned to all provinces in 1962, and AID provided modest support to the Strategic Hamlet Program. In July 1962 the AID Mission (then called USOM) created a new Office of Rural Affairs under Rufus Phillips to
manage this support. However, Phillips and his successor, George Tanham, were never adequately backed up. Instead, AID kept pressing developmental and "nation-building" programs on a GVN whose machinery to execute them had largely atrophied. For example, Tanham points out that even by the summer of 1965 his office included only a few more than 100 people, about 1/250th of the total U.S. military and civilian presence then in Vietnam.

Moreover, most U.S. civilian agencies (CIA was a notable exception) were not equipped, staffed, or structured to deal with the exigencies of a situation like Vietnam. As Cooper puts it,

By and large the non-defense elements of the government were neither psychologically nor organizationally able to come to grips with an insurgency that was quickly getting out of hand. None of the courses given at the Foreign Service Institute, and none of the experiences of AID specialists and Foreign Service Officers elsewhere, seemed relevant to what was going on in Vietnam.

Duncanson too is critical of the inexperience of U.S. civilian advisers. The strongest criticism comes from General Taylor, who finds the slowness of U.S. civilian agencies to move on political, economic, and information programs unfortunately lending color to later charges that the U.S. "tended to neglect the political and social aspects of the situation and fatuously sought an impossible victory." The peacetime funding and personnel procedures of most civilian agencies also proved ill-suited to wartime exigencies. For example, it was estimated in 1966 that it took around eighteen months for supplies ordered through AID machinery to reach Vietnam.
V. INSTITUTIONAL OBSTACLES TO THE LEARNING PROCESS

If it is largely understandable, for reasons given earlier in this study, why our early responses were so ill-suited to the atypical problems we confronted in Vietnam, this still leaves the question of why, many years later, so little has changed. As late as 1969, a knowledgeable participant, Brian Jenkins, in the course of many discussions with the author, dubbed it "the unchangeable war." Why? True, both the U.S. and the GVN have somewhat modified their approaches in response to such changing circumstances; key examples of adaptive response will be discussed in Chapter VII. But after over twenty-two years of Vietnam involvement in one form or another since we began aiding the French in 1950, our response is still overwhelmingly military and conventional, our ability to influence the GVN still limited, our conflict management still fragmented. Why haven't we learned faster?

Again it seems that institutional factors play a significant role. Brian Jenkins, for example, has cited numerous reasons for our unchanging military response, most of them revolving around typical organizational behavior or built-in institutional constraints: the belief that proposed changes might not work; the conviction that present strategy is working; the assurance that more is available and therefore change unnecessary; the belief that organizational changes are impossible in the midst of war; the view that the Vietnam war is an aberration and has no application to the future; the rejection of new doctrines as exotic and of marginal importance; incentives to continue what one is doing; institutional loyalty that rejects external pressure for change even in the face of private doubts; the twelve-month tour; and the lack of a single commander to impose his will on the system. Whatever the relative weight one attaches to these factors, they all have relevance and reinforce the case that numerous institutional factors have long inhibited U.S. military adaptation to the unusual circumstances of Vietnam. Again, however, many of them are understandable. For example, while Vietnam hardly turned out to be of
marginal importance to our military institutions, neither does our Vietnam experience appear to provide the optimum source of doctrinal and tactical lessons for the future (see Chapter IX).

As already noted, it would be too easy to attribute such problems entirely to inadequate leadership. Though U.S. field commanders seem destined to bear the brunt of criticism over U.S. military performance in Vietnam, many of these problems were either the province of Washington or were well-nigh incapable of solution except over time. Why? It is because the underlying causes of these weaknesses are to be found largely in the "system" itself -- the nature and behavior patterns of the organizations that waged the war. Ellsberg, drawing on his Vietnam experience, remarks that we do not know enough about the "learning properties of our bureaucracy." It is hard to disagree with his conclusion that those bureaucratic properties of organizations -- insensitivities, blindnesses, and distorted incentives -- which slow up learning need to be more fully analyzed.\(^1\)

**INSTITUTIONAL INERTIA**

One form of institutional constraint typical of organizational behavior -- bureaucratic inertia -- is strongly evident here. A hallmark of bureaucracy is reluctance to change accepted ways of doing things. Bureaucrats prefer to deal with the familiar. It is more comfortable and convenient to continue following tested routines, whereas to change may be to admit prior error -- a cardinal bureaucratic sin. So, whether private or public, civilian or military, organizations typically like to keep operating the way they are operating, and to shift only slowly in response to changing situations. And the more hierarchical and disciplined they are -- military organizations are almost archetypes -- the greater the built-in institutional obstacles to change except slowly and incrementally. Even a cursory review of the fate of many military innovations and innovators would be sufficient to illustrate the point. Dr. Vannevar Bush, World War II head of the Office of Scientific Research and Development, has described some of the obstacles to technological innovation in the military services even during wartime. To him, military organization "suffers
from a disease that permeates all governmental ... organizations --
the daft belief that if one does nothing one will not make mistakes,
and the drab system of seniority and promotions will proceed on its
way."

Moreover, once large organizations become committed to a course
of action, the ponderous wheels set in motion, vast sums allotted, and
personnel selected and trained, it is difficult to alter course. In-
stead, programs tend to acquire a built-in momentum of their own. And
if obstacles are encountered, the natural tendency is to do more of the
same -- to pour on more coal -- rather than to rethink the problem and
try to adjust response patterns. Thus "more of the same" -- though per-
haps with a few cosmetic changes -- seems to be a typical bureaucratic
response. Stanley Hoffmann describes how, given the nature of bureau-
cracy, it must painfully build an internal consensus and how, once
reached, this "tends to be very difficult to reverse. Therefore, there
is a built-in momentum or inertia." In particular, once a military
operation is launched, "a certain logic of military operation" almost
naturally takes over, one which "it takes a determined and unlikely
combined overall effort of the other agencies, including sometimes the
Pentagon, to reverse."3

This sort of institutional inertia is amply illustrated in the
Vietnam case. Once we set a course and invested heavily in it, the
machine proved very difficult to turn around. "More of the same" power-
fully reinforced the escalatory trend in Vietnam till 1968, as several
analysts have noted. James Thomson, for example, points to the "self-
enlarging nature" of our military investment:

Once air strikes and particularly ground forces were intro-
duced, our investment itself had transformed the original
stakes. More air power was needed to protect the ground
forces; and then more ground forces to protect the ground
forces. And needless to say, the military mind develops its
own momentum in the absence of clear guidelines from the
civilians.4

While the sheer institutional and physical difficulty of shifting
strategy (or de-escalating) should not be underestimated, President
Johnson finally did begin a shift toward de-escalation in 1968 by suspending the bombing of the North. President Nixon has carried it much further. During 1968-1971 the GVN/U.S. authorities in Saigon also at least modestly increased the weight of effort devoted to pacification and somewhat reduced the emphasis on search-and-destroy operations. The massive use of firepower was sharply cut back, and the attrition strategy modified. Yet one cannot escape the feeling that this change was forced mostly by U.S. disillusionment with the war and the gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces, together with the enemy's heavy 1968 losses and consequent reversion to a protracted war strategy. Nor can the diversionary effect of the incursions into Cambodia and Laos be left out of the equation. Moreover, even today bureaucratic inertia and other institutional constraints still lay a heavy hand on GVN/U.S. conduct of the war.

LACK OF INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY

Another organizational phenomenon with seriously adverse impact on U.S. ability to learn and adapt in Vietnam is the shocking lack of institutional memory. "We have devised a unique sort of bureaucratic machine which . . . tends to ensure that our operation in Vietnam will always be vigorous, will never grow tired, but also will never grow wiser." Or, to cite John Vann, "We don't have twelve years' experience in Vietnam. We have one year's experience twelve times over."

To a great extent this has been the product, largely unforeseen, of the twelve-month tour for U.S. military personnel. It followed the peacetime precedent of thirteen-month tours designed to minimize inequity where dependents had to stay home. As early as October 1961, OSD apparently tried to extend the normal adviser duty tours from twenty-four to thirty months with dependents, and from twelve to eighteen months without. But the Army successfully opposed this on grounds of equity. The twelve-month tour remained the norm, especially after dependents were no longer permitted in Vietnam, and became sacred after 1965. It also seemed highly desirable for political and morale reasons when draftees began to be sent to Vietnam. But yet another factor was the desire of the armed services to rotate as many personnel
as possible through Vietnam for training purposes. After all, it was "our only war." While the one-year tour facilitated rotating a large number of career officers through command slots, these slots were so much in demand that most combat commands were limited to six months.

The costs were horrendous, and far more than financial. Almost as soon as people learned their jobs, they were rotated home. This was a particularly serious handicap in intelligence work and in the advisory system. Of course, some stayed longer or returned for second or third tours (especially since 1969), but they were the exception rather than the rule. The author strongly objected to this discounting of experience, but found Washington agencies adamant on grounds of equity and morale as well as of the presumed need for training as many people as possible by running them through Vietnam.

Further contributing to lack of institutional memory was the tendency to neglect such lessons as were available from the successful British counterinsurgency response in Malaya, and French failures in the First Indochina War. Many tried to point out these lessons (see pp. 3-4 and 41-44), but they lay outside U.S. institutional experience and so had little impact. Conditions in Malaya were considered so different as to make that experience almost irrelevant, which led to the ignoring of tested U.K. techniques. As for the French, what could we learn from them since they had done so poorly? An American army historian who visited the French military attaché in Saigon in 1963 was told that he was the only American who did so. Such factors "misled American advisers into disregarding French experience, either political or military... even military lessons learnt from the Corps Expéditionnaire were not applicable to American or American-taught operations. This injudicious attitude was passed on from generation to generation of American advisers over the years, with considerable cost in dollars and in lives." At least Lansdale and his disciples sought to apply in Vietnam what they had learned in backing Magsaysay's successful quashing of the Huk rebellion, but they too were largely ignored.
Somehow the great institutional participants placed a very low premium on adapting their responses to the atypical needs of Vietnam. If anything, the incentives were to do the reverse. We didn't want to restructure or reequip our combat forces to optimize their capabilities for Vietnam because we regarded Vietnam as a temporary diversion from their more normal employment. To revamp a significant fraction of our general purpose forces for Vietnam hardly seems to have been considered, because it would have been so expensive and so distorting for the preferred force structure. If anything, there was greater incentive to use in Vietnam the weapons, organizational structures, tactics, and techniques which were institutionally preferred for other reasons, rather than adapt them to Vietnam. For example, the Navy and Air Force preferred to use expensive F-4 Phantom jets in Vietnam than propellor-driven A-1Es because this way they got more Phantoms for their inventory. The rationale was to have "general purpose" forces, even if the general purposes served were hardly those most relevant in Vietnam. The same was true of U.S. civilian agencies, which showed little inclination to adapt their regular structures, programs, or personnel policies to the needs of Vietnam.

In particular, the peacetime military and civil personnel systems proved quite inflexible in terms of providing the right kind of career people, putting them in the right jobs, or retaining them for optimum tours of duty in Vietnam. In World War II men had been sent overseas for the duration; in Vietnam even careerists -- not just draftees -- served minimal tours. It was largely business as usual. No agency did much to design personnel policies which would have optimized performance in Vietnam. There was little organized effort to select people for key jobs on the basis of prior experience or adaptability.

Preferred career incentive patterns posed another institutional obstacle to adaptation. The best way to get ahead in the military services or civilian agencies is to stay in the "mainstream." The most desirable military slots for the purpose are those in command of U.S. units. In Vietnam, therefore, the best officers naturally tended to gravitate toward these slots, toward which the military personnel system
also pushed them. This system operated to the detriment of the advisory effort, which after 1965 tended to get less highly qualified men and to lose them as soon as they became experienced. It was even less desirable to be a military adviser in pacification than to be a tactical unit adviser. This was just not the way to get ahead. It is fortunate that many qualified military men nonetheless volunteered for pacification work. Many civilian bureaucrats, too, were reluctant to serve in a wartime theater like Vietnam, not for want of courage but because they saw such atypical duty as doing little to advance their careers. Many capable Foreign Service officers, for example, were reluctant to serve in CORDS, and the State Department began cutting back on its representation as soon as it felt it decently could. The same problems were reflected on the Vietnamese side, where able officers or civil officials hesitated to disrupt their normal career patterns to serve in "sideshow" programs like pacification.

Pressures for conformity, always strong in large hierarchical institutions, also militated against adaptiveness. An officer or official who wanted to do things differently often found that this was frowned upon rather than encouraged. Nor did funding or personnel procedures make experimentation easy. Though our Vietnam experience is replete with able men and promising experiments, all too few of the latter were followed up consistently, lasted long enough, or grew big enough to have significant impact (see Chapter VII).

INADEQUATE ANALYSIS OF PERFORMANCE

Yet a further reason why we were so slow to learn and adapt was the notable paucity of systematic analysis of performance — both in Washington and in the field. The irony is that such systematic aggregative analysis proved well-nigh indispensable to understanding what was actually going on in so complex and multifaceted a conflict situation as Vietnam (a fact the U.S. media also never grasped). There is much to be said for the verdict of Enthoven and Smith as of end-1968:

The problem was not too much analysis; it was too little. The President and his key advisors sought candid assessments of the war, but they would not pay the political
costs in terms of friction with the military to get them. There was no systematic analysis in Vietnam of the allocation of resources to the different missions of the war and no systematic analysis of the effectiveness and costs of alternative military operations. Little operations analysis was being conducted in the field or in Washington. And even if all these analyses had been made, there was no good program budget or over-all organization in the Executive Branch of the government to put the findings to use, on either the military or the civilian side.9

Their judgment seems a little harsh in some respects, particularly since some excellent analytical work was done by Enthoven's own Systems Analysis people in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. Since 1968 it has been extensively relied upon by the top decisionmakers in DOD, though largely ignored in the field. Indeed OSD/SA's Southeast Asia Analysis Report, produced monthly or bimonthly since 1967, provides in the author's judgment by far the best running analytical account (unfortunately still classified) of the course of the war.

Also interesting is the sharp contrast between the extensive 1966-1968 analysis of the effectiveness of the air war against North Vietnam and the relative lack of such analysis of the ground war in the South (or of the associated air effort, which was even larger than that against the North). Because of the political sensitivity of the air campaign against North Vietnam, including the risks of triggering Soviet or Chinese intervention, the debate over it from 1965 through 1968 was buttressed by numerous analytical studies by CINCPAC, the Air Staff, and the JCS on the military side, and OSD/SA, CIA, and the Jason Study Group on the civilian side. These analyses had considerable impact on the 1968 decisions to suspend the air war in the North and to switch the effort to the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex.10

In the field of tactical operations analysis, much more was done on the air side by 7th Air Force, CINCPAC, and the Air Staff than was ever attempted for the ground war, and it resulted in many tactical and technical improvements. This may have been partly because the problems involved were more amenable to analysis, and also because of greater prior experience with such studies on the part of the air establishments involved.
Even on the ground side, the OSD/SA analyses of the difficulty of winning the war by attrition affected the 1967 and 1968 decisions to stabilize the U.S. force levels in South Vietnam (see Chapter IV). On the other hand, MACV never developed much capability to analyze U.S. or ARVN military performance. In line with the attrition strategy, the focus was mostly on such factors as casualty ratios and weapons-captured-to-weapons-lost ratios. Even these were regarded mostly as progress indicators. Little systematic attempt (comparable to that of OSD/SA) was made to discern operationally meaningful patterns.

Perhaps the most systematic attempt by MACV to collect useful data and analyze trends was made by its pacification advisory component. This was deemed essential because "Analyses of 'pacification' and popular support for the GVN were much tougher to make than analyses of the military side of the war. The numerically analyzable aspects of progress were even fewer and less significant than those used for military operations..." Moreover, pre-1967 pacification reports had proved highly subjective and misleading. Hence CORDS created a sizable Research and Analysis Division and developed an array of new measurement systems which, while far from foolproof, provided a detailed and vastly improved picture of quantitative trends in the countryside. More recently, systematic poll-type surveys of rural attitudes have added greatly to our understanding. Yet even the pacifiers could in hindsight have usefully done a good deal more analysis than they did.

A particularly crucial analytical weakness was the lack of adequate program budgeting to permit showing where the main costs were being incurred in relation to performance. Even a crude program budget of total U.S./GVN costs by OSD/SA showed vividly that the overwhelming bulk... was going into offensive operations, with relatively little into population security, pacification, and related programs... For example, in fiscal 1968, almost $14 billion was spent for bombing and offensive operations, but only $850 million for pacification and programs designed to offset war damage and develop the economy and social infrastructure in South Vietnam.
The author, who sought consistently to make this point and to encourage more such analysis, believes that greater attention to costs and cost/benefit ratios would have facilitated a more balanced, effective, and less costly effort than that actually employed.

Among the reasons for the comparative paucity of systematic analysis, institutional factors bulk large. Organizations are usually neither long on self-criticism nor very receptive to outside analysis of their performance. For example, the Chairman of the JCS at least twice formally complained to the Secretary of Defense about the Vietnam work of OSD/SA. Enthoven and Smith stress such considerations in assessing why more systematic analyses were not done by the U.S. establishment in Saigon:

First, the leaders in Vietnam were not studying "theoretical" questions of this kind. They were extremely busy with the enormous day-to-day operating problems posed by the massive American build-up, the ubiquity and effectiveness of the VC/NVA attacks, and the condition of the South Vietnamese allies. In the beginning, staving off defeat was such a clear purpose that there seemed to be no need for a searching evaluation of long-range objectives. Unfortunately, this pattern was to persist. Second, typically, the environment of a military staff, especially one serving a field commander, is not conducive to a self-critical evaluation of alternative strategies. Rather, the whole spirit of such an operation stresses teamwork. An officer who articulates and defends a policy different from the official position can expect to suffer in his fitness reports and subsequent promotions.

Third, military staff and field commanders had a one-year tour and usually more than one job within the year, so that there was little time to assimilate the lessons of the war. Fourth, the leaders had no alternative strategy and so no incentive to make calculations that would call into question the strategy of attrition. Alternatives suggested from outside the command, such as General Gavin's "enclave strategy," were received by many in Saigon (and in Washington) as threatening criticisms to be rebutted rather than given serious analytical consideration.

Why did the Joint Chiefs not perform such analyses and report such conclusions to the President and the Secretary of Defense? Largely because the JCS made virtually no independent analysis of the Vietnam war. They viewed their role as supporters of the commanders in Vietnam and the Pacific. They used the vast flow of data from Vietnam as input material for keeping themselves informed of daily events in the war so that they could better argue General Westmoreland's case to top
civilian officials. They did not attempt to organize the data for systematic assessment of strategy. They did not even establish an analysis group until late 1967, and then denied it the leeway necessary to analyze basic questions. In short, the JCS had no desire to second-guess General Westmoreland. The President and Secretary of Defense always consulted the JCS before making decisions, but the advice was absolutely predictable: do what General Westmoreland and Admiral Sharp ask, and increase the size of the remaining forces in the United States.13

* * *

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 to do 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 U.S. support and advisory effort, despite the huge investments made, to generate an adequate GVN and RVNAF response to the challenges faced. It also helps answer the question why the enormous direct U.S. contribution to the war -- almost 550,000 troops at peak, thousands of aircraft, and billions of dollars -- had such limited impact for so long.
VI. LACK OF UNIFIED MANAGEMENT

The very way in which the U.S. and the GVN "managed" their roles in the Vietnam conflict created another series of institutional constraints which seriously limited their ability to overcome the problems already discussed. In the Malayan insurgency, the British and Malayan soon grasped that such a response required highly integrated civil-military/U.K.-Malayan conflict management, which proved crucial to their success.¹ In contrast, the U.S. and GVN at no time during the entire 1955-1971 period went very far toward pulling together all the disparate facets of their anti-VC/NVA effort under some kind of unified conflict management.

This also contrasted strongly with the enemy's approach. Hoopes, an experienced management consultant, comments on the disparity:

For the enemy the war remained fundamentally . . . a seamless web of political-military-psychological factors to be manipulated by a highly centralized command authority that never took its eye off the political goal of ultimate control in the South. For the United States, however, the war had become by October 1967 a complex of three separate, or only loosely related, struggles: there was the large-scale, conventional war . . . the confused "pacification" effort, . . . and the curiously remote air war against North Vietnam. . . . ²

Thompson too sees "all through the period an unfortunate tendency to regard the war as being three wars" and finds that it resulted from "lack of unified control."³

Who was responsible for conflict management of the Vietnam war? The bureaucratic fact is that below Presidential level everybody and nobody was responsible for coping with it in the round. With relatively few exceptions, neither the U.S. Government nor the GVN set up any specialized planning or operating agencies for counterinsurgency. Nor was there much overall coordinating or supervisory machinery for pulling together disparate programs within the U.S. Government and GVN or between these two allies. Instead both governments were organized
conventionally, with little room for large-scale activities that cut across traditional agency lines.

The way in which both governments ran the war in largely separate bureaucratic compartments, with each government and each agency within it largely "doing its own thing," had a significant adverse impact on its effective prosecution. Such diffusion of responsibility diluted managerial focus and limited the degree of adaptability needed to meet the special circumstances found in Vietnam. It encouraged instead what Stanley Hoffmann describes as "parochialism . . . the inevitable concomitant of fragmentation" and "lack of imagination (or, more accurately, resistance to political creativity) in foreign policy." And lack of adequate machinery for follow-through meant that even many policies that were adopted were never actually carried out in the intended way.

Lack of any overall management structure contributed to the over-militarization of the war by facilitating the predominance of the U.S. and GVN military in its conduct. This in turn led to the tail wagging the dog, with everything else required to conform. Moreover, "The complete lack of balance and of coordination between military operations and civil programmes" also contributed to "the many harmful side effects of the war -- refugees, inflation, nepotism, draft dodging, black markets and corruption." Though the U.S. military at any rate were quite responsive to civilian leadership, that leadership not only lacked machinery for exerting civilian control but for various reasons exerted relatively little influence over how the military functioned in the field. If anything, the "problem was not overmanagement of the war from Washington, it was undermanagement." In support of this verdict, Enthoven and Smith point to "a deep resistance to trying to run the war from Washington." Except for setting political limits on out-of-country operations and determining the level of manpower and resource allocations, Washington left the conduct of the war mostly to Saigon. And there the U.S. Ambassador, though the titular head, in practice left the military side of the war entirely to COMUSMACV.

By the same token counterinsurgency (or pacification) fell between stools. It was everybody's business and nobody's. The absence
of any single major agency or directing machinery charged with it contributed greatly to the prolonged failure to push it on a large scale. Here is one major reason why, even though many correctly analyzed the need, and pacification was from the outset a major component of U.S. declaratory strategy (see Chapter VIII), it failed for so long to get off the ground. McNamara himself, in his pessimistic October 1966 trip report to the President, noted that "a part of the problem undoubtedly lies in bad management on the American as well as the GVN side. Here split responsibility -- or 'no responsibility' -- has resulted in too little hard pressure on the GVN to do its job and no really solid or realistic planning with respect to the whole effort."  

Lack of unified management also diluted control over the oft-noted 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. One consequence of GVN and U.S. attempts to deal with the unusual requirements of insurgency war through the existing bureaucratic structure was a plethora of programs conducted by different agencies, each jealously guarding its prerogatives and insistent on its own procedures. Add the U.S.-sponsored programs to those created by the GVN, and the list is long indeed. Ambassador Taylor notes that in early 1965 "about sixty programs" were being conducted under the aegis of the U.S. Mission.  

A bewildering variety of programs, organizations, funding sources, procedures, reporting systems, and end-use checks still characterizes the GVN/U.S. effort in Vietnam. Since 1967 some of these have gradually been pulled closer together according to central pacification plans agreed upon by the U.S. and GVN, but their field execution is still highly diffused. For example, a province chief does not control the budgets of the provincial technical services. These are developed and administered exclusively by the ministries in Saigon.

Another consequence of GVN/U.S. utilization of essentially peacetime management structures has been the use of mostly peacetime planning, programming, financial, resource allocation, and distribution procedures, which changed only slowly under pressure. The extent to which these procedures inhibited flexible and timely adaptation to
counterinsurgency needs has been frequently remarked upon and deserves fuller examination than is feasible here. As might be expected -- since they were not designed to cope with wartime exigencies -- the civilian agencies were far more hidebound than the military. Most AID procedures, designed for conventional economic assistance programs, were particularly cumbersome and slow-moving.

However, even U.S. military logistic support -- generally one of the brighter aspects of U.S. performance in Vietnam -- was constrained to an extent by the high-level U.S. decisions to deal with Vietnam essentially via the existing U.S. military establishment (only gradually expanded) and via largely peacetime procedures. The Besson Board report, in drawing logistic lessons from Vietnam experience, cautiously alludes to this problem in many instances.9

Last but not least, there seems little doubt that lack of combined U.S./GVN management machinery seriously limited U.S. ability to secure 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. Though South Vietnam's leadership, administrative, and institutional weaknesses undermined its ability to cope with the VC threat -- indeed led to the felt need for direct U.S. intervention -- the U.S. did little even after its intervention to create machinery for overcoming these weaknesses. Instead, it ended up largely taking over the war from the GVN. For example, one of the chief reasons for poor GVN and RVNAF performance was the often poor caliber of leadership at field and ministerial levels. There were many cogent reasons for proceeding cautiously in this direction, but some form of combined command (if not combined overall war direction) would have given the U.S. far greater influence over the selection of these leaders than it actually exerted.

Again, as will be seen below, many suggestions were made for improving U.S. and interallied conflict management. Again, very few of them were adopted -- and these only belatedly. Secretary McNamara, more than any other key official, kept raising such management issues: a DOD-led task force in 1961, proconsular power for the Ambassador in 1964, combined command in 1965, and unifying the U.S. civil-military
pacification support effort in 1966. He apparently didn't push them very hard, however, probably because of the difficulty of overcoming the many service and non-DOD interests eager to preserve the status quo.

In retrospect, the diffusion of authority and fragmentation of command characterizing both the U.S. and the GVN effort (and the inter-relationship between them) help to explain why it proved so hard for so long to translate Vietnam policy into practice or to convert our overwhelming superiority in manpower and resources into operational results. They placed serious institutional constraints on GVN/U.S. performance in Vietnam. In a seminar held at the Royal United Service Institution (RUSI) in February 1969 on "Lessons from the Vietnam War," a group of senior British officers and civilians concluded that lack of unified control in the field was one of the major errors made.10

U.S. CONFLICT MANAGEMENT -- WHO RAN THE STORE IN WASHINGTON?

By and large, the U.S. ran its share of the war with essentially a peacetime management structure. Cooper notes how, even after the war escalated, no Vietnam "high command" emerged to coordinate all aspects of Washington war management. "Nor, even in the Pentagon, was there a single focal point -- a 'Mr. Vietnam.'"11 Few major changes were made in Washington to unify conflict management, even after the direct U.S. force commitment grew to proportions exceeding that in the Korean War. Instead, we mostly made do with what structure existed at the time. This is not to say that top officials neglected the war. On the contrary, the President and his top advisers probably spent even more time on it than might have been necessary if the supporting structure had been better organized.12 The President himself spent a great deal of time following the war in detail, as did necessarily his White House national security staff, particularly his Special Assistant for National Security Affairs. The same was true of the Secretaries of State and Defense, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Nor was there any lack of field visits, meetings, conferences, study groups, and staff inputs. President Kennedy sent several fact-finding missions to Vietnam in 1961 alone. The periodic trips of the
Secretary of Defense to Vietnam were another important device for management review and proposing decisions. They linked together Washington and the field. But such informal liaison and occasional ad hoc committees were the order of the day. The war management process was basically one of ad hoc interaction between the key agencies, with little formal machinery created, especially for systematic planning, programming, and follow-through. Below the top there was very little structure for pulling together the many strands of counterinsurgency war.

If the Pentagon Papers are any guide, Washington-level management issues were only infrequently addressed in the welter of high-level discussions on programs and force levels during 1955-1965. One interesting early attempt was in April 1961, apparently at the instigation of General Lansdale. Walt Rostow advised the new President that "gearing up" our Vietnam responses needed "the appointment of a full-time first-rate backstop man in Washington. McNamara, as well as your staff, believes this to be essential." When Kennedy asked Deputy Secretary of Defense Gilpatric for a Vietnam action program, the latter set up a high-level interagency task force sparked by Lansdale to provide it. Gilpatric's report called for not only a substantially increased U.S. aid and advisory effort but creation of an ongoing Presidential Task Force to provide "overall direction, interagency coordination and support" for the proposed programs. Gilpatric was to head it, and Lansdale was to go to Vietnam as expediter and coordinator of the program. But this most unusual proposal never had much chance. Bureaucratic politics promptly intervened. State objected successfully to such roles for Gilpatric and Lansdale. Having an ambassador report to a task force chaired by the Deputy Secretary of Defense with Lansdale as his executive apparently was too much for the Department of State to swallow.

Instead, a middle-level career diplomat, Sterling Cottrell, took over leadership of what was "downgraded to a conventional interagency working group." When Cottrell left in 1963, only an action officer-level Vietnam Working Group was continued. In 1964 a slightly higher-level interagency Vietnam Coordinating Committee under William Sullivan (later Leonard Unger) was again formed. While given direct access to
the Secretary of State, in practice it served mainly as a vehicle for middle-level exchange of views and ideas.

In any case, the laboring oar on Vietnam remained mostly with Defense. As Schlesinger comments, the very composition of the October 1961 Taylor-Rostow Mission (i.e., the absence of a comparable senior State official) apparently connoted "a conscious decision by the Secretary of State to turn the Vietnam problem over to the Secretary of Defense."17 The State Department retained its titular coordinating role as primus inter pares among the great national security bureaucracies, but this existed more in theory than in practice -- at least on Vietnam. General Taylor complains that State, which should have assumed a supervisory and coordinating role in the interrelated departmental activities in Washington, did not. In fact Taylor, by now a Presidential consultant, engineered a new interdepartmental committee system in early 1966, designed to strengthen the State Department role. But as he sadly notes, it did not rise to the challenge, playing no role on Vietnam.18

Nonetheless, some steps were taken to strengthen Washington management as U.S. intervention grew. An informal "war cabinet" gradually developed in late 1965 or so, at what became known as the "Tuesday Lunch" in the White House family dining room. Originally it consisted only of the President, Rusk, McNamara, McGeorge Bundy (later Rostow), and Hoyers (later George Christian). The author sat in frequently during 1966-1967. Later the Tuesday Lunch was expanded to include CIA Director Helms, the Chairman of the JCS, and others.19 It provided an invaluable forum for intimate top-level discussion and decision on key issues, but had no full-time machinery to support it.

At least one senior military man -- General H. K. Johnson, Army Chief of Staff during 1964-1968 -- believed that close integration of the political, economic, information, security, and military branches of government is essential to ensure a concentration of effort against an insurgency. One must constantly keep foremost in mind that military action is only a part of counterinsurgency and that a well-integrated "team" can often compound a military success or minimize a failure.20
General Johnson commissioned the massive PROVN study by an Army staff team, which in March 1966 decried the lack of unified Washington backup for Vietnam and prescribed a Special Assistant to the President for Vietnam Affairs to "coordinate" on the President's behalf the five separate and often competing agency efforts involved in Vietnam. Its impact is unknown, except on the author's own subsequent proposals for reorganization of pacification management.

However, growing concern over the neglect of the paramilitary and civil dimensions of the Vietnam conflict, and the by then apparent inability of the several agencies concerned to pull it together and provide it wartime impetus, did lead eventually to perhaps the only major U.S. organizational innovations of the Vietnam war. A group of senior officials convened at Warrenton in January 1966 to consider how to develop more of a pacification effort in Vietnam also pointed to the need for better Washington backup arrangements. This theme was picked up at the February 1966 Honolulu Conference, where the U.S. side noted that improvement of U.S. organization was essential. As a result of this emphasis on balancing our military effort by doing more to win "the other war," the new Deputy Ambassador in Saigon, William J. Porter, was told to pull together and direct all U.S. support efforts not under MACV -- the beginning of a process which led to the unified pacification advisory effort of 1967 (see Chapter VII). However, Porter regarded his new role "primarily as a coordinating effort," and genuine unified management was not to be achieved till 1967.

After some interagency debate as to whether Washington backup for what President Johnson termed the "other war" should be in State or in the White House, the President resolved the issue by appointing in late March 1966 a Special Assistant to oversee it. What this "other war" encompassed was left deliberately vague, except that it clearly excluded what was by then called "McNamara's war." On the other hand, the new Special Assistant's charter charged him with "supervision," not just coordination -- a unique grant of management of authority to a White House staff officer, and one which was suitably exploited. The new Special Assistant, with a small but select staff, did manage to help pull together and impart some vigor to the "other war" effort.
But the post was in effect downgraded by the President after the first incumbent was transferred to Vietnam.

In late 1966 the lack of any machinery below the top led President Johnson to set up a highly informal subcabinet group, chaired by Under Secretary of State Katzenbach, to think through the knotty problems of the war. Informally called the "non-group," it met fairly frequently -- particularly after mid-1967. Though the author proposed it and got the necessary approvals, it had not played much of a role up to the time he left for Vietnam. The Nixon Administration restructured the group, and formalized it as the Vietnam Special Studies Group of the NSC, chaired by the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs and supported by an interagency working group.

Another management change sparked by the White House was the creation in early 1967 of a separate Vietnam Bureau in AID, headed by an Assistant Administrator, to deal full-time with Vietnam programs, which by then took up over one-fourth of the total AID budget. In DOD, however, the only pre-1969 organizational innovations were DDR&E's creation of a special deputy to pull together and expedite R&D for Southeast Asia, and the special arrangements made for the "sensor" program (see p. 107). CIA also created a small top-level analytical staff under George Carver in the Director's own office.

Aside from these modest efforts, however, there has been little systematic attempt to bring together interagency or even intra-agency Washington management of the Vietnam war. Instead, each of the agencies has basically sought to cope with Vietnam requirements through its own peacetime management structure, without much effort even to design special procedures to meet wartime exigencies. Aside from those mentioned in the previous paragraph, not a single senior-level official above the rank of office director or colonel in any U.S. agency dealt full-time with Vietnam before 1969.

The present Administration has created more formal committees, but the situation has not basically changed. The Under Secretary-level Vietnam Special Studies Group headed by Henry Kissinger meets infrequently and does not appear to play a continuing policy or management role. The real work is done by a group of able analysts on
Kissinger's own staff, who provide the White House with an important analytic capability which did not exist before. There is also an ad hoc group on Vietnam under the NSC. In mid-1969 DOD finally created a full-time Vietnam Task Force headed by a brigadier general (now a major general) with a small staff. It briefs the Secretary, but is layered under the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (ISA) for East Asia/Pacific Affairs. Under the Task Force is an intra-DOD Vietnamization Task Group with observers from other U.S. agencies. All these groups may lead to more systematic policy coordination, but they do not add up to unified Washington management in any sense.

**WHO WAS IN CHARGE IN SAIGON?**

Generally the same lack of unified U.S. conflict management has characterized the situation in the field. Hillsman points out that

From the beginning, the United States effort lacked both the "unified civilian, police, and military system of command and control" and the "subordination of civic, police, social, and military measures to an over-all counterguerrilla program" that were the first principles of the strategic concept that had been worked out.26

This problem was recurrently addressed, but never fully resolved. In particular, the thorny problem of U.S. civil and military command relationships was never addressed head-on in Vietnam, despite full recognition that it existed. When the conventional MAAG in Vietnam was complemented in 1962 by a military assistance command (MACV), the question of giving its commander a directive "consistent with the desire of the President for unity of responsibility for all activities related to the counterinsurgency effort" was addressed, but the solution left him essentially independent of the Ambassador.27 MACV finally absorbed the MAAG in 1964, and later became a full-scale theater headquarters pulling together the U.S. military effort. It did some business directly with Washington, but mostly had to deal through CINCPAC and its satellite service component commands set up in the light of World War II experience to control multifront Pacific operations. CINCPAC also had primary responsibility for out-of-country air operations. But some have