IX. WHAT INSTITUTIONAL LESSONS CAN BE LEARNED?

The preceding analysis suggests that, whatever the wisdom of the various U.S. decisions to intervene in Vietnam, there is also much to be learned from the way we went about it. Though by no means the whole answer, the underlying conclusion which emerges from this study is the difficulty encountered by conventional government institutions -- in this case both U.S. and GVN -- in responding optimally to such atypical problems as they confronted in Vietnam. This does much to explain why there was such an immense disparity between the cumulatively massive effort mounted and the ambiguous results achieved. It also helps explain why such a gap emerged between policy and performance -- between the guidelines laid down by the policymakers and what was actually done in the field.

Among the many underlying reasons have been the unique and unfamiliar conflict environment of Vietnam, the atypical nature of the conflict in which we became enmeshed, and the sharp contrast between the enemy we faced and the regime we backed. As this study seeks to demonstrate, however, it was more than that. We perceived the difficulties we confronted better than our responses would suggest. But a series of constraints -- largely inherent in the behavior patterns of the GVN and U.S. institutions involved in the struggle -- made it difficult for them to gear their responses sufficiently well to those perceptions. Almost regardless of what policy called for, these institutions tended to play out their existing institutional repertoires, and to adapt themselves only slowly even to felt needs. And there was little top-level follow-through or adequate management machinery to force them into different patterns of response. Largely as a result, much of what we did turned out to be futile, wasted, and even irrelevant. Here is one key reason why, despite all the tragic human and material costs incurred, the U.S. and GVN have still not achieved a satisfactory outcome in Vietnam.
If this analysis is at least broadly valid, then many useful lessons flow logically from it. Insofar as they relate to the typical behavior of government institutions when confronting unfamiliar problems, these lessons of course have far wider application than to insurgency situations of the Vietnam type. But their applicability also would obviously vary with each future situation. In fact Vietnam itself teaches us the dangers implicit in taking a past experience as an explicit model for the future. As we learned from attempting to apply in Vietnam what we learned in the Korean War, such lessons may not be equally applicable in quite different situations. Since the unique features of Vietnam are highly unlikely to be duplicated, we must avoid analogies which could lead to gross misperceptions about how best to deal with quite different contingencies. The suggested lessons which follow are framed with this caveat in mind.

It is also tempting to suggest, as one key lesson of Vietnam, that "policy is easy to decide; execution is much more difficult." But this would be a grievous oversimplification. For sound policy formulation must take fully into account the capabilities of the institutions involved to execute it effectively. Where a high degree of institutional adaptation is required, our Vietnam experience amply illustrates the sheer enormity of the task of making much of a dent in the "system." It shows the difficulty of changing institutional behavior patterns, even in the light of frustrating experience. Yet large, hierarchically organized institutions seem to be a fixed feature of the contemporary scene, indispensable to meeting many complex needs of society. Since we can't do without them, we have to pay the price of accepting their built-in limitations to the extent that they cannot be altered. Thus, wise policy must take adequately into account the institutional realities that will largely shape its execution.

Indeed, reflecting on our Vietnam failures, Stanley Hoffmann asks: "Are bureaucratic problems ones about which we can do very much?" He fears that the government bureaucratic apparatus is "thoroughly unreformable." But this seems a harsh verdict, perhaps overinfluenced by our Vietnam experience. Vietnam was so atypical as to be a poor test
case. And this study has shown that even in Vietnam some institutional adaptation emerged and much more was proposed. In fact, history is replete with examples of institutional adaptation over time. Also, some institutions seem to adapt better than others, perhaps private ones more rapidly than public under the competitive pressures of the marketplace. At any rate, the better we understand the nature of the problem and the impact of the constraints involved, the more likely we are to seek sensible remedies.

Moreover, it is almost axiomatic that institutional change tends to be forced in the wake of what is widely perceived as a catastrophe, when accepted patterns of behavior are severely challenged as having failed. Numerous examples from military history come readily to mind. Whether or not they regard Vietnam as a catastrophe, our military and foreign policy institutions are under heavy fire for their Vietnam performance. In this sense the climate for absorbing "lessons" from this costly experience may be more favorable then if the outcome had been less ambiguous.

Lastly, it is always difficult to frame such lessons in terms that are sufficiently generalized to be broadly applicable, yet specific enough to be operationally useful. What follows may not satisfactorily resolve this dilemma, nor does it pretend to exhaust the lessons of Vietnam. In keeping with the purpose of this study, it comprises three categories: (a) some general observations on the requisites for adaptive institutional responses; (b) more specific suggestions as to the various ways and means of generating such adaptation; and (c) similar suggestions as to how best to generate such adaptive responses in client regimes. All these are stated rather briefly and baldly, since they merely attempt to synthesize and summarize what has already been developed in the preceding chapters. Moreover, the author is painfully aware that in every case they are "easier said than done."

THE REQUISITES OF ADAPTIVE RESPONSE

1. Perhaps the key lesson to be learned from our Vietnam experience is that atypical problems demand specially tailored solutions. So
baldly stated this sounds almost banal. But as Vietnam shows, such solutions are all too difficult to achieve in practice. Neither the U.S. nor the GVN get very high marks on this score in the Vietnam case, in strong contrast to the British in Malaya, for example. Instead, our approach was distinguished by its sheer conventionality. The reasons for this, as discussed in this study, suggest several further lessons.

2. Above all the policymakers must take fully into account the ability of the institutions carrying out the policy to execute it as intended. For, whatever the nature of the problem and the policy adopted, the institutions tasked to execute it will tend to contort this policy in practice to doing what they are used to doing -- playing out their institutional repertoires. Vietnam provides overwhelming evidence that existing U.S. and GVN agencies -- including their field echelons -- were for the most part unable to perform effectively missions that were very different from those they were used to performing. And their reluctance to adapt persisted, for largely institutional reasons, long after it was patently clear that the missions were not being carried out effectively.

3. Adaptive response requires much more than well-conceived policy; it requires adequate machinery at all levels for effective follow-through to see that the policy is effectively carried out, and to force adaptation where essential. Such machinery was sadly lacking in most cases in Vietnam, and its absence contributed greatly to the gap between policy and performance. For what Vietnam suggests as to remedial measures see the next section below.

4. Where the U.S. -- as in Vietnam -- is largely fighting a war by proxy, effective means of stimulating optimum indigenous performance are essential. As this study suggests, the U.S. did not get comparable value for its massive aid to the GVN. Means of narrowing this gap are also discussed below.

WAYS OF FORCING ADAPTATION

As already suggested, it is much easier to draw such generalized, and in hindsight obvious, lessons than to learn from our Vietnam
experience how to apply them in practice. Indeed, this experience sug-
gests instead the enormous obstacles involved. Institutionalizing flexi-
bility and adaptiveness is no easy matter; it goes against the bureau-
cratic grain. Moreover, changing institutional repertoires entails far
more than a realistic appreciation of the nature of the problem and
clear policy guidance to cope with it -- guidance adapted flexibly to
changing circumstances. It also involves balanced programs vigorously
and flexibly carried out with a realistic sense of priorities, plus the
management machinery to pull these programs together and make sure they
are effectively carried out.

It is also more than just a matter of providing the right leader-
ship, important as this is. Vietnam shows how even highly qualified
and experienced leaders, many of whom saw clearly the need for adaptive
change, were often frustrated in their attempts to get it. All the other
factors which influence how an institution will perform its mission need
to be modified as well. Doctrine, training, performance standards, in-
ternal goals and incentive systems, and self-analysis capabilities must
all be made congruent with the mission to be performed. Fortunately,
some aspects of our Vietnam experience suggest at least partial ways
around these institutional roadblocks. What they add up to is the need
for a deliberate effort to offset the inevitable bureaucratic tendency
to keep doing the familiar and to adapt only slowly and incrementally,
no matter how clear the need for change.

1. First, and most obvious, we must select flexible and imagina-
tive conflict managers at all levels. It is depressing how so many of
our senior officers and officials in Vietnam, especially at the middle
levels, were picked on the basis of normal institutional criteria or
even the convenience of the institution rather than because they were
regarded as particularly qualified for the job. Vietnam shows how many
such qualified people are available but how poorly suited U.S. and GVN
personnel and incentive systems -- military and civilian -- are to bring-
ing them to the fore. There was no more painful example of the inade-
quacy of conventional personnel and selection systems for coping with
atypical needs. On this score, the military must learn that the best
commanders may not be the most flexible and adaptive program managers, nor the best advisers to local governments or forces. Civilian agencies must learn that executives to run large programs, especially in wartime, may be quite different animals from those who normally rise through regular promotion systems which value quite different talents.

2. Training and incentive systems need to be revised to place a higher premium on flexibility and adaptiveness instead of applying the "school solution," and on innovation and experiment rather than conformity. Vietnam all too often showed the inadequacy of "doing it by the book" -- a book which wasn't really very relevant. Again this is admittedly easier said than done, but Vietnam also shows how high a price we paid for not trying harder to do so.

3. Where specially tailored programs which are not in conventional organizational repertoires or which cut across conventional agency lines are required, it may be best to set up autonomous ad hoc organizations to run them -- with the requisite funding, resources, people, and other backing to do the job. If the institutional constraints described in this study are such an impediment to adaptive response, then it would seem better to adapt the organizational structure to the need -- in other words, deliberately break the bureaucratic mold -- than, as so often in Vietnam, to attempt to meet the need through the existing organizational structure. In general, such ad hoc expedients proved successful in Vietnam (e.g., the Marine CAPs, the CIDG program, the RD Ministry, or CORDS under MACV) when given adequate support.

4. Multidimensional conflict situations requiring integrated politico-economic as well as military responses can best be dealt with by unified management at all levels. Vietnam suggests that in such a conflict we cannot afford to separate out its many aspects and attempt to cope with them in separate bureaucratic compartments only loosely coordinated in the normal peacetime fashion in Washington or in the field. Such normal peacetime machinery of government did not suffice in either Washington or Saigon. Diffusion of responsibility proved the enemy of adaptive response. Interagency coordination and pulling all
strands together only at the White House level may suffice for policy formulation. But in the Vietnam case it proved wholly inadequate to compel an integrated effort, responsiveness to priorities, and adequate follow-through to prevent the individual agencies involved from marching to their own bureaucratic tunes. Based on his Vietnam experience, Barry Zorthian sees integrated policy direction and program management as the first "bedrock requirement" for successful U.S. assistance to a local counterinsurgency effort. He defines it as "recognition by the U.S. that a successful effort depends on an integrated and responsive political/military program; and organization of our own considerable resources in accordance with this principle as a means of maximum effectiveness."¹

a. If an exceptional U.S. supporting effort which cuts sharply across normal agency responsibilities is decided upon, it seems advisable to set up special ad hoc machinery at the Washington level to manage it. Several options are available, ranging from making a single agency the executive agent through ad hoc task forces to special machinery in the White House itself. Whichever is decided upon, it will need a clear grant of Presidential authority and solid Presidential backing to overcome the natural bureaucratic infighting which it will almost inevitably generate.

b. Unified management of the U.S. effort in the field is similarly essential to optimum response. The loose "country team" approach was a failure in Vietnam. The author would tend in most cases to share the view of Sir Robert Thompson that "to ensure a united effort, the ambassador must be a proconsul with absolute authority locally over all policy and agencies."²

c. This raises a fundamental question as to whether the traditional U.S. separation between military and civilian responsibilities is optimum in multidimensional conflict situations such as Vietnam. Thompson regards civilian control as "imperative, though this does not mean that it cannot be exercised by a general in a civilian post."³ In the author's view, the top field post could be civilian or military, depending on the situation and on the caliber of leadership available. Few U.S. ambassadors have had much experience in managing large enterprises;
moreover, much would depend on whether U.S. support were to be predominantly military.

5. Effective unified management takes more than just a "single manager"; he must also have his own staff. As Vietnam experience demonstrates, the top manager cannot properly carry out his mandate without some kind of unified civil-military planning, operations, and evaluation staff responsible directly to him. He must have his own eyes and ears, and means of ensuring adequate follow-through. It need not be large, however; here is an instance when quality is far more important than quantity.

6. A corollary lesson is the need to place a higher premium on thorough evaluation and analysis of performance, since even the best managers need analytical tools to design optimum responses and facilitate learning. The relative lack of such analysis was a critical flaw in Vietnam. By its very nature, this uniquely fragmented politico-insurgency conflict made quantitative as well as qualitative analysis indispensable to understanding. Yet Enthoven and Smith underline that "there was no organized critical analysis of the strategy and operations of the Vietnam war -- cost effectiveness or otherwise." They conclude:

One of the main lessons for government organization that should be drawn from U.S. involvement in Vietnam is that the President and the Secretary of Defense must have, but today lack, a reliable source of information and analysis of overseas operations that is independent of the military chain of command and Service interests, can get at the basic facts, is capable of self-criticism, and can give searching consideration to genuine alternatives without prior commitment to existing policies . . .

Another lesson of almost equal importance is that U.S. military commanders need, but for the most part either do not have or have and do not use, operations analysis organizations that provide them with a systematic method of learning by experience.

ACHIEVING ADEQUATE PERFORMANCE FROM ALLIES

All the preceding lessons are, of course, as applicable to client states as they are to the United States itself. In the case of Vietnam,
the GVN's response to the threat it confronted was even more constrained than that of the U.S. And, surprisingly, most of the useful examples of adaptive response were U.S., rather than GVN-inspired. But Vietnam also suggests a series of ways in which the U.S. should act to secure optimum performance from the clients it is supporting.

1. U.S. aid inputs, however massive, cannot be effectively utilized without viable indigenous institutions to carry out the programs the U.S. is supporting. Lack of an effectively functioning GVN and RVNAF administrative structure to utilize it was one major reason why massive U.S. aid inputs to the GVN and RVNAF ended up largely wasted.

2. Avoid mirror-imaging as a routine response. When U.S. agencies are charged with helping shape and support local institutions, they almost invariably seek to shape these institutions along familiar U.S. lines, whether or not this is optimal (often this last question is not even addressed). In hindsight, we went much further in attempting to shape the GVN and RVNAF in our image than the situation called for. Thus much of our massive aid was misdirected, and too little aid flowed to programs which needed it most.

3. When the U.S. is supporting local programs, it should not hesitate where necessary to use the leverage provided by this support to ensure that it is optimally utilized. Despite the many obstacles involved, it is clear in retrospect that the U.S. failed to use sufficiently the enormous leverage its aid conferred on it to compel better GVN and RVNAF performance.

4. Any U.S. advisory effort should be specially tailored to the needs of each situation. Clearly, the U.S. advisory effort in Vietnam was too slowly expanded in scope and depth for optimum impact, not enough attention was paid to the selection of military or civilian advisers, short tours meant inadequate experience and limited institutional memory, and the emphasis was technical-assistance-oriented to the exclusion of sufficient advisory focus on the deficiencies in individual leadership that proved South Vietnam's greatest weakness.

5. When the U.S. is backing a major local government effort which cuts across normal interagency lines, e.g., counterinsurgency, it should
press that government to create special machinery to manage it, if necessary by using U.S. aid inputs as a lever to this end. Lack of such machinery was long a major handicap to effective GVN performance. Only when it was created in pacification, for example, did the GVN effort really begin to produce results commensurate with the investment.

6. Should the local government prove so weak and ineffective that the U.S. decides on direct intervention -- a contingency which seems unlikely under the Nixon Doctrine -- some form of combined management is probably indispensable to the optimum use of combined resources. Among other things it will facilitate the use of such leverage as the U.S. commitment provides. One can even envisage situations where the U.S. stops short of sending combat forces, but where the U.S. resource input is so large as to justify insistence on a form of combined command (or a Director of Operations on the Malaya model) as the price of U.S. aid. In retrospect, some form of combined command in Vietnam could not have helped but improve RVNAF performance, and have assisted in better selection of Vietnamese commanders. As we have seen, such devices as combined command or injection of U.S. officials into the GVN structure were considered (though rejected) even before the U.S. intervened directly.

7. Last but not least, if flexibly tailored response to the unique nature of each situation is the optimum, then we must bear in mind that it will not necessarily be best to follow in perhaps quite different circumstances what it seems in retrospect would have been the optimum in Vietnam. Indeed, we should consciously guard against what might easily become the new conventional wisdom. This too has numerous implications for our doctrine, training, incentive patterns, and the like.

* * *

If these rather generalized "lessons" and suggestions seem like restatements of the obvious, just recall what actually happened in Vietnam. Looking in hindsight at that painful, even tragic experience
suggests that they have been more honored in the breach than the observance. True, the variety of institutional and other constraints described in this paper are only part of the reasons why. Yet, as this study has served to demonstrate, they must be included among the complex reasons behind our poor performance in the Vietnam war. If our failures in Vietnam help us to recognize this problem area, to clarify our perceptions of the costs of not dealing with it, and to encourage the search for ways of doing so in future, we will at least have a leg up on the solution -- and this study will have more than served its purpose.