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LOST IN THE FOREST OF TIGERS
THE UNITED STATES' SEARCH FOR A COORDINATED
PLAN OF ACTION IN VIETNAM, 1959-1961

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The views expressed in this academic research paper are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official policy or position of the US government or the Department of Defense.

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Preface

With the United States' involvement in such conflicts as Bosnia and Somalia and the trend in the global strategic environment pointing to increased occurrences of these types of conflicts, the military should study the nation's history to see what has led to success in the past when faced with similar conditions. There is not much to choose from in this area where the U.S. has led an extended, coordinated effort to help a nation resolve its problems while providing it the ability to function normally after the U.S. has withdrawn. Korea is one example but could be argued to be more of a clash between the super powers than a situation where the U.S. had provided the infrastructure and aid for South Korea to stand alone and succeed. During the early portion of the Vietnam War, the U.S. was faced with this type of challenge, and it was due to the failure to meet this challenge that led to the deployment of combat troops in 1965. While there are many positive lessons to learn from this war, this essay will focus on an area that serves as a better learning tool for what to avoid opposed to emulate. With the current emphasis on jointness and interagency and international coordination to meet success, Vietnam serves as an excellent example of how the U.S. was unable to achieve a coordinated plan of action to attain its objectives among the State Department, Department of Defense, and the Government of Vietnam. With the demands of our current environment and shrinking defense budgets as well as a national strategy of Engagement and Enlargement, the U.S. will continue to be involved in conflicts around the globe but must depend on a coordinated action

throughout its own instruments of power as well as the international community to be successful.

Abstract

This essay attempts to determine why the United States resorted to the use of combat troops in Vietnam in 1965 which signaled a failure in the counterinsurgency plan and the inability to execute a coordinated plan of action between all instruments of power. It answers this question by examining the period from 1959 to 1961 when the Vietcong insurgents were growing in strength and the United States was relying on the military, economic, and political instruments of power to resolve the situation. Rather than relying on the use of direct force, the U.S. attempted to build up the South Vietnamese government, military, and economy so that it could be a self sufficient nation capable of defeating the insurgency in their country and, if necessary, defend against a possible North Vietnam invasion. The primary tools that the U.S. relied on to assist in strategy development and implementation in this effort was the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG—later the MACV) under the Department of Defense and the U.S. Embassy under the State Department. This essay predominantly relies on primary source information from the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series and *The Pentagon Papers* in describing how the lack of coordination and interaction between these two agencies spread to Washington and resulted in the reliance on the military instrument of power to resolve a situation which was widely recognized as being a political problem. The plan that emerged from this environment, titled “The Basic Counterinsurgency Plan for Vietnam” was signed by President Kennedy shortly after taking office in 1961. This

early heavy reliance on the military instrument of power established by this plan would escalate after 1961 to the eventual commitment of combat troops in Vietnam in 1965.

Chapter 1

The Situation Deteriorates

This is the worst yet....You know Ike never briefed me about Vietnam.

—President John F. Kennedy

This was President John F. Kennedy's response on 2 February 1961, two weeks after his inauguration, after reading Brigadier General Edward C. Lansdale's report on his visit to Vietnam from 2 -14 January 1961. At this point, the United States had 11 years and billions of dollars of aid invested in the support of a free Vietnam, a role it had increased after the French withdrawal with the signing of the Geneva Accords in 1954. Yet, as President Kennedy's statement indicates, Vietnam was overshadowed by other more prominent concerns of the Cold War and the containment of communism world wide. It was these same concerns; however, that drove decision making by the American representatives in Vietnam and their immediate superiors in Washington in the Department of State and Department of Defense who created and implemented most of the American strategy during President Eisenhower's terms in office. As the situation evolved in early 1960, President Kennedy would come to rely heavily upon the perspectives of these people which had a major impact on U.S. involvement in Vietnam throughout his administration.¹

President Kennedy's self serving remarks should not be taken to mean that Southeast Asia did not concern President Eisenhower. As he entered the last year of his eight in office in 1960, Eisenhower described in his State of the Union Address that his greatest concern was "the congressional and executive responsibilities to the U.S. and other nations being ever mindful that an accumulation of seemingly minor encroachments upon freedom gradually could break down the entire fabric of a free society."² During his farewell address to the nation in January 1961, he further defined the threat of Communism by stating that "we face a hostile ideology, global in scope, atheistic in character, ruthless in purpose, and insidious in method."³ Even President Kennedy voiced his understanding of the magnitude of the situation in his inaugural address in which he stated "we shall pay any price, bear any burden...to assure the survival and success of liberty."⁴

While these statements indicate the concerns that drove the formulation of policy during this period, their lack of specificity, coupled with President Eisenhower's decision not to focus on Vietnam during his briefing with President Kennedy, signified a lack of appreciation about how events in Vietnam were building to a climax. Due to this lack of focus at the highest levels, it was left to the people on the ground in Vietnam and their immediate chain of command in Washington to formulate the strategy in dealing with this situation. The information and recommendations provided by the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) and the Embassy produced a power struggle between the Department of Defense and the Department of State over the appropriate method of achieving the primary objective of preventing the spread of Communism. The final product of this dispute, The Basic Counterinsurgency Plan for Vietnam, was sitting on

President Kennedy's desk when he took office. He approved this plan eight days later on 28 January 1961. The plan that President Kennedy set into motion had at its core a failure to achieve a coordinated plan of action in the application of the military, economic, and political instruments of power. This failure resulted in diminished unity of effort and the unfocused provision of aid, elements of which remained imbedded in America's involvement until the end of the war in Vietnam.

After the signing of the Geneva Accords in 1954, the events that unfolded in Vietnam went as the U.S. and South Vietnam had hoped. A RAND Corporation study estimated the number of Vietcong guerrillas during 1955 to 1959 had diminished from 10,000 to 2,000 personnel, and economic aid had decreased from \$322 million to \$187 million per year.⁵ This created the perception of success within the U.S. which resulted in the Eisenhower administration's policy remaining fairly constant throughout the period as reflected in National Security Council memoranda 5612/1 in 1956 and 5809 in 1958. These documents described official U.S. policy for Southeast Asia as the development of a strong, stable, Vietnamese government; the eventual reunification of a free and independent Vietnam under anti-Communist leadership; free elections in the entire country; and the development of a self sustaining military capable of maintaining internal security and providing limited resistance to external attack.⁶ These policy objectives provided the guidance for the application of military, economic, and political measures which the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) and the American Embassy implemented without major dispute during this period due to the relative success of their programs.

Ironically enough, it was this perceived success and the subsequent pursuit of the American policy of free elections in Vietnam that triggered a major change in the situation. With the significant drop in Vietcong activity, President Diem of South Vietnam felt the time was right to conduct free elections. Even though the U.S. objective was to have free elections in both North and South Vietnam, the U.S. perceived the South Vietnamese elections as a positive move by President Diem to allow the people to have more of a voice in the government and to gain confidence in the legitimacy of the administration. The Geneva Accords in 1954 specified elections to unify north and south Vietnam but President Diem did not support them for fear of losing due to Communist corruption of the elections. To ensure that the Communists would not interfere, President Diem had his military conduct company and battalion size sweeps in the Vietcong influenced areas. This resulted in an 85% turn-out by the people for the election, President Diem being re-elected, and, most importantly, the U.S. and South Vietnamese judging the elections as successful and adding legitimacy to the government.⁷

The situation was not as stable as the U.S. had thought, however, as Communist insurgent activity rapidly increased from September to December 1959. Comparing insurgent activity during these four months in 1959 to the same time period the previous year, 52 assassinations and 89 kidnappings in 1958 rose to 119 assassinations and 213 kidnappings in 1959.⁸ One month after the elections, the Vietcong (Vietnamese Communist insurgents) openly and successfully attacked two ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) companies for the first time since the signing of the Geneva Accords. Prior to the elections, U.S. perceptions were that the threat was of minimal concern, but five months later the Embassy declared the threat as the number one problem

for the Government of Vietnam (GVN). The Embassy based this assessment on three reasons that were contributing to the deterioration of the country's stability: "1. Intensified Vietcong guerrilla and terrorist activities. 2. Weaknesses apparent in the GVN security forces. 3. The growth of apathy and considerable dissatisfaction among the rural populace towards the government."⁹

Both the MAAG and the Embassy agreed upon this assessment but each believed that they had the best solution to these issues which the two agencies wrestled with until conditions changed with the commitment of troops in 1965. The failure of the MAAG and the Embassy to foresee this escalation in the conflict foreshadowed more than just the commitment of troops and was the result of two miscalculations, one at the national level and one at the operational level (MAAG/Embassy). In both of these miscalculations, the failure of a coordinated effort between the military and political arms of the government began to become evident.

At the national level, the problem was the identification of and development of a strategy for the area of operations. The U.S. treated each nation in Southeast Asia (Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam) separately, even though, according to the U.S., the source of the problem for all three emanated from North Vietnam. Depending on which nation was the priority, the President placed the most emphasis for strategy and resources to resolve the situation. The North Vietnamese could just shift their effort from one area to the next to place their strength against the weakest of the three nations. From 1955 to 1960 the President's operational emphasis was on Laos.

General Maxwell Taylor (U.S. Army Chief of Staff until 1959) believed that the U.S. should treat the whole of Southeast Asia as a single strategic area for which the U.S.

should apply a common strategy against a single enemy—North Vietnam.¹⁰ Desiring to treat each nation as a separate strategic area, the State Department developed OPLANs (Operational Plans) for Vietnam for 1957 through 1960 which provide a generic application of political, economic, and military measures to solve the problem. Therefore, as Brigadier General Lansdale stated in a memorandum on the security in Vietnam, the President told the MAAG and Country Team to create a stable Vietnam which could withstand Communism but gave no guidance as to how or to what effect the situation in other nations such as Laos and Cambodia would have on Vietnam.¹¹

At the operational level the problem arose from the different perceptions of the situation by the MAAG and the Embassy and the information chain that created these perceptions. In the Embassy, information flowed from President Diem and his officials to the Ambassador to the State Department in Washington. As Diem wished to promote an improving situation to heighten American confidence in his abilities, his reports to Ambassador Durbrow were primarily positive unless otherwise negatively motivated as a plea for additional aid. In an effort to maintain their current status in society, President Diem's advisors also painted a positive picture for fear of being the target of Diem's anger after rendering a negative report. This not only colored Ambassador Durbrow's picture of the situation but President Diem's as well as he rarely visited the rural areas of the country where the problems existed. Ambassador Durbrow interpreted the true nature of the information most of the time but personally held President Diem in such contempt (once stating that he "would like to take a club to him") that he relied on his sources in *Washington* as much as those in Vietnam.¹²

The MAAG's problems resulted from a matter of numbers and responsibility. Up to this point, MAAG could place advisors only at division and corps levels and could not accompany any ARVN units on combat patrols. The MAAG Commander, Lieutenant General Samuel T. William's, requested through CINCPAC (Commander in Chief, Pacific Admiral Felt) to place advisors down to regimental level and allow them to accompany combat patrols in order to increase the flow of timely and accurate information but not to get involved in direct action.¹³ On 25 May 1959, CINPAC approved this request with the exception that no advisor would be able to accompany a South Vietnamese combat patrol for fear of his advisory duties taking on more of a combat role. The other issue with pushing advisors down to a lower level was the increased number of advisors necessary to accomplish this task. Increasing the number of MAAG personnel was an issue still being dealt with when the rise in Vietcong activity occurred. Nevertheless, General William's was essentially in the same boat as Ambassador Durbrow, with very little ability to get an accurate perspective of what was occurring from the ground level.¹⁴

Notes

¹Kennedy to Walt W. Rostow (White House Advisor), 2 February 1961, record of conversation, *United States Vietnam Relations, 1945 - 1967, Book 2 of 12*, (Washington DC, 1971), p. 96.

²State of the Union, Read by President Eisenhower before a Joint Session of Congress, 7 January 1960. *American Foreign Policy—Current Documents, 1960*. (Washington DC, 1964), p. 9.

³Address by President Eisenhower to the Nation, 17 January 1961. *American Foreign Policy—Current Documents, 1961*. (Washington, DC, 1965). p. 4.

⁴Inaugural address of President Kennedy, 20 January 1961. *Ibid.* p. 8.

⁵From letter, Rand Corporation, L-1498Z, 8 November 1967. *United States Vietnam Relations, 1945 - 1967, Book 2 of 12*, (Washington DC, 1971), p. 25.

⁶Editorial note on NSC 5809, "U.S. Policy in Mainland Southeast Asia." *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960, Volume I—Vietnam*. (Washington, DC, 1986), p. 34.

Notes

⁷Telegram from the Ambassador to Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Department of State, 16 September 1959. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960, Volume I Vietnam*. (Washington, DC, 1986), pp. 233-236.

⁸Dispatch from the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Department of State, Appendix 1 to Enclosure 1 - Special Report on Internal Security Situation in Vietnam (Figures compiled by MAAG based on ARVN reports).

7 March 1960. Ibid. P.p. 300-317.

⁹Country Team Assessment, March 1960. *United States Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967, Book 2 of 12*, (Washington DC, 1971), p. 43.

¹⁰Memorandum of a Conversation, the President's Palace, Saigon, 29 October 1958. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960, Volume I—Vietnam*. (Washington, DC, 1986), pp. 91-93.

¹¹Memorandum from the Secretary of Defense's Deputy Assistant for Special Operations (Lansdale) to the Deputy Secretary of Defense (Douglas), 12 February 1960. Ibid. pp. 279-281.

¹²Memorandum from the Deputy Chief for Logistics of the Military Assistance Advisory Group in Vietnam (Lampert) to the Chief of the Group (William's) (recollection of the Ambassadors remarks during a Country Team meeting on 5 May 1959), 9 May 1969. Ibid. Pp. 279-281.

¹³Letter From the Chief of the Military Assistance Advisory Group in Vietnam (William's) to the Commander in Chief Pacific's Chief of Staff (Riley), 31 March 1959. Ibid. Pp. 178-179.

¹⁴Letter from the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Felt) to the Chief of the Military Assistance Advisory Group in Vietnam (William's), 25 May 1959. Ibid. Pp. 199-200.

Chapter 2

Taking Sides

What neither General William's or Ambassador Durbrow fully realized until later was that the Communists had just increased their efforts to undermine the Diem Government. Instead of sending patrols of three to four man teams in the rural areas to try peacefully to sway the uneducated populace to their side, the Vietcong was now massing in company sized elements to inflict its will forcefully. The sweeps that President Diem ordered to roust out potential troublemakers from the rural part of the country did not quell the insurgents as originally thought but triggered a heightened response.¹

With 96 more assassinations in January 1960 followed by 122 in February and a Vietcong attack on the Vietnamese Army installation near TayNinh on January 26th, the situation gained visibility in Saigon and Washington and people started looking for answers. Earlier issues perceived as minor disagreements among the Defense and State Departments now evolved into reasons for blame. Brigadier General Lansdale fired the first shot in a memorandum dated 12 February in which he stated, "The fundamental of the Vietnamese situation is a political one. Without a political basis for operations, military actions can only provide a temporary solution."² Even though BG Lansdale addressed this memorandum within the Defense Department, Deputy Secretary Douglas took it to Assistant Secretary of State Jeff Parsons to communicate the Defense Department's view.

BG Lansdale's comments implied that regardless of what actions the MAAG implemented militarily, they could not be effective due to the Embassy's inability to effect political reforms.

On 16 February, Ambassador Durbrow sent a dispatch to the State Department which highlighted his interpretation of the problem which he discussed in a meeting with President Diem. During this meeting, Diem discussed the difficulty in organizing his relatively small army for both an external conventional attack and the increasing Vietcong internal guerrilla attacks. To this point, the MAAG had assisted the ARVN in reorganizing into corps and divisions with the intent of enhancing the ARVN's ability to train and control their units as well as integrate more easily with other (U.S.) military forces in case of a large scale attack. After all, this conventional force ideology practiced by the military had been President Eisenhower's philosophy since the signing of the Geneva Accords and was based on his experience with the Korean War. President Eisenhower stated that, "In the future, these peripheral wars must not be permitted to drag out. We must now plan to fight peripheral wars on the same basis as we would fight a general war."³

Ambassador Durbrow's contention was that conditions had changed to such a point that our development of the ARVN and security forces should also change. More emphasis should therefore be placed on anti-guerrilla training and an organizational set up better suited to meet the unconventional threat. The MAAG should apply this not only to the ARVN but primarily the Civil Guard (CG—national police force) and the Self Defense Corps (SDC—village security) who were currently incurring much of the Viet Cong wrath. This deviation in training and organization was something that Ambassador

Durbrow claims to have thought of well before the increase in Viet Cong activity. His force of choice to conduct this transition was Special Forces.⁴

The fact that this conversation about the training of the South Vietnamese defense forces occurred without the presence of the man responsible for military assistance (General William's) implies that anti-guerrilla training may not have been the main concern that day. President Diem, who suggested that he fix the problem by raising a 10,000 man anti-guerrilla force, was most likely looking for a cause for additional military aid, at least to restore the \$10 million cut in U.S. aid from the 1959 to 1960 budget. Ambassador Durbrow was obviously pointing the finger at the MAAG for the inability of the GVN's forces to deal with the worsening situation. In a telegram from the Secretary of State to Ambassador Durbrow dated 7 July 1959, it was actually the Defense Department which had raised the issue to the State Department of detailing Special Forces teams to the MAAG to act as advisors on anti-guerrilla tactics.⁵ In a subsequent memorandum from CINCPAC dated 15 February 1960, Admiral Felt recommended against the assignment of Special Forces because MAAG overt assignment was impossible due to the MAAG's personnel restrictions and covert assignment had failed when tried in a similar situation in Laos. Temporary assignment to the office of the Military Attaché, who works directly for Ambassador Durbrow in the Embassy, was denied due to conflict in mission.⁶

This issue of how best to train the South Vietnamese forces to meet the increased threat created the first major rift between the MAAG and the Country Team and was to have a large effect on The Basic Counterinsurgency Plan published in 1961. Part of this rift was that LTG William's had never been comfortable with the command relationship that existed between him and the Ambassador. By Presidential order, the Ambassador is

charged with coordination of various agencies in the host country, one of which is the MAAG. LTG William's contended that instead of coordination it was subordination of the MAAG, a situation which left him with the feeling that a diplomat was trying to run his military business. This biased LTG William's opinion of the Ambassador's decisions on many things which added to the disunity that existed between the US's military and political instruments.⁷

In response to the strong accusations made by the Ambassador and the Vietnamese President, LTG William's was very defensive in a reply to the Vietnamese Assistant Secretary of State (Dung). In this letter, he essentially re-directs the blame to the Vietnamese by stating that "MAAG officers have no command authority over Vietnamese troops whatsoever. They may only advise and recommend as to training. If the Vietnamese Commanders do not choose to follow the advice and suggestions of the MAAG advisor, they do not do so."⁸ Of course, to this point, the MAAG did not appear to have a lot of problems in this area as they had totally reorganized and trained the South Vietnamese military into a conventional force. The real reason behind William's training program appears latter in the letter when he states that "It is an established military fact that well trained soldiers, with good leadership and sound plans can successfully fight any kind of enemy on any kind of terrain."⁹

This was the legacy left to the American Army from its experience in World War II and the Korean War, lessons that William's was now trying to apply to a third world army. His mirror imaging of the two forces was not unique as this was indicative of much of the Cold War military and still dominates much of the current U.S. thought about training a small force to meet any number of situations. What was ironic about the Vietnam

situation was that the MAAG took a force that had fought an insurgency for the past ten years, turned it into a conventional force, and was now going to use U.S. forces who had learned from limited experience in the Philippines and the British in Malaya to train it as a counterinsurgency force. Reflecting back ten years after the fact, William's even wonders how the U.S. thought they could train the South Vietnamese to fight a conventional war and defeat the insurgents, when in 1954, the South Vietnamese plus 150,000 French troops had been unsuccessful in doing so.¹⁰

Aside from this desire to focus more on anti insurgency training, President Diem was taking a few other measures to do what he felt would fix the situation. The issue of establishing a centralized command structure had been a point of contention between LTG William's and Diem for some time. The chain of command had run through the province chiefs directly to President Diem. When an incident would occur within a particular province, the province chief would direct the forces, taking command and control away from the unit's parent Battalion or Regiment. Not only did this result in units being committed to battle with an unfamiliar chain of command, but the province chief rarely had much military experience and was little more than a puppet for Diem. What William's argued for was a single operational commander with all of the military means needed, with authority to employ these means without interference from the province or the national administration. This was the American principle of attaining unity of command concentrated against a common objective. In response, President Diem appointed Colonel Khaun as the Fifth Military Region Commander with full powers over all security forces, something which was seen as a positive action by the MAAG and the Embassy. What had not been resolved within the chain of command issue was the control of the Civil Guard—

South Vietnam's constabulary force which was doing a majority of the fighting against the V.C.¹¹

During the four month period after the elections, the Civil Guard (CG) had 68 personnel killed and 86 wounded compared to the ARVN regulars who had 31 killed and 49 wounded and the Self Defense Corps which had 24 killed and 27 wounded. Ambassador Durbrow had successfully convinced President Diem to keep the CG under the Ministry of the Interior and to make its role primarily as a police force. By keeping the CG under the Ministry of Interior, the equipping and training of the force was left to the Embassy's United States Operations Mission (USOM) under Arthur Gardiner. The problem was that there was only 12 civilians working for USOM responsible for 50,000 members of the CG. Therefore, the CG received no training and no advising at the ground level as USOM only had enough personnel to assist at the Ministry level. The fact that the GVN established their role as a police force as opposed to a paramilitary force also meant that they were equipped with little more than side arms. This left the main force that the GVN utilized to prevent the spread of insurgency in rural areas untrained and underarmed against an enemy operating up to company size with automatic weapons. Instead of being the stabilizing force that Diem and Ambassador Durbrow had intended, the CG became the VC's symbol of the GVN's inability to protect the people.¹²

As the both the GVN and the Country Team saw the ability to protect the people as one of the two essential requirements in order to re-gain public support for the current administration, LTG William's thought that the handling of the CG was one of the early failings in the strategy to defeat the communists. LTG William's believed that the CG should be placed under the Ministry of Defense and be trained and equipped to serve as a

paramilitary force. By putting the CG under the Ministry of Defense, the MAAG would assume responsibility from USOM for training and equipping this force. Not only would the CG be better equipped and trained to deal with the VC, they would also be centrally organized under Colonel Khaun so that their efforts would be coordinated with the other South Vietnamese forces. Ambassador Durbrow told the MAAG to not interfere in this issue; therefore, it did not get elevated until formulation of The Basic Counterinsurgency Plan. LTG William's believed the Ambassador told the MAAG "hands off" because without this role the USOM would lose justification for its twelve civilian slots. Ambassador Durbrow justified his position by saying that no stable democracy could have a military police force without the danger of the formation of a military dictatorship. This time it was Ambassador Durbrow placing an Americanized solution on a Vietnamese problem.¹³

Other than the necessity to protect the populous, the GVN also recognized that they had to establish the people's trust in the legitimacy of the government in order to re-gain their support. After this period of increased VC activity, President Diem realized that he was getting inaccurate reports from his province chiefs about the extent of the V.C.'s effects on the population and the effectiveness of government reforms. Since the Geneva Accords, President Diem pursued reforms which had improved life in the rural areas. The construction of schools, roads, and hospitals were a large contributor to the stabilization of the country up to 1959. President Diem also pushed the development of Agrovilles which he learned from the British experience in Malaya and used to consolidate the populace in communities up to 10,000 people for better protection from the V.C. The

reforms themselves were good for the country but the way in which they were implemented caused distrust among the people¹⁴

The Province Chiefs were responsible for implementing the governments reform programs. To do so, they relied upon “volunteer” labor from the people in the province. The problem arose from the Province Chiefs strong arming the people into doing the work instead of educating them on the mutual benefits of the government reforms. People left their homes to work on Agrovilles without knowing that this was being done for their own protection. As a result, the V.C. were able to easily infiltrate these disgruntled communities and prey on their dissatisfaction with the current regime. This prompted Colonel Khaun, who was now in charge of cleaning the V.C. out of the 5th Region communities to say, “Local administrators make ten Viet Cong behind my back faster than I can kill one in my front.”¹⁵To his credit, President Diem realized the problem and removed some of the Provincial officials and ordered a slowdown on the Agroville program so the people would not be pushed so hard. He also ordered his civilian officials to explain in detail the purpose behind the reforms. Shortly after inaugurating his first Agroville on 26 March; however, Diem’s perception of this problem changed, thinking instead that the reports of disgruntled populace were exaggerated. Even though he did implement some changes to improve the situation, this was a problem the Country Team (Embassy and MAAG) would have to contend with throughout Diem’s administration.¹⁶

Even though Ambassador Durbrow may have been initially unaware of the extent of the problem of public support due to political incompetence and corruption, he was fully aware now and placed political reform at the forefront of his agenda in Vietnam. While President Diem continued to ask for money for more forces and more equipment,

Ambassador Durbrow de-emphasized the military instrument as a means for countering the insurgency and focused more on the importance of winning the confidence of the local population. Militarily, Ambassador Durbrow thought existing military and security forces trained in anti guerrilla techniques would be sufficient if the government could re-gain the backing of the people. This difference of opinion between Diem and the Ambassador would develop over the next year to one of personal hatred. This went so far as Ambassador Durbrow advocating during Country Team meetings and correspondence to the State Department that President Diem should be removed through a possible coup by either military, political, or social organizations. The effect this created was that the US's primary means of influencing the political situation, identified as the root cause of the upswing in insurgent activity by both military and political analyst in Washington, was now tainted by an anti-Diem sentiment in the Embassy.¹⁷ This not only contributed to Diem's favoritism of the MAAG and the use of the military instrument, but widened the gap in cooperation between the GVN and the Embassy and the Embassy and the MAAG.¹⁸

Notes

¹Telegram from the Chief of the Military Assistance Advisory Group in Vietnam (William's) to the Secretary of Defense's Deputy Assistant for Special Operations (Lansdale), 10 March 1960. Ibid. Pp. 320-324.

²Memorandum From the Secretary of Defense's Deputy Assistant for Special Operations (Lansdale) to the Deputy Secretary of Defense (Douglas), 12 February 1960. Ibid. Pp. 279-281.

³Memorandum of Discussion at the 277th Meeting of the National Security Council, 27 February 1956. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957, Volume XIX - Southeast Asia*. Pp. 210-211.

⁴Dispatch From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Department of State, 16 February 1960. *FRUS, 1958-1960, Volume I—Vietnam*. Pp. 283-286.

⁵Telegram From the Secretary of State to the Embassy in Vietnam, 7 July 1959. Ibid. Pp. 217-219.

⁶Telegram From the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Felt) to the Office of the Secretary of Defense, 15 February 1960. Ibid. Pp. 281-282.

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⁷Oral History Interview with the MAAG Commander, Nov 55 - Aug 60, LTG Samuel William's, May 1970. *Air Force University Oral History Program*. P 43.

⁸Letter From the Chief of the Military Assistance Advisory Group in Vietnam (William's) to the Assistant Secretary of State for National Defense of the Republic of Vietnam (Dung), 29 February 1960. *FRUS, 1958-1960, Volume I—Vietnam*. Pp. 291-293.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Oral History Interview with the MAAG Commander, Nov 55 - Aug 60, LTG Samuel William's, May 1970. *Air Force University Oral History Program*. P 46.

¹¹Dispatch From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Department of State, Enclosure 1—Special Report on Internal Security Situation in Vietnam, 7 March 1960. *United States Vietnam Relations, 1945 - 1967, Book 2 of 12*, (Washington DC, 1971), p. 303 - 310.

¹²Telegram From the Chief of the MAAG in Vietnam (William's) to the Secretary of Defense's Deputy Assistant for Special Operations (Lansdale), 10 March 1960. *FRUS, 1958-1960, Volume I - Vietnam*. Pp. 320-324.

¹³Oral History Interview with the MAAG Commander, Nov 55 - Aug 60, LTG Samuel William's, May 1970. *Air Force University Oral History Program*. Pp. 21, 82.

¹⁴Dispatch From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Department of State, Enclosure 1—Special Report on Internal Security Situation in Vietnam, 7 March 1960. *FRUS, 1958-1960, Volume I - Vietnam*. P. 313.

¹⁵Telegram From the Chief MAAG in Vietnam (William's) to the Secretary of Defense's Deputy Special Assistant for Special Operations (Lansdale), 25 March 1960. *Ibid.* P. 349.

¹⁶Dispatch From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Department of State, 26 March 1960. *Ibid.* P. 350-351.

¹⁷Oral History Interview with the MAAG Commander, Nov 55—Aug 60, LTG Samuel William's, May 1970. *Air Force University Oral History Program*. P 43.

¹⁸Letter From the Chief of the MAAG in Vietnam (William's) to the Secretary of Defense's Deputy Assistant for Special Operations (Lansdale), 17 May 1960. *FRUS, 1958-1960, Volume I - Vietnam*. Pp. 463-464.

Chapter 3

Looking For Answers

The MAAG did recommend some military changes to help resolve some of the problems created by the political conditions but did little to understand or help effect the causes of these conditions. Instead of focusing on the will of the people to support the regime and resist the insurgency, the MAAG focused on how to prevent the insurgents from directly effecting the people. In a memorandum to the Joint Chiefs, General Lemnitzer, Chief of Staff of the Army, accurately communicated the Army's position by stating that "In order to reduce and eventually eliminate the terrorists activities of the Viet Cong, the populace of South Vietnam must be physically and psychologically separated from the terrorists..."¹ In order to do this, LTG William's recommended that an expanded, centralized intelligence system be created so that the GVN could better focus limited defense assets. He also recommended training in civil affairs and psychological warfare to assist in the building of community programs and education of the threat Communism presented to their way of life. Looking to the external source of the problem, LTG William's asked for an increased border and coastal surveillance capability to slow down or eliminate the infiltration of the Viet Cong from the North.²

This psychological and physical isolation of the people from the enemy was the basis for the Pacification Program that would later evolve from The Basic Counterinsurgency

Plan. The MAAG communicated this ideology to the GVN which implemented it through their Agrovillage program. Whereas later after-action reports would show that the use of force combined with isolation and preparation of the people were successful, during the development of this plan several potential problems were identified.³ As the GVN based the Agrovillage program on the similar plan successfully implemented in British Malaya, the conditions in which the British used the program in Malaya were very different. “In Malaya, a colonial power of another race (British) led native forces (Malayans) against guerrillas who were largely foreigners (Chinese). The people in Vietnam are fighting Vietnamese. The political attraction and security of village populations is quite different.”⁴ Therefore, the GVN was fighting an “invisible enemy,” constructing and protecting villages that often contained the very enemy from which the people were designed to be isolated.

The other issue that the MAAG struggled with as the predominant military concern of how to counter the insurgency was how the force should be best organized to meet the threat. The problem was that there were two different threats. The general consensus, as evidenced by the name of the defensive plan President Kennedy signed into action in 1961, was that the internal threat posed by the Vietcong insurgents was the most immediate. The MAAG was also very concerned about the large conventional force threat posed by North Vietnam as it had been the Communist’s stated objective to unify all of Southeast Asia under Communist rule. As has already been discussed, the MAAG and the Embassy had already identified specific training as part of how to resolve this dilemma. The Ambassador wanted to drop all other training and focus on anti-guerrilla training. The MAAG, believing that this could result in a quick and decisive defeat at the hands of a

North Vietnamese conventional force, believed that all forces should be trained on the basics first, then train selected security (CG & SDC) and ARVN specifically in anti-guerrilla training. This also met Diem's request for an additional 10,000 soldiers as a commando force to conduct these anti-guerrilla operations. Therefore, it became more than just a matter of training, it became a matter of numbers - how many people serving in what capacity would be enough to meet the internal threat of the Viet Cong and still deter the external threat of the North Vietnamese?⁵

Something that the MAAG and the Embassy did agree on was that President Diem's method of raising a 10,000 man Commando force would not help the situation. Diem proposed to take the best of the ARVN, CG, and SDC to form this elite force. In order to train and support this force, he would need another 10,000 men, making the magic number 20,000. Both LTG William's and Ambassador Durbrow believed this would only weaken the existing forces which were already understrength and lacked adequate leadership. CINCPAC concurred and again related the situation in Vietnam to British Malaya stating that only regular forces were required to successfully defeat that insurrection.⁶ The general belief was that all President Diem would accomplish would be the creation of another untrained force, much like the CG was currently. However, LTG William's found that the problems with training and the number and duration of force commitments was not enough soldiers to do both - be trained adequately and be employed in a large enough force to meet the threat.⁷

In a reply to a memorandum from Ambassador Durbrow criticizing the MAAG's organization and training of the South Vietnamese forces, ⁸ LTG William's detailed how the Vietnamese did not have enough forces to man their defensive posts and undergo

training at the same time. The GVN employed its forces in two theater's, the northern theater to protect against North Vietnamese invasion and control the border against VC infiltration, and the southern theater where they were fighting the strength of the VC insurgency in the Mekong Delta region. The ARVN positioned three divisions in the North and four in the South. While the MAAG had been able to train some of the units stationed in the north, training in the southern region had all but ceased due to the rise in VC activity. Throughout 1959, the ARVN employed an average of 25 battalions to fight the VC with an additional 20 relegated to static security missions at rubber plantations, logistical installations, and communications centers. In 1960, the ARVN employed 34 battalions against the VC and 18 battalions in static security. The result of this employment plan was that by 1960 the MAAG was able to train only three of seven divisions on basic infantry tasks, much less conduct anti-guerrilla training.⁹

LTG William's first proposal to solve this dilemma was a rotation system in which the ARVN would rotate trained units from the north to the south so that the southern units could receive the training. This proposal never materialized as LTG William's realized the associated problems with the rotation due to transportation costs, new unit unfamiliarity with terrain and the mission, and the need for trained units on the border. More importantly, on occasions when LTG William's made this recommendation to the ARVN and President Diem, his request would be denied due to their concern over the instability created by the growing insurgency. This not only left units untrained but also created war weariness in the units which had been employed against the VC or at the border for years without relief. Another partial solution that LTG William's continued to push was the reorganization of the CG under the Ministry of Defense. If the MAAG could get them

trained appropriately, the CG could assume the security positions that was tying up 18 ARVN battalions in 1960. As this alone would not totally solve the problem and still pending approval from Washington, the only other solution was to raise the force level by 20,000 which would increase the ARVN by 10 regiments plus support and make the training rotation possible.¹⁰

Ambassador Durbrow opposed any increase in the force whether it was for commando or conventional forces. There are two issues that separate his position on this proposal from LTG William's. As previously discussed, Ambassador Durbrow did not see the immediacy of the threat from the north and how, with an advantage of 8:1 in fighting forces, the South Vietnamese couldn't quickly defeat the insurgents with only part of that force while training the other. This leads to the other issue which was how long was it going to take to terminate the conflict. LTG William's believed it would take three to four years to train and organize the force to a point where it could defeat the insurgency and have a strong enough unit on the border that would deter the North Vietnamese after the United States withdrew. Ambassador Durbrow was looking for immediate results. With aid decreasing from 1959 to 1960, he saw the growing impatience of the US requiring the defeat of the insurgents immediately if it was going to happen at all. Therefore, raising the force level meant the creation of a force that would not be effective for at least a year or two. The GVN needed to use the existing forces focused against the insurgents combined with a number of liberalizing reforms to gain the public's assistance in defeating the VC.¹¹ Overall, Ambassador Durbrow's interpretation of LTG William's suggestions contained in his replying memorandum is that it "went all over the lot and

landed nowhere and added up to a rather weak explanation as to why they had not done more in the anti-guerrilla training field.”¹²

With the MAAG and the Embassy carrying their feud to Washington via memoranda and telegrams within their agencies, it was difficult for the National Security Council (NSC) to get an accurate picture of what was going on in Vietnam much less make recommendations on suggested actions. In a 9 May 1960 meeting of the NSC, the President indicated that only now was he receiving indications that President Diem was losing touch with his people and losing effectiveness.¹³ This after almost 5 months of correspondence by Ambassador Durbrow to the contrary. Representing the Department of State in this meeting was Livingston Merchant, the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs and member of the Operations Coordinating Board. In a later Special Report by the Operations Coordinating Board, Merchant reported that differences between the MAAG and the Embassy were being resolved (when they were just heating up). This report also discussed the positive action taken by the GVN in rapidly executing the Agroville program, building of the commando force, and centralizing the command and control structure. In actuality, correspondence preceding this report indicated that either the MAAG or the Embassy saw each one of these issues as directly contributing to problems the GVN was having in dealing with the insurgency.¹⁴

Aside from the problems in deciphering a coordinated action created by the opposed views of the MAAG and the Embassy, the information flowed to the NSC from various sources which for the most part reflected this same opposed pro-military or pro-State Department opinions. Both LTG William's and Ambassador Durbrow corresponded primarily with personnel who held middle level positions in their respective departments.

LTG William's favored BG Edward Lansdale, Deputy Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Special Operations. Ambassador Durbrow favored either John Irwin, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, or Jeff Parsons, Assistant to the Secretary of State. It is obvious from their correspondence that these individuals shared the opinions of their representatives in Saigon which further added to the divergence between the Defense and State Departments in Washington. There were other independent sources, such as National Intelligence Estimates and CIA reports, designed to provide the NSC with another perspective on what was occurring in Vietnam. Looking at how these sources gained their information, however, it became evident that the sources were not as independent as the NSC would have intended. As stated by Sherman Kent, Assistant Director of Intelligence for National Estimates, 'the information the United States had on the situation in Vietnam depended very much on the personality of the Chief of MAAG. If he gave the attaches access to information on the armed forces, intelligence analysts would know a good deal about them; if not, they would know next to nothing.'¹⁵

This left the NSC with no unbiased, third party perspective of what to do in Vietnam. Instead, as Mr. Sherman indicates, the NSC based its decisions on the information gained from the various, opposing personalities of the war. LTG William's was on the one side, claimed by Ambassador Durbrow to be nothing more than a "yes man" for President Diem while hailed by others to be the only one capable of influencing the South Vietnamese Leadership.¹⁶ BG Lansdale was influential in communicating the MAAG's position not only because he was favored by the Diem administration but he was also seen by many in Washington as the resident expert on Vietnam. Ambassador Durbrow was on the other side, disliked by Diem and thought of as counterproductive by the MAAG and

Defense Department while being able to convince only those in the State Department that political reforms were the key to resolving things.¹⁷ Therefore, as the situation in Vietnam progressed through 1960, these personalities and the information they portrayed to the Eisenhower administration planted the seeds that grew into The Basic Counterinsurgency Plan for Vietnam. With the Defense Department's stronger representation in Washington and LTG William's perceived working relationship with the GVN, coupled with the negative attitude and offensive personality of Ambassador Durbrow, the Defense Department would have the greatest impact on the development of this plan.

Even though this flow of information tainted decision making at the highest levels, there is every indication that up through the NSC, there was an awareness of the conflict of personalities and opinions between the Defense and State Departments originating in Saigon. In the same May 1960 NSC meeting, President Eisenhower said that "the U.S. ought to do everything possible to prevent the deterioration of the situation in South Vietnam." To accomplish this he "hoped the Departments of State and Defense would consult together to see what could be done."¹⁸ Even within the Defense Department, there was the realization that Vietnam would require the same unity of effort from the U.S. that the U.S. was preaching to the Vietnamese. However, whichever agency was able to influence the U.S. strategy of how this was going to occur, would have the backing of the NSC and, most importantly, US aid. The Defense Department struck first calling for a GVN national plan of action. This originated with a staff study conducted by CINCPAC in April of 1960 which formed the basis for a Joint Chief's recommendation to the Secretary of Defense to gain U.S. government support for counterinsurgency operations.

In a subsequent memorandum to the Joint Chiefs, CINPAC stated that in order to control a maximum counter-insurgency effort the plan must have coordinated action by all U.S. agencies in Saigon.¹⁹ This was the beginning of the formalized process resulting in The Basic Counterinsurgency Plan for Vietnam.

Notes

¹Memorandum From the Chief of Staff, United States Army (Lemnitzer) to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 24 March 1960. Ibid. P. 345.

²Telegram From the Chief of the MAAG in Vietnam (William's) to the Secretary of Defense's Deputy Assistant for Special Operations (Lansdale), 10 March 1960. Ibid. Pp. 320-324.

³Memorandum: Lessons Learned #30 - Psychological Warfare/Civic Action, 19 August 1963. MAAG - Vietnam.

⁴Memorandum From the Secretary of Defense's Deputy Assistant for Special Operations (Lansdale) to the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for National Security Council Affairs and Plans (William's), 14 April 1960. Ibid. Pp. 136-137.

⁵Letter From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Parsons), 19 April 1960. Ibid. Pp. 396-398.

⁶Telegram From the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Felt) to the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Affairs (Irwin), 14 March 1960. Ibid. Pp. 328-329.

⁷Telegram From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Department of State, 10 March 1960. Ibid. Pp. 325-328.

⁸Memorandum From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Chief of the Military Assistance Advisory Group in Vietnam (William's), 19 April 1960. Ibid. Pp. 401-406.

⁹Memorandum From the Chief of the Military Assistance Advisory Group in Vietnam (William's) to the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow), 1 June 1960. Ibid. Pp. 478-479.

¹⁰Telegram From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Department of State, 29 March 1960. Ibid. Pp. 354-355.

¹¹Telegram From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Department of State, 5 September 1960. Ibid. Pp. 556-570.

¹²Letter From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Parsons), 27 July 1960. Ibid. P. 524.

¹³Memorandum of Discussion at the 444th Meeting of the National Security Council, 9 May 1960. Ibid. Pp. 446-447.

¹⁴Special Report Prepared by the Operations Coordinating Board, 15 June 1960. Ibid. Pp. 498-499.

¹⁵Editorial Note to the Letter From the Chief of the MAAG in Vietnam (William's) to the Assistant Secretary of State for National Defense of the Republic of Vietnam (Dung), 29 February 1960. Ibid. P 293.

Notes

¹⁶Letter From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Parsons), 27 July 1960. Ibid. P. 525.

¹⁷Memorandum Prepared in the Department of Defense, 4 May 1960. Ibid. Pp. 439-440.

¹⁸Memorandum of Discussion at the 444th Meeting of the National Security Council, 9 May 1960. Ibid. P. 447.

¹⁹Memorandum From the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Felt) to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 30 June 1960. Ibid. Pp. 512-513.

Chapter 4

A Means To An End

In Vietnam, the people are both the battlefield and the prize.

—BG Edward Lansdale

Just at the time when the formulation of this plan was in full swing, a major leadership change occurred with LTG William's retiring and LTG Lionel C. McGarr becoming Chief of the MAAG on 1 September . This was obviously very good news for Ambassador Durbrow who had been working with Jeff Parsons in Washington to try to influence LTG McGarr's perception of the best means to fix Vietnam.¹ The State Department was a little perturbed over the fact that they had not been consulted by the Pentagon in this appointment and would soon find that LTG McGarr bore a great likeness in personality to LTG William's. The MAAG also had people briefing LTG McGarr on how to best deal with the situation in Vietnam. In a memorandum from BG Lansdale, he urged continued support of President Diem and stated that negative perceptions of the GVN leader were generated by "information reflecting the wishful thinking of some U.S officials who have personal reasons for pushing these views which are useful to their ambitions." BG Lansdale defined LTG William's success in gaining approval for military action as "careful consideration of the facts before talking with the South Vietnamese earning him the reputation of being worth listening to. With other Americans who were not so careful, the

Vietnamese sat politely through their discussion but judged their advice as valueless and was not heeded.”² Sitting on LTG McGarr’s desk when he arrived in Saigon was a telegram from the Joint Chiefs asking for ideas on how to solve the security situation in Vietnam. The response to this, titled “Actions to Strengthen Stability of the Government of Vietnam,” highlighted all of the programs LTG William’s advocated since the flare up of VC activity in 1959.³ As a result, the Department of Defense didn’t miss a beat in their push for a GVN national plan of action supported by the U.S. While the outward hostility between the MAAG and the Embassy was tempered for the moment, the differences of opinion were as strong as always.

In response, Ambassador Durbrow sent a telegram to the Department of State re-emphasizing his position on the contents of the MAAG memorandum which contradicted all points from raising of the force level, reorganization of the CG, training, and increased budget support.⁴ In subsequent talks with LTG McGarr, Ambassador Durbrow found that the new Chief of the MAAG was much more flexible than his predecessor but still held firm on all of the primary issues previously discussed.⁵ This failure to close the gap between the MAAG and the Embassy and CINPAC’s publishing of the draft Plan for Counter-Insurgency Operations By the Government of South Vietnam⁶ placed Ambassador Durbrow in a position either to conform to the Department of Defense’s program or to initiate his own plan of action immediately. On 14 September, the Ambassador sent a Telegram to the Department of State in which he outlined his plan to conduct a “frank and friendly talk” with President Diem. This purpose of this talk was to present Diem with a de’marche, placing coercive demands on the President to comply with the political reforms that to this point he was neglecting. Within this policy, the

Ambassador emphasized that US policy to Vietnam should be, “an anti-Communist, Vietnamese Government which can command loyal and enthusiastic support of the widest possible segments of the Vietnamese people, and is able to carry on an effective fight against Communist guerrillas.” With this policy, the US should support Diem as the best available leader, if he can not meet the proposed reforms, the US should consider an alternative leader.⁷

On the 7th of October, against the desires of the Department of Defense, the State Department approved Ambassador Durbrow’s request to conduct this talk. On 14 October, President Diem received the Ambassador. Ambassador Durbrow began the conversation with a discussion of the recent decision to transfer the CG from USOM to the MAAG which after months of requests, President Diem was pleased to hear. The Ambassador then asked to speak with the President in private and proceeded to *read* a 14 page document containing a majority of the proposals that the State Department was attempting to implement. This document contained recommendations to replace the Minister of Interior and Defense, publicly condemning the Can Lao party, free press, and subsidizing peasants for the work they do for government programs. To these suggestions, President Diem stated that they would be very difficult to implement under the current conditions but he would take them under consideration. The Ambassador then discussed the issue of transferring the President’s brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, and brother’s wife, Madame Nhu, to a diplomatic position out of the state. The public associated both of the Nhuses with the corrupt Can Lao party which used strong arm, often violent tactics to coerce the people into conforming to political reforms. To this proposal, the President was silent and changed the subject to the situation in Laos.⁸ This followed the pattern

suggested by BG Lansdale in his briefing to LTG McGarr in which the President would listen, not consider what was being said, then move on to another subject. The problem was that Ambassador Durbrow had totally lost the confidence of President Diem by this point. No matter how valid his issues, many of which the Department of Defense agreed, President Diem would not take them under advisement. The Defense Department's original disagreement with the Ambassador's request was not so much what was being presented, but how it was being presented and who was doing the presenting.⁹

This is where both sides stood going into the final months of the Eisenhower administration and development of The Basic Counterinsurgency Plan for Vietnam. Aside from their differences stated for or against the military or political plans of action, they also differed a great deal in how to sell the programs to President Diem. After not receiving adequate results from his earlier suggested liberalizing reforms, Ambassador Durbrow advocated a coercive strategy which took form in his October de'marche. In the Ambassador's opinion, previous proposals had no "teeth" and it was time to take negative action against something important to Diem but not threatening to the security of the state. This translated into denying the approval of a force increase or provision of additional equipment until the GVN implemented some of the political reforms.¹⁰ The Ambassador also realized that this action may make it more difficult for the GVN to beat the Viet Cong threat, but the GVN had ample resources to defeat the insurgency as long as they accepted the Embassy's reforms.¹¹

On the other hand, the MAAG believed that the only way to obtain full support from the GVN was to show President Diem the US's sincerity in the support of his government and administration. Instead of holding the force increase as a carrot to entice Diem to

meet our reforms, the US should approve the force increase to show President Diem that the Americans will do everything possible to help his cause. LTG McGarr argued that by demonstrating “such concrete evidence of strong US support of the GVN, vividly demonstrated by the approval of the much desired force increase, could be expected to assist in bargaining with President Diem for the adoption of other improvements in the political, economic and social fields.”¹² This reflects the approach of both agencies since the surge in activity in 1959. The Defense Department won over the confidence of the GVN to effect its plans while the State Department used threats as leverage to get things done. For the State Department this resulted in the total alienation of the GVN administration and for the United States the inability to effect the stated objective of creating a stable government for South Vietnam.

Two events occurred in late 1960 that put the final influence on which department’s perspective would mold the development of The Basic Counterinsurgency Plan. The first event was a failed coup d’etat by members the ARVN’s elite Airborne Battalions. The People’s Revolutionary Committee demanded that Diem be removed and also demanded many of the reforms that the State Department had been advocating. After the GVN defeated the coup, the effect it created was that the GVN suspected possible US involvement in the coup. This was particularly aimed at Ambassador Durbrow who had been openly suggesting to members of the Country Team that they should identify a replacement for Diem as a coup was immanent. If there was any ability for the Ambassador to positively influence actions in Vietnam, it was now no longer possible.¹³ Secretary of State Herter even sent a telegram telling the Ambassador to cease his

coercive tactics with President Diem as this would only worsen the situation.¹⁴ Elbredge Durbrow's days as the Ambassador to Vietnam were numbered.

The other event influencing the plan was the publishing and Defense Department circulation of LTG McGarr's information paper titled, "Information Guidance and Instructions to MAAG Advisory Personnel." In this paper LTG McGarr re-emphasized some previous MAAG thoughts identifying the solution to the Vietnam problem as the ability of the armed forces to protect the lives of the people. To this end he proclaimed that two things needed to occur. The first was to reduce or eliminate VC intervention from the outside—isolate the battlefield. The second was to prevent the growth and success of the VC military action while waiting for the political reforms to take effect. He believed that they had not achieved this objective because the US had not adequately coordinated all of the elements of national power.

Where he diverted some from his predecessor was through the creation of an anti-guerrilla guerrilla. If the US authorized the 20,000 man force increase, the MAAG, through the GVN, would organize and detail specialized ARVN units employing improved guerrilla tactics against the VC guerrilla. For President-elect Kennedy, who had already developed some ideas of his own on the use of specialized forces to fight this type of war, this is exactly what he wanted to hear. LTG McGarr also addressed the popular notion of getting the job done quickly, stating "Time is our most precious commodity and the urgency of the situation requires that we use every second gainfully. The MAAG or the RVNAF cannot afford the luxury of an eight hour day or five day week. History will not wait." Not only was a copy of this letter circulated through Defense channels during the

later development of the Counterinsurgency Plan, but it was also attached to a copy of the plan that was sitting on President Kennedy's desk the day he took office.¹⁵

Notes

¹Letter From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Parsons) to the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow), 9 June 1960. Ibid. Pp. 492-493.

²Memorandum From the Secretary of Defense's Deputy Assistant for Special Operations (Lansdale) to LTG McGarr, 11 August 1960. Ibid. Pp. 531-534.

³Paper Prepared by the MAAG in Vietnam—Actions To Strengthen Stability of Government of Vietnam, 1 September 1960. Ibid. Pp. 550-556.

⁴Telegram From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Department of State, 5 September 1960. Ibid. Pp. 556-560.

⁵Letter From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Parson), 6 September 1960. Ibid. Pp. 564-567.

⁶Plan For Counter-Insurgency Operations by the Government of South-Vietnam—To be completed by the Country Team (MAAG) and the GVN, 14 September 1960. Ibid. Pp. 573-575.

⁷Telegram From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Department of State, 16 September 1960. *United States Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*, Volume 2. Pp. 57-58.

⁸Telegram From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Department of State, 15 October 1960. *FRUS, 1958-1960, Volume I - Vietnam*. Pp. 595-596.

⁹Memorandum From the Secretary of Defense's Deputy Assistant for Special Operations (Lansdale) to the Regional Director, Far East (O'Donnell) in the office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, 20 September 1960. Ibid. Pp. 580-585.

¹⁰Letter From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Parsons), 30 November 1960. Ibid. P. 694.

¹¹Telegram From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Department of State, 3 May 1960. Ibid. Pp. 433-436.

¹²Enclosure Titled, MAAG Comments on Recommended 20,000 Increase in RVNAF Force Level, to Letter From the Chief of the MAAG (McGarr) to the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Felt), 21 November 1960. Ibid. Pp. 695-703.

¹³Memorandum From the Secretary of Defense's Deputy Assistant for Special Operations (Lansdale) to the Secretary of Defense (Gates), 12 November 1960. Ibid. P. 653.

¹⁴Telegram From the Secretary of State to the Embassy in Vietnam, 9 December 1960. Ibid. Pp. 720-721.

¹⁵Information Guidance and Instructions to MAAG Advisory Personnel by LTG McGarr, 10 November 1960. *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945 - 1967, Volume 2*. Pp. 83-86.

Chapter 5

The Plan In Action

The most vital consideration of U.S. policy in Viet-Nam is to create governmental stability by the eradication of insurgency in the Republic of Viet-Nam and to that end activities of all U.S. agencies will be coordinated.

—The Basic Counterinsurgency Plan For Vietnam

On 28 January, President Kennedy approved the Basic Counterinsurgency Plan for Vietnam. It consisted of the base plan with three annexes: annex A dealt with the required ARVN force level, annex B dealt with the concept of operations, and annex C dealt with logistical support. Even though the plan originated from the Joint Chiefs and CINCPAC, a Country Team staff committee composed of representatives of several U.S. agencies to include the Embassy and the MAAG provided much of the details. The Joint Chief's intent was for the GVN to develop a strategy to implement the directives in the plan while being supported by the U.S. According to the staff committee's assessment, "if the GVN does not take immediate and extraordinary action to regain popular support to correct the organizational and procedural weaknesses which contribute to the growth of the Viet Cong power, the Viet Cong can cause the overthrow of the present GVN government in months to come."¹

The staff committee's assessment mirrored the Embassy's argument to target the will of the people from the previous year, but, aside from a few political tasks which referred

back to the Ambassador's de'marche of October, the plan was clearly dominated by the implementation of the military instrument to solve the crisis. Two of the primary assumptions of the plan were that the greatest threat to South Vietnam was the expansion of Communist guerrilla warfare and the most vital consideration of U.S. policy for building government stability was the eradication of the insurgents. The mission of the plan was short and simple and focused on the use of force defeat the Communist insurgency. The plan also described the continued organization of the Civil Guard under the Defense Ministry as well as the need to develop a force basis to cope with the situation. The committee devoted an entire annex to the latter point which focused on the need for a 20,000 man force increase.²

The fact that the plan contained most of the issues addressed by the MAAG Commanders during the past year while only referencing Ambassador Durbrow's political reforms is indicative of U.S. impatience in dealing with the situation and the emphasis on the military instrument to bring it to a speedy conclusion. Military force instead of GVN government stability should now be the target of U.S. and Vietnam strategy and a larger force is required to meet the internal and external Communist threats. The plan also showed that many of the problems the MAAG and Embassy identified in early 1960 still existed. The void between the GVN and the people, lack of communication leading to a disgruntled populous, and the GVN's inability to provide security to the people were all early items of concern. Highlighted in the Basic Counterinsurgency plan, these problems served as a symbol of the MAAG's and the Embassy's inability to develop a coordinated action to resolve them. But with the plan focusing on a military solution and the poor perception that high ranking government officials in Saigon and Washington had of

Ambassador Durbrow due to his difficulties during the latter part of the year, President Kennedy decided where to place his emphasis which was to have immediate results for the MAAG and Department of Defense.³

The most immediate result occurred two days after the signing of the plan in which President Kennedy authorized an increase in expenditure of \$28.4 million to raise the ARVN force level by 20,000 men and \$12.7 million to improve the quality of the Civil Guard.⁴ This was a great victory for the MAAG in what had been a major point of contention for most of 1960. Not only did the plan more heavily rely upon the military and MAAG course of action for resolving the conflict, but the MAAG was now receiving the resources it deemed necessary to carry out this plan. It had not been a total victory for the MAAG; however, as the Embassy and State Department's influence soon started to become evident in President Kennedy's method in implementing the plan. In a memorandum dated 3 February 1960, Secretary of State Dean Rusk made it clear to Ambassador Durbrow that while the President had approved the force increase and allocated funds for this increase, these funds were only for 1961. Congress would approve any further commitment of resources in support of the GVN and would do so only if the GVN accepted the terms of the Basic Counterinsurgency Plan. "If the GVN is willing to accept the obligations involved in its implementation, the U.S. is ready to give full and immediate support in carrying it out."⁵ Therefore, while the Basic Counterinsurgency Plan showed the administration's commitment to the military instrument in solving Vietnam's problems, the method in which the administration administered the plan favored the State Department's use of pressure tactics to force the GVN to conform to the required plan of action.

Though not a direct result of the plan, BG Lansdale's trip report on his visit to Vietnam in early January of 1961 had a major effect on how President Kennedy wanted the plan executed by his agencies in Saigon. To this point in the MAAG and Embassy dispute, BG Lansdale was the most significant influence for the Department of Defense and LTG McGarr in Washington. When Walt Rostow, Deputy Special Assistant to the President, showed the memorandum to the President, the contents of the report and the credentials of the man who wrote it raised the President's perception of the severity of the situation in Vietnam to a higher level. In the memorandum, BG Lansdale described the increased Communist threat which he estimated at 15,000 men strong with no real possibility for the GVN to seal off the constant infiltration from the North. He did not believe that this was a hopeless situation but certain measures had to occur immediately if the U.S. was going to achieve its objectives in Vietnam. One of his central themes throughout the report is that the U.S. must show through words and action their unswerving support of President Diem and South Vietnam. To this end, he recommended Ambassador Durbrow's and USOM Chief Gardiner's removal due to their inability to get along with either the GVN leadership or the MAAG which had produced nothing but negative results. Likewise, the U.S. must change its tactic from pressure to support to get the GVN's confidence for carrying out the plan. "If the next American official to talk to President Diem would have the good sense to see him as a human being who has been through a lot of hell for years—and not as an opponent to be beaten to his knees—we would start regaining our influence with him in a healthy way. The next time we become 'holier than thou', we might find it sobering to reflect on the DRV (North Vietnamese

Democratic Republic of Vietnam). Do the Soviets and the Chinese Communists give Ho Chi Minh a similar hard time, or do they aid and abet him?"⁶

By mid March of 1961, the Kennedy administration determined that they were closing in on many of the military directives outlined in the Basic Counterinsurgency Plan; however, they were still far apart with the GVN on the political reforms. Soon after, Frederick Nolting replaced Elbridge Durbrow as the Ambassador to Vietnam. Both President Kennedy and Secretary Rusk determined that it was time to promote a more positive image in Vietnam with the hope that Ambassador Nolting would give them this fresh start leading to the GVN's acceptance of the political reforms. Regardless of BG Lansdale's recommendation, Durbrow's influence and the State Department's standard method of pressure tactics still was the predominant means of trying to get things done in Vietnam well into the month of May. Although, it was around this period that regional and world events would change the administrations approach to Vietnam.⁷

It late April President Kennedy was faced with a number of problems which effected U.S. morale and perceptions of how the administration was handling world events. The Bay of Pigs, the possibility of the Soviets moving on Berlin, and the loss of U.S. influence in Laos, left the President with the necessity to act on Vietnam and produce immediate positive results. This would not only shore up public opinion in the states but would also demonstrate to the GVN that the U.S. was not going to withdraw its support in Vietnam as was occurring in Laos. Again, leaning to the military instrument to solve his problems, the President created a special task force for Vietnam under the leadership of Deputy Secretary of Defense Gilpatric with BG Lansdale as his principal assistant. The purpose of this task force was to develop a program of action to prevent Communist Domination of

South Vietnam.⁸The results of this task force called for the consideration of increasing ARVN forces to 200,000 and the deployment of U.S. forces to assist in infrastructure building with the strong possibility of being involved in combat action as part of their duties. This was obviously a big step in the use of military force which for the first time under Kennedy called for American troops being deployed in a direct action role. Politically, the task force recommended supporting the current GVN administration. By the end of May, President Kennedy, while considering the military recommendations of the task force, ordered the change in approach to the GVN from pressure tactics to one of support.⁹

The military remained the instrument of choice for much of the remainder of 1961. It was evident, however, that President Kennedy was still not satisfied with the progress in Vietnam. To get a better feel for what was happening the President directed trips by Vice President Johnson, his Special Financial Group to Vietnam under the direction of Dr. Eugene Staley, and his Military Representative General Maxwell Taylor. Vice President Johnson's report stated that the "basic decision in Southeast Asia is to decide whether to help these countries to the best of our ability or throw in the towel in the area and pull back our defenses to San Francisco and 'Fortress America'." To this, the Vice President recommended to "proceed with a clear-cut and strong program of action."¹⁰ This recommendation in addition to the Staley report which emphasized increased support to Vietnam resulted in authorization of another force increase to 200,000 men.¹¹ After increased Viet Cong activity in which they organized attacks up to battalion strength and a subsequent request by President Diem for a joint U.S. and GVN effort, General Taylor's

report recommended among other things the introduction of a military task force under U.S. control in a combat role.¹²

It appeared that the emphasis on the military created by the dispute between the MAAG and the Embassy as well as the Embassy's inability to accomplish any reforms was going to lead President Kennedy into committing U.S. troops in support of American objectives in Vietnam. Had it not been for the unlikely occurrence of an agreement between the Secretary of Defense McNamara and Secretary of State Rusk that the U.S. should supply only logistical support, the commitment of troops probably would have occurred in 1962.¹³ Instead, 1962 continued to show the divergence between the State Department and Embassy and Department of Defense and MAAG. The MAAG gained influence with an organizational change which gave the MAAG Commander equal status as the Ambassador opposed to the previous subordinate relationship in which many of the decisions and information had to go through the Embassy.¹⁴ While relations between the MAAG and the Embassy had greatly improved with the appointment of Ambassador Nolting in 1961, the State Department still carried that same contempt towards the GVN administration and differences in the best way to make the GVN implement American plans.¹⁵ The State Department once again called for pressure tactics for President Diem to implement political reforms in exchange for the funding of the latest force increase to 200,000. In an end of year report, Roger Hilsman of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, stated that "the GVN will not be able to consolidate its military successes into permanent political gains and to evoke the positive support of the peasantry unless it gives more emphasis to non-military aspects of the counterinsurgency program."¹⁶

This was the general consensus of the Kennedy administration entering 1963. A change in leadership had occurred in both the MAAG (now MACV - Military Assistance Command Vietnam) under General Harkins and the Embassy under Ambassador Henry Lodge. In contrast to 1959 through 1961, the National Command Authority now made most of the decisions regarding Vietnam. The MACV and the Embassy were more of an instrument to implement these decisions rather than driving policy decisions in Washington. With the Viet Cong threat continuing to wage a war of attrition and having no indicators of it subsiding, the President turned his attention to what many in the State Department had said was the cause of the problem in Vietnam—President Diem. The President’s patience to implement political reforms through Diem had run out. With the perception of continued corruption by President Diem’s brother and wife, in addition to the Buddhist uprisings in July against Diem, the administration began to look for alternatives for GVN leadership.¹⁷

In a telegram to Ambassador Lodge, Secretary of State Rusk instructed the Ambassador to inform Vietnamese generals plotting a coup that all military and economic aid in support of South Vietnam would be suspended unless a change occurred in the current leadership. To President Diem, changes such as the removal of his brother and brother’s wife were impossible. If not for the fact that they were his immediate family, the Vietnamese public would perceive this action as their President serving as a puppet of the American government. The Kennedy administration was again applying the pressure tactic, this time to suspected military coup leaders, to fix the problem or the U.S. was going to deny any further support.¹⁸ Not everyone in the administration supported this position including Vice President Johnson. He believed that while President Diem was not

the ideal leader, there was no real alternative. A subsequent assessment by Secretary of Defense McNamara and General Taylor also disagreed due to the great progress displayed by the military campaign and fear that further actions against the GVN administration would detract from the military success which had taken years to achieve.¹⁹

This position by Secretary McNamara and General Taylor was too little too late for President Diem who, along with the Nhu, was overthrown and killed during a coup by military leaders on 1 November 1963. The lack of support displayed by the U.S. combined with the growing dissatisfaction of the Vietnamese populous condemned President Diem and American efforts to reform the military and political situation in Vietnam. Three weeks later, President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas leaving President Johnson to pick up the pieces in Vietnam and implement his plan to prevent Communist take-over in Southeast Asia. As previously indicated, President Johnson favored a strong plan of action to support Vietnam and entered into a period characterized by disarray created by Diem's coup and subsequent government instability reflected in nine changes of leadership from 1963 to 1965. Once again, the administration looked to the military instrument to achieve its objectives with the commitment of combat troops in 1965.

Notes

¹The Basic Counterinsurgency Plan for Vietnam, 4 January 1961. *F.R.U.S., 1961 - 1963, Volume I - Vietnam*. P. 6.

²Ibid. Pp. 1-12.

³Content of the Basic Counterinsurgency Plan for Vietnam, 4 January 1961. *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945 - 1967, Volume 2*. Pp. 86-92.

⁴Memorandum for the Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense from the President, 30 January 1961. *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945 - 1967, Volume 11*. P. 13.

⁵Telegram from the Department of State (Rusk) to the US Embassy in Saigon (Durbrow), 3 February 1961. Ibid. Pp. 14-16.

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⁶Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense (McNamara) from BG Lansdale, Subject: Vietnam, 17January1961. Ibid. Pp. 1-12.

⁷The Kennedy Program and Commitments, 1961. *United States-Vietnam Relations, 194-1967, Volume 2*. Pp. i-ii.

⁸Creation of the Presidential Task Force on Vietnam and the Drafting of a Program of Action on Vietnam, April 1961. *F.R.U.S., 1961-1963, Volume I - Vietnam..* P. 74.

⁹A Program of Action to Prevent Communist Domination of South Vietnam, 6 May 1961. *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945 - 1967, Volume 11*. P. 70-87.

¹⁰Memorandum to the President from the Vice President, Subject: Mission to Southeast Asia, 23May1961. Ibid. Pp. 159-166.

¹¹National Security Action Memorandum No. 65, Subject: Joint Program of Action with the Government of Vietnam. Ibid. Pp. 241-242.

¹²Telegram, Eyes Only For the President From General Taylor, 1November1961. Ibid. Pp. 331-342.

¹³Memorandum for the President from the Secretary of Defense (McNamara) and Secretary of State (Rusk), 11November1961. Ibid. Pp. 359-366.

¹⁴Memorandum for the Secretary of State from the Secretary of Defense, 18 December 1961. Ibid. P. 426.

¹⁵Oral History Interview No. 489, Ambassador Frederick G Nolting Jr., 9 November 1971. *United States Air Force Oral History Program*. Pp. 28-32.

¹⁶Memorandum to the Secretary of State from Roger Hilsman, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Subject: The Situation and short-term Prospects in South Vietnam, 3 December 1962. Ibid. Pp. 487-489.

¹⁷The Situation in South Vietnam, National Intelligence Estimate, 10July1963. *Ibid.* Pp. 530-535.

¹⁸Telegram No. 243, Secretary of State (Rusk) to U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam (Lodge), 24August1963. Ibid. Pp. 536-537.

¹⁹Memorandum for the President from the Secretary of Defense (McNamara) and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Taylor), 2October1963. Ibid. Pp. 554-558.

Chapter 6

Lessons Learned

Many military leaders study Vietnam and try to determine what caused the problems that America faced during this conflict so that they could prevent from making the same mistakes in the future. The possibility of any one event or situation being the lone cause is unlikely due to the complexity of this war. Many have looked to the period when American soldiers were actively engaged in the fighting to find their answers. However, in today's environment of reduced forces and funds as well as the difficulty in distinguishing friend from foe, conflicts that are resolved before American soldiers are committed to combat are often judged the most successful. When studying the critical period in the Vietnam conflict from late 1959 to the development of the Basic Counterinsurgency Plan for Vietnam in 1961 there is much to be learned by both the soldier and the diplomat.

The inability of the MAAG and the Department of Defense and the American Embassy and the State Department to develop and implement a coordinated military and political plan of action in Vietnam set the trend for the reliance on the military instrument as a means toward attaining U.S. objectives in Vietnam. The dispute between these agencies resulted in President Kennedy not settling on a single strategy in implementing his plan and instead he switched back and forth from a military to political emphasis. The President approved the Basic Counterinsurgency Plan for Vietnam in order to provide the

framework for South Vietnam to develop a coordinated plan of action to defeat the Communist. History shows that President Diem was ineffective in accomplishing this plan, but the roots of his failure grew in the American's not achieving a political and military coordinated plan to guide the GVN.

Even though both military and political leaders claimed Vietnamese political stability as the most important factor to prevent the spread of Communism, problems within the State Department prevented what could have been the answer to saving South Vietnam from being the focus of U.S. strategy. On the other hand, military leaders were trying to solve political problems with military solutions, focusing on the means to achieve political stability (kill the insurgents) as opposed to the objective of a strong South Vietnamese government with people united in their cause with the ability to defend themselves. The military instrument brought immediate, tangible results while the political instrument lagged behind due to a conflict in methodology and personalities. The Kennedy administration clung to these results as a way to bring a quick end to a messy situation.

In the memorandum that raised President Kennedy's awareness soon after his inauguration, BG Lansdale stated that he felt Ambassador Durbrow should be moved out of Vietnam due to staying too long in the "forest of tigers" which had made him ineffective in carrying out U.S. objectives. In fact, the real problem was the inability of the military and diplomats to find each other in this forest and coordinate their efforts to defeat the enemy within. Instead, they remained separated and, over the course of the war, the tigers devoured them one by one.

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