



We're Back

Well, we never really went away. We helped 332 pieces get the visibility they're due by publishing them in single article format since September, 2007. But this issue announcing some of the winners of our first writing competition (see p. 5) marks our return to regular publishing of select works in a proper journal style. We will continue to bring you what we can when we can: news and commentary via the SWJ Blog, longer pieces via the Journal online, and now these regular "print" issues, too -- at least this freely distributed PDF e-zine that you can print yourself if you so choose. Look for another edition shortly with more winners and more news about Small Wars Foundation.
- Dave & Bill

In This Issue

CORDS and the Whole of Government Approach: Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Beyond, <i>by Richard Weitz, Ph.D.</i>	1
Getting Past the First Cup of Tea, <i>by J. Andrew Person</i>	10
Examining the Armed Forces of the Philippines' Civil Military Operations: A Small Power Securing Military Relevancy in Nontraditional Military Roles, <i>by Delilah Russell</i>	15
Clio in Combat, The Transformation of Military History Operations, <i>by LTC John A Boyd, Ph.D., US Army</i>	24
Task Force Stryker, Network Revolution, <i>by CPT Jonathan Pan, US Army</i>	32
Book Review of Ben S. Malcolm's White Tigers, My Secret War in North Korea. <i>Reviewed by MAJ Bradford Burris</i>	40
Haiti: Boots on the Ground Perspective, <i>by Col Buck Elton, USAF</i>	42

About the Writing Competition, p. 5

About Small Wars Foundation, p. 23

Foreign Policy column, p. 2

CORDS and the Whole of Government Approach

Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Beyond

by Richard Weitz, Ph.D.

Grand Prize Winner, Question #2

All too often, the U.S. national security system has proven unable to integrate its diplomatic, military, economic, and other elements of national power adequately. The weak integration, due primarily to poor interagency cooperation, has presented particular problems for the United States when waging counterinsurgencies. The new U.S. counterinsurgency field manual, FM 3-24, points out that "military efforts are necessary and important to counterinsurgency (COIN) efforts, but they are only effective when integrated into a comprehensive strategy employing all instruments of national power."¹

The case of the Vietnam War—sometimes misperceived as a counterinsurgency failure—shows how the United States can conduct such campaigns more effectively. Confronting what until recently was the most extensive counterinsurgency and nation-building challenge the U.S. national security community had ever faced, the U.S. gov-

ernment adopted a novel civil-military strategy that achieved remarkably rapid if limited successes under trying conditions. The experience offers lessons to current and future U.S. policymakers as they grapple with new COIN challenges.

Background

Until 1968, U.S. and South Vietnamese military forces concentrated on killing the Viet Cong (VC) insurgents and North Vietnamese combat units present in the Republic of (South) Vietnam (RVN) as well as disrupting, primarily through air strikes and ground interdiction offensives, the flow of reinforcements and supplies through the Ho Chi Minh Trail from North Vietnam to the South. In addition, Operation Rolling Thunder sought to induce Hanoi to curb its support for the insurgency by inflicting measured pain through aerial bombardment. Neither South Vietnamese military units nor the many American combat forces that entered after 1965 proved very adept at defeating the insurgents or preventing the infiltration of reg-

¹ Headquarters, U.S. Department of the Army, *FM 3-24: Counterinsurgency* (Washington, D.C., December 15, 2006), p. 2-1.

ular North Vietnamese units and logistical support into the South. The Viet Cong regularly retained the initiative and contested the control of the Government of (South) Vietnam (GVN) over large areas. Critics of the attrition strategy then adopted by U.S. and RVN forces called for greater efforts at local area defense, aggressive small-unit patrolling that relied on surprise ambushes rather than massive firepower, and "pacification" measures to weaken popular support for the insurgency.

In the context of the Vietnam War, "pacification" referred to "the collection of programs by which the United States attempted to assist the Saigon government to gain control over and build popular support throughout the RVN."² The objective of these programs, which received increased resources as the war progressed, was to deprive the VC of support among the rural population by protecting villagers from VC intimidation through military, police, and intelligence activities. The expectation was that the enhanced security would decrease support for the insurgency by establishing conditions for sustained economic growth and more effective GVN performance. Successful pacification

requires a whole-of-government approach to achieve the tight connection between the military and civil dimensions of the conflict. Although pacification involves non-military programs such as land reform and good governance measures, it entails an essential military security dimension as well.³ The population needs long-term security to feel comfortable cooperating with the government against the insurgents. According to former U.S. military officer and later seniorCORDS administrator John Paul Venn, "Whether security is ten percent of the total problem or ninety percent, it is inescapably the *first* ten percent or the *first* ninety percent."⁴

Although many U.S. and RVN agencies participated in pacification, their efforts were initially poorly integrated. The U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) provided military training to the RVN Army, but the command's assets were outside the control of the U.S. embassy in Saigon. Despite regular meetings between the MACV Commander and the American ambassador,

² David L. Anderson, *The Columbia Guide to the Vietnam War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 150-151.

³ Andrew F. Krepovich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 12.

⁴ Cited in Ronald H. Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1993), p. 283.



Watch for [Robert Haddick's](#) weekly editorial, [This Week at War](#). Friday evenings at Foreign Policy.

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military-civilian coordination was weak.⁵ Poor integration also prevailed among the programs run by the various civilian agencies, which differed in mission approaches, goals, and chains of command but continued to grow in size and complexity. For example, the State Department, Department of Agriculture, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), U.S. Information Service (USIS), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and other U.S. government agencies pursued separate and conflicting pacification initiatives without an integrated strategy.⁶ The American and RVN pacifica-

⁵ Robert W. Komer, *Bureaucracy at War: US Performance in the Vietnam Conflict* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1986), p. 90.

⁶ William Colby, with James McCargar, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989), pp. 82, 191; and Robert Shaplen, *The Road From War: Vietnam, 1965-1970* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 158.

tion programs were also poorly coordinated.⁷ The lack of a single major agency or directing body meant that pacification “was everybody’s business and nobody’s.”⁸

Despite the evident confusion and inefficiency, repeated efforts to integrate pacification activities better before 1967 failed. Reform proposals sought only improved coordination, not unified command or direction. They also addressed only civilian program efforts, leaving the military to conduct its own war.⁹ Representatives of the State Department and the CIA resisted consolidating U.S. pacification efforts under the military.¹⁰ Past experience had persuaded the civilian agencies that the military would pay insufficient attention to pacification and treat it as an adjunct to conventional military operations.¹¹ The military’s overwhelming presence in the RVN, however, made it difficult for civilian U.S. government agencies to operate efficacious independent pacification programs.

NSAM 362

On May 9, 1967, President Lyndon Johnson took a radical step to overcome these coordination problems. He signed National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 362, which established the “Civil Operations and Revolutionary [later ‘Rural’] Development Support Directorate.” Johnson appointed his chief pacification advisor, Robert W. Komer, to head the new organization with the rank of ambassador. The organizational structure of CORDS established a unique model for promoting an integrated approach to COIN activities. CORDS adopted the unprecedented approach of aligning nearly all the civilian and military interagency assets involved in the counterinsurgency under one civilian manager—and then placing that civilian within the military hierarchy as a Deputy Commander of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). For several reasons, Komer had pushed for placing the U.S. military in charge of CORDS.¹² First, he wanted senior commanders to pay more attention to pacification and local security. Second, he sought to ensure that programs could draw on the military’s substantial resources. Finally, he aimed to exploit the U.S. military’s clout with South Vietnam’s military leadership.

The practice of centralizing command of civilian and military resources in a single central headquarters was replicated at each level of the GVN. CORDS established a unified American civilian military advisory team structure that worked with the RVN agencies involved in pacification in all areas of the country’s administrative hierarchy: the 4 military regions; the 44 provinces; and the 242 districts. CORDS coordinated most U.S. in-country personnel, including almost all USIA, USAID, and State Department employees deployed in the field, as well as those CIA employees involved in intelligence and area security and those American military advisors not directly involved in conventional combat operations (such as those in support of rural local security forces). The Department of Defense provided most funds and other assets for CORDS activities. The military accepted the burden because most pacification programs cost very little compared with conventional combat operations.¹³ By 1969-1970, 14,300 American advisors of all types worked in South Vietnam. Most of them (approximately 8,000) were involved with CORDS. Almost 7,000 of these CORDS personnel were military; over 1,000 were civilian. In addition, there were approximately 3,000 U.S. combat advisors.¹⁴

The result was that a single coordinator headed the civilian and military pacification efforts at the local levels where the programs were actually executed. Orders and reporting occurred within CORDS’ chain of command for both civilian and military projects, allowing for greater efficiency and coordination. CORDS enjoyed access to considerable civilian and military resources and helped unify the planning, support, attention, and other activities of the numerous U.S. and South Vietnamese groups engaged in pacification.

CORDS Program Elements

CORDS involved a diverse set of activities. USAID sought to improve RVN’s macroeconomic performance by reducing inflation and increasing employment. It also distributed food and agricultural supplies to the rural population and promoted rural education, health care, and public works projects. Information (propaganda) operations were led by the Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO), which distributed leaflets, posters, and newspaper and magazine articles throughout Indochina. The USIS also attempted to develop a

⁷ George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), p. 63.

⁸ Komer, *Bureaucracy at War*, p. 83.

⁹ Colby, *Lost Victory*, p. 192.

¹⁰ Spector, *After Tet*, p. 281.

¹¹ Colby, *Lost Victory*, p. 207.

¹² Spector, *After Tet*, p. 280.

¹³ John Prados, *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995), pp. 205, 209.

¹⁴ Jeffery J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1988), p. 452.

nationwide TV network, though this effort suffered from insufficient numbers of Americans with Vietnamese-language skills or deep knowledge of Vietnamese culture.¹⁵ Political reforms also received some attention. For example, the pacification plan for 1969 focused on reviving local government by providing more development funds to villages that held elections.¹⁶ The development of voluntary associations, such as labor, youth, sports, and civic groups, was also encouraged.

This mix of CORDS programs included the key elements of U.S. support to the pacification initiatives undertaken by the RVN. To this end, CORDS representatives made a systematic effort to induce GVN leaders to give more attention and resources to pacification as well as better manage these programs.¹⁷ CORDS also made a sustained effort to replace incompetent or corrupt regional RVN administrators and military officers who had primarily civil responsibilities. The Hamlet Evaluation System and other periodic assessments served as levers to highlight inadequate performance. Local CORDS officials were required to evaluate their South Vietnamese counterparts at least annually. Komer pressured MACV and the U.S. embassy to work with South Vietnamese leaders to secure removal of poor performers.¹⁸ The annual and special CORDS pacification campaign plans represented the most detailed combined U.S.-GVN operational planning in the war.¹⁹ In other areas, specifically military operations, U.S. and RVN authorities conducted almost two separate wars.

CORDS put additional emphasis on the “Chieu Hoi” (“Open Arms”) Amnesty Program for VC deserters. Since its inception in 1963, it had offered amnesty and “rehabilitation” to VC and North Vietnamese defectors who surrendered to the RVN as Hoi Chanh (“returnees”). Over 172,000 defected after 1966,²⁰ versus 75,000 between 1963 and 1967.²¹ VC Hoi Chanh (returnees) surrendered using safe conduct passes and, after a short period of internment to ensure that they were legitimate deserters, they would be retrained in a craft or given some land for farming and be resettled. The program was not without its problems. Many non- or low-level VC would participate for the free food,

shelter, and other material benefits.²² Monetary awards for South Vietnamese responsible for a defection (under the “third-party inducement plan”) led to phony defectors who split the reward money with corrupt officials.²³ True defectors also encountered suspicion and other resistance when they genuinely sought to integrate in RVN society.

In an effort to bolster local security and allow pacification to proceed with minimum outside interference, CORDS launched a major program of security sector reform. The goal was to provide villagers with sustained security protection so that the civic action programs would gain their support and the intelligence agencies could eliminate the local VC civilian infrastructure. One major initiative of CORDS was to revitalize and expand the RVN National Police. A strong national police with integrated locals had been one of the keys to defeating the Malayan Insurgency. CORDS managers hoped that a similar entity could be established throughout the South Vietnamese countryside to counter the VCI and take the security burden off the U.S. and RVN militaries.²⁴ Despite persistent corruption and morale problems, police training and performance improved.

CORDS also expanded and improved the GVN’s pacification programs. While the U.S. military focused on fighting the VC and the North Vietnamese, the Army of RVN (ARVN) worked on reestablishing a GVN presence in the countryside and regaining popular support. MACV assigned Mobile Training Teams to instruct ARVN conventional units on how to support pacification. CORDS also increased U.S. assistance to the Regional Force/Popular Force militia (RF/PF; aka “Ruff-Puffs”). These territorial units consisted of male part-time volunteers from the locality (RFs served only in their home province; PFs only in their village). Their mission was to conduct patrols, ambush guerrillas, and call on regular quick-reaction ARVN forces for assistance when necessary. Before CORDS, they had been assigned low priority in terms of weapons, supplies, and training. They also had been frequently misused to support conventional operations.

¹⁵ James William Gibson, *The Perfect War: The War We Couldn't Lose and How We Did* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1988), pp. 282-286.

¹⁶ Colby, *Lost Victory*, p. 264.

¹⁷ Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, pp. 84-85.

¹⁸ Komer, *Bureaucracy at War*, pp. 33-34

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

²⁰ W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell, *The Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Crane, Russak, 1977), p. 220.

²¹ Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 91.

²² Gibson, *The Perfect War*, p. 304.

²³ Spector, *After Tet*, p. 286.

²⁴ Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: the Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (New York and Washington: Praeger, 1966), pp. 103, 105, and 110.

The SWJ Writing Competition

This issue presents the prize winners for Question 2 of our first writing competition, along with other selected works. Question 1 winners will be published in a separate issue shortly. Question 2 as it was put forward at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/competition> was:

Postcards From The Edge – the practical application of the Whole of Government approach.

Organizational issues are being discussed from Goldwater-Nichols II to unity of effort and simple hand-shake-con. Whatever the structure on high, people from different walks of life and different functional expertise need to work together on the ground at the pointy end of the spear to deliver effects that matter. Discuss real experiences (personal, known firsthand, or researched and documented) of real people facing real challenges that offer relevant insights into the conduct of a small war.

Consider any, all, or none of the following:

- Discuss what worked and/or what didn't, and why.
- How did participants from different agencies, branches, nations, etc. look at problems differently, and how were those views eventually reconciled (or not)?
- Discuss personal challenges.
- Discuss the moral and ethical challenges of small wars.
- Approach as a turnover guide to a successor.
- Inform operational approaches and "grand" tactics, techniques, and procedures.
- Inform human resourcing / manpower / training & education.
- Relevance for national resource strategy.
- Relevance for go-to-war decisions and conflict strategy.

Komer successfully lobbied to gain responsibility for the training and support of the RF/PF units.²⁵ CORDS soon created hundreds of small U.S. Mobile Advisory Teams (MATS) to train them. The RF/PF strength rose from 300,000 in 1967 to almost 500,000 by the end of 1969. The units received M16s and other advanced weapons to replace their WWII-era stocks. In addition, CORDS arranged to reassign the units under the command of provincial and district chief rather than to ARVN. Previously, the U.S. military had favored a single unified chain of command for all armed RVN units for reasons of efficiency, but this arrangement had encouraged the use of the RF/PF in conventional operations. As a result of these new policies, the RF/PF was soon killing more insurgents than the ARVN.²⁶

William Colby, Komer's deputy (1967-68) and then successor (November 1968-June 1971), launched an initiative in 1968 to provide arms to able-bodied male and female villagers who, due to their age or sex, did not already serve in the military or security services. The People's Self-Defense Force (PSDF) would spend one day a week or so on

unpaid guard duty and would share a common stock of weapons or perform unarmed support functions. The PSDF included approximately 1 million members by early 1969.²⁷ Almost 200,000 of these possessed arms, while the other members (predominately women, the elderly, or members of youth groups) were involved in military support and social welfare activities. Subsequent analysis showed that the VC normally could circumvent or defeat the PSDF with little effort, but Colby later explained that their purpose "was not to produce trained soldiers but to recruit to the Government's side the very individuals who would otherwise find excitement in joining the local Communist guerrilla groups."²⁸

The Phung Hoang ("Phoenix") program aimed to coordinate and better exploit the overly compartmentalized and frequently competing U.S. and RVN intelligence programs directed at neutralizing the civilian Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI). This clandestine political and administrative organization performed essential functions for VC

²⁵ Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, p. 84.

²⁶ Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (John Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 220.

²⁷ Charles R. Smith, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: High Mobility and Standdown: 1969* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1988), p. 282.

²⁸ Colby, *Lost Victory*, p. 242.

cadres, including recruitment, propaganda, logistics, intelligence, and terrorism. Whereas initially the Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs)—platoon-sized paramilitary units—focused on attacking local VC guerrillas, under CORDS the PRUs also identified and arrested suspected VCI members for further interrogation, though many suspects were killed when they resisted.

Phoenix became quite controversial, especially in Washington, due to disagreements in goals and the conduct of operations. U.S. civilian and military analysts could not agree on the size of VCI—estimates ranged from 34,000 to 225,000.²⁹ Army intelligence focused on identifying the VC order-of-battle rather than VCI. Although Phoenix operations may have captured many VCI members and supporters, most of these were not the most influential or senior operatives. In addition, PRUs soon gained a reputation as assassination squads, leading American commanders to curb U.S. military participation in the Phoenix program. RVN officials apparently used the program to eliminate their noncommunist opponents. A quota system encouraged the punishment of innocent people, and bribery allowed possible VCI members to escape arrest. Finally, widespread allegations of torture during interrogations discredited the program within the United States. As with the contemporary search for metrics to assess the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, CORDS analysts sought objective ways to determine if they were winning the insurgency. They relied heavily on the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES) established by the CIA in the mid-1960s. This computer-based system incorporated monthly feedback from U.S. district advisors, who answered questions on a variety of security and development issues. The HES was partly discredited when it appeared to exaggerate successes in pacification before the Tet Offensive. Advisors' lack of deep knowledge regarding their districts limited the utility of their evaluations.³⁰ The CORDS Research and Analysis division subsequently tried to improve the HES by relying less on advisors' subjective judgments and more on objective, quantified data acquired through more specific questions about such items as the number of defections, refugee returns, and terrorist incidents.³¹

The Tet Offensive and Project Recovery

Under its initial "Project Takeoff," CORDS achieved some measurable progress for the successful conduct of COIN and nation-building operations. The National Police and the Regional and Popular Forces performed better, the 1968 pacification plan for the first time integrated the U.S. and RVN pacification programs, and many HES ratings improved. The VC's Tet Offensive, which began in late January 1968, initially disrupted many of CORDS' rural operations as the U.S. and ARVN withdrew from the countryside to defend the cities.³² The fighting produced over 1 million new refugees and damaged or destroyed nearly 170,000 houses.³³ CORDS personnel were forced to focus on physical reconstruction rather than political dimensions of pacification.

In a few months, however, CORDS leaders realized that much of the VCI and VC military infrastructure in the RVN had collapsed. As a result, it was easier to ensure security in rural areas while CORDS pacification efforts took hold. North Vietnamese replacements, deprived of a strong VCI, needed time to understand and exploit local conditions. The U.S. and GVN soon redoubled their pacification efforts to exploit the VC's military setbacks and the new intelligence revealed about the VCI. Under "Project Recovery," CORDS secured more resources to initially assist the many RVN refugees and then to reestablish regional security and a local GVN presence through an accelerated pacification campaign plan focused on community development.³⁴

During the 1968-1972 period, the indigenous VC steadily lost influence in South Vietnam due to the success of CORDS. North Vietnamese regulars had to assume a more visible role in the fighting. In effect, the U.S. and GVN had won the counterinsurgency conflict. Unfortunately, they then confronted a new conventional war against the North Vietnamese military, assisted by a residual VC support network, at a time when popular support for the war effort in the United States had vanished.

The effectiveness of the CORDS pacification programs became evident during the North Vietnamese Easter Offensive, which began on March 30, 1972. Unlike during Tet, the VC proved unable to assist the offensive by launching a mass uprising

²⁹ Prados, *Hidden History of the Vietnam War*, p. 210.

³⁰ Gibson, *The Perfect War*, pp. 307-311.

³¹ T. Louise Brown, *War and Aftermath in Vietnam* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 227; and Gibson, *The Perfect War*, p. 313.

³² Gibson, *The Perfect War*, p. 311.

³³ Spector, *After Tet*, p. 279.

³⁴ Richard Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1995), pp. 156-57.

in South Vietnam's urban or rural areas. Supported by a redoubled U.S. air campaign as well as the massive supply of U.S. equipment provided through the Nixon administration's "Vietnamization" campaign, the ARVN was able to halt the North Vietnamese offensive, leading Hanoi to redirect its efforts toward securing a favorable peace settlement. Despite CORDS' initial expectations, the North Vietnamese negotiators succeeded in requiring the withdrawal of all U.S. military advisers under the terms of the January 1973 ceasefire agreement.³⁵

Assessment

Despite the relative success of CORDS, the revitalized pacification campaign proved insufficient to win the Vietnam conflict. First, the decline in U.S. public and congressional support for sustaining the war effort undermined Komer's strategy of winning the insurgency through a patient, long-term approach.³⁶ William Colby, Komer's successor after November 1968, saw the post-Tet situation as a race in which CORDS had to "so strengthen the Government that it could survive with a major reduction in American assistance."³⁷ The number of CORDS personnel fell by over half during 1971 and continued to decline throughout 1972. CORDS was formally dissolved in January 1973 with the Paris Peace Accords (Article 5 required that all U.S. advisors withdraw from South Vietnam). Subsequent RVN efforts proved ineffective. As Harry Summers observes, "It was not until after the war had already been lost on the American home front that we put counterinsurgency in proper perspective as a valuable adjunct to our military operations against North Vietnam."³⁸

Another problem was that CORDS and other pacification programs were uniquely successful in achieving interagency integration. Management problems, especially excessive compartmentalization, still plagued other areas of the American war effort.³⁹ U.S. and RVN military forces continued to operate under two entirely separate chains of command. U.S. Army tactical advisory teams remained outside the CORDS chain of command, complicating coordination efforts.⁴⁰ CORDS constituted only one staff directorate out of five within MACV. The overall American military effort was

fragmented among the military services, with each fighting their own air war as well as different ground strategies. More broadly, the U.S. war campaign lacked a mechanism to integrate pacification or other civilian programs with the majority of military operations.⁴¹ Perhaps the greatest problem was that the U.S. government lacked an effective local partner. Transforming CORDS' initial gains into long-term triumphs required South Vietnamese authorities to take the lead in sustaining pacification, but the GVN was militarily and administratively too weak to consolidate gains. Corruption, inefficiency, and bureaucratic and factional infighting among the South Vietnamese wasted resources and forced CORDS to rely on U.S. military and civilian personnel for far too many activities. Even many militarily skilled ARVN commanders, eager to combat the enemy, underestimated the importance of pacification efforts or protecting population centers. They were inclined to use RF/PF units to support their conventional operations and were reluctant to allocate substantial resources to these units. Partly as a result of these failures, VC terrorist attacks persisted sufficiently throughout the 1968-72 period to dissuade peasants from openly siding with the government.

Finally, by the time that CORDS became fully operational after 1972, the main U.S. adversary had become North Vietnam's conventional forces rather than Viet Cong guerrillas.⁴² CORDS' post-Tet "one war" pacification strategy achieved remarkable successes, but it was too little, too late. The Easter 1972 Offensive showed how little the notable progress in rural pacification now mattered for the RVN's fate. CORDS' pacification successes meant that the VC launched few guerrilla attacks, but North Vietnamese regulars were able to conduct a major conventional offensive that was only heavy U.S. air strikes and other military support (intelligence, logistics, and rushed deliveries of replacement equipment) halted. This support was fast evaporating. The sanctuary North Vietnam offered the insurgents, the increasing number of its own troops involved in the conflict, and the tenacity shown by its leadership and people in pursuit of the vital national objective of reunification meant that Hanoi would eventually secure the military triumph denied its insurgent allies.

³⁵ Hunt, *Pacification*, p. 269.

³⁶ Maclear, *Ten Thousand Day War*, p. 257.

³⁷ Colby, *Lost Victory*, p. 233.

³⁸ Summers, *On Strategy*, p. 175.

³⁹ Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, p. 63; Komer, *Bureaucracy at War*, pp. 18, 81-110.

⁴⁰ Clarke, *Advice and Support*, p. 212.

⁴¹ Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, p. 85.

⁴² Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999), p. 69.

Lessons Forgotten: Afghanistan and Iraq

Understanding the CORDS experience in Vietnam is critical to understanding the promise and challenges of forging a unified interagency COIN effort. The establishment of CORDS correctly recognized the need for tightly integrated civil-military support for pacification. The Joint Staff later described American involvement in the Vietnam War as “a seemingly incoherent war effort” due to inefficiency among the myriad of U.S. Government agencies [that] operated independently, without much interagency coordination.”⁴³

CORDS overcame the pacification dimensions of this problem by establishing the first fully integrated civil-military field organization in U.S. history. Waging a major counterinsurgency effort requires a single chain of command to unify the resources, expertise, and planning efforts of numerous civilian agencies with those of the military. The single-management structure established by CORDS throughout South Vietnam meant that conflicts among agencies could be resolved in the field in Vietnam rather than in Washington.⁴⁴ It also provided a single “chain of advice” from U.S. to RVN officials at each administrative level. In the case of Afghanistan and especially Iraq, the Defense Department evidently excluded the State Department from the military’s prewar planning for the campaigns and the initial post-conflict reconstruction efforts in both countries. In order to compensate for what was soon recognized as a major mistake, the U.S. government established Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) to promote interagency cooperation regarding U.S. post-conflict governance and reconstruction efforts in both countries. Unfortunately, even though the PRTs are organized differently in both countries and operate in diverse ways—and in a different political, military, economic, and social context than during Vietnam—they have suffered from many of the same types of flaws that impeded pacification efforts in Vietnam before CORDS. In particular, they were initially not well integrated into a larger counterinsurgency strategy and experienced persistent interagency differences over funding, staffing, and other issues. Since their formation in 2002, the PRTs have been at the forefront of U.S. efforts to apply military and civilian COIN assets in an integrated manner. Generally consisting of several dozen military personnel and a smaller num-

ber of civilians, the PRTs have performed a variety of pacification activities in both countries ranging from providing technical and financial support for local civic action projects like rebuilding schools and roads to undertaking political and security initiatives such as advising local government officials or training indigenous security forces. Their organic or associated military components have provided essential unit security to enable civilian experts to improve local economic and political conditions even in relatively insecure regions. In Afghanistan, other NATO governments have adopted the PRT construct due to its perceived value in integrating their civilian and military contributions to the war effort.

The PRTs are regularly described as essential for winning the war. Yet, observers of the U.S. PRTs in both Afghanistan and Iraq complain about “a lack of unity of command resulting in a lack of unity of effect. Funding is not consolidated . . . funding streams are extremely confusing.... Metrics do not exist for determining if PRTs are succeeding.”⁴⁵ A major impediment to initial civil-military integration in the Afghan and Iraq PRTs has been uncertainties regarding the specific responsibilities and authorities of the various U.S. agencies involved. In both cases, no approved interagency doctrine was established and no formal interagency agreement governed the division of roles within the PRTs. Their members would often receive separate instructions from various joint commands as well as from their agency headquarters in Washington. As a result, “with no one in overall charge, disputes are referred to more senior officials up separate ‘stovepipes’ of authority.”⁴⁶ A USAID Interagency Report highlighted problems with interagency coordination by noting that a “lack of explicit guidance led to confusion about civilian and military roles.”⁴⁷ Similarly, those familiar with the teams in Iraq cite “high-level wrangling between State and the Defense Department over who would provide security, support, and funding. No memo-

⁴³ Cited in Scott W. Moore, “Today It’s Gold, Not Purple,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* (Autumn/Winter 1998-99), p. 101.

⁴⁴ Colby, *Lost Victory*, p. 207.

⁴⁵ *Forging a New Shield* (Washington, DC: Project on National Security Reform, 2008), p. 151, <http://www.pnsr.org/data/files/pnsr%20oforging%20a%20new%20shield.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Robert Perito, “Congressional Testimony: The U.S. Experience with Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Iraq and Afghanistan,” United States Institute of Peace, October 18, 2007, <http://www.usip.org/resources/us-experience-provincial-reconstruction-teams-iraq-and-afghanistan>.

⁴⁷ U.S. Agency for International Development, “Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan: An Interagency Assessment,” June 2006, p. 10, http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADG252.pdf.

randum of understanding was in place to delineate each agency's responsibilities."⁴⁸

In the absence of a clear operational strategy for PRTs in either Afghanistan or Iraq during their first few years of operation, what coordination existed occurred largely on an ad hoc basis. In some cases, improvisations produced good civilian-military coordination, especially between PRTs and the military units engaged in more traditional combat operations. In too many other instances, however, the better-resourced and more numerous military personnel imposed their own priorities on civilian reconstruction missions even when limited initial guidance designated the less well-endowed State Department and USAID as the lead agencies for these reconstruction and governance projects.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the PRTs frequently encountered difficulties coordinating with the humanitarian NGOs, which have a major presence in both countries.⁵⁰ This collaboration problem arose notwithstanding that COIN doctrine now recognizes the PRTs as important contributors to civil reconstruction efforts.⁵¹ It was not until November 2006 that the Defense and State Departments adopted a memorandum of understanding that specified their respective financial and other contributions to the PRTs.⁵²

In Vietnam, the philosophy animating CORDS also appreciated that territorial security was just as essential for successful pacification as effective pacification was for achieving military success. Without security against local guerrilla attacks, neither economic development initiatives nor opportunities to participate in elections will induce naturally cautious people to openly support their government against the insurgents. The importance of training and equipping local security forces, such as the RF/PF, instead of relying on the national army or foreign military units for security

is clear. By actively engaging the populace in pacification, local communities assume responsibility for their own security and development. The population will more closely identify with and support a government that sponsors these endeavors and oppose guerrillas who seek to disrupt them. One reason why U.S. forces have found it difficult to withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan is that the local security forces have proved incapable of defending civilians from insurgent attacks. Inter-agency differences over staffing, funding, and other issues related to establishing and sustaining the PRTs also distracted them from their task of providing security and promoting reconstruction in their localities.

The PRTs appear to have become more effective in recent years, and have enabled U.S. pacification efforts to reach even remote areas in conflict-prone regions. Nonetheless, many of these start-up difficulties could have been avoided had the initial PRT architects paid greater attention to the lessons of CORDS rather than, as seems to have been the case with other COIN issues, treated Vietnam as a painful and eagerly forgotten aberration from the proper combat role of a military still largely unenthusiastic about fighting small wars.

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⁴⁸ Shawn Dorman, "Iraq PRTs: Pins on a Map" *Foreign Service Journal*, March 2007, p. 22, http://www.afsa.org/fsj/mar07/iraq_prts_1.pdf.

⁴⁹ Robert Perito, "Special Report 152: The U.S. Experience with Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan: Lessons Identified," United States Institute of Peace, October 2005, <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr152.pdf>; and USIA, "Provincial Reconstruction Teams," p. 10.

⁵⁰ Michael Dziedzic and Colonel Michael Seidl, "Special Report 147: Provincial Reconstruction Teams and Military Relations with International and Non-governmental Organizations in Afghanistan," United States Institute of Peace, September 2005, http://www.usip.org/library/oh/afghanistan_prt.html.

⁵¹ Department of the Army, *FM 3-24: Counterinsurgency*, p. 2-1.

⁵² Robert Perito, "Special Report 185: Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Iraq," United States Institute of Peace, March 2007, p. 3, <http://www.usip.org/resources/provincial-reconstruction-teams-iraq>.