The Quiet War

Counterinsurgency Programs during the Vietnam War – French, American, and Vietnamese Experiences from 1952 to 1964

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Abstract

The Vietnam War, or "Guerre d'Indochine" as the French called it, was at the intersection of two of 20th century's great clashing forces, Decolonization and the Cold War. The Japanese, British, Chinese, French, and later the Americans came to this small stretch of land covered with jungle and rice paddies for different reasons: strategic access, raw materials, the glory of empire, and the global struggle against communism. What they had in common was that they were not invited. The Vietnamese people, who had a long history of fierce resistance against foreign domination, used the tactics of asymmetrical and irregular warfare against their more powerful enemies. A common theme among French and American soldiers was that they were fighting an invisible enemy. Ambushes would materialize at any time of day and night. They could make entire brigades disappear in the jungle after an attack. The Vietminh, and later the Vietcong, blended into the rural population and it was often impossible to separate friend from foe.

This thesis is an attempt to analyze how the French, the South Vietnamese government of Ngo Dinh Diem, and the Americans dealt with this form of warfare. With many of today's armed conflicts being asymmetrical in nature, the lessons we can extract from these experiences might prove very valuable in future conflicts.

Frontispiece

Fhttp://ciptvn.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/MONTAGNARDS-15.jpg

Dedication

To my wife Michèle, who encouraged me to become a student again and to Noa and Luc, who showed a lot of patience on the long drive with their dad to Aix-en-Provence to “look at old paper instead of enjoying a day at the beach”.

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Definition of Terms

Binh Xuyen	Organized crime syndicate in Saigon
Cao Dai	Religious movement founded in South Vietnam in 1926, which mixes ideas and concepts from other religions
Counterinsurgency	Military and political action taken against the activities of guerrillas or revolutionaries
Hoa Hao	Vietnamese Buddhist religious movement that was formed in 1939 by the Buddhist reformer Huynh Phu So. One of the first group of organized armed resistance against the French and Japanese
Insurgency	A rebellion against authority such as a government of a nation-state when those taking part in the rebellion are not recognized as belligerents
Jedburgh	Clandestine operation during WWII in which agents were parachuted into occupied Europe to harass the Germans
Lao Dong	Communist Workers Party of the DRV
Montagnards	Indigenous population of the Central Highlands, numbering about 1 million out of 34 million Vietnamese in 1960
Viet Cong	Military arm of the National Liberation Front (NLF), established in December 1960, the Viet Cong was created by the North Vietnamese communists to foment an insurgency in South Vietnam
Viet Minh	National independence coalition formed on May 19, 1941 by Ho Chi Minh to organize resistance against French colonial rule and occupying Japanese force

Abbreviations

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
BRIAM	British Advisory Mission to South Vietnam
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIDG	Civilian Irregular Defense Group
COIN	Counterinsurgency
DCI	Director of Central Intelligence
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
FULRO	United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races
GAMO	Groupement Administratifs Opérationnels Mobiles
ICBM	Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles
IVS	International Voluntary Services
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam
MAD	Mutually Assured Destruction
MOS	Military Operations Section
MSUG	Michigan State University Group
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NLFSV	National Liberation Front for South Vietnam
NSAM	National Security Action Memorandum
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
PRC	People’s Republic of China
ROV	Republic of Vietnam
SHD	Service Historique de la Défense
SMM	Saigon Military Mission

SOV	State of Vietnam
USIS	United States Information Service
USOM	United States Operations Mission
VDP	Village Defense Project

I.

Introduction

The man on the balcony looked frail but determined. The crowds in Ba Dinh square, close to the Governor-General's Palace in Hanoi, had gathered all morning. At noon, there were already more than 100,000 people waiting to hear their leader. The day was September 2, 1945, incidentally the same day Japan surrendered to General Douglas MacArthur on the deck of the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay.[1] When he finally stepped up to the microphone, it took a while for the crowd to quiet down.

His first words were familiar, yet unexpected: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness."[2] For Ho Chi Minh, who was proclaiming Vietnamese independence by quoting the American Declaration of Independence, it was the culmination of a life-time working to free his people from colonialism. For the Vietnamese people listening to him, it was the pinnacle of a fight that had started more than nineteen hundred years earlier, when the Trung sisters had led the first successful rebellion against the Chinese Han dynasty.[3] They had expressed the same longing for freedom and independence, and the

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[1] Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012), 96.

[2] Edward Miller, *The Vietnam War, A Documentary Reader* (Chichester: Wiley, 2015), 11.

[3] Ben Kiernan, *Việt Nam: A History from Earliest Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 78.

will to fight for it, as their countrymen did in the square that day. After Ho Chi Minh had finished his speech, an American plane flew over the city. As soon as the people in the crowd recognized the insignia on the plane, spontaneous applause and cheers broke out.[4] As it turned out, these feelings of happiness and kinship toward Americans were one-sided and would not last for long. The struggle was not quite over yet. Ho Chi Minh and his people would have to continue the fight for another three decades, first against the British and Chinese, then the returning French, and finally the Americans, to fulfill Ho's promises. During the thirty years of struggle, the Vietnamese would fight a new—and at the same time a very old—kind of war against their oppressors. They proved very adept at using insurgency tactics against their more modern and heavily armed adversaries. They used the same tactics that the Trung sisters had used against the Chinese. Their knowledge of the terrain, the support they received from the local population, and above all, their ability and willingness to take huge casualties made them a resilient and, in the end, invincible enemy to the foreign powers that had decided that this strip of land in Southeast Asia was in their national interest.

Dating back to the late 19th century, European colonial powers had tried to come up with a winning formula against the insurgency tactics used by many of their colonial subjects fighting for more autonomy. Many combinations of military, paramilitary, political, and economic programs had been tried with varying levels of success. The aim of this thesis is to look at French, South Vietnamese, and American counterinsurgency

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[4] Larry H. Addington, *America's War in Vietnam: A Short Narrative History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 28.

experiences during the first and second Indochina Wars and try to understand what programs worked and why. Among the programs analyzed in detail will be the "Pacification by Prosperity" program of General François de Linarès in Tonkin in 1952, President Diem's "Agroville" program in 1959, and the "Civilian Irregular Defense Group" (CIDG) launched by the CIA in 1961. This thesis will investigate set up, tactics, organizational questions, success, and scale of these programs to attempt to understand the reasons why some were more successful than others.

Specifically, the following questions will be addressed in detail:

1. What were the goals the different programs set out to accomplish and what was their success?
2. What was the strength of the insurgency at the time these programs were devised and how did the insurgents react to the success of the programs or lack thereof?
3. What was the motivation of the population to participate in these programs and were their expectations met?
4. What was the effect of political tensions between the U.S and South Vietnamese governments, or the French Colonial government and the local populace on these programs?
5. What was the impact of these programs on the bigger picture of the conflict and did subsequent programs learn from the mistakes and problems of earlier programs?

In military theory, there are two main doctrines of counterinsurgency. The people-centric approach based on military strategists like David Galula was mainly concerned

with giving the local population the means to defend themselves. Its main assumption was that simple farmers and townspeople were victims of the insurgency just as much as the government was its target. Opposed to this was the enemy-centric doctrine, which concentrated the population in fortified areas, while armed troops carried out search-and-destroy missions to crush the insurgency. Both doctrines have their merit and have been successfully applied in conflict. Both have also failed in certain contexts. This thesis will attempt to find what approach has worked during the Vietnamese conflict and why.

This is also the significance that I hope can be attributed to my research. In-depth analysis of counterinsurgency strategy and tactics has been neglected by historians, especially in the United States, for many decades after the end of the conflict in Vietnam. There were some studies done in the mid-2000s when the issue became important again in the context of U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nonetheless, I believe there is still a lot to learn from the French and American experiences in Southeast Asia for today's conflicts, which are often fought asymmetrically and where Armed Forces frequently find themselves in the role of nation builders. There has been a lot of research done about the Vietnam War. The second Indochina War, in particular because of its societal consequences in the United States, has been widely analyzed. A lot of the research has focused on the later years of the war though, after the Gulf of Tonkin resolution was passed in 1964, when the conflict really entered the American consciousness. In the French context, the "sale guerre", the filthy war as it was called by the leftists in France,[5] was overshadowed by another colonial struggle that had a more direct impact on the political situation in France, the War in Algeria. The voluminous

[5] Edward Rice-Maximin, *Accommodation and Resistance – The French Left, Indochina and the Cold War 1944 – 1954* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986), 67.

secondary literature on the beginning of the Cold War and the two Indochina wars has been very important to understand the big picture of the conflict. For a detailed look at the counterinsurgency aspect of the war, I have relied on many primary sources, among them documents and an interview provided by David Nuttle, the architect of the Village Defense Project in the Central Highlands. The Vietnam Center and Archive at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, TX, where a large number of government and personal papers, as well as oral histories of the American War are preserved, has been particularly helpful. For the French experience, the "Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer" (ANOM) in Aix-en-Provence, and the "Centre d'Archives du Ministère des Armées, le Service Historique de la Défense" (SHD) in Vincennes, Paris were rich sources of materials.

II.

A New Kind of War

Ho Chi Minh was prototypical for many colonial revolutionaries. Leaders across Asia, Africa, Europe, and South America were grasping at the chance the end of World War II provided to get rid of their foreign masters. The prospects looked good. Their European rulers were exhausted after the second global conflict in as many generations. Much of the European industrial base was destroyed, their coffers heavily depleted and their population weary of further conflict. The principal victor of the war, the United States, was a former colony itself. Since its inception, the United States consistently—if not always volubly—championed the cause of independence movements and it had rarely supported the colonial goals of its European allies. At the end of World War I, the American government had even formalized what it felt were legitimate claims of all peoples around the world. In a speech in front of Congress in early 1918, President Wilson had proclaimed U.S. war aims as well as his vision for a post war world in form of fourteen points. Point five stipulated free, open-minded, and impartial adjustment of colonial claims.[6] In effect, it elevated the claims of colonized peoples to at least the same level as those of their colonizers. This became known as the self-determination clause and it was eagerly taken up by many leaders in the Third World. During World War II,

[6] Avalon Project, "President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points," avalon.law.yale.edu [Retrieved August 1, 2018].

President Roosevelt had reiterated these claims in the Atlantic Charter, which he and Prime Minister Churchill had agreed upon in 1941.

It was therefore natural for Ho Chi Minh, who had worked closely with and been supported by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during the Japanese occupation, to look towards the U.S. for help in his bid to gain independence for his people. In late 1945, he wrote a letter to President Truman, proposing a plan for Vietnamese independence, including a suggestion that Vietnam might become a U.S. protectorate until it was deemed ready for independence. He never received a reply. The reason Ho's pleas fell on deaf ears was that the geopolitical situation had changed dramatically since 1941. The Great Alliance, consisting of the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union was crumbling. The post-war world was starting to be consumed by an ideological struggle between capitalism and global communism. The Soviet Union had been expanding its sphere of influence first in Eastern Europe, but increasingly also in the Third World, positioning itself as a champion of national liberation. In this contest, the United States, the leader of the Western Alliance and champion of democracy and capitalism, often found itself in the unfamiliar role of supporting European colonizers while trying to squash peoples' urge for independence, which they perceived as communist agitation.[7]

Southeast Asia was very much part of these developments. Vietnam's fate had been discussed during the Potsdam Conference. The Allies had agreed, without consulting the Vietnamese, that the British would occupy Vietnam south of the 16th

[7] Frederick Nolting, *From Trust to Tragedy: The Political Memoirs of Frederick Nolting, Kennedy's Ambassador to Diem's Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 5.

parallel with troops stationed in Malaya, while Nationalist Chinese would do the same in the North. This arrangement was to be temporary though.[8] Over the longer term, it was the U.S. State Department's view that a return of French control in Indochina provided some significant advantages. It would bolster French post-war recovery and it would also mitigate the risk of a communist takeover of the country.[9] It seems clear that in 1945, the Indochinese problem, if it was recognized as such by the Truman administration, was already seen through the prism of the emerging conflict with Soviet Russia. Otherwise, there is no reason why the American government could not have championed a process like it did in the Philippines, where independence was granted shortly after the war. It was just as clear though that for Ho Chi Minh and his compatriots, the struggle against foreign powers remaining or returning to Vietnam, was still what it had always been, a battle for independence.

Indochina

Vietnam is the easternmost country of the Southeast Asian peninsula, covering about 128,000 square miles, roughly the size of New Mexico. It is located between the 9th and 22nd parallels and shares borders with China in the North, Laos in the West and Cambodia in the South. To the East and South, it has a 2,000-mile-long coast on the South China Sea and the Gulf of Thailand. Its shape reminds one of bamboo sticks with two rice bowls attached at either end, the traditional way the Vietnamese carry rice to market. The origins of the country are in the North, in the fertile delta of the Red River.

[8] James A. Warren, *Giap, The General Who Defeated America in Vietnam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 36.

[9] Addington, *America's War in Vietnam*, 25.

For much of the first millennium of the modern calendar, Northern Vietnam was part of Imperial China. The first independent Vietnamese entity was formed in AD 939, following a victory at the battle of Bach Dang River. In it, Vietnamese rebel forces, under the leadership of Ngo Quyen, defeated the invading forces of the Southern Han state of China. This ended Chinese domination of Vietnamese affairs.[10] Vietnam entered what is commonly called the era of dynasties. With only a few interruptions during the Ming dynasty, Vietnam was ruled by Vietnamese monarchs. It was during that time that the Buddhist religion established itself as the main religion. Vietnam's independence lasted until the late 19th century, when the French colonized the country.

All through history, the Vietnamese had fought foreign invaders. In large part, this struggle against foreign influence was what defined them. The Vietnamese leader who would successfully conclude the struggle almost two millennia after it had started was somewhat of a cipher. He was born on May 19, 1890, the son of a teacher from Nghe An Province. His name was Nguyen Sinh Cung. At age ten and according to local tradition, he was given a new name by his father, Nguyen Tat Thanh. Over the course of his life, he would use more than seventy different names and aliases, finally settling on Ho Chi Minh, which means the Enlightened One.[11]

After studying at the Lycée in Hué, he travelled to France in 1911, working in the kitchen of the ship that brought him to Europe. The steamer arrived in Marseille in July 1911, where Ho applied to the French Colonial Administrative School. When his

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[10] Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 113.

[11] Michael Lind, *Vietnam, the Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 2.

application was rejected, he did not return home. As a matter of fact, he would not see his homeland for thirty years, returning only in 1941 to organize the resistance against the Japanese Empire, which had invaded his country. His travels would take him to the United States, where he worked as a baker at the Parker House Hotel in Boston and as a help for a wealthy Brooklyn family.[12] Later, Ho Chi Minh travelled to the United Kingdom, where he worked as a dishwasher and trained as a pastry chef at the Carlton Hotel in London. After the end of the Great War, he returned to France, where he began his political education in Paris. He joined a group of Vietnamese exiles advocating for their country's independence. When the Versailles peace conference got underway in January 1919, the group submitted a petition based on President Wilson's Fourteen Points, but they were rebuffed. Less than two years later, Ho became a representative to the Congress of Tours and a founding member of the French Communist Party (PCF).[13] In 1923, he travelled to Moscow, where he first studied, then taught and wrote at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East. He travelled to China in the mid-1920s but had to leave again after Chiang Kai-shek launched his anti-Communist coup in 1927. He remained in the Soviet Union for much of the 1930s, studying and teaching at the Lenin Institute. It was only in 1938 that he went back to China as an advisor to Mao's Red Army.

[12] William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (London: Hachette UK, 2012), 51.

[13] Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography* trans. Claire Duiker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 18.

In 1941, Ho returned to Vietnam to lead the Viet Minh, a group of patriotic Vietnamese fighting the Japanese occupation and Vichy France.[14] He had been away from his home country for more than thirty years. The enemies he and his compatriots faced over the next three decades had several traits in common. Their troops were all better armed, trained, and organized than his ragtag army. He knew that if he fought on their terms, he would lose. His war plans were therefore based on what John F. Kennedy would later call "another type of war, new in its intensity, ancient in its origin, war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins, war by ambush instead of combat, by infiltration instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him."[15] Ho's calculation was based on the fact that the Vietnamese were fighting for their homeland, their family, and their survival. They had nowhere else to go. Still, he knew that the struggle ahead would be long and filled with incredible hardship for his people.

[14] Michael H. Hunt, *The World Transformed: 1945 to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 624.

[15] John F. Kennedy, "Remarks at Westpoint to the Graduating Class of the U.S. Military Academy," June 6, 1962, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Wolley, *The American Presidency Project*, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=8695 [Retrieved: August 27, 2018].

How Do We Fight These Rebels?

"It has been said critically that there is a tendency in many armies to spend peace time studying how to fight the last war." These words were written by Lieutenant Colonel Julian L. Schley in an article of the "The Military Engineer" in 1929.[16] They certainly had lost none of their accuracy during the first and second Indochinese Wars. When they got involved in Vietnam, the French and later the American Armed Forces were essentially built to fight World War II. That war had been based on large mechanized units and fast movement. The German had initiated the Blitzkrieg in Poland in 1939. Heavily armed, mechanized infantry and tank formations supported by heavy artillery and air forces moved quickly to occupy large areas of territory. The main theatres of the war, Eastern and Western Europe, North Africa, and Italy all followed the same pattern. The Cold War had even reinforced that trend. During the late 1940s and through the 1950s, the American Forces had relied heavily on large mechanized units to protect Europe, supported by submarines, Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM), and strategic air forces that could deliver nuclear weapons. The Eisenhower administration had dubbed its military strategy with the telling acronym MAD, Mutually Assured Destruction.

The war in Indochina, as were most revolutionary wars in former colonies, would be very different. The country was covered with hills, thick jungle, rice paddies and rivers that did not allow for quick mechanized movement. The heavy equipment, artillery, and tanks were useless in such environments. The enemy, using guerrilla tactics, was able to ambush concentrated formations and then quickly disperse in the jungle or

[16] Julian L. Schley, "Some Notes on the World War," *Military Engineer* 21 (1929): 55.

blend into the civilian population as to never offer significant targets. One of the recurring themes in accounts of soldiers who fought in Indochina, was that they were fighting an invisible enemy.[17] They were, as Mao had stipulated in his rules for guerrilla warfare, moving among the population like fish in water.[18]

Whenever the Vietnamese fought set piece battles, they suffered large numbers of casualties. Dating back to World War II, Ho Chi Minh had decided that his strategy would be to outlast his enemies.[19] His calculation was that the Western public would not tolerate the kind of cost in blood and treasure necessary to win. Ho explained this with an anecdote from the animal kingdom, his famous elephant and tiger quote: "If the tiger ever stands still, the elephant will crush him with his mighty tusks. But the tiger will not stand still. He will leap upon the back of the elephant, tearing huge chunks from his side, and then he will leap back into the dark jungle. And slowly the elephant will bleed to death. Such will be the war in Indochina."[20] He also banked on the fact that both the French and the Americans had an interest in keeping the war limited. The Vietnam War for them was a proxy war after all. France's goal might have been to win back its colony, but even for the French, and most definitely for the Americans, the war was being fought in the context of the Cold War. The American experience in Korea had been that if they pressed too hard, the Chinese and Soviet communists might come to the aid of their comrades. The struggle might then very quickly escalate out of hand, as indeed it had in Korea. Ho

[17] William Broyles, *Goodbye Vietnam* (New York: Openroad Media, 2013); Lucien Bodard, *La Guerre D'Indochine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), 36.

[18] Mao Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare* (New York: Dover Publications, 2005), 93.

[19] Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (Boulder: Basic Books, 2016), 222.

[20] Wilbur H. Morrison, *The Elephant and the Tiger: The Full Story of the Vietnam War* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1990), 14.

Chi Minh was aware that the Vietminh, the Vietcong, and even the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) could not compete with the French or American fighting forces in terms of firepower and sophistication. He and his top military commander, General Vo Nguyen Giap, therefore adopted a strategy of what we today call, asymmetric warfare. They used insurgencies, hit and run tactics, and their superior knowledge of terrain to attack their enemies when they least expected it and could not bring to bear their superior fire power.

This posed a huge challenge for the French and later American commanders: Modern regular armies were ill-prepared for these kinds of missions. Special Forces were the exception, however. They were comprised of elite soldiers, trained and equipped for special missions behind enemy lines. In the United States, the beginning of Special Forces can be tracked back to the early days of World War II. Geoffrey Pyke, an unorthodox Cambridge-educated journalist who had escaped German Prison camps in World War I, presented a plan to Lord Louis Mountbatten, Chief of Combined Operations Headquarters, for a small elite force to be parachuted behind enemy lines in Norway to conduct guerrilla operations against the Wehrmacht. Pyke even designed an armored snow vehicle to go with the plan. Mountbatten liked the idea and pitched it to Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army George Marshall. The project, called Project Plough at the time, eventually turned into the First Special Service Force.[21] This joint U.S.–Canadian unit was involved in operations in the Aleutian Islands, Italy, and France, before it was disbanded in 1944. It was the direct ancestor to later Special Forces, which were beginning to be assembled in the early 1950s.

[21] Bret Werner, *Storming Monte La Difensa: The First Special Service Force at the Winter Line, Italy 1943* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2015), 8.

During the Presidential election of 1960, John F. Kennedy had attacked the Eisenhower administration's reliance on America's strategic nuclear arsenal to fight the Cold War. These weapons were not useful in the limited, low-intensity conflicts that were cropping up all over the world and were in effect, proxy-wars of the Cold War. He encouraged a more flexible approach that would allow the United States a more gradual approach to involvement. One component of this strategy was the buildup and expansion of the Special Forces Operations Command. These forces would be trained in irregular warfare, insurgency and counterinsurgency tactics, and would also take on the training of indigenous forces. On October 12, 1961, President Kennedy visited the U.S. Army Special Warfare Center at Fort Bragg, North Carolina to highlight these activities. In the following years, the green berets as they were called because of their distinctive headgear, would expand their numbers significantly and play a vital role as advisors in the early years of the Vietnam War, when the U.S. Government was loath to send regular combat troops to Indochina[22]

[22] John Fitzgerald Kennedy Presidential Library, Green Berets, https://www.jfklibrary.org/JFK/JFK-in-History/Green-Berets.aspx [Retrieved: August 28, 2018].

III.

Counterinsurgency Programs

The term "guerrilla warfare", or what we today call asymmetric warfare, was coined in Napoleonic times during the Spanish Rebellion in 1808, when a small number of partisans tied up more than a quarter million French troops on the Iberian peninsula.[23] The tactics the Spanish employed were designed to turn their apparent weaknesses, small numbers of troops, fewer and less powerful weapons, and a less sophisticated organization, into strengths. The tactics used by the guerrilleros against the French were not new, they were as old as warfare itself. As a matter of fact, asymmetric warfare had probably been more prevalent in the history of warfare, as conventional warfare presupposed a similar organization and size of armed forces, which is seldom the case.

Insurgencies develop when there is a significant mismatch in terms of man and firepower of the opposing forces. The less powerful belligerent focuses his forces on the weaknesses of the opponent. If his enemy has large forces, he tries to take advantage of its slowness, when he is disadvantaged in terms of firepower, he blends into the population for protection, help, and support. Mao Tse-tung, the most important theoretician of insurgency warfare in modern times, likened the insurgents to fish, that swam among the sea of the local populace.[24] While many of Mao's theories were based on an earlier Chinese military strategist, Sun Tzu who 2,400 years earlier wrote "The Art of War", they were nonetheless adapted to the modern world and reflected Mao's own

[23] John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 15.

[24] Tse-tung and Griffith, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, 8.

experiences during the long and bloody civil war against the Chinese nationalists under Chiang Kai-Shek. The most distinctive feature of guerrilla wars, or revolutionary wars as Mao called them, is that its objective is the population. The mismatch of power makes it impossible for the insurgent to take on his enemy's troop directly or try to occupy terrain, so he concentrates on winning over the population. This is only possible, as Mao has argued, if insurgents have clear political goals and a political philosophy that is understood and supported by the population.[25] This makes the conflict a distinctly political one. Military victories are still important, but they take a back seat, as the most important victory is getting the population to support their cause. In conventional wars, political activities are relegated to second place, until the arms have spoken. Once the victor has been determined on the battle field, political considerations make a reentry to decide under what terms hostilities will cease and what the political settlement will look like after the war is over.[26] Another feature of a revolutionary war is that it is generally protracted. The Indochina War essentially began at the end of World War II and concluded only thirty years later, in 1975 with the fall of Saigon. This makes revolutionary wars very expensive for side defending the status quo. There is another reason for the high cost of counterinsurgencies, aptly illustrated by David Galula, a French military officer and author of "Counterinsurgency Warfare". Insurgencies are fluid by nature, whereas counterinsurgencies are rigid, guerrilleros can choose their targets, while the government has responsibility for all assets of a state. If the insurgents decide to attack a bridge, the government has to guard all bridges. If they attack farmers

[25] Tse-tung and Griffith, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, 42.

[26] David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger, 1964), 4.

in a village, all farmers will ask for protection.[27] This makes revolutionary wars very difficult to plan and costly to fight.

Pacification by Prosperity and the French Experience

The beginnings of French involvement in Vietnam can be traced back to the 17th century, when Jesuit missionaries established first contacts in what the French would come to call Indochina.28 It was the harassment of these missionaries by the Nguyen dynasty, who increasingly saw them as a political threat, that provided the pretext for military intervention. In 1858, Napoleon III ordered Admiral Charles Rigault de Genouilly to mount a naval attack on the port of Da Nang. Genouilly took the city but had to leave after a few months due to illness and logistical problems.29 In early 1859, the French took Saigon and continued to expand their influence. The Vietnamese government was forced to cede three provinces. Within just 30 years, the French would establish a colony that included the three parts that make up current-day Vietnam, Tonkin, Cochinchina, and Annam, as well as Cambodia, and Laos. In the following decades and during the early 20th century, French Indochina would become an economically important colony for the French. With the port of Saigon as the main conduit, coal, rice, and rubber were its main exports.30

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[27] Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 6.

[28] Kathryn Robson and Jennifer Yee, *France and Indochina: Cultural Representations* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005), 3.

[29] Spencer C. Tucker, *Vietnam* (Milton Park: Taylor & Francis, 2002), 29.

[30] David Lim, *Economic Growth and Employment in Vietnam*, Routledge Studies in the Growth Economies of Asia (Milton Park: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 2.

As with most European colonies in the Far East, World War II proved to be a major reversal for the colonizers. Even though Vichy France kept nominal control of Indochina during much of the war, it was the Japanese imperial army which was in effective control. The Japanese took complete control in 1944 when Vichy France collapsed.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt had always been reluctant to support his European allies to gain back their former empires after the war. This was true for the British in Singapore, Malaya, and India, and it was even more so for the French in Indochina. But FDR had died in April 1945 and his successor, President Harry S. Truman, had inherited a domestic and global political situation which was dramatically different from the one his predecessor had faced in 1941. Tensions with the Soviet Union were on the rise and the new President increasingly looked at the world through that prism. In that context, he preferred to let the European powers take back control of their former colonies, rather than to grant independence and risk a communist takeover.

As a result, it was agreed at Potsdam in 1945 that after the Japanese surrender, Vietnam would be split into two zones. North Vietnam would be occupied by the Chinese Nationalist troops under Chiang Kai-Shek, while the South would be taken over by a British contingent from Malaya, under the leadership of General Dir Douglas Gracey. This was an interim measure before the French could relieve them and reclaim their territory. General de Gaulle immediately organized a force of 35,000 troops, commanded by General Leclerc, to be sent to Vietnam. Admiral Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu arrived in Saigon in October 1945 to take the top political job, high commissioner for

Indochina.[31] After the Chinese nationalists retreated in the North in 1946, the French lost little time to fill the vacuum and established themselves in Hanoi. At first, Ho Chi Minh, who had declared independence in September 1945 and taken residence in Hanoi, tried to negotiate with the French in good faith. He travelled to Paris to find some role for the Viet Minh but when these negotiations fell apart in late 1946, he had no alternative than to retreat to a secluded mountain headquarters about 80 miles from Hanoi. From there, he would direct the fight of the Viet Minh for eight long years.

What has been called the First Indochina War can be divided into two major phases. The first lasted from 1945–1949 and can be categorized as a colonial conflict, while the second, lasting until the final French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 was more along the lines of a Cold War proxy war, where the North Vietnamese were heavily supported by their Chinese and Soviet allies while the French were increasingly dependent on US support. Initially the French made good progress, supported by the British troops still in country, to reclaim the areas around Saigon as well as large parts of Cochinchina and Annam in 1946. In Tonkin, things proved more difficult. Ho Chi Minh initially supported a French comeback, mainly because Hanoi was still under the control of nationalist Chinese troops who were pillaging the city. The French troops under the command of General Leclerc landed in Haiphong harbor and entered Hanoi in the summer months of 1946 without firing a shot.[32] But the underlying problem of relations between France and her former colony were not addressed and remained unclear. The

[31] Logevall, *Embers of War*, 123.

[32] Philippe Héduy, *La guerre d'indochine: 1945 – 1954* (Paris: Société de Production Litéraire, 1981), 15.

French wanted Indochina to remain in their empire with Cochinchina becoming an autonomous region. The Vietminh and their leader Ho Chi Minh were striving for independence and reunification of the three "ky", Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina. Open hostilities were just a question of time.

They came on November 23, 1946 when French artillery bombarded the port of Haiphong.[33] In December, Ho Chi Minh decided to launch an offensive to retake Hanoi. The Vietminh had been gearing up for conflict for several months. The French were able to hold back the tide and French pressure compelled the Vietminh leadership to leave Hanoi and relocate their headquarters to a mountainous jungle region in Thai Nguyen-Bac Kan-Tuyen Quang.[34] What followed was a bloody guerrilla war where both sides did have enough resources to continue it, but not enough to defeat their enemy. Ho was aware that his army was still under-equipped to directly confront the French. The Expeditionary Force on the other hand lacked the number of resources to decide the conflict in their favor. The French Union forces, which were to fight in the jungles of Indochina from 1946-1954, were constituted mainly of regular volunteer troops, many of them with colonial provenance themselves, from the Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia), West Africa, Madagascar, and Southeast Asia.[35] There also was the Foreign Legion, where many Germans escaping persecution had found a home after World War II. The number of soldiers from Metropolitan France was actually quite small. Only a "levée en masse" could have produced the needed number of troops, but that was

[33] Héduy, *La guerre d'indochine*, 15.

[34] Logevall, *Embers of War*, 168.

[35] Martin Windrow, *The Last Valley: Dien Bien Phu and the French Defeat in Vietnam* (London: Orion Books, 2005), 117.

impossible due to the shaky political situation in France. Still, geopolitically, the French had the upper-hand and Ho Chi Minh knew it. France had been able to secure the tacit support of one of the superpowers (i.e., United States), while making sure that the other (i.e. Soviet Union) and the main regional power (i.e., China) remained uncommitted. This changed in 1949. After a brutal civil war and a decisive victory in Manchuria, Mao Tse-tung had proclaimed the creation of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949. What remained of Chiang Kai-Shek's forces retreated to the island of Taiwan. This opened up the possibility of help from Communist China and the Soviet Union to the Viet Minh. Ho Chi Minh did indeed travel first to Beijing and then to Moscow in early 1950, where he met with Mao and Stalin and secured substantial help for his cause.[36] This impacted the situation on the ground significantly. Not only was there an increase of material support in the form of weapons, ammunition, and food, the area North of the Sino-Vietnamese border also provider secure areas for General Giap's forces to rest, train, and resupply. Communist forces took the offensive in the second part of 1950 and would win their biggest victories over the French before Dien Bien Phu. In early October, shortly after the rainy season, Giap's troop encircled and defeated the French in what has become known as the tragedy of Route Colonial (RC) 4. In only 2 weeks, the French lost two thousand soldiers and three thousand more were captured. Northern Tonkin was effectively in the hands of the Communists.[37] Planners in Paris were looking for a drastic solution to redress the situation. They turned to General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, who

[36] Mari Olson, *Soviet-Vietnam Relations and the Role of China, 1949-64* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 15.

[37] Héduy, *La guerre d'Indochine*, 74.

in early December was appointed Commander in Chief of the Expeditionary Corps and High Commissioner for Indochina, uniting the highest military and political posts.[38]

De Lattre was one of France's great military leaders of the 20th century. During World War II, he had led seven divisions numbering 256,000 men as the head of Army B in Operation Dragoon, which landed Allied troops in Provence and freed the strategically important ports of Marseille and Toulon. After the end of the war, he took the post of Commander in Chief of the French Forces in Germany. His temperament matched his accomplishments. He was an egocentric as well as a stickler for protocol.[39] When his plane landed in Saigon on December 19th, he lost no time to make his presence felt. With scant regard for his personal safety, he toured the Mekong Delta in a small spotter plane, visited troops, and made it clear to subordinates who was in charge. He scrapped an order which, after the disaster of RC4, had instructed the dependents of soldiers stationed in Hanoi to leave the city. He reiterated that he did not intend to allow Tonkin to fall. His impact could be felt throughout the entire French Expeditionary Force. Morale improved quickly, which was important but not enough as de Lattre knew well. He reorganized the higher echelons of the Expeditionary Force and brought in people he trusted. Generals Linarès, Salan, Allard, and Gambiez were no Indochina experts and had only limited experience in colonial wars, but they were in the mold that de Lattre wanted: flexible, determined, and able to adapt to a new situation. He also altered the tactics of the French forces, introducing so-called mobile groups. He integrated sub-division army units with greater independence, which he knew well from his experience in Morocco in the early

[38] Logevall, *Embers of* War, 261.

[39] Logevall, *Embers of* War, 263.

1920s and had also been used in the form of "Combat Commands" during the late stages of World War II.[40] These changes redressed the situation on the ground in early 1951, at least temporarily. De Lattre won significant victories against the Viet Minh in Vinh Yen, Mao Khe, and Yen Cu Ha and kept Northern Tonkin from falling entirely into the hands of the Viet Minh.[41] In September of the same year, De Lattre returned to Paris due to ill health, where he died only four months later. General Salan, who took over from De Lattre in 1951 continued along the lines that had been set out by his mentor. In Tonkin, in April 1952, he ordered operations designed to clean out the Viet Minh from the delta. These operations, "Amphibie", "Mercure" in the South, and "Porto", "Polo", and "Turco" in the North, set the stage for a pacification project designed by General de Linarès with Nguyen Van Tam, who was the governor of Tonkin. Called "Pacification by Prosperity"[42], the plan aimed to implement General Joseph Galieni's "oil spot" theory. Instead of sealing off an area and working from the outside in to encircle and destroy the enemy, Galieni's strategy, which he had successfully developed in his many colonial appointments from the Sudan to Madagascar and Indochina during the late 19th century, turned the approach on its head. It was based on building protected villages in areas that were already considered pacified and to work from the inside out. After the military operations in April had significantly weakened the Viet Minh, Gen. de Linarès started to

[40] Maurice Vaïsse, *L'armée française dans la guerre d'Indochine (1946 – 1954) ; adaptation ou inadaptation ?* (Vincennes: Éditions Complexe, 2000), 190.

[41] Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York, Viking Press, 1983), 163.

[42] Christian Gerlach, *Extremely Violent Societies: Mass Violence in the Twentieth-Century World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 189.

fortify towns in these areas and to move people from the surrounding villages.[43] He also set up so-called "Groupement Administratifs Opérationnels Mobiles" (GAMO), which were tasked with rebuilding civilian administration of the towns and the region surrounding it. They also supported the population which had been transferred from their villages to these newly formed fortified towns with medical and economic assistance. The setup of the GAMO's were relatively uniform and included:

- 1 group head at the district level
- 2-3 deputies at the sub-district level (for single fortified towns)
- 100-140 Soldiers of the Vietnamese National Guard with 6 Officers
- 10 agents of the "Sûreté Nationale"
- 2 Medics
- 6 Agents responsible for propaganda
- 2 Secretaries[44]

At first these GAMO were well received in the Tonkin Delta. The army troops that had just fought and beat the Viet Minh were happy to hand over the further administration of these regions to an organization led by civilians. The population appreciated the medical and economic help that they were receiving and saw progress toward a more normalized civilian administration of their towns. By mid-August, the

[43] Jean-Marc Le Page, "Le Tonkin, laboratoire de la 'pacification' en Indochine?" *Revue historique des armées*, 248 (2007): 116-125.

[44] Le Page, "Le Tonkin," 116-125.

French had set up 5 GAMO locations in the delta.[45] When General de Linarès wrote to the Governor of North-Vietnam in October 1952, he was exuberant:

> "I was very pleased to see the various military authorities who have been in direct contact with the GAMO, the satisfaction they have had for some time in their cooperation with these important bodies of the administration of North Vietnam, ... the action reports of the GAMO also make clear the defeats they constantly inflict on the rebels … in the recently liberated villages ....[46]

But there were also critical voices. One of them was Colonel Rhiner, who was head of the Hanoi regional office for liaison and pacification. He bemoaned the lack of resources that was available to the program. Medical and economic support were critical for the success of the program but almost never available in sufficient quantities. Propaganda and intelligence, two other areas which he deemed important, suffered because it was impossible to find enough qualified agents. As was the case in many areas of the French Indochina war, the Expeditionary Force did not seem to have the resources available to make a difference.[47] Also the Vietnamese troops assigned to the GAMO resented the fact that they were put under civilian leadership. After October 1952, the program was not significantly changed until the end of French involvement after the battle at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Even though the number of people moved into protected

[45] Le Page, "Le Tonkin," 116-125.

[46] Service historique de la Défense, Château de Vincennes, Paris. SHD/DAT, 10 H 2 763, 11 octobre 1952, lettre no 406/B5, du général de Linarès commandant des FTNV (forces terrestres du Nord-Viêtnam) au gouverneur du NVN (Nord-Viêtnam) (translated from French).

[47] Service historique de la Défense, Château de Vincennes, Paris. SHD/DAT, 10 H 2 763, 25 juillet 1952, fiche no 263/ZN/B5, du colonel Riner.

villages was staggering, some three million according to some counts,[48] the French were unable to significantly alter the political and military situation on the ground.

In contrast to the Red River Delta in Tonkin, the French took a very different approach in the Central Highlands. The territory, though strategic for any conflict in Indochina as later events would show, was certainly quieter during the early 1950s. The fight between the Viet Minh and the French Expeditionary Force was focused on Tonkin and the Red River Delta. Nonetheless, the French, as well as the Viet Minh were aware of the importance of the area in any conflict as a link between the South and the North. The Montagnards, as the French called them, were a collection of 35-40 indigenous tribes which are mainly of Malayo-Polynesian, Tai, and Austroasiatic origin. They lived in agrarian communities with few links to the outside world. By many measures of modern civilizations, these were backward people, living off subsistence farming and practicing animalistic religions. They were outside of the Vietnamese mainstream, but they did accept the authority of the Vietnamese kings and especially Bao Dai, who had worked hard with the French on a compromise which granted limited self-government to the Montagnards.[49] The Central Highlands were formally attached to Annam and put under the personal control of His Majesty Bao Dai. About three years later, with a decree published on May 21, 1951, the non-Vietnamese population of the Central Highlands was given a special status, which included some autonomy in local matters. This political

[48] Gerlach, *Extremely Violent Societies*, 189.

[49] Clive J. Christie, *A Modern History of Southeast Asia: Decolonization, Nationalism and Separatism* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1996), 92.

independence was accompanied by a social and economic development plan run by the Vietnamese government and supported by the French. The plan had three declared goals:

- *Social Progress:* Fighting the depopulation of the Central Highlands and developing agriculture to make the Montagnards less dependable on the woods and bring them modern agricultural techniques that will make their food supply more stable
- *Technical Modernization:* Building public works and other infrastructure to support modernization
- *Economic Development:* new infrastructure and improved production of crops should allow for trade to develop which will have a positive impact on the Montagnard's wellbeing[50]

Overall, the program was designed to give the indigenous population access to modern forms of civilization to make them equivalent with the Coastal Vietnamese, but without disrupting their traditions. As the plan mentions, the basic social element of the Central Highlands is the village.[51] Every aspect of life is centered there. The family, farming, exchanges of goods, religion, everything is anchored in the village. It was therefore important for the plan's success to respect that fact. The Montagnards, who historically had a tense relationship with the Coastal Vietnamese, did not want their affairs to be directed from Hanoi or Saigon. This is reason why Bao Dai and the French allowed a certain autonomy for the Montagnard territory. The program had a positive

[50] Plan de Développement économique pour les Pays Montagnards du Sud du Domaine de la Couronne, Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provences. FR ANOM 6 HCI 244, 4.

[51] Plan d'Action sociale pour les Pays Montagnards du Sud du Domaine de la Couronne, Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provences. FR ANOM 6 HCI 244, 15.

impact on the Central Highlands. In later years of the war, this would become an area fought for by all sides, especially because of its strategic value as an entry point into South Vietnam from the North. But in the early 1950s, the area was mostly stable. In a report from the Chief of Security in Dalat dated November 22, 1952, it is written that no Viet Minh activity has been registered in Kon Tum Province for two months. It also mentions that the French planters are still confidently investing in enlarging the sizes of their plantations, investments the report notes, that will only pay back in three to four years.[52]

It seems contradictory that a plan with no discernible military component achieved to keep the Viet Minh at bay, while in other parts of the country security forces with the support of the French Army were unable to get the insurgency under control. It is important in this context, and we will get back to this in later sections of this thesis, that insurgencies only work if the targets of the insurgency have a certain level of discontent with the central government or administration. If the people see progress in their daily lives and the central government addresses the concerns of the people, it is actually very difficult for an insurgency to take root, even in a place like the Central Highlands of Vietnam, where the support for the Central government was quite weak. As we will see, the situation in the Central Highlands would change significantly for the worse once the French were gone.

[52] Direction des Services de Sécurité du Haut-Commissariat Brigade de Surveillance du Territoire pour les PMS, Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provences. FR ANOM 6 HCI 244, N. 1641/RG.

When the representatives of the United States, the USSR, the People's Republic of China, France, Great Britain and other countries convened in the old League of Nations building in Geneva on April 26th, 1954 to discuss Asian security issues, Indochina was not the first topic on the agenda. As a matter of fact, deliberations on Vietnam would not begin until May 8th, after the Korean War had been settled. May 8th proved to be a fateful date, as Dien Bien Phu had fallen to a massed assault of General Giap's troops just the day before. The resolution participants agreed upon roughly two months later was based on a Chinese proposal to end the conflict by temporarily separating Vietnam at the 17th parallel.[53] The North would be put under the control of the Lao Dong, while an entirely new State of Vietnam (SOV) would be created in the South. Popular elections were scheduled for 1956 to reunite the country and decide who would rule Indochina henceforth.[54] Ho Chi Minh was at first bitterly opposed to the idea of separation, even a temporary one, but once it became clear that the Soviet Union supported the Chinese proposal, he relented and accepted the plan. He could not go against both his backers. The United States was not thrilled with the result either, the American delegation had been present during the deliberations but on instruction from President Eisenhower, had not participated. After the signing of the accord, the U.S. government did not formally endorse the deal. It only officially "took note" of it.[55]

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[53] The United Nations Organization, Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Viet-Nam 20 July 1954, [Retrieved: September 2, 2018] https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org /files/KH-LA-VN_540720_GenevaAgreements.pdf.

[54] Addington, *America's War in Vietnam*, 44.

[55] Robert F. Randle, *Geneva 1954; The Settlement of the Indochinese War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 352.

In the new State of Vietnam, Bao Dai, the Vietnamese monarch, was made head of state. His choice for Prime Minister was an unlikely one. Ngo Dinh Diem had been born in 1901 in Quang Binh Province in Northern Vietnam to a noble family. His catholic faith made him part of a minority in a country where the majority religion was Buddhist. His father had been a high-ranking mandarin during French Colonial times and the first headmaster of the National Academy in Hué.[56] Educated at the School of Public Administration and Law in Hanoi after having turned down a scholarship to study in Paris, Diem became a provincial governor at age 25.[57] In 1933, he served as minister of the interior, but resigned after a few months when the French turned down his legislative reforms.[58] In 1945, when Ho Chi Minh declared independence, Diem was offered a post in the new government but declined. He left Vietnam not to return for almost a decade, spending most of his exile in the United States, building relationships that would prove crucial in the years to come. Wesley Fishel from Michigan State University (MSU), who would later head the Vietnam Advisory Group, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, Cardinal Francis Spellman, Representatives Mike Mansfield, John F. Kennedy, and CIA's William J. Donovan were among the most prominent of a group of supporters Diem befriended.[59]

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[56] Bernard Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1963), 235.

[57] James H. Willbanks, *Vietnam War: A Topical Exploration and Primary Source Collection* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2018), 95.

[58] Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 6.

[59] Joseph Morgan, *The Vietnam Lobby* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 1-14; Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History*, 276.

There is some discussion among historians whether Bao Dai's decision to choose Ngo Dinh Diem as prime minister in 1954 was directly influenced by the U.S. government and whether the Eisenhower administration forced the appointment of Ngo Dinh Diem. This is the view put forward by Denis Warner in his book "The last Confucian". As Fredrik Logevall writes in *Embers of War*, this argument is not convincing. There is evidence to suggest that Diem was not a known quantity in U.S. policy-making circles in 1954. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles for instance told the American delegation in Geneva that he saw no alternative to the current regime.[60] But Bao Dai knew that Diem had an extensive network of American backers and with the French gone, he recognized that he the SOV needed the United States as a patron and wanted to please them with his choice.[61] Be it as it may, it was clear that the United States had replaced the French as guarantor of the South Vietnamese State and that Diem was, if not a puppet, then at least a man who enjoyed almost unconditional U.S. support.[62] Still, Ngo Dinh Diem faced a herculean task, the French having left the country a fractious place. There was the Hoa Hao sect, controlling the Mekong Delta, the Cao Dai in Tay Ninh, Binh Xuyen, the syndicate which controlled organized crime in Saigon, and of course the Montagnards in the Central Highlands.[63] These groups had enjoyed limited

[60] Logevall, *Embers of War*, 589.

[61] William Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1994).

[62] Jessica M. Chapman, "Debating the Will of Heaven: South Vietnamese Politics and Nationalism in International Perspective, 1953–1956" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2006), 90.

[63] Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 3.

autonomy under the French and had even been allowed to raise their own armies since 1949.[64]

The religious setup was also diverse, with many of the indigenous people still living in animistic traditions. The majority of the Vietnamese was Buddhist, but there was also a sizeable Catholic community. The size of this minority had significantly grown as a result of the Geneva Accords in 1954, when a huge number of Catholics had relocated from the DRV to the South. Ngo Dinh Diem needed to find a way to unite his country, or at least to consolidate his power, if he wanted to have any chance of survival. Diem approached this task with a more holistic vision than he has generally been given credit for. Diem's detractors were fond of painting him as an authoritarian, whose detached style created a lot of ill-will among his compatriots. He was also caricatured, especially by the North Vietnamese propaganda machine, as a U.S. lackey and traitor.[65] This is too simplistic. Diem did have his own vision on how he wanted to develop South Vietnam. The Americans saw the instability in Vietnam mainly as a military problem, Diem had a more encompassing approach. It was based on an obscure European political philosophy from the 1930s called Personalism, a combination of catholic humanism and the belief in the importance of personal responsibility. It was a third way of sorts, trying to find a balance between man and state. The Vietnamese had to overcome not just Communism, but also Underdevelopment, and Disunity, and he felt that his policies

[64] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 9.

[65] Andrew Jon Rotter, *Light at the End of the Tunnel: A Vietnam War Anthology*, 3rd ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 159.

would have to address all three problems in order to have a lasting impact.[66] To implement his vision of a modern Vietnam, the new Prime Minister could have worked toward compromise and set up a coalition government that included all important fractions. He decided on a different approach however, building an oppressive regime based on personal loyalty to him and his family and systematically attacking groups that disagreed with him and his policies, which sometimes included the American government.

In 1955, Diem, who had never supported the Geneva Accords, called for an election to select between him and Bao Dai to become South Vietnam's next president. The plan in effect negated the planned elections that had been agreed upon in Geneva in 1954. Some Americans remained unconvinced. General J. Lawton Collins, who had become President Eisenhower's special representative in Vietnam in November 1954, lobbied his superiors in Washington to look for an alternative to Diem. But Diem proved very clever, and a little lucky, when his troops won a major military victory over the Binh Xuyen in April 1955.[67] This success fortified his position in the eyes of the American and in certain circles, there was even talk of the "Diem Miracle".[68] Diem handily won the ensuing election with 98.3% of the vote.[69] Following that victory, he proclaimed the Republic of Vietnam (ROV). He continued to relentlessly pursue his vision of a modern

[66] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 58.

[67] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 9.

[68] Booklet, U. S. Information Service − South Vietnam: The Formative Years, (ca. 1964), Folder 01, Box 01, Milton Adams Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Available<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=0040101004>. [Accessed: 7/7/2016].

[69] Ronald J. Cima, *Vietnam* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1989), 5.

Vietnam, based on his philosophy of Personalism, with a variety of policies and programs. One example was the policy of assimilation. It was designed to surmount the challenge of the many-faceted ethnic, cultural and religious setup of Vietnam. He tried to assimilate different minorities into the Vietnamese cultural sphere, with the goal of uniting them behind his government. In the Central Highlands, he launched the Land Development Program, in which thousands of coastal Vietnamese, many of them Catholic, were sent to live and farm in what had previously been tribal areas. It was a forced relocation program on a massive scale. Government figures put the number of people relocated to the Central Highlands at 125,000.[70] Some of the names of the villages and cities were even changed from their traditional to Vietnamese ones. In the short run, his policies had proved successful, at least in the sense that they allowed Diem to consolidate his power and make his government, and by extension the country seem more stable and safer. In the long run however, his heavy-handed policies bred contempt and even hatred in many parts of Vietnamese society. The American government, who had supported dictators in Asia and other parts of the world before, trading democratic values for the sake of stability, might have accepted this, but Diem's self-serving and at the same time increasingly self-defeating authoritarianism was a constant irritant, although not one they were ready to tackle directly yet.

The discontent provided fertile ground the communists. The insurgents in the South were also about to get additional help from the DRV. During much of the latter part of the 1950s, Ho Chi Minh had been busy consolidating his power in the North. The DRV went through a bloody purge, ostensibly directed at the land-owning class. In

[70] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 58.

reality, it was directed at anybody who disagreed with the government. The people that were charged were mostly found guilty and punished.[71] The late 1950s also coincided with the rising in the Lao Dong power structure of a new breed of younger and more aggressive politicians, led by Le Duan and Le Doc Tho. Le Duan, who was appointed to the Secretariat in 1956 and became Secretary General in 1960, wanted to use the war in the South to unite the people in the DRV and thereby strengthen his position in the Secretariat.[72] His gamble paid out. Beginning in early 1958, there was a steady increase of raids in the South. In early 1959, Ho Chi Minh decided to fully back Le Duan's strategy and declared a People's War to reunite both Vietnams. It was these developments that prompted the Diem Administration to initiate the Agroville Program in 1959. It was announced by President Diem during his "Double Seven Day Speech", celebrating the fifth anniversary of his ascension to power on July 7, 1954. In the speech, Diem called for the creation of "densely populated settlement areas in the countryside, where conditions are favorable to communication and sanitation and where minimum facilities for the grouping of the farmers living in isolation and destitution in the back country exist. These settlement areas will not only improve the life of the rural population, they will also constitute the economic units which will play an important role in the future development of the country as a whole."[73] The pacification program was an adaptation of a pilot program the Diem administration had experimented with since

[71] The Pentagon Papers: Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force. Volume 1, Chapter 5, Section 1, pp 242-269.

[72] Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International Story of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 43.

[73] Joseph T. Zasloff, "Rural Resettlement in South Vietnam: The Agroville Program," *Pacific Affairs* 35, no. 4 (Winter, 1962-1963): 327.

February 1959, when they had started to concentrate population of regions that were exposed to communist insurgent's activity into fortified camps. These camps were not only designed to shield the population from attacks, they also physically separated the population into groups deemed loyal or disloyal to the government. Families suspected of having ties to the Viet Cong or with family members living in the North, were concentrated in soc-called qui-khu camps, while families who were perceived as loyal were put in in qui-ap camps.[74] The blueprint for the Agroville Program was provided by Sir Robert Thompson, who was heading the British Advisory Mission in Saigon (BRIAM), and was Diem's closest advisor in counterinsurgency matters at the time. Thompson had been part of Britain's successful counterinsurgency during the Malayan Emergency. The Agroville Program was basically a carbon copy of that British strategy.[75]

After Ngo Dinh Diem had made the Agroville Program public in his "Double Seven Day Speech", the administration stepped up the pressure on the regional governments to implement the program. Two days after the speech, a letter from the Government Delegate to the province chiefs set out specific instruction on how to implement the program:

> "Chiefs of district are ordered discreetly to take up relations with the presidents of village sections of the National Revolutionary Movement, groups of friends, members of the councils of notables of the villages, hamlet chiefs, and with representatives of the population so that these groups *spontaneously* call for the opening of a conference under the presidency of the chief of district. At these conferences, the

[74] Milton E. Osborne, *Strategic Hamlets in South Vietnam: A Survey and a Comparison* (Ithaca: Department of Asia Studies, Cornell University, 1965), 22.

[75] Gian P. Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency* (New York: New Press, 2013), 16.

> policy of the national government will be praised, the policy and actions of the Communists will be condemned, and at the conclusion there will be a demand for the concentration of all Viet Cong families in order to cut their relations with the Communists. These conferences will deliberate and indicate in general the principle by which these families will be concentrated: families having relatives in the North, or having relatives who work for the Viet Minh etc. These meetings must be held within a period of ten to fifteen days."[76]

The scope of the plan was never made public, but according to Joseph T. Zasloff, at least 80 Agrovilles were planned between 1959 and 1963, most of them in the Mekong Delta and the area surrounding Saigon where the Viet Cong was most active.[77] Agrovilles were planned on the concept of "little cities", as an aide to Diem explained, "with all of the modern conveniences."[78] At first, a city center would be laid out, including shops, schools, hotels, offices, and artificial canals. Around it, up to fifteen hundred family-sized residential plots were made available. Families from the surrounding five to six kilometers would be relocated, sometimes forcibly, to the Agroville, having to build their own accommodation there. They kept the parcels of land they had worked on before, making it necessary, in addition to the community work that was now expected from them, to commute to their fields every day.[79] The government also intended to build a new road system that would connect the Agrovilles amongst each other, develop competent cadres to administer the new towns, provision of public land that would make

[76] Zasloff, "Rural Resettlement," 330.

[77] Zasloff, "Rural Resettlement," 331.

[78] Miller, *Misalliance*, 179.

[79] Miller, *Misalliance*, 180.

the Agrovilles financially independent, and to create a vigorous youth movement.[80] Major Thao, who was put in charge of the program, estimated a significant increase of tax revenue. Tax collection was notoriously difficult in Vietnam, where farmers were living in small communities spread over the country-side. Concentrated in in these new towns, collection became easier. Public lands that were to be farmed by the Agroville communities also presented a new tax base to be exploited.[81] Security was another important goal of the program, fortified towns being easier to defend that dispersed villages in the countryside. Viewed more cynically, population concentrated in Agrovilles was also a lot easier to monitor and control and the fact that the initial program separated people in different camps based on their perceived loyalty suggests that this must at least have been a secondary goal of Diem's.

The program immediately began to generate protests. The decision whether a family was deemed loyal or disloyal was arbitrary and used by some officials to settle old scores. Also, it was often well-connected and prominent families who had relatives in the North and were therefore put in qui-khu camps. An additional problem was the conscription of thousands of farmers to work the construction of the Agrovilles. This was in line with Diem's philosophy of Personalism and the self-reliance it prescribed. Pressed for quick results however, provincial chiefs often conscripted more farmers than they needed and kept them for long periods of time, which prevented peasants from working on their own fields and caring for their families.[82] The discontent found a voice in April

[80] Zasloff, "Rural Resettlement," 332.

[81] Zasloff, "Rural Resettlement," 332.

[82] Catton, *Diem's Final Failure*, 68.

1960 in the form of the Caravelle Manifesto. Named for the Caravelle Hotel in Saigon where it was made public, it was an open letter to President Diem, signed by eighteen prominent political and religious leaders of South Vietnam. The text summarized the reasons for the general discontent in the population with Ngo Dinh Diem's policies. The Agrovilles are mentioned by name in the section about "Economic and Social Affairs", where the group laments the fact that farmers are forcefully removed from their villages and concentrated in "magnificent but useless" Agrovilles, where they are separated from their families and unable to work their fields. This was an ideal ground for communist propaganda and went a long way to alienate the farmers from the central government.[83]

There were additional problems with the program. According to Major Pham Ngoc Thao, whom President Diem had made responsible for implementing the program, one of the key weaknesses was its focus on security. The Program had had its origins in the Ministry of the Interior and Ngo Dinh Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, who was also head of the Secret Police. In the words of Major Thao, the program was crude, unsophisticated, and focused too much on security aspects. It neglected the economic and social implications of the relocations and totally disregarded the fact, that for a counterinsurgency program to work, the population needs to derive some personal benefit from it. It is only then that they will reject the propaganda and the pressures of the insurgency, which is the point of the counterinsurgency in the first place.[84] If one considers Diem's overall plan for the modernization of Vietnamese society, this

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[83] The Pentagon Papers: Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force. Volume 1, Chapter 5, Section 3, pp 314 – 346. Available from: https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon/pent14.htm [Accessed: 9/23/2018].

[84] Zasloff, "Rural Resettlement," 330.

assessment is harsh and one-sided, but it is true that Diem did very little to inform the population, and apparently his military as well, of his plans. Not understanding the goals the government was pursuing, the program was solely known for its dislocation and hardship. For the peasants that were forcibly moved, the Agrovilles represented a major change in the way they lived their lives. For centuries they had lived in their small villages tending their rice paddies. The combination of an urban lifestyle with the fact that they were being forced to work without pay on community projects were just too much for them. Regional cadres also did little to explain the program to the farmers. In the end, only about 23 of the planned Agrovilles were completed by the end of 1960. The program had no positive effect on the military situation. If anything, the situation in the Mekong Delta became more precarious as a result of the discontent generated by the program. It was never officially abandoned, although no new Agroville were constructed after the summer of 1960. Activities in existing Agrovilles just petered out.

The Agroville Program was the main attempt of the Diem regime to pacify the rural areas on its own. Later projects, especially the Strategic Hamlet Program which was a reincarnation of the Agroville Program and is mentioned subsequently, were heavily influenced by the U.S. government. It can therefore be used as a showcase of Diem's vision of not only how he intended to win the hearts and minds the farmers, but also, more generally, what his conception of rural life in South Vietnam should be. As such, it was a dismal failure. The resistance was immediate and fierce. The South Vietnamese president and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu's intentions might have been good, but the way the program was implemented infuriated the rural population. Always the mandarin, Ngo Dinh Diem had no empathy for the disruptions the program caused to the lives of the

farmers. The group behind the Caravelle Manifesto were political and religious leaders outside of the government which resisted Diem's policies because of their oppressiveness, but also because they recognized the importance of the farmers in getting the insurgency under control. The fact that the program was dropped barely a year after its inception also hinted toward resistance to it within the government and military, which was implementing it. The main reason for its failure though was the fact that it did not accommodate the needs and wants of the people it was trying to win over. Insurgencies work when there is a believable promise of a future that is better than the present. Counterinsurgencies only work if the people feel they have more to lose than to gain with the alternative. Ngo Dinh Diem's Agroville program absolutely did not achieve that. On the contrary, it alienated people even more from the central government, at a time when the insurgency was taking up momentum.

Civilian Irregular Defense Group and the American Experience

On February 8, 1959, William Colby landed at Tan Son Nhut Airport, north of Saigon.[85] The experienced operative had come to Vietnam to take over as CIA Deputy Station Chief of the American Mission. Colby's service with U.S. Intelligence had started back World War II, as one of the infamous "Jedburghs". They were allied special agents who had been parachuted into occupied Europe by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). After the war, he studied law at Columbia University and practiced it briefly in New York, before being recruited by the newly formed CIA. Much of the 1950s Colby had spent in Rome, where he organized the center-right Christian Democratic party to keep control of the country against the communists. Colby arrived in Saigon on the first day of Tet, the lunar New Year and the country's most important holiday. All shops were closed, and the Vietnamese were preparing feasts for their family and friends. While driving from the airport, Colby, accompanied by his wife and four children, were driven through the residential outskirts of Saigon, a rather poor neighborhood with narrow streets and densely packed shanties. Later, they drove through Cholon, the Chinese part of the city that lay to the West, to arrive in the center of Saigon, where they would take up residence in an old French villa.[86]

Saigon at the time was still a colonial city. With over two million inhabitants, it lay on the Saigon River, about 25 miles inland from the coast. The city had been nicknamed the "Paris of the Orient". The French had designed it to rival Singapore, the British colony on the tip of the Malayan peninsula. There were wide boulevards and

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[85] Randall Bennett Woods, *Shadow Warrior: William Egan Colby and the CIA* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 122.

[86] Woods, *Shadow Warrior*, 123.

beautiful mansions, an Opera house, a large Catholic cathedral and of course, the Palace of the Governor-General, which housed President Diem. Bill Colby's arrival in the city came at a time of increased American activities in Vietnam. American involvement dated back to the beginning of World War II, when Indochina as it was then called, had been a crucial part of the Imperial Japanese Army's advance in Southeast Asia during the spring and summer of 1941. The country was rich in natural resources, and its location allowed the Japanese to stage their attack on the oil-rich Dutch colony of Indonesia. The resulting invasion led to the U.S. government's decision to freeze Japanese assets in the United States and to put economic sanctions on Japan, which in turn precipitated the Imperial government to plan the attack on Pearl Harbor, which dragged the United States into World War II.[87]

After the French departure in 1954, the American government almost immediately increased its direct presence in Saigon. On April 20, 1955, G. Frederick Reinhardt was appointed new American ambassador to South Vietnam. Reinhardt, educated at Cornell and Harvard, was an accomplished diplomat, who had held the position of Vice Consul in Austria during the Anschluss in 1938 and Consul in Moscow from 1945 to 1948. He had also been an interpreter during the Teheran Conference in 1943.[88] Under his leadership, the U.S. mission in Saigon became more involved in the ongoing struggle than it had never been. The embassy, and especially the CIA station it

[87] Addington, *America's War in Vietnam*, 22.

[88] "Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, The Conferences at Cairo and Tehran, 1943 − Office of the Historian." history.state.gov. Archived from the original on 2018-04-16.

housed, was focused on rooting out the communist threat.[89] One of the people at the center of these activities was Col. Edward Lansdale. He had arrived in Saigon in 1954. He had been sent to Vietnam by his mentor, Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Allen Dulles. Dulles had been impressed by what Lansdale had achieved in the Philippines in the early 1950s, where he had coached a little-known politician, Ramon Magsaysay, to become President of the country in 1953, crushing a communist-inspired rebellion in the process. "I want you to do in Vietnam what you did in the Philippines", Dulles had said to Lansdale during his sendoff meeting.[90] This was easier said than done, not because the United States lacked experience installing new governments, as they had done in West Germany, but because this time, it would have to be done with virtually no resources.[91]

Edward Lansdale quickly became one of Ngo Dinh Diem's most trusted advisors. They had frequent and long discussions about all topics relating to Diem's administration, from counterinsurgency to economic problems and politics. In his role of trusted advisor, Lansdale operated independently of the U.S. Mission or even the CIA station. He reported directly to DCI Dulles in Washington. He set out to replicate his success in the Philippines by implementing similar ideas in Vietnam, from paramilitary operations, psychological warfare to propaganda.[92] Even though he was less successful in

[89] William Conrad Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War – Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships,* Part I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 305.

[90] Stephen Kinzer, *The Brothers: John Foster Dulles, Allen Dulles, and Their Secret World War* (New York: Henry Holt, 2013), 192.

[91] Max Boot, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam*. (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, a Division of W.W. Norton, 2018), 185.

[92] Panagiotis Dimitrakis, *Secrets and Lies in Vietnam: Spies, Intelligence, and Covert Operations in the Vietnam Wars* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016)

Saigon than he had been in Manila and left the scene in 1956, he understood one of the main problems that would plague the Americans; as it had the French before them, during the entirety of the War.

Diem's grasp on power was focused and limited to the urban parts of Vietnam, most notably Saigon. Support for the government among the rural population was almost nonexistent. It became clear to Lansdale, that Diem needed to win the "hearts and minds" of the farmers, if he wanted to have any success in weakening the insurgency. He made this clear in a memo he wrote to Wesley Fishel, Director of the Michigan State University Group (MSUG), in September 1955, shortly before he left Vietnam. He wrote:

> "The loyalties of the people in the villages has heretofore been extended to whatever party, religious sect or warlord that seemed to care for their welfare. It is necessary to unify these people under the national banner. The lack of public services in the villages has prevented their keeping abreast of the social and economic changes which have taken place in larger towns and cities, with the result that the Communists have exploited growing discontent, disseminating propaganda and recruiting agents for subversive and guerilla activities."[93]

This was very perceptive and remained one of the major barriers to Diem's success in fighting the communist insurgency.

The time period from 1956, when Col. Lansdale left Vietnam, to 1959, which coincided with Bill Colby's arrival, was one of relative quiet. The governments of the DRV and the ROV were both focused inward, stabilizing their administration and consolidating their power base. Also, Vietnam was no longer a focal point of the Cold War. International attention had moved on and was once again targeted on Europe and

[93] Memorandum from Edward G. Lansdale to Wesley Fishel, 6 September 1955, Folder 58, Box 1191; Michigan State University Archives & Historical Collections, Wesley R. Fishel Papers, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Accessed 29 Jul. 2017 <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=6-20-EB-116-UA17-95_000265>.

the Middle East, where political unrest in the Soviet Union (i.e. uprising in Poland and Hungary) and the Suez Crisis in 1956 captured newspaper headlines. The period of calm was about to end though. In March 1959, Ho Chi Minh, in a session of the communist party, declared a People's War to unite all of Vietnam under his leadership.[94] In early 1960, the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam (NLFSV) was created to provide an organizational framework for the insurgency in the south.[95] Many fighters and cadres of the former Viet Minh, who had been repatriated to the North after the Geneva Accords, were sent back to the South to intensify the fight against the Diem government and his American backers. As a result, there was a significant increase in violence at exactly the time Colby was settling in with his family in Saigon.[96]

1960 was also a time of change in the United States. It was a presidential election year and the two candidates, Senator John Fitzgerald Kennedy and Vice President Richard Milhous Nixon, were both avid Cold Warriors. Their approach to defense was very different though. Nixon was a defender of the policy of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). This strategy, which was based on the policies of President Eisenhower, relied heavily on strategic nuclear forces. It reflected Eisenhower's approach of always making sure he had superior resources and planning. The goal of the strategy was to make clear to the Soviets that any war with the United States would mean complete destruction of their country and people. Eisenhower's strategy was very potent,

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[94] The Vietnam War: Seeds of a Conflict. Available from: http://www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/vietnam/index-1945.html.[Accessed: 6/23/2018].

[95] Wilfred Burchett, *The Furtive War* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 95.

[96] The Pentagon Papers: Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force. Part-IV-A-5-p. 61. Available from: https://nara-media-001.s3.amazonaws.com/arcmedia/research/pentagon-papers/Pentagon-Papers-Part-IV-A-5.pdf. [Accessed: 6/23/2018].

even if it was quite rigid.[97] JFK was looking for a more flexible approach to foreign and military policy. He had read General Maxwell Taylor's "The Uncertain Trumpet"[98] and agreed with him that the focus of the Cold War had shifted to smaller scale wars in the Third World. These wars were limited in terms of scope and size and in that context, massive retaliatory nuclear arsenals were useless. Kennedy also recognized that these wars were often fought asymmetrically, challenging a military establishment whose equipment and training prepared them mainly for a conventional conflict with the Soviet Union in Europe. As a result, Kennedy suggested a more flexible approach to military planning, where Intelligence Services and Special Forces played an important part.

This approach aligned very well with William Colby's analysis of the situation in Southeast Asia. He understood, that any war in Vietnam, and especially one against a communist insurgency, could not be won with conventional means. Even though President Diem in early 1960 was more secure in his position than at any other time during his reign, his reach did not extend much beyond Saigon. Colby understood that for this fight to be won, Diem needed to get the loyalty and support of the the rural population, a group he had done much to alienate. According to Maoist doctrine, communist revolution was based on the farmer, as opposed to the Soviet Union where it centered around the urban proletariat. If there was to be any way of fighting off the communists in Vietnam, the government needed to win over Vietnam's farmers.

[97] William I. Hitchcock, *The Age of Eisenhower: America and the World in the 1950s* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

[98] Maxwell D. Taylor, *The Uncertain Trumpet* (New York: Harper, 1960).

In late 1960, Colby started asking his superiors in Washington for permission to start counterinsurgency operations. He received a green light from Washington in form of NSAM 52 in March 1961, where the new administration authorized the CIA to implement covert actions in Vietnam.[99] One of the first and most successful of these programs came to be known as the Village Defense Project (VDP), later renamed the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG). Its beginnings owed a lot to chance. In late 1959, David A. Nuttle, a 23-year-old Kansan with an agricultural degree from Kansas State University, arrived in Vietnam on a two-year contract with the International Voluntary Service (IVS). The IVS was a privately funded, non-governmental organization that provided agricultural and community services in South Vietnam. Nuttle was put in charge of Ea Kmat, the organization's oldest station in Ban Me Thuot, the capital of Darlac Province in the Central Highlands. The station successfully helped local farmers increase their production of fibre crops, rice, livestock, and vegetables.[100] During his time in Darlac, Nuttle made a habit of roaming the countryside with his motorcycle. He visited countless villages where he got to know the village elders. An avid hunter, he shared his prey with the Montagnards, whose weapons, including bows and arrows had been confiscated by the Vietnamese.[101] This made him quite popular. The group he had the most extensive relationships with were the Rhadé, the main tribe in Darlac province. Nuttle got fluent in their language and even wrote an ethnographic study about them.[102]

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[99] Woods, *Shadow Warrior*, 546.

[100] J.P. Harris, *The Buon Enao Experiment and American Counterinsurgency* (Sandhurst: Central Library Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, 2013), 7.

[101] Harris, *The Buon Enao Experiment*, 4.

[102] Harris, *The Buon Enao Experiment*, 7.

Unlike the coastal areas, mainly inhabited by Vietnamese of Chinese descent, the Central Highlands, the mountainous area in the Annamite Chain north of Saigon and leading up to the 17th parallel, was inhabited by indigenous tribes (e.g., Rhadé, Jarai, Bahnar, Koho and Mnong). The Diem government had implemented a number of policies that had attempted to forcefully integrate the Montagnards into Vietnamese society. These policies had included trivial things like changing the names of villages, but also the relocation of entire villages and the settlement of mainly catholic refugees from North Vietnam to their homeland. Rather than integrating the Montagnards into the Vietnamese mainstream, it had alienated them. Still, the Central Highlands and their inhabitants were vital to the ROV and Diem's government because of their geographic location. The Central Plateau of the Annamite Chain is the main gateway for any invasion from the North. It is also an important supply route that links North Vietnam to the South, leading through the Montagnards' homeland.

As he became familiar with the tribes during his work with the IVS, Nuttle had understood that while the Montagnards were not supportive of the central government in Saigon, their relationship with the Communists was just as fraught. NLF insurgents stole their crops, coerced them into fighting and generally made their lives miserable. He felt that the tribes could be motivated to resist the Viet Cong, if they were able to defend themselves and their families. In early 1961, coincidence conspired to bring about a major change in the lives of many of the Montagnards. Occasionally, David Nuttle would drive his motorcycle back to Saigon to enjoy some of the social life the city offered. There, at an embassy party, he met Bonnie Layton, a nineteen-year-old socialite, whom

in February 1961, he began to date. Bonnie's parents would invite Nuttle to dinners when he was in Saigon, probably at least in part to check his suitability as a boyfriend of their daughter.[103] Bonnie's father was Col. Gilbert Layton, head of the Military Operations Section (MOS) of the U.S. mission in Saigon. He was in charge of all paramilitary operations in South and North Vietnam for the CIA. In a series of discussions, the young IVS worker told the senior spy about his experiences in the Highlands and his ideas of helping the tribes fight against the insurgency. Layton was interested, and on May 5th, he raised the subject with William Colby. As a result of these discussions, Colby submitted the idea for further investigation to the CIA Country Team. [104] For some time, Nuttle did not hear back, probably thinking his idea had been rejected by the bureaucracy. It had not. Colby liked the idea, he was looking for new ways to counter the communist insurgency and the Central Highlands were the perfect place. The NLF had become active there in 1960 and their operations were showing some success.

In August 1961, Nuttle was ordered from Ban Me Thuot to Saigon to meet Ambassador Nolting and the Country Team to discuss the situation in the Central Highlands. The Country Team consisted of Lieutenant-General L.C. McGarr and Colonel M.P. Ward from MAAG, William Colby of the CIA and Douglas Pike of the United States Information Agency. They presented their strategy for the Central Highlands to Nuttle and solicited his feedback. It followed the conventional wisdom of the time. Their

[103] David Nuttle, *They Have Stone Ears Don't They?* (unpublished account of IVS worker and later CIA employee David Nuttle's activities in Darlac, the Buon Enao Experiment and American Counterinsurgency. Jessica Elkind, Professor of History at San Francisco State University and author of "Aid under Fire" confirmed the existence of the script in email correspondence with the author. The version referenced here was made available to the author by David Nuttle, along with additional information and a telephone interview in January 2019, 5.

[104] Harris, *The Buon Enao Experiment*, 9.

goal was to isolate the Montagnards from the Viet Cong. They would establish fortified villages or safe havens, under the control of the government and move the Montagnards and their families there. Any other territory would be declared a fire free zone.[105] Nuttle disagreed with the team's proposed strategy because he felt the Montagnards would not accept restrictions on their movement. Their livelihood depended on their being able to live in their villages and access their fields. He proposed the approach he had been discussing with Gil Layton of the program that would arm the Montagnards and allow them to defend their villages and themselves. It took another two months until early October before Nuttle received a green light by Station Chief Colby to implement his idea. Colby was aware of the strategic importance of the area, but he also knew of the difficult relationship between the indigenous people and the Vietnamese. There was no way the CIA could launch such a program without at least tacit approval by the South Vietnamese government. He approached Ngo Dinh Ngu, the President's brother with the idea and got the approval to start a program with the Rhadé, The program was named Village Defense Project (VDP) on October 5th, Nuttle resigned from the IVS and signed his commission with the CIA. Three days later, he was on a CIA plane headed to Ban Me Thuot. In Ban Me Thuot, the initial team started to take shape. Jack Benefiel was the CIA case officer. He split his time between Saigon and Darlac and coordinated with the County Team of the U.S. Embassy. Y-Rit, a Rhadé who had worked with Nuttle during his time with the IVS, was the translator. He was fluent in Vietnamese, Rhadé and English. Paul Campbell, a special forces medic would treat the Rhadé's medical problems

[105] Harris, *The Buon Enao Experiment*, 9.

to increase goodwill.[106] One of the conditions Ngo Dinh Nhu had stipulated before he agreed to the pilot program was that the project would have to be overseen by the Vietnamese Special Forces. That is why, in the beginning of November, Captain Khoai from the 77th Observation Group arrived on the scene with ten additional special forces troops. Knowing about the tense relationship between the Montagnards and the ARVN, they were chosen very carefully. None of them was ethnic Vietnamese. All of them Highlanders, about half were Rhadé and the other half Jarai.[107]

The communist insurgency had been gaining traction all through 1961 and the general situation in the Central Highlands had been deteriorating rapidly. The communists were aware that Diem's treatment of minorities in general and the policy of resettling catholic refugees specifically had alienated many tribes.[108] About a week after arriving in Ban Me Thuot, David Nuttle and Paul Campell started touring Rhadé villages to find a suitable spot to start. Sgt. Campbell, in civilian clothes, would treat the village folks while Nuttle talked politics with the village elders. The villagers, some of whom had known Nuttle for years and trusted him, were vary of the Americans. They knew that Americans had an agenda and wanted to avoid being taken advantage of, as they had been by the French.[109]

After visiting more than a dozen villages, the team settled on Buon Enao as an initial site, a village just a couple of miles away from the Ban Me Thuot in the middle of

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[106] Nuttle, *They Have Stone Ears Don't They?*, 12.

[107] Harris, *The Buon Enao Experiment*, 13.

[108] Woods, *Shadow Warrior*, 156.

[109] Harris, *The Buon Enao Experiment*, 11.

Rhadé country. Y-Ju, the village chief, was an old friend of Nuttle's, whom had visited the village often during his time at IVS. During the initial visit in early October, Y-Ju 's daughter had fallen ill and had been treated by "Dr. Paul". During the treatment, Campbell had been very respectful of Rhadé traditions, administering drugs only when the village sorcerer was present and could accompany the proceedings with his ritual chants. This had created trust. The latter part of October was taken up with negotiations on how to start the program. The Rhadé proved to be seasoned negotiators with a keen sense of their importance to the American cause. They posed three conditions for their participation. First, the attacks on Montagnard villages by the ARVN and the Vietnamese Airforce had to cease immediately. Second, Rhadé villages that had been forced to support the Viet Cong would receive amnesty if they declared allegiance to the Diem government and third, the defense program had to be accompanied by medical aid, educational, and agricultural assistance.[110] Once these conditions had been accepted by the Americans and South Vietnamese, the pilot project started in earnest. The villagers built a double bamboo fence around the village. A sign was put on the fence clearly indicating that the village was loyal to the GVN. Underground family shelters were constructed for the women and children. The South Vietnamese government had stipulated that no fire arms be distributed before to the Rhadé before Ngo Dinh Nhu had inspected the village, so the Rhadé defended themselves with bow and arrows.[111] A village defense force was created and some of the Rhadé were even trained as medics.

[110] Nuttle, *They Have Stone Ears Don't They?*, 13.

[111] Nuttle, *They Have Stone Ears Don't They?*, 14.

Finally, in mid-November, a GVN inspection team, led by Col. Tung, arrived in Buon Enao. They were impressed by what they saw and certified the villagers to receive modern fire weapons. In mid-December, a delegation led by Ngo Dinh Nhu and William Colby visited Buon Enao, and they were just as impressed as Col. Tung had been. Based on this visit, and approved by the CIA country team, Nhu authorized the expansion of the project. The specifics of the authorization were:

- Expansion to forty additional Rhadé villages within a fifteen-kilometer radius of Boun Enao
- Rhadé villages would enter the program on a voluntary basis under essentially the same terms used for Boun Enao
- All village defense volunteers would now be trained on, and assigned, modern weapons
- A volunteer unit to be called a Strike Force would guard any village while its volunteer defenders were in training
- The Strike Force unit would also be used as a reserve force to assist villages under attack
- Village chiefs and elders would be briefed on the program. And an armed Information Unit would be trained to travel from village to village with songs and skits about program concepts
- Various GVN agencies, USOM, and USIS would be requested to provide support for social, economic, and information programs

- Half of a U. S. Army Special Forces A detachment (six men) and ten Vietnamese Special Forces personnel (Rhadé and Jarai) would conduct paramilitary training
- The village medic program was to be expanded on a priority basis with training conducted at Boun Enao
- Each Rhadé village participating in the program would be given a two-way voice attack-alert radio. USOM was to provide the radios, and U. S. Special Forces would train Rhadé radio
- Every Rhadé having a weapon was to be screened, identified, photographed, and certified by his village chief. Complete records were to be kept as to who had what weapon
- Intelligence and informant programs were to be rapidly expanded to prevent Viet Cong infiltration of the program[112]

The expansion in Buon Enao proved successful.[113] Within just a couple of months, the village became a training base for further villages that joined the program. By October 1962, a year into the program, which by now had been renamed CIDG, more than 200 villages in Darlac Province were participating, protecting about 60,000 people with a force of 10,600 Village Defenders and 1,500 Strike Force personnel.[114] The program, which had spread to include other tribes than the Rhadé, had considerable

[112] "Buon Enao" History of VDP in the Colby Papers, Center for the Study of the Vietnam War, Texas Tech. University, Lubbock, Texas, 17.

[113] Gerald C. Hickey, *Free in the Forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands, 1954-1976* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 79.

[114] Harris, *The Buon Enao Experiment and American Counterinsurgency*, 25.

influence on the situation in the Highlands. By the end of 1962, the GVN was able to declare Darlac province clear of insurgency operations.[115] These results were spectacular. Once Nhu saw the results, he allowed the CIA to expand the program into the Mekong Delta. One of the offspring was operation "Sea Swallows" led by a Catholic priest of Chinese descent, Father Nguyen Lac Hoa.

[115] Ganesh Sitaraman, *The Counterinsurgent's Constitution: Law in the Age of Small Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 171.

IV.

The Aftermath

After the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba, President Kennedy decided to fundamentally change the way the United States engaged in covert warfare. He signed National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 55, in which he ordered the military to take over all current and future paramilitary activities of the CIA.[116] This decision had disastrous effects on the CIDG program in South Vietnam. In May 1962, CIA Division Chief Desmond Fitzgerald and Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Paul Nitze met to decide that along the lines of NSAM 55, control of the CIDG program would be transferred from the CIA to MACV, the highest military authority in Vietnam.[117] The operation was named "Switchback" and it started in July 1962. In addition, all operations were to be coordinated with the Vietnamese Special Forces, under the command of Gen. Le Quang Tung.[118] On the ground in Vietnam, the decision was not well received. The CIA felt, correctly, as later developments would to show, that the handover to MACV and the involvement of the Vietnamese Special Forces were going to distort the program's mission and exacerbate the tensions between the Montagnards and

[116] National Security Action Memorandum Number 55: Relations of Joint Chiefs of Staff to the President in Cold War Operations, June 28, 1961, The Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Papers, Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts. Available from: http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/sjtthyMxu06GMct7OymAvw.aspx) [Accessed: 7/7/2016].

[117] Gerald C. Hickey, *Window on a War: An Anthropologist in the Vietnam Conflict* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2002), 102.

[118] Hickey, *Free in the Forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands, 1954-1976*, 101.

the Vietnamese.[119] There were major misgivings in the Armed Forces as well. General Harkins, whose MACV had been entrusted with the running of CIDG, was a known opponent of military participation in counterinsurgency operations. He felt the military's organization and size did not lend itself to these types of operations.[120]

Unfortunately, the critics were proven right. CIDG, the program which had been judged an unqualified success even by the Diem Administration as late as October 1962, would lose its effectiveness in 1963. There were many reasons for the deteriorating situation. The Buon Enao project first and foremost had been a defensive program. David Nuttle, the architect of the program, understood that the Montagnards' main motivation was not to fight communists on behalf of a distant and distrusted government in Saigon. It was the security of their own villages and families that motivated these fighters. The program was built around the idea of fortifying the villages where these farmers had been living for generations. He was a proponent of a 'people-centric' counterinsurgency strategy.[121] The U.S. Army, which took over responsibility for the program during Operation Switchback, had a different counterinsurgency doctrine favoring a more enemy-centric approach, where troops focus on search and destroy missions and the underlying political, social, and economic problems are neglected.[122] This fundamentally changed the nature of the program. The fact that the Montagnards were being sent on

[119] Hickey, *Window on a War*, 103.

[120] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified*, 91.

[121] Phone interview by the author with David Nuttle, January 2019.

[122] Darrell Carr, "Civil Defense Forces in Counterinsurgency: An Analysis of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group in Vietnam," Master of Military Art and Science, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, 2012, 11.

offensive missions, most of them close to the Laotian border, meant that their villages were left unprotected, their fields and rice paddies unattended, and their families at the mercy of the Vietcong. In order to provide protection for the population, the U.S. Army and the South Vietnamese fell back on an idea which had been tried unsuccessfully many times before, during the first Indochina War and during the Agroville Program in 1959. They concentrated the population in fortified towns. This freed up indigenous troops to be used for offensive operations against the Vietcong and put the military problem at the center of the counter-insurgency strategy. The fortified towns this time were called Strategic Hamlets. The Program was a brainchild of Ngo Dinh Diem and his main advisor for counterinsurgency, the head of the British Advisory Mission to South Vietnam (BRIAM), Sir Robert Thompson.[123] In many respects, it was a copy of the Agroville Program analyzed earlier in this thesis and it repeated many of its mistakes. According to Michael Benge, a USAID employee at the time, this created a huge amount of resentment among the Montagnards. The fighters were on missions far away from their villages, while their families were being put in camps, under the control of the hated Vietnamese.[124]

There was another change that affected CIDG in early 1963. When the program had been run by the CIA, bureaucracy was not a major concern. CIA operatives, who were located in the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, were flexible when making decisions, communicating with headquarters or requesting and dispensing funds. The organization

[123] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified*, 80.

[124] Interview with Michael Benge, 31 January 2002, Michael Benge Collection, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University.

of MACV, who took over CIDG in 1962 and 1963, was very different. “Colonel Morton, ... fully appreciated the political delicacy of CIDG expansion, but found himself immersed in the administrative and logistic complexities of Operation Switchback.”[125] He had to deal with the vast U.S. Army and Department of Defense bureaucracies. For months he was unable to release funds because his budget had not been approved by the Pentagon. He received low priority for air transport and was therefore constantly struggling to get helicopters to support him. These bureaucratic problems obviously were not just a problem for the commanding officer of Operation Switchback, they were also a major source of frustration for the Montagnard fighters and their U.S. Special Forces advisors, at a time when Viet Cong activities were once again on the rise.[126]

With operational control being transferred to MACV, the CIA also lost influence on who would run the camps and units of CIDG. As a result, MACV, which closely coordinated its efforts with the ARVN, appointed a number of Vietnamese Special Forces officers to positions of responsibility in the CIDG camps. When they were put in charge of the camps, the quality of the weapons and the amount of ammunition provided decreased significantly. It also became apparent that corruption in the camps was rampant. The Vietnamese charged exorbitant prices for foodstuffs, which were often rotten. They kept back pay for families, who had lost family members in the fighting, for themselves. The Montagnards felt betrayed by the Americans, whom they had trusted and fought with. By 1964, the U.S. Army had assumed full control of CIDG. Command of the program had been transferred to the 5th Special Forces Group that was setting up its

[125] Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified*, 95.

[126] F. J. Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces 1961-1971* (Arlington County: U.S. Department of the Army, Vietnam Studies, 1973), 40.

headquarters in Nha Trang. At the time, there were other counterinsurgency programs being run in Vietnam. Programs such as Trail Watchers, Mountain Scouts, and Combat Intelligence Teams had been run by the CIA in cooperation with the ARVN. General Westmoreland, who had become deputy commander of MACV in January 1964, was looking for a way to consolidate these programs. He did so early in 1964 and as a result, 5th Special forces assumed control of a nation-wide, rural border surveillance program, encompassing nearly 20.000 men with a budget of $ 10 million a year.[127] This might have made the program more manageable for the U.S. Army. The fact that CIDG was now a country-wide program including many Vietnamese with a significant operational role of the ARVN did nothing to reduce the Montagnards alienation. Observers of the scene like Michael Benge who was in Darlac Province during the summer of 1963, talks of the disillusionment of the Montagnards. His insight is unique because he had travelled to the region in the early 1960s and could see the difference. 1964 was a pivotal year for the Montagnards. Some of the early leaders of the autonomy movement, who had been imprisoned by President Diem since 1957, were released in early 1964 after Diem had been assassinated and his regime toppled.[128] Unfortunately, General Kanh, the new leader of the ROV, did not go further in accommodating the demands of the Montagnards and the disillusionment that had built up during the Diem years remained and even grew in the following years. Over the summer of 1964, the more militant elements of the autonomy movement constituted the Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées

[127] Darrell Carr, "Civil Defense Forces in Counterinsurgency: An Analysis of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group in Vietnam," Master of Military Art and Science, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, 2012, 66.

[128] Hickey, *Free in the Forest, 1954-1976*, 93.

(FULRO), the United Struggle Front for the Oppressed Races. In September 1964, the newly formed group staged the first of what was to be a series of revolts in CIDG camps and demonstrations in Ban Me Thuot. These rebellions culminated in 1965, when a number of U.S. Special Forces were taken prisoners and more than 30 SVA soldiers were killed in CIDG camps.[129] Y Bham Enuol, the leader of FULRO, and his inner circle went into hiding in Cambodia.

1964 was a pivotal year for the Americans as well. The assassinations of Presidents Diem and Kennedy within a month of each other in late 1963 linked the American government even closer to the fate of Vietnam. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which was passed by Congress in August 1964, set the stage for the American build up and the introduction of regular American troops into the theater. The deteriorating situation in the Central Highlands was not central to these developments. It was nonetheless on the radar of some of the central actors and it was used by at least one administration official to caution against further involvement in Indochina. Under Secretary of State George Ball, in a secret memorandum dated October 5, 1964, argued against expanding military actions against North Vietnam, mentioning the Montagnard rebellion as an example of unintended consequences of expansion. His advice was not heeded.[130]

CIDG, at least in its initial phase, had been the most successful counterinsurgency effort the U.S. Government was able to pull off during its long involvement in Vietnam. It secured a strategically important area at a time when the insurgency in the rest of the

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[129] Sidney Jones, *Repression of Montagnards: Conflicts over Land and Religion in Vietnam's Central Highlands* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2002), 23.

[130] Hickey, *Window on a War*, 160.

country was gaining momentum. The fact that it disintegrated in the years following 1963, as well as the failure of other counterinsurgency programs, made sure that when the United States ramped up its military presence after the Gulf of Tonkin resolution in 1964, it did so with a conventional military strategy based on regular troops, not a specialized counterinsurgency strategy.

V.

Conclusion

Ho Chi Minh's enemies during the first and second Indochina Wars were among the most powerful countries in the world. Their armies were equipped with the most advanced weaponry in existence, helicopters, aircraft carriers, tanks, and planes. They should have been able to beat any enemy, yet they lost. They were beaten by a third world country with severely limited resources and few modern weapons. How was that possible? The main reason was that they were unprepared for the conflict they were facing. The French and American armies had been trained and equipped to fight a conventional war in Europe, not a revolutionary one in the jungles of Southeast Asia. The Vietnamese on the other hand had fought superior enemies for more than two thousand years. Their very existence was in part due to the common resistance to foreign invaders. They knew how to fight these wars and they were ready.

David Galula, the French military theorist, has written extensively about the distinctive features of revolutionary wars.[131] For one, there is an asymmetry between the belligerents, either of power, organization, or both. This lack of means can be turned into a strength by the insurgent however because it is his prerogative to engage the enemy. It is he, who in effect, sets the terms of battle. Secondly, because his relative weakness makes it impossible for the insurgent to occupy land, the object of the conflict becomes the population. If the insurgency is successful in alienating the population from the authorities, possibly even to get its active support, rooting out an insurgency becomes an

[131] Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 4.

almost impossible task. Thirdly, the beginning of an insurgency is difficult to date, because the shift from peace to war is often gradual. Fourthly, revolutionary wars are often protracted. All these features held true in Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh was the chief architect of an insurgency that had started in 1941 against the Japanese. Later he fought the British and the Chinese, the French, and, even though he did not live to see his people's ultimate triumph, the Americans. As advisor to Mao during the Chinese civil war, he had learned firsthand how to organize a successful insurgency. He and his main military organizer, General Giap, followed Mao's strategy and learnings very closely. In the end, they succeeded by beating the world's biggest and most modern armies and finally achieve what their people had aspired to for two millennia, an independent country free of foreign influence.

If the French, President Diem, and the United States were unsuccessful in pacifying the Vietnamese, it was not for lack of trying. From the early days of the struggle, many observers as well as the protagonists themselves, knew that the key to victory lay in getting the support of the rural population. After all, this is how Mao had been victorious in the Chinese civil war. They tried a variety of strategies and tactics, some of which have been analyzed in this thesis. These programs can be divided into two major groups. The first followed an enemy-centric approach, in which the rural population was concentrated in secured towns. The goal was to isolate the insurgents from the rest of the population. In John Nagl's paraphrasing of Mao Tse-tung, they tried to separate the fish from the water.[132] General de Linarès' Pacification by Prosperity, Diem's Agroville, and the American Strategic Hamlet Program are all in this category.

[132] Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, 27.

They were all unsuccessful because they did not take into account the fact that Vietnamese peasants' life had been centered on the village for centuries. This is where they lived and worked. They were not accustomed to living in urban conditions and resented the fact that they had to leave their villages, even if the security situation had been better in the fortified towns, which it often was not. They were also compelled to work on public works programs to build these towns, which meant they had less time to devote to their own fields and rice paddies. The second group was based on a people-centric strategy, which allowed the farmers to remain in their villages, where they had lived for generations. These programs gave the farmers the means to defend themselves, while also trying at improving their living conditions by giving them training and economic help. The French development program in the Central Highlands and the Buon Enao Project (early CIDG) can be seen in this light. These programs fared better as has been shown in this thesis to be sure, mainly because they respected the differences in Vietnam's diverse society and did not fundamentally change rural lifestyles. In the end though, even these relatively successful programs could not stem the tide.

There are two main reasons for this. The first is what John Nagl calls organizational learning.[133] After analyzing a number of counterinsurgency programs from Malaya to Vietnam, one of his main conclusions is that there is no one-size-fits-all strategy that works when fighting an insurgency. In any conflict, political, social, economic, and military parameters are different, and it is difficult to ascertain in advance, what strategy will work best. He advocates a trial-and-error approach where different strategies are tested out. While doing this, the military must become adept at

[133] Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, 6.

understanding what works, what does not and why. It must become a learning organization. Militaries being very conservative organizations, this is not something that is achieved easily. It is nonetheless crucial if the counter-insurgency is to be successful. In the Indochinese context, this does not mean that these varied programs should not have been implemented. Robert Thompson, a close advisor of President Diem and head of the British Advisory Mission in Saigon helped set up the Agroville program, which was more or less a copy of his experiences in Malaya. Edward Landsdale, another Diem confidant, had helped President Magsaysay put down the Hukbalahap rebellion in the Philippines. He was very influential with Diem and implemented counterinsurgency strategies in the mid-1950s. All of these experiences were valuable. The problem was that the military and political authorities failed to learn from the failures and successes of these programs. The Strategic Hamlet Program in 1962 was almost an exact copy of the Agroville Program President Diem had launched in 1959. It had an enemy-centric strategy and totally disregarded the successes CIDG had accomplished with its people-centric approach in the Central Highlands. Military authorities and especially the U.S. Army went into the conflict with a standing counterinsurgency doctrine they were unwilling to adapt to local circumstances. They were trying, as David Nuttle put it, "to kill their way to victory".[134] It is interesting to note in this context, that the most successful programs in Vietnam were the ones that were the least connected to the military. CIDG was run at least initially through the Saigon CIA station. The U.S. army was involved only at the fringes by supporting the program with Special Forces. The same was true for the Development Program for the Central Highlands organized by the French, which was in

[134] Phone interview with David Nuttle in January 2019.

the hands of civil authorities. It underlined the fact that counterinsurgencies are first and foremost a political endeavor, not a military one. To win the hearts and minds of the population, providing security obviously is an important factor, but there must also be an attempt to improve the wellbeing of the common people, or at least alleviate the gripes they have against the central government. Otherwise, they will lack the motivation and self-interest to participate in the counterinsurgency.

The second major reason was that the foreign belligerents did not recognize the conflict in Indochina for what it was, the justified quest of a proud people to get rid of foreign domination and become independent. After 1945, the French government wanted to eradicate the memory of the ignominy of 1940, when France had been overrun by the Germans, by taking back control of its colonies. The reentry proved successful and probably easier than even Charles de Gaulle expected. The British transferred control in the South and even Ho Chi Minh accommodated the reentry because he wanted to get rid of the nationalist Chinese, who had taken control of Tonkin in the North. But the times had changed. Inspired by Wilson's Fourteen Points and Roosevelt's Atlantic Charter, the Vietnamese, like so many other people in the third world, demanded more autonomy and say in their affairs. The French did not want to relinquish power and lose their colony, which precipitated the insurgency. The Vietminh over the long term proved a formidable opponent, who consistently stepped up its engagement according to Mao's three stages of war until they defeated the French in a set piece battle at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. After the peace conference in Geneva, Ho Chi Minh, who had gained formal control of the North, continued the insurgency in the South against the new government of South Vietnam under Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem was a nationalist with stellar credentials himself,

and he had his own vision of an independent Vietnam. But his controversial governing style proved ineffective in rallying and unifying his people. He based his government on personal loyalty to himself and a small clique of high government officials, often with family ties, which alienated many important groups in Vietnam's diverse society. Many attempts to pacify the countryside, the Agroville program is only the most visible one, were motivated at least as much by controlling the population and keeping himself in power as it was to mount a viable counterinsurgency. He also opened himself up to the charge of being an American lackey, by accepting the help that the U.S. government was lavishly providing. In the end, his policies alienated enough people that he was brought down and killed in a coup in 1963. The Americans' influence grew throughout the 1960s and they started to take a more active role in policy and military operations. The U.S. had been present in Vietnam since 1945, but their help had been indirect, mainly by footing the bill of the French war and building and supporting Diem's government in the early years of his reign. In many ways, the Americans, and especially the U.S. Armed forces were the least prepared for the conflict that was about to unfold. Victorious in World War II and the leader of the free world during the Cold War, they had little experience with insurgencies. The American people were used to having its military win wars decisively, and they did not have the stomach for protracted wars with uncertain ends. The U.S. Armed Forces might well have improved their chances of success by doing things differently, but even had the employed tactics been better, the generals more insightful and the soldiers better motivated and trained, I believe it would have made little difference. In the end, it was the Vietnamese people and especially the rural population who set the terms of battle. The foreign belligerents' inability to win the hearts and minds

of the common farmer was what proved decisive. The French, President Diem, and successive U.S. presidents starting with Harry S. Truman and ending with Richard Nixon were unable to get the insurgency under control because they were unable or unwilling to grant the Vietnamese what they were ultimately fighting for, an independent country, free of foreign domination.

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