"Between Grand Strategy and Grandiose Stupidity": The Marine Crops and Pacification in Vietnam

Adam Weinstein
THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

"BETWEEN GRAND STRATEGY AND GRANDIOSE STUPIDITY":
THE MARINE CORPS AND PACIFICATION IN VIETNAM

By

ADAM WEINSTEIN

A thesis submitted to the
Department of International Affairs
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Degree awarded:
Spring semester, 2007

Copyright 2007
Adam Weinstein
All rights reserved
The members of the Committee approve the thesis of Adam Weinstein
Defended on Wednesday, April 4, 2007.

Michael Creswell
Professor Directing Thesis

Max Paul Friedman
Committee Member

Mark Souva
Committee Member

Approved:

Lee Metcalf, Director, International Affairs

The Office of Graduate Studies has verified and approved
the above named committee members.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis was made possible by the generous support of several individuals and institutions. The Florida State University Department of International Affairs, under the direction of Dr. Lee Metcalf, offered me a graduate assistantship to pursue a Master’s degree and permitted me to design my own course of study. Dr. Max Friedman of the FSU History Department has been an invaluable guide in my research on American foreign relations. Dr. Michael Creswell of the History Department helped me sharpen my focus on the development of U.S. military strategy over time. Each of these professors has also spent untold hours mentoring me personally and professionally, and I hope to repay their efforts as a future colleague.

I am humbled that the Marine Corps Heritage Foundation in Quantico, Virginia, awarded me the Lieutenant Colonel Lily H. Gridley Memorial Master’s Thesis Fellowship to further my research. I can only hope that, in return for their trust and confidence, this study shines a useful spotlight on the Marine Corps’s past – and its possible future.

Finally, I owe the greatest debt of gratitude to Alan and Anne Weinstein, my parents, who challenged me to think critically about the world in which they raised me. They have patiently supported me through many years of capricious and whimsical decisions. I promise them that I will make this education pay for itself soon enough.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ............................................................................................................................ v

1. PROLOGUE ............................................................................................................... 1

2. THE COUNTERINSURGENCY ERA ........................................................................... 5

3. "SEMPER GUMBY": THE ALWAYS-FLEXIBLE MARINES ........................................... 11

4. VIETNAM AND EARLY PACIFICATION ..................................................................... 20

5. THE MARINES IN VIETNAM ................................................................................. 25
   Bucking the trend ....................................................................................................... 25
   The Combined Action Platoons: Genesis ................................................................. 31
   The Combined Action Platoons: Life and death ...................................................... 34

6. DEBRIEFING: AN ASSESSMENT OF CAP WEAKNESSES ..................................... 42
   Insecurity .................................................................................................................. 42
   Cost liabilities .......................................................................................................... 44
   Atrocities ................................................................................................................... 46
   Entropy ..................................................................................................................... 48

7. BACK TO THE FUTURE: THE COUNTERINSURGENT'S RESURGENCE .......... 50

REFERENCES ............................................................................................................... 60

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH ............................................................................................. 64
ABSTRACT

Only a fraction of armed forces in Vietnam made the “other war” – the war for hearts and minds – their primary struggle. These were the U.S. Marines comprising the Combined Action Platoons, who lived and worked in individual hamlets, trained local security forces, made civic improvements, and sought to secure the war’s objectives on the lowest community level. The program’s scope and achievements were limited; while 85,000 Marines occupied Vietnam at the conflict’s apogee, CAP Marines never numbered more than 2,500. However, in an age of renewed interest in “small wars” and pacification, the CAP program is a remarkable subject of study.

This study re-examines the CAP program with two basic goals. First, it argues that the program represented a departure from the U.S. government’s conventional wisdom regarding pacification and counterinsurgency operations, and this departure was consistent with the Marines’ institutional traditions of flexibility, non-conformity and strategic innovation. The Marine Corps’ identity as an army-navy hybrid gave it a starring role in America’s so-called “small wars” of pacification abroad; its diminutive size allowed members to put a premium on open thought and political involvement that is rare in most military institutions. Grounded in these Marine traditions, the CAP program originated as an act of insubordination – as military innovation almost always does.

Second, this study examines the CAP program’s potential exportability, its resemblance to modern counterparts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and its grand strategic implications. The Marines’ experience in Vietnam suggests that while the CAP concept marks a significant advance in counterinsurgent theory, it still assumes a long, expensive occupation that carries numerous caveats as well as large – and largely predictable – risks. These risks limit the usefulness of combined action to selected political and geographical ground states: it is useful in an Afghanistan, but probably not in an Iraq. An empirically honest understanding of pacification and its hazards can help policymakers distinguish between justifiable future missions and imprudent, costly gambles. They will recognize the difference, as B. H. Liddell Hart put it, “between grand strategy and grandiose stupidity.”
CHAPTER 1

PROLOGUE

“Indeed, to forego aims which are not ‘worth the candle’ is the difference between grand strategy and grandiose stupidity.”
- B.H. Liddell Hart

“War is God’s way of teaching Americans geography.”
- Ambrose Bierce

More than three decades have passed since the last American soldier left Vietnam, but America still fights a Vietnam war. Academics, military professionals and laypeople alike debate the lessons of a conflict that bore so much violence and turmoil without the courtesy of a clear, decisive outcome. The debate has intensified since the United States initiated an invasion of Iraq that became an occupation, and that still is, four years later.

Much of the same strategic rhetoric has surfaced today as was popular in the Vietnam era. Having won the war against Saddam Hussein and his regular army, America now finds itself embroiled in the “other war.” The fight to make Iraq safe and stable is cast as a battle for the “hearts and minds” of regular Iraqis and a struggle to isolate the violent extremists that hide among them. Consequently, pacification operations that support counterinsurgent warfare, such as “enclave,” “oil-spot,” or “SysAdmin” strategies, have become widely fashionable among armchair strategists and government officials for perhaps the first time since Vietnam.¹ That conflict’s history is now combed meticulously for clues and wisdom of pertinence to the modern U.S. condition.

Yet only a fraction of armed forces in Vietnam made the “other war” their primary struggle. These were the U.S. Marines comprising the Combined Action Platoons, who lived and worked in individual hamlets, trained local security forces, made civic improvements, and sought to secure the war’s objectives on the lowest community level. The program’s scope and achievements were limited; while 85,000 Marines occupied Vietnam at the conflict’s apogee, CAP Marines never numbered more than 2,500. However, in an age of renewed interest in “small wars” and pacification, the CAP program is a remarkable subject of study.

Much recent literature exists on the history of the CAP program in Vietnam, including critical assessments of the program’s capabilities and achievements. These studies rarely view the CAP program, especially its inception and evolution, in the historical context of the Marines’ earlier experiences as adaptive pacifiers – agents of political and social change abroad – and as military mavericks – outspoken, contentious critics and innovators on political-military issues. Further, even the newest literature on CAP fails to critically assess whether the strategy may be exported to varying climes and places. Considerations above and below the operational level – the cultural, geographical, and political indicators of success, for example, or the international implications of a foreign military intervention – are seldom integrated into such studies.

This study re-examines the CAP program with two basic goals. First, it argues that the program represented a departure from the U.S. government’s conventional wisdom regarding pacification and counterinsurgency operations, and this departure was consistent with the Marines’ institutional traditions of flexibility, non-conformity and strategic innovation. The Marine Corps’ identity as an army-navy hybrid gave it a starring role in America’s so-called “small wars” of pacification abroad; its diminutive size allowed members to put a premium on open thought and political involvement that is rare in most military institutions. This unique combination of experience and esprit de

---


corps disposed the Marines in Vietnam to tread a new path in counterinsurgency that accorded with their empirical observations. According to one expert on pacification before and during Vietnam, “Of all the United States forces the Marine Corps alone made a serious attempt to achieve permanent and lasting results in their tactical area of responsibility by seeking to protect the rural population.”

Second, this study examines the CAP program’s potential exportability, its resemblance to modern counterparts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and its grand strategic implications. Revisionist perspectives on Vietnam, advanced by commentators such as Norman Podhoretz and the Vietnam veterans Harry Summers, Dave Palmer, U.S. Grant Sharpe, and William Westmoreland, maintain that America’s Vietnam War was winnable, but the effort was scuttled — either by a political establishment that tied the military’s hands or by an American public that did not fully understand the war’s dynamics and was swayed by a “fifth column” of protesters. A subset of this revisionist thesis centers on counterinsurgency efforts like the CAP program: the strategy was successful, but it was not applied widely enough or long enough with sufficient zeal to ensure victory. In fact, this argument is a prologue to a similar contention made today regarding the “War on Terror,” namely that an institutional return to counterinsurgent strategy can “win” Iraq and Afghanistan, unless the U.S. “gives up” on the effort.

The Marines’ experience in Vietnam does not fully support this thesis. It suggests that while the CAP concept marks a significant advance in counterinsurgency, it still assumes a long, costly occupation that carries numerous caveats as well as large — and largely predictable — risks. These risks limit the usefulness of combined action to selected political and geographical ground states: it is useful in an Afghanistan, but probably not in an Iraq. Consequently, even as the modern Marine Corps studies and refines pacification operations, many Marines reject the revisionists’ argument for pacification as a panacea and counsel against an over-reliance on military intervention to solve political problems. An empirically honest understanding of pacification and its hazards can help


policymakers distinguish between justifiable future missions and imprudent, costly gambles. They will recognize the difference, as B. H. Liddell Hart put it, "between grand strategy and grandiose stupidity."\(^7\)

CHAPTER 2

THE COUNTERINSURGENCY ERA

At 10 a.m. on June 6th, 1962, President John F. Kennedy ascended a stage in the field house at West Point to deliver a commencement message to the United States Military Academy’s senior class. It was the eighteenth anniversary of the Allied landing at Normandy, and the Navy war veteran sensed concern among the cadets that they had missed the golden days of soldiering. The war against fascism was over, and the war against communism seemed to demand more technicians, not tacticians. The members of West Point’s Corps saw modern combat as a matter for national leaders with red telephones and launch codes, removed from a battlefield. Stockpiles of nuclear-tipped missiles had rendered their profession obsolete.

"Nothing could be further from the truth," their commander in chief told them. Like their fathers, uncles, and older brothers, the class of 1962’s generation had a calling:

The graduates of West Point, the Naval Academy, and the Air Academy [sic] in the next ten years will have the greatest opportunity for the defense of freedom that this Academy's graduates have ever had... for we now know that it is wholly misleading to call this “the nuclear age,” or to say that our security rests only on the doctrine of massive retaliation.8

"Massive retaliation," the idea that Soviet aggression could be deterred by the threat of a U.S. nuclear counterattack, seemed adequate to prevent an atomic first strike or a large-scale offensive on the European land mass. But there was a chink in the nuclear armor: it could not ensure adequate “containment” of the communist threat.

Who in the world could reasonably believe that America’s leaders would risk global Armageddon if the Soviets made a move to dominate Malaya, or Guatemala, or Vietnam? After the Second World War, peoples in these and other nations were

---

8 John F. Kennedy, “Remarks at West Point to the Graduating Class of the U.S. Military Academy, June 6, 1962,” Public Papers of the Presidents.
loosening the shackles of imperial dominance and flirting with self-government. None seemed strategically significant by itself. But each appeared susceptible to penetration by communist agents. In an era of nuclear parity, “it would seem increasingly likely,” wrote retired U.S. Army General Maxwell Taylor, “that the dynamism of Communism will... seek an outlet in the form of aggression with limited objectives.” Without some check on these ambitions, Taylor feared, the “Free World” would “be exposed to loss through piecemeal erosion.”

Kennedy briefed the graduating cadets on this situation. The world had seen plenty of fighting since his PT boat days, and none of it involved nuclear weapons. “This is another type of war,” the president told them,

new in its intensity, ancient in its origin - war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins, war by ambush instead of by combat; by infiltration, instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him. It is a form of warfare uniquely adapted to what has been strangely called “wars of liberation,” to undermine the efforts of new and poor countries to maintain the freedom that they have finally achieved. It preys on economic unrest and ethnic conflicts. It requires... a whole new kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of force, and therefore a new and wholly different kind of military training.

Kennedy had already been thinking about this new strategy for more than a year - since his inauguration, in fact, when he brought Taylor out of retirement, first as a special military advisor, then as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Taylor envisioned a strategy of “flexible response,” which expanded the military’s conventional capabilities and its suitability for a variety of roles short of all-out war. For Kennedy, such flexibility translated to resolve. “Any potential aggressor,” he warned in March 1961, “contemplating an attack on any part of the free world with any kind of weapons,

---


10 Kennedy, “Remarks.”

conventional or nuclear, must know that our response will be suitable, selective, swift, and effective."\(^{12}\)

Vietnam was seen as one such beleaguered corner of the free world. After the ejection of Japanese forces from the nation after World War II, a struggle had been waged between indigenous nationalists and French forces attempting to assert control over their former colony. The natives had established control over Hanoi in 1945 under Ho Chi Minh, a communist who was rebuffed by France (as well as then-U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt) in his attempts to negotiate independence for the Vietnamese. From their remaining strongholds in the South, French forces (with ample U.S. assistance) fought *la guerre sans fronts* – a war without borders – against Ho’s revolutionary army, the Viet Minh.\(^{13}\)

The French sought victory by attrition, trying to fix the enemy in the open and annihilate him in a set-piece battle. After a few such costly exchanges, however, the Viet Minh denied the French further conventional battles, preferring to operate in small units under cover of night or the canopied jungle. Assassinations and kidnappings, hit-and-run ambushes, booby traps: each tactic or weapon of the Viet Minh was calculated to maximize its political and psychological effects, not only upon the enemy, but upon the native populace as well, with whom it maintained intimate ties. Eventually, the French were bested even at their own game: once assembled in Dien Bien Phu, a valley ringed by an impossibly steep ridge, they were shelled mercilessly by Viet Minh battalions who had carried heavy artillery piece-by-piece up the canyon ridge, a feat the French had thought impossible.

The French military defeat resulted in a de facto partitioning of Vietnam. According to a 1954 peace agreement negotiated in Geneva, Ho Chi Minh would retain power in the north, while the French would depart the south, with nationwide elections to be held two years later. However, southern officials, now advised by the U.S., foresaw that the 1956 election would sweep Ho’s communists into power nationwide. In response, they suspended the elections, formed the Republic of Vietnam ("Government of


Vietnam,” or GVN), installed as its president Ngo Dinh Diem – a former Catholic priest and ardent anti-communist – and gave him sweeping constitutional powers. He made haste in alienating Buddhists and peasants while courting the West, laying the foundations for a “war of national liberation” by the communists, who under Ho in 1960 declared the north a Democratic Republic of Vietnam. That same year, communist sympathizers in the south established the National Liberation Front (NLF, also derogatorily called the Viet Cong or VC) to wage an insurgency and focus internal pressure on Diem’s regime.¹⁴

South Vietnam’s woes coincided with Kennedy’s general concern over a Soviet pro-guerrilla strategy. In October 1961 the president sent a mission, led by General Taylor, to South Vietnam to study ways in which the U.S. might assist the beleaguered Diem government against the NLF and its sponsors in the north. Upon the mission’s return, Taylor recommended full-scale political involvement, in the form of economic and administrative aid, as well as the introduction of an American force of “significant value.” But Taylor prescribed a surprisingly conventional military approach to the guerrilla conflict: First, U.S. airpower was needed to boost the mobility of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), which he argued was mired in “static defense.” Second, he suggested that the ultimate source of the NLF’s “guerrilla aggression” was North Vietnam and recommended strategic (though non-nuclear, at least) bombing of the north. He probably perceived these actions as improvements over the French strategy in the 1945-1954 war; a more mobile ARVN, with U.S. support, he assumed, could canvass more of Vietnam’s extensive rural territory without ever being pinned down at a Dien Bien Phu, especially after bombs broke the will of the NLF’s state sponsors.¹⁵

Kennedy accepted the spirit of Taylor’s recommendations more than the letter. He agreed to give South Vietnam more military advisors – a number of whom had assisted Saigon since the Truman administration – as well as more weapons, aircraft, and public avowals of support. By the time of Kennedy’s assassination, U.S. government personnel


¹⁵ Ibid., 456-8.
in South Vietnam numbered 23,000.\textsuperscript{16} However, the president’s search for a new strategy aimed to avoid, not invite, substantial commitments of conventionally trained American foot soldiers. He remained convinced that at the heart of “flexible response” lay a revolution in the American way of warfare, a shift from reliance on superior firepower and mobility to “unconventional” methods: small-unit tactics, special operations and counterinsurgency. Kennedy’s obsession with this more nuanced, politically and economically integrated counter-guerrilla strategy manifested itself in many ways. At his insistence, the size of the Army’s Special Forces branch grew by 500% in one year, and its members were authorized to wear a green beret to distinguish themselves from regular line soldiers. The Navy received its own special warfare unit, the SEALs. Taylor convened a special counterinsurgency group composed of several government principals, including the president’s brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. And the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) received a Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency, Marine Major General Victor H. “Brute” Krulak.\textsuperscript{17}

Krulak’s appointment highlighted the prominent role Marines would play in Kennedy’s strategy for underdeveloped nations. The service was so sensitive to this new mission that the \textit{Marine Corps Gazette} dedicated its first issue of 1962 to counterinsurgency. Many of its articles would be published in book form later that year, among them essays by Assistant Secretary of State Roger Hilsman, who discussed his experiences with the Burma insurgency in the Second World War; Howard University professor Bernard Fall, perhaps the United States’ only academic expert on Vietnam at the time, whose dissertation studied the French-Indochina War firsthand; Walt Rostow, an M.I.T. professor and Kennedy advisor who championed the U.S. effort to vanquish communism by “modernizing” vulnerable third-world countries; and retired Marine Brigadier General Samuel B. Griffith II. Griffith was a contemporary of Krulak’s, and both saw extensive service in the Far East during their careers - a critical factor in their later perspectives. For his doctoral research at Oxford, Griffith translated Sun Tzu’s \textit{Art of War} into English; shortly thereafter, he became the first English translator of Mao’s

\textsuperscript{16} Weigley, \textit{The American Way of War}, 460.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 456; Krepinevich, \textit{The Army and Vietnam}, 30-31.
Primer on Guerrilla Warfare, which one fellow Marine called “the capstone to any study of the guerrilla,” evidence that Griffith had sounded “the first note of warning about unconventional warfare.” This was not merely bluster: when President Kennedy read the work of Mao – and he did, along with the writings of Che Guevara and histories of previous guerrilla wars – he likely read Griffith’s translation. For his part, Kennedy sent the Marine Commandant a memorandum, reprinted in the Marine Corps Gazette’s counterinsurgency issue, praising the service’s dedication to his vision and stressing its importance for the future.

The Marines embraced this special identification with counterinsurgency. As Krulak put it to his JCS colleagues, “Over the years Navy/Marine have directly and routinely participated in similar operations, in response to National Policy and as roving American Ambassadors and are considered equipped to perform counterinsurgency operations now [sic].” Their eagerness could be traced back to two themes in the service’s heritage: the search for a defining mission, and intimate experience with “small wars” in distant lands. Not only would both traditions earn the Marine Corps a seat at Kennedy’s counterinsurgency table; they would push the Marines to adapt and improvise a new strategy in the war for Vietnamese hearts and minds when the old one was found wanting. These institutional themes deserve closer examination.

---


19 Marine Corps Gazette, January 1962.

CHAPTER 3

‘SEMPER GUMBY”: THE ALWAYS-FLEXIBLE MARINES

Since its birth, the United States Marine Corps has been a stepchild in the American armed forces establishment. It was created on November 10, 1775, in Philadelphia to maintain order on the Continental Navy’s ships of the line. Those first Marines also constituted a ready boarding or landing force for close-quarters engagements with the enemy. In fact, the modern Marine Corps operational structure reflects this long-standing nautical heritage. It still serves security functions for the fleet and is technically a component of the Department of the Navy. However, the Marines possess a distinct – and, to outsiders, somewhat confusing – service identity, borne out of their combination of naval and ground combat experience. Its highly ritualized culture, diminutive size and relatively minor role in the United States’ major wars before the 20th century left the Marine Corps outside the mainstream both of military and public opinion, attempting to justify its very existence outside the Navy or Army. Historian Russell Weigley argued that the Corps’ highly-touted performance in the First World War hardly made the service more useful, for “the Marines fought just as though they were Army infantry, although perhaps an elite formation, and their historic duties had never quite given the Corps a clear raison d’etre.”

Yet this existential angst also made the Corps an introspective – and innovative – institution. At the same time Marines of the Allied Expeditionary Force were distinguishing themselves at Belleau Wood, their Commandant, Major General John Archer Lejeune, built the service a master base at Quantico, Virginia, intending it to become a laboratory for the study of future conflict; he also oversaw the creation of the Marine Corps Gazette as an academic forum for all Marines, irrespective of rank, to

---

21 Weigley, The American Way of War, 255.
share the lessons of their experience. In this period between the World Wars, while the U.S. Army pursued a strategy of isolationist “continentalism,” Marines began to bang the drum of amphibious operations and an over-the-horizon strategy to check the rising influence of Japan’s naval power in the Pacific. Since the turn of the century, the Marines had maintained a considerable presence in the Pacific – particularly in China and the Philippines – and could attest to the formidability of Japan’s growing island empire. This body of experience, combined with their natural suitability for “ship-to-shore attacks,” held the promise that “an island-hopping war against Japan might at last provide the Marine Corps with a distinctive reason for existing.” 22 Few who later witnessed the Corps’ role in the Pacific war could have disagreed.

Despite their distinguished performance in the Second World War, the Marines entered the postwar era again defending their existence as the Truman administration sought to unify the armed services in a single cabinet-level department. Though a number of “unification” proposals were debated, nearly all implied limits “on the role and missions of the Marine Corps to make it little more than an auxiliary police force.” To many in the administration and the other services, Marines were simply soldiers with nautical traditions, and their existence separate from the Army represented a wasteful duplication of effort. General Alexander Archer Vandegrift, the Marines’ postwar commandant, considered the unification provisions a first step toward “the total abolition of the Corps.” 23

In response, Vandegrift and his most trusted aides – including Victor Krulak, the Joint Chiefs’ future counterinsurgency czar – assembled a public campaign to sell the Corps as vital to national security in its own right. In this atmosphere, it was not enough merely to recount the service’s distinguished campaign history or its string of successes in the most recent war. Krulak would recall in his memoirs that the unification debate reinforced among his shipmates a conviction that “Marines must not only be better than everyone else but different as well.” 24 Hence they grew adept at what he termed

22 Weigley, The American Way of War, 255.


“midnight entrepreneurship,” thinking critically and at length about the Corps’ potential for usefulness in future conflicts.25 Their solution was to position the Marine Corps as a “force-in-readiness,” the armed services’ chief strategic innovator, as distinct from a large, ponderous and stalwart Army bureaucracy.

Examples of this innovation abounded, the Marines claimed; their service, for example, had helped pioneer combined-arms operations: support of ground troops with naval gunfire, aircraft, and armored vehicles. But the American public most readily identified the Marines with their ship-to-shore expertise in the Pacific, and the service played up this image. Vandegrift argued to the Senate Naval Affairs Committee that in the first half of the 1900s, “The Marines in conjunction with the Navy provided the nation with a doctrine, techniques and equipment which became the standard pattern of amphibious warfare” worldwide. Those operations were “the key to victory in every major theater of war” and, to Vandegrift’s mind, “the most important contribution any American service ever made in the field” in terms of forward-looking combat strategy. “In grim contrast,” he continued, “the Army failed miserably to develop” capabilities in the fastest-growing fields of land warfare: air and armor operations. “How, then,” Vandegrift concluded, could the Army “reasonably claim to usurp our unquestioned pre-eminence in still another specialty”?26

The public-relations strategy worked. The Marine Corps was saved by the intervention of public opinion and the support of influential members of Congress, and its mission as the United States’ chief amphibious force was ratified in law. Most important, future Marines would proudly adopt the mythos advocated by men like Krulak and Vandegrift: The Marine Corps was thereafter considered special by virtue of its abilities to look ahead to the next war, to stress the unique value of its past experience, and to buck the tide of conventional thought whenever necessary. From the Marine perspective, military supremacy came not simply from strict regimentation and adherence to dogma, but from a spirit of adventurism and experimentalism. As one sympathetic naval officer put it during the unification debate, “It would certainly be a great mistake to deprive the

25 Krulak, First to Fight, 169.

26 Vandegrift, Once a Marine, 315-317.
Navy and Marine Corps of the freedom of expression and independent development that are so essential for the preservation of a modern, efficient means of self-preservation.”

Nowhere were those freedoms on greater display than in the Marines’ small-war experiences and the lessons learned from them. Though it was far less salient than amphibious warfare in the public’s mind after the Second World War, that other role—wager of “small wars”—also was a Marine Corps specialty. As the U.S. expanded its economic and political reach in the early 20th century, the Corps’ size and nautical character ideally suited it to wage limited engagements in overseas areas of American interest without incurring political costs: the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Nicaragua, the Philippines, and China, among others. Particularly in the Central American interventions that would later be called the “Banana Wars,” Marine operations conformed to a pattern: liaise with the local, U.S.-friendly government and train its constabulary forces; harass, capture, or kill organized guerrilla resisters; and initiate civic action, essentially acting as economic and social ombudsmen for the populations targeted by the guerrillas. More than any other missions they would undertake, these small operations would enable the Marines to cultivate their mythical reputation as the “first to fight for right and freedom.”

Yet their experiences as raiders, occupiers, pacifiers, ambassadors, and governors in these far-off lands seldom squared with such high ideals. The ambiguities and brutalities of service abroad, particularly in the colonial context, often led Marines to question, amend, or discard the objectives that American politicians had sent them to secure. Their deployments were planned in a similar haphazard nature: as Vandegrift would recall of his early career, “We relied on makeshift provisional battalions and regiments to answer the demands of expeditionary duty, particularly revolts in Cuba or the Caribbean countries.” Once there, the Marines learned the caprices of jungle and

---

27 Vandegrift, _Once a Marine_, 306.


29 Hennessy, _Strategy in Vietnam_, 24-5.

30 Vandegrift, _Once a Marine_, 35.
guerrilla combat. Such operations demanded an open mind and a willingness to “throw out the book” whenever necessary. Vandegrift's experiences in Haiti bore this out. “We learned many cunning and wily tricks the hard way,” he remembered, “but we also invented many ourselves. Survival in the field often depended on quick thinking, always on self-reliance.”

Such quick thinking and self-reliance often led the Marines to strategic and tactical conclusions that ran counter to Western military intuition. People, not territories, were the decisive factor in small wars; consequently, technology and massed firepower played only limited roles – and in fact could turn out to be counterproductive – in quelling native insurgencies. Out of a pragmatic concern for mission completion rather than altruism, the Marines found that benevolent interaction and deference to local culture got them farther than demonstrations of brute force. These lessons were amplified by leaders like General Smedley Darlington Butler, already a Marine legend and two-time Medal of Honor recipient when he described his men’s mission “to protect American lives and property” in Shanghai, China, in 1927: “Nobody shot, that was the slogan,” insisted Butler. “To go through with this, live on foreign soil, live in the territory of a friendly nation which protested our presence, and not fire a shot, and come away with their good will.” Butler boasted in his letters home, “The British are brutal with the Chinamen but I won’t permit our people to even touch them – we must be gentle but firm – and the funny thing is that we control our police district much more easily than do the other and rougher foreigners.”

This uncommon mix of paternalism and earnestness was codified in the Marines’ 1940 Small Wars Manual. It was not only the first military training document of its kind; it also established small warfare as a Marine cause celebre, even as the Second World War raged in Europe:

---

31 Vandegrift, Once a Marine, 58.


Small wars represent the normal and frequent operations of the Marine Corps ... The Marine Corps has landed troops 180 times in 37 countries from 1800 to 1934. Every year during the past 36 years since the Spanish-American War, the Marine Corps has been engaged in active operations in the field. In 1929 the Marine Corps had two-thirds of its personnel employed on expeditionary or other foreign or sea duty outside of the continental limits of the United States.34

The aim in such conflicts, the manual continued, was “not to develop a belligerent spirit in our men but rather one of caution and steadiness. ... A Force Commander who gains his objective in a small war without firing a shot has attained far greater success than one who resorted to the use of arms.”35 To that end, commanders should undertake projects “dealing with the social, economic, and political development of the people.” Implicit in such a mission was a sincere engagement with local culture and history:

This implies a serious study of the people. ... By analysis and study the reasons for the existing emergency may be deduced; the most practical method of solving the problem is to understand the possible approaches thereto and the repercussion to be expected from any actions which may be contemplated.36

These lessons by no means constituted a sure-fire formula for overseas pacification. The friction and fog of war were just as evident in small operations as they were in large ones. The aims of “friendly” local governments, elites, and businessmen always complicated the Marines’ tasks. So often before, Butler found his Marines spending less time in constructive activities and more time tangling with “wretched politicians” and natives who refused to “fall in with our American plans and ideas for their betterment.”37

---


36 Ibid., 18.

Vandegrift, his protégé, would not have disagreed; he recalled that the situation in Haiti in particular had “made Tammany Hall politics look like a Sunday-school picnic.”  

The desire to do good could not be extinguished; it was a U.S. Marine’s job requirement. But decades of “small wars” had taught Butler, Vandegrift, and their shipmates to temper their crusading spirits. Pacification was a long, costly process requiring patience, education, intelligence, and confidence-building measures among the target population, which could easily be undermined by excessive reliance on military force. Such was the most valuable lesson of the Small Wars Manual, argues one historian: far from offering pacification up as a panacea for the underdeveloped world’s ills, it “presented a generally clear appraisal of the confused political-military nature of low-intensity operations.”

This appraisal remained intact up to Kennedy’s counterinsurgency era. When former Marine Brigadier General Samuel Griffith II, a small-war veteran, undertook the U.S.’s first serious study of Maoist guerrilla warfare, his analysis echoed the Small Wars Manual. Griffith studied Mao Zedong’s favorite ancient tactician, Sun Tzu, and learned “that combat involves a great deal more than the collision of armed men… He considered the moral, intellectual, and circumstantial elements of war to be more important than the physical…” This acknowledgement of mixed means and ends, Griffith argued, was an advantage for the guerrilla. “In the United States,” he wrote, “we go to considerable trouble to keep soldiers out of politics, and even more to keep politics out of soldiers. Guerrillas do exactly the opposite… The end product is an intensely loyal and politically alert fighting man.”

Worse still, Griffith thought that an American force would generally find the deck stacked against it politically and socially in most societies targeted by guerrillas, for

38 Vandegrift, Once a Marine, 52.
circumstances largely beyond the U.S. soldiers’ control. “Several hundred millions less fortunate than we,” he warned,

have arrived, perhaps reluctantly, at the conclusion that the Western peoples are dedicated to the perpetuation of the political, social, and economic status quo… today many of them feel that [their aspirations] can be achieved only by a desperate revolutionary struggle that we will probably oppose. This is not a hypothesis; it is fact.42

The Marines’ experiences showed that a long-term commitment to the welfare of a targeted people could, on some occasions, have a stabilizing effect on such societies. But based upon his reading of Mao and Sun Tzu, Griffith imagined that such favorable opportunities were rare, and the clock ran in the guerrilla’s favor. He pointed out that centuries before the development of Western-style democratic government, Sun Tzu had charted the deleterious effect a drawn-out war had on any nation’s populace and livelihood: “‘No country,’ he wrote, ‘has ever benefited from a protracted war.’”43 In their balanced appraisals of counter-guerrilla operations, the Small Wars Manual and Griffith’s writings typified the paradoxical Marine approach to warfare generally: hate war and remember its costs, but prepare for its worst incarnations with zeal nonetheless.

That zeal paid off. By the beginning of the counterinsurgency era, only the Marine Corps possessed both the breadth of experience and the institutional momentum to adopt a political-military approach to violent instability in underdeveloped nations. Counter-guerrilla warfare required, according to one Assistant Secretary of Defense (who held a reserve Marine commission), “troops which can be sent not merely to fight but also to maintain order… not only useful troops but usable troops,” who could deploy to the far reaches of the earth as soldier-statesmen without much grumbling from the domestic electorate. “The kind of troops,” the official concluded, “a man like President Coolidge was willing to send to the Caribbean, to Nicaragua and Haiti would seem to be the kind which could fulfill this requirement.”44 The Marines had again found a reason to

42 On Guerrilla Warfare, 5.

43 The Art of War, xi.

exist; as before, that reason was to assume a role for which no other service had adequately prepared.
CHAPTER 4

VIETNAM AND EARLY PACIFICATION

For a time, however, the Marines would have to wait. Having rejected a U.S. military presence in the numbers Taylor initially sought, Kennedy hoped to save South Vietnam from communist infiltration with an ideological effort, relegating combat forces to a secondary role. The most visible incarnation of this effort was the Strategic Hamlet program, established in 1962 and based on the assumption of Kennedy advisors that the guerrilla’s political aims could be pre-empted by offering “progress,” American-style, to targeted populations in underdeveloped societies. The modernizing “miracles” of Western Europe and Japan after the Second World War, as well as the administration members’ study of Marxist literature, convinced them that the key to stemming off communist revolution was to appropriate the revolutionary mantle in the name of Western democracy and market economics. “We must become guardians of the development process rather than custodians of the status quo,” argued Secretary of State Dean Rusk. “We must be pro-modernization as well as anti-communist.”

To some extent, this gospel of revolutionary modernization resonated with the military teachings of several counterinsurgency veterans. Edward Lansdale, an Air Force and CIA officer who advised the administration on counterinsurgency, argued from his experiences in the Philippines that the U.S.-supported Magsaysay army succeeded in defeating the Hukbalahap guerrillas only after resolving social and political grievances of a rural populace that had supported the rebels. In his view, soldiers with an adequate understanding of the political stakes in an insurgent war could transmit this understanding to a peasantry through modernization and civic works.

---

More influential still was the writing of Robert G. K. Thompson, a British advisor to South Vietnam and a veteran of the successful Malayan counterinsurgency. He observed that the guerrilla’s strength was not from arms or manpower, but rather the ability to maintain a shadowy infrastructure of intelligence, supply, and moral support over large swaths of territory among a sympathetic populace (or even an indifferent one). The key to destroying the guerrilla’s cause was to destroy this infrastructure: Using a metaphor lifted directly from the insurgency doctrines of Mao, Thompson argued that a government “must get all the ‘little fishes’ out of the ‘water’ and keep them out; then they will die.” Thompson consequently recommended “clearing” civilians from the rural countryside, where the insurgents could agitate them, and resettling them in concentrated villes, where they could forge closer bonds with the benevolent central government – bonds of the sort Lansdale had pushed.  

Whatever material improvement such an approach may have offered over imperialist interventions of centuries before, it was problematic in the Vietnamese context. Daniel Ellsberg, a Defense Department analyst who would later gain notoriety for leaking the *Pentagon Papers* to the press, recalled the prevailing conviction that the U.S. “should be promising revolution, our own brand of revolution, better – more revolutionary, more democratic, more materially promising – than the communists’ sort.” American advisors initially rejected the term “pacification” for such work, believing it to be a holdover of the failed French “colonial lineage”; they preferred instead to call the agenda “Revolutionary Development.” Yet that term did the U.S. no favors, Ellsberg observed. First, “The landowning elites that the Saigon regime represented regarded any sort of revolution as anathema and didn’t want to publicize it at all, even as a hollow slogan.” Second, Ellsberg intoned, “The Communists did have a monopoly on the word ‘revolution,’ and they meant it.”

Nevertheless, the Kennedy administration’s political philosophy and Thompson’s military perspective appealed to Ngo Dinh Diem’s government; he saw it as an ideal opportunity to forge a lucrative, enduring relationship with the United States, one that

---


provided him money and resources to increase Saigon’s reach into rural Vietnamese life. His brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, instituted the Strategic Hamlets program in January 1962. Political scientist Samuel Huntington would later admiringly describe its and related programs’ aims as “forced-draft urbanization and modernization which rapidly brings the country in question out of the phase in which a rural revolutionary movement can hope to generate sufficient strength to come to power.” Such a strategy was, he suggested, “the answer to ‘wars of national liberation.’”

The first step of the program was for the Diem government, with U.S. assistance, to dismantle the guerrilla’s infrastructure and any social arrangement that supported it. Large numbers of peasants from vulnerable rural villages would be resettled into the new centralized hamlets, where they would be educated and trained to accept a new social and economic order. The remaining inhabitants of the countryside, it was assumed, would be insurgents and their sympathizers. Cut off from their primary means of subsistence, unable to radicalize or terrorize the populace for political gain, the insurgents would hopefully retreat or wither away; but if not, their lack of civilian cover would now make them vulnerable targets. In effect, social tranquility would emanate outward from the strategic hamlets, like the spread of an oil spot on a piece of paper.

This idea was “neither new nor revolutionary,” wrote Vietnam expert Bernard Fall. Military commanders had always sought to cut off partisans from civilian populations as a matter of course. Only three years before in Vietnam, Nhu had overseen the U.S.-underwritten “Agroville” program in which relocated peasants, “often far from their rice fields,” had to begin their lives again with virtually nothing. In fact, the idea of permanent civilian enclaves had a more ominous parallel: during the Boer war, Fall pointed out, “The Boer civilians were either assigned” by the British “to their own towns or ‘concentrated’ – this gave rise to the term ‘concentration camp’ – in areas where contact with Boer forces was impossible.”

---

50 Latham, Modernization as Ideology, 151.
51 Krepinevich, The Army and Vietnam, 64.
52 Corson, The Betrayal, 47.
No matter how much American planners romanticized the strategic hamlets as a way to convert “‘traditional’ peasants” into “‘modern’ citizens,” the reality was unmistakable. In the very first district selected as a pilot for the project, only one third of roughly 200 families moved voluntarily; the remainder had to be coerced with the threat of violence into settling at the new hamlet, where they were expected to construct their own houses and fortifications. Three months later, the region in which that district was situated had still failed to move 93 percent of its inhabitants when communist guerrillas, assisted by local villagers, ambushed a large convoy of government army vehicles.\textsuperscript{54}

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of life in the strategic hamlets was that such mutinous behavior was not more widespread: villagers were subjected to constant surveillance and curfews and forced to labor in methods that were alien to them. They bore witness to the corruption and incompetence of South Vietnamese governmental representatives, while being educated to accept that those officials were ambassadors of a new culture of freedom and social justice. Thus the hamlet program seemed almost tailored to alienate the rural peasant: it negated his chosen way of life economically and culturally, and it convinced him of the stupidity and avarice of the government that asked for his support.

There was another significant drawback to concentrating a region’s entire civilian population in a strategic hamlet: it made a highly visible, valuable and vulnerable target for enemy attacks. The Saigon government claimed responsibility for the security of inhabitants in the strategic hamlets; Viet Cong guerrillas realized that successful attacks on the enclaves would demoralize the peasants and expose the government’s inability to provide the people with this most fundamental of its promised benefits. In summer 1963, one U.S. official reported to the White House that fifty strategic hamlets had been overrun by VC forces in the Mekong Delta region alone.\textsuperscript{55}

Beyond the hamlet strategy’s shortcomings, Saigon’s predicament grew more dire by all measures in 1962 and 1963. The Viet Cong was gaining, not losing, numbers as disaffected or fearful South Vietnamese joined its ranks. Diem and Nhu had made too

\textsuperscript{54} Latham, Modernization as Ideology, 181.

\textsuperscript{55} Krepinevich, The Army and Vietnam, 87.
many enemies in the South, particularly among the majority Buddhist population, and an uprising in mid-1963 culminated in the brothers’ execution in November. The fall of the Diem government, combined with the assassination of President Kennedy, effected a wholesale rejection of the failing hamlet strategy.

Though the strategic hamlets were abandoned, U.S. war planners retained many of the unsophisticated assumptions upon which the program was based. Chief among these were the opposition of the U.S./South Vietnamese development plan to the nation’s rural traditions and the imposition of an “us or them” dilemma upon the citizenry. In a 1965 interview, the head of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), General William Westmoreland, listed the Vietnamese peasant’s choices as threefold: He could remain in his hamlet, without guarantees of security; he could join the enemy camp and face extermination; or he could relocate to a government-controlled enclave as a refugee. When a journalist asked the general if only one of those choices could be taken seriously, he replied affirmatively: “I expect a tremendous increase in the number of refugees.”

Such was the United States’ first concerted attempt to win Vietnamese hearts and minds. In fact, U.S. advisors were already convinced that such a course was inadequate and that a significant presence of U.S. air forces and ground troops was necessary to prevent a complete victory by communists in South Vietnam. Many of these advisors, particularly senior military officials, felt that the focus on separating the guerrillas from the people was a diversion from the main problem: external support of the insurgency, including manpower and supplies, by North Vietnam. Over the next two years, the U.S. Army, led by Westmoreland, sought and obtained a wider mandate to bomb North Vietnam and land Marines in the South. The Vietnam War was now America’s war.


57 Corson, The Betrayal, 49.
CHAPTER FIVE

THE MARINES IN VIETNAM

Bucking the trend

The Marine Corps landed an amphibious task force just outside the Vietnamese city of Da Nang on the morning of March 8, 1965. Their greeting ashore by dignitaries and curious peasants belied the challenges they would soon face. They were initially tasked with perimeter defense of the Da Nang airfield and were ordered to “not, repeat not, engage in day to day actions with the Viet Cong.” Yet many Marines sensed that they had become “committed to a war that seemed to defy solution.” By early June, the Marine mission expanded to defending enclaves around three different airfields, though even this mandate seemed far from satisfactory. As one captain put it, the force “promptly occupied the areas and secured them. Equally promptly the Marine Corps leaders sensed the futility of defending a few bits of level terrain to support long-range air bombardment.”

To be sure, the airfields had their strategic importance; but, beyond Da Nang, Vietnam’s second largest urban area, the Marines saw that the countryside belonged to the Viet Cong’s quasi-communist insurgents. The guerrillas moved and operated at will, able even to sap the airfield’s perimeter defenses on occasion and to unleash mortar and grenade attacks with impressive frequency. It seemed facile to allow the insurgents this free reign, for even if the costs they exacted were minor, their freedom of movement and striking ability undermined the Vietnamese people’s confidence in the ARVN and in its American backers. “Positive security against Viet Cong violence,” the Marines

58 Hennessy, Strategy in Vietnam, 1.

59 Ibid., 65.


concluded, “was needed to extract the presence and movements of the rural communist revolutionaries from the uncommitted peasantry.”62 In other words, the enemy’s military posture had become a political problem, and the Marines needed a mixed response – military and political – to deal with it.

Army General Westmoreland was not ignorant of the challenge. His MACV staff, which oversaw all American troops in Vietnam, recognized the increasing violence and instability of the countryside and responded by giving the Marines a broader area of responsibility: this was I Corps, a geographically and culturally distinct zone surrounding Da Nang that encompassed 10,000 square miles, or roughly one sixth of the South Vietnamese land mass.63 However, the Marines and their Army overseers had divergent visions for securing and stabilizing I Corps. Westmoreland envisioned a three-stage process: “stop losing,” assume the offensive, then “mop up” the remains of enemy resistance.64 Hence he insisted on aggressive mobile operations, which entailed not only assistance of ARVN on I Corps terrain but deep American patrols that would hunt and kill (“search and destroy”) enemy fighters. Westmoreland put a premium on troop mobility out of a desire to clear enemy forces quickly from as large a swath of terrain as possible, thus “securing” it for the ARVN.

The Marines agreed that territorial control was a priority. However, they found such control fleeting; tipped off by villagers, insurgents could retreat from an area and give it the illusion of stability. Once an ARVN or U.S. military unit had passed through, control of the area would revert to the insurgents, who “flowed back in, gathered up the ‘goodies’ provided by the United States, eliminated those persons who came out in favor of the GVN, and re-established their control.”65 Worse still, whenever it was possible to engage the enemy, he proved difficult to kill, and the American reliance on superior firepower virtually assured high residual damage and casualties among the civilian

62 Stolfi, Civic Action, 2.


64 Hennessy, Strategy in Vietnam, 75.

65 Corson, The Betrayal, 57.
populace. One U.S. Army advisor during the strategic hamlet era, who grew so frustrated at the Westmoreland strategy that he resigned his commission, reported that he would gladly have endorsed such a policy if we knew who the enemy was and where he was. ... Guerrilla warfare requires the utmost discrimination in killing. Every time we killed an innocent person we lost ground in our battle to win the people. The majority of the Vietnamese population ... is not committed either to the Communists or the government, and indiscriminate killing by either side can be the deciding factor.66

Given this situation, their limited resources, and their institutional memory, the Marines preferred to methodically clear individual hamlets or villages, then reinforce them with indigenous defenses before moving outward to expand the secure areas. It was a slow strategy, but it had adherents in high places. The Marine Commandant, General Wallace Greene, argued in Washington that the Army strategy of “find’m, fix’ m, and destroy’ m” was a fantasy without the local institution of insurgent-proof enclaves.67 General Lewis Walt, who commanded the Marine force in Vietnam, agreed, as did Krulak, who was now the commanding general of all Marines in the Pacific fleet. The latter sang pacification’s praises whenever possible, insisting that

If we can destroy the guerrilla fabric among the people, we will automatically deny the larger units the food and the intelligence and the taxes, and the other support they need. At the same time, if the big [enemy] units want to sortie out the mountains and come down to where they can be cut up by our supporting arms, the Marines are glad to take them on, but the real war is among the people and not among the mountains.68

Westmoreland’s opposing strategy of “attrition,” much-maligned in the years since Vietnam, is best understood in the context of the Army’s experience. Rather than simply

66 Krepinevich, The Army and Vietnam, 84.

67 Hennessy, Strategy in Vietnam, 75.

abandoning counterinsurgency for a conventional strategy of attrition, MACV was trying to play to U.S. and ARVN strengths while avoiding the mistakes that had ruined the French and the strategic hamlets. Time was a critical factor in the calculus: MACV planners estimated that, after the time it took to locate and destroy main enemy strength, third-phase “mopping-up” operations alone would require an additional one and a half years. To insist on a strategy as slow and methodical as the Marines’ enclave pacification would have been to concede an American presence of a decade or more. Furthermore, Westmoreland assumed Marine enclaves would face the same difficulties the French citadels had: they were inadequate to close porous borders or slow the growth of communist support during the French Indochina War. That strategy had fallen apart when French forces, wary of repeated Viet-Minh raids, abandoned their massive air enclave at Lang-Son in 1953. They never regained an “oil spot” from which to expand their control.  

There was a final consideration in Westmoreland’s disdain for local pacification, which is also illustrative of a great schism among counterinsurgency strategists. “The issue between Westmoreland and Krulak,” wrote one pacification expert, “transcends the continuing rivalry between the Army and the Marine Corps. It goes to the heart of insurgency warfare – what is the role of external (in this case U.S. troops) forces in pacification?” While the Marines’ experiences in Vietnam and previous small wars convinced them to intervene directly on behalf of a native population’s safety, the conventional wisdom was that only native troops could be effective pacifiers. On this latter view, an outside group like the U.S. Army should act as trainers and equippers of the native forces, using them as intermediaries with the civilian populace. In adopting this latter theory, Westmoreland was in good company; Dr. Fall argued similarly, if less optimistically:

A U.S. Marine or Special Forces officer can perhaps fly a helicopter better than anyone else or even outwrestle a Communist guerrilla in judo or karate; he may be able to live in the jungle by trapping animals and,

---

69 Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams*, 106.

70 Corson, *The Betrayal*, 177.
through grueling training, may out trot a native while carrying a heavy pack (though this is doubtful) – but he simply cannot indoctrinate a South Vietnamese peasant or intellectual with an ideology that is worth fighting for. This ‘our’ Vietnamese must do for us, or rather, for themselves ... 71

Thus MACV viewed pacification as a problem for the Vietnamese, with the assistance of U.S. civilian administrators. To dedicate American combat troops to the effort would be counterproductive and a misallocation of resources in his view.

The Marines could not have disagreed more. As they expanded operations in I Corps, they found that the existing pacification structure was formidable only on paper. In reality its practitioners – particularly the South Vietnamese representatives – were “too slow or corrupt” to respond to the needs of the populace. Thus, the Marine leadership concluded, to occupy the troops with meaningless search-and-destroy patrols while spurning local stability operations would be the true waste of resources. As one historian puts it, while Westmoreland “believed destruction of the guerrillas would bring security,” the Marines concluded that “security would destroy the guerrillas.” 72

Despite the rising tension between the “Army” strategy and the “Marine” strategy, Westmoreland wished to avoid an “interservice imbroglio” and granted the Marines leeway to pursue a limited clear-and-hold strategy while still committing to the larger hunt for main forces of the North Vietnamese Army. Like all compromises, this was an agreement that pleased neither side. Krulak lamented that “every man we put into hunting the NVA was wasted” on “a mutation strategy … designed to pacify all shades of strategic thought…” 73 Critics at MACV likely believed the same thing, concerned that a fantastical Marine experiment would draw attention away from the real fight. One Army general cast aspersions both on the Marines’ willingness and fitness to engage the enemy: “I did everything I could to drag them out and get them to fight … They just wouldn’t

71 Fall, The Two Viet-Nams, 344.
72 Hennessy, Strategy in Vietnam, 75.
play. They just would not play. They don’t know how to fight on land, particularly against guerrillas."74

The Marines’ strategy appeared to receive vindication against Army wisdom in early 1966, when a pause in U.S. bombing of North Vietnam had failed to produce any peace negotiations and Kennedy’s successor, President Lyndon H. Johnson, began to face increasing domestic pressure over the war’s conduct. An ad hoc summit of U.S. military and political leaders was held in Honolulu in February 1966. According to the New York Times, “The word ‘pacification’ was on everyone’s lips” at the conference, and “many important members of the Johnson Administration embraced the idea with all the enthusiasm of a horse player with a new betting system.” The Washington Star’s Vietnam correspondent wrote that the Honolulu agreement, which also called for 100,000 additional U.S. troops, portended “an American-sponsored brand of social revolution as an alternative to communism in South Vietnam” and the end of a U.S. strategy “aimed at stabilizing the status quo in Asia.” Lofty rhetoric notwithstanding, no one in the Johnson administration seemed to know what “pacification” entailed in any practical sense. The strategy’s details were left to MACV commanders, who continued to tolerate corrupt and inefficient South Vietnamese pacification programs, effectively paying lip service to Washington’s pacification priorities.75 At the same time, the troop increase enabled Westmoreland to widen his own attritional strategy. Killing the enemy still took precedence over repairing the countryside.

Yet for almost a year, the Marines had already committed themselves to the pacification field experiment: the application of their small-war experiences to the anticommunist crusade in Southeast Asia. “Few explanations,” states one commenter, “emerge to justify their actions except to note that the conditions confronting them in the field convinced them the old way was the better way.”76

---

74 Krepinevich, The Army and Vietnam, 175.


76 Hennessy, Strategy in Vietnam, 78.
The Combined Action Platoons: Genesis

“For a while,” stated Marine historian General Edwin Simmons, pacification in Vietnam “appeared remarkably simple: you liberated a hamlet or village from VC domination, provided it with a shield of security, and nurtured and encouraged the renascence of governmental control and institutions with a sincere and carefully thought-out program of civic action.” Yet regular line companies found only marginal success in implementing this strategy, and even then only in the outlying rural regions that were most sparsely populated. The Marine generals’ commitment to village-level goodwill operations did not waver, however. By summer 1965, they insisted on massing as much as 50 percent of the Marine I Force contingent within village enclaves. At the same time, they issued broad directives to encourage element commanders to adopt their own grassroots approaches to village problems. One of their mid-grade officers, Colonel William Corson, who would later command the CAP program, reflected positively on this policy of direct action:

It is possible, as the Army has done, to ignore the problems of pacification if you live on a ‘hill,’ but when you are down in the hollow surrounded by the problems they intrude upon your existence. This was the intent of Krulak and Walt, for although neither was exactly sure what form civic action should take, their policy of forced proximity was designed to produce some sort of reaction from the Marines.

The generals achieved their desired effect. That summer, Marine commanders in several different village hamlets struck upon the same solution: a small unit comprised of volunteers - some hopefully knowledgeable of Vietnamese languages and cultures - would move into a hamlet, learn the customs and traditions of its inhabitants, perform civic works projects to improve the hamlet’s infrastructure, conduct night security

---

77 Simmons, “Marine Corps Operations in Vietnam,” 47.

78 Hennessy, Strategy in Vietnam, 79.

79 Corson, The Betrayal, 176.
patrols, and give military training to the local men who comprised the hamlet’s Popular Forces (PF).\textsuperscript{80}

This last function was perhaps the most important. Popular Forces were local militias, ostensibly under ARVN control but actually administered – if at all – by local village chiefs. The militiamen’s equipment and training were meager to nonexistent, as was the idea of regular pay for their service. Their reputation in the hierarchical South Vietnamese military establishment was lamentable. Their sole incentive for remaining in service was the promise – which occasionally did not hold true – that they could remain in their home district and would not be plucked away for ARVN service.\textsuperscript{81} Despite the Popular Forces’ inferiority, I Corps Marines began to perceive them as the linchpin to regional security. Krulak recounts in his memoir a comment about the Popular Forces by Defense Secretary Richard McNamara: “He said, ‘We are going to have to do something about this. These may well be the most important military people in Vietnam. They have something real to fight for - their own hamlet, their own family.’ And he was right.”\textsuperscript{82}

Thus the Marines concluded that they should combine their own military expertise with the PFs’ local knowledge. Once adequately equipped and trained, the PFs could operate on joint patrols with Marines, even taking the lead on some occasions. Jointness with South Vietnamese units was not new for American forces, but PF troops stationed in their own hamlets proved far less prone to desert or participate in corrupt practices – two perpetual problems in regular ARVN units. The Marine plan added another novel dimension. “U.S. commanders are prohibited by General Westmoreland’s orders from commanding Vietnamese troops,” Corson noted, “but in CAP those orders are disregarded. This disobedience is not a simple act of Marine obstinacy, but is a means to insure [sic] survival of the CAP and accomplishment of its mission.”\textsuperscript{83} A further innovation was the requirement of living among the hamlet’s soldiers and their families,


\textsuperscript{81} Peterson, \textit{The Combined Action Platoons}, 23.

\textsuperscript{82} Krulak, \textit{First to Fight}, 176.

\textsuperscript{83} Corson, \textit{The Betrayal}, 183.
taking an interest in the ancestral terrain and the livelihoods these PFs were tasked with protecting. Corson observed that “although there was no immediate transformation” in the targeted hamlets, the mere fact of a 24-hour Marine presence meant that “the Vietcong had to shoot their way into the hamlets, and this was not to their liking.”84 Thus, before any other advances were effected, there was a rapid denial of recruits and food supplies to the insurgents.

The local nature, as well as the consistency, of the Marine presence was emphasized: These incipient Combined Action Companies (CAC) and Platoons (CAP) worked to achieve self-sufficiency in the field, so they would not have to beg from the villagers or retreat to rear-area bases for supplies. Further, their aims were far more modest than the modernization or search-and-destroy theorists’. All the program’s objectives were predicated on the Marines’ ability to produce security results, rather than rely on rhetorical exhortations. Corson - an old Asia hand, doctor of economics, and former Naval Academy professor, summarized the intended progression in a hamlet:

The CAP initially makes no effort to enlist hamlet residents in an intelligence net. The peasants are first given the opportunity to observe that the CAP provides military security solely from its own resources. They become aware of CAP strength as prisoners are brought back … and dead Vietcong are brought in … The CAP tends to remove the superman aura surrounding the Vietcong. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the peasants become convinced that the CAP will remain and is competent to destroy the Vietcong. Usually the breakthrough in acquiring intelligence information comes from the hamlet children, who adopt and in turn are adopted by the Marines … The developing empathy between the Marine and the peasant is exploited as a matter of tactics.85

---

84 Corson, The Betrayal, 178.

85 Ibid., 187.
Local peasants, the Marines surmised, would respond positively when offered a tangible, immediate security benefit, then an earnest “personal appeal,” and nothing more. “Attempts to promote a virulent anticomunist crusade are avoided,” Corson added.  

Beyond its emphasis of local security over the rhetoric of free-world progress, a further distinction that set the Combined Action Platoon apart from other pacification efforts was its insistence on a “soft-sell” approach to construction and civic action in the hamlets. The Marines believed that cooperation with the Vietnamese people was possible only by resorting to “personal appeal rather than propaganda.” This stood in direct contrast to programs like the strategic hamlets, in which developmental assistance was a top-down approach that engendered xenophobic tensions. Contrary to the prevailing U.S. government idea of pacification as a “modernization” or “urbanization” process, the Marines committed themselves to being a “well-mannered minority which poses no threat to the existing social order,” eschewing forced relocations or plans to revolutionize the peasant economy. A reliance on Western-style “best practices,” on actuarials and economic theories of development absent sincere consultation with the affected locals, invariably came across as cultural imperialism and undercut the goals of civic action. Consequently, CAP Marines warned, “In the case of civic action what is best is not necessarily good.” The point of the program was not “to displace the village leadership or replace the Revolutionary Development program,” on captain argued. “Quite the contrary ... village chiefs and Revolutionary Development Team Leaders have been quick to use the CAC units in their support.”

The Combined Action Platoons: Life and death

In 1966, the American commitment of forces to Vietnam expanded drastically. Marine ranks in I Corps swelled from 9,000 to 40,000 by the beginning of that year, and the CAPs experienced a concomitant growth, However, despite the CAP program’s initial promise, it failed to meet its target goal of 74 operational platoons by year’s end. This

---

86 Corson, The Betrayal, 187.

87 Ibid., 188.

88 Stolfi, Civic Action, 40.
shortfall is explained in part by the lack of Popular Forces in many of the areas CAP Marines targeted. The commander of one regular Marine battalion, whose tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) included two CAP units, reported that “not one PF was a resident” of the villages they policed, because “all the eligible resident males, who should have been members of the PF platoons were gone! They had been drafted into the ARVN, joined the VC, or deserted” to avoid service altogether.\(^9\) This predicament was deepened by a nationwide Buddhist uprising against Diem’s successor, Premier Nguyen Cao Ky, in mid 1966.

Buddhist dissent, already commonplace against Ky and his American backers as a result of their efforts to replace Vietnam’s traditional social structure with a strong central government, was further inflamed when Ky fired Walt’s Vietnamese counterpart, the Buddhist I Corps commander General Thi. Ky declared martial law against the ensuing demonstrations, precipitating a violent period of in-fighting during which the ARVN siphoned off local PF soldiers to quell the disturbances.\(^9\) Any PFs remaining behind proved no match for the VC insurgents, who mercilessly attacked the village irregulars, convincing the survivors to turn tail and flee: Corson estimates that 40,000 Popular Forces soldiers deserted in the first half of 1966, a number almost matched by the amount killed in action.\(^9\) The Marines themselves were forced to dedicate additional resources to the uprising, first to help the government dampen it, then to prevent Ky’s government forces from firebombing their own cities to wipe out the demonstrators and end the crisis. In time, the PF manpower crisis would ease, but the Buddhist uprising was still an unmitigated disaster for the Marines’ political goals: it effectively signaled the end of South Vietnam’s few good-faith efforts at pacification, and it reinforced to the Vietnamese people the U.S. military’s apparent willingness to support an unpopular GVN regime at the expense of the native-born democratic movements.\(^9\)

---


At the same time, the Marines' hamlet war was beleaguered by a renewed impetus from Westmoreland to mobilize against regular enemy forces. Intelligence suggested that NVA units were increasingly infiltrating the South via a demilitarized zone (DMZ) straddling the North-South border, and more Marine units were dedicated to the fight against these regulars and the prevention of DMZ breaches. This would be a recurring theme throughout the war: whenever indicators of large enemy movements were found in I Corps, Westmoreland would exhort the Marines to abandon their methodical enclave strategy and go on the mobile offensive. He recounted in his memoirs that the Marines were "assiduously [sic] combing the beachheads, trying to establish firm control in hamlets and villages, and planning to expand the beachhead gradually up and down the coast..." Westmoreland went on to argue that this strategy still left the enemy space to maneuver, and besides, MACV "simply had not enough numbers to put a squad of Americans in every village and hamlet." This assumption effectively kept the CAP program small until Westmoreland's departure in 1968. Although it did continue to expand in that time, it never achieved its 1967 end goal of 114 field platoons. In fact, many pacification advocates would later argue that the North Vietnam's most renowned military strategist, General Vo Nguyen Giap, utilized his regulars in northern demonstrations of force to siphon Marines away from the villages, which would be left vulnerable to demoralizing VC infiltrations. This was the outcome in any case.

CAP commanders acknowledged the severity of the situation. Their most obvious difficulty was fulfilling the requirement that their units be self sufficient. Corson conceded that, even by early 1967, combined-action units "were an effective rear-area auxiliary defense force" but had not demonstrated the strength "to assume the main responsibility of the Other War – pacification." Walt and the staff of his command, the

---


95 Peterson, The Combined Action Platoons, 64.


97 Corson, The Betrayal, 179.
Third Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF), concurred that the program’s modest successes were outweighed by its small size and lack of resources, and in May 1967 he petitioned Krulak to formalize the CAP program as a permanent fixture of III MAF’s command structure, establishing a headquarters and training school for it at Da Nang.\textsuperscript{98}

Even so, supplies were still hard to come by. MACV still considered the Marine program an unnecessary distraction, and its members were forced to pilfer goods while assuming multiple command duties. Such “midnight entrepreneurship,” according to one Cap veteran, included “stealing lumber from the Seventh Air Force … and going down to the Navy and … coming in with fake orders for 1300 M1-M2 carbines…”\textsuperscript{99} Corson echoed this point. “CAP civic action is done on the ‘cheap’,,” he opined:

The other services have also assisted voluntarily – and at times involuntarily, when the CAP organization fills midnight requisitions at their poorly guarded logistical installations. The cumshaw or trading approach is not adequate to support all the possible civic action in the CAP program, but given the official U.S. attitude and the ineptitude of the USAID effort, it represented the best we could do.\textsuperscript{100}

The CAP units’ best met its ultimate test in late January 1968 during the period known as the Tet Offensive. Over a two-day period, combined forces of the VC and the NVA launched an orchestrated offensive across the entire South Vietnamese nation. Seventy-five percent of the country’s provincial capitals and five of its six major cities were flooded with nearly 100,000 enemy troops. The immediate effects of this devastating attack were compounded when Westmoreland, fearful that the urban assaults might be a feint preceding a massive invasion from across the DMZ, failed to divert sufficient forces from hinterlands into the cities. U.S. and GVN forces were able to re-establish control over the major cities by late February, but the VC continued its offensive operations with unprecedented frequency over the next few months. In this period, the American public saw via television a war whose brutality shocked them, a war whose conduct belied the

\textsuperscript{98} Peterson, \textit{The Combined Action Platoons}, 36.

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 47.

\textsuperscript{100} Corson, \textit{The Betrayal}, 189.
optimistic reports they had received from both the Johnson administration and the military establishment. By the time the Tet Offensive withered and the communists retreated with massive casualties, domestic American support for the war effort had plummeted, and the call for U.S. demobilization began in earnest.\footnote{Hennessy, \textit{Strategy in Vietnam}, 133.}

Few units endured the hell that the CAPs did during Tet. According to one CAP veteran, even before the offensive, the platoons exhibited “a marked and disturbing proclivity for being overrun” by enemy forces.\footnote{Peterson, \textit{The Combined Action Platoons}, 38.} “The CAPs were vulnerable at night,” writes one historian,

Because they generally sent out two patrols, leaving only 4 U.S. and 6 PF [troops] to defend their base area. The VC would consequently attack the CAP base with 60-100 men. With this 10-1 advantage more than 50 percent of such attacks killed 50 percent of those caught at the ill-fated CAP HQ/patrol base.\footnote{Hennessy, \textit{Strategy in Vietnam}, 157.}

The situation worsened during Tet. According to later Marine assessments, attacks on the CAPs had accounted 14 percent of all enemy activity in I Corps in 1967; in the three months around the initial Tet attack, CAPs – whose numbers amounted to no more than three percent of U.S. Marines in Vietnam – suffered nearly 50 percent of all I Corps attacks. Outside Da Nang on February 8, a NVA regiment advancing on the city battled a 15-man CAP reaction force for 15 hours, suffering 288 combat deaths before killing all but one Marine in the CAP force. On several occasions outside Hue in late February and early March, several CAPs had to give up ground and call massive air and artillery fire down upon their own positions to quell the enemy advance, destroying the villages they had fought so long to save.\footnote{Ibid., 58.} Notwithstanding a general consensus that “CAP hamlets demonstrated less setbacks and recovered quickest from the Tet campaign,” the Marines’ hamlet war had clearly struck a nerve with the enemy.\footnote{Hennessy, \textit{Strategy in Vietnam}, 136.}
In response to the new attention given them by the VC and NVA, the CAP leadership experimented with a basic shift in tactics: greater unit mobility. While the stationary “compound” CAPS were susceptible to overruns and ambushes, a number of “mobile” CAPs would be created, adopting (in principle) the methods of the guerrilla, becoming more difficult to locate and attack. The shift not only cut down on Marine casualties; it also earned the Corps some much-needed currency with MACV, for it resembled search-and-destroy more than the Marines’ original enclave strategy. This change in emphasis remains a source of debate among veterans of combined-action operations. Despite its superficial successes - “mobile CAPs suffered fewer casualties and killed more of the enemy,” states one chronicler – it also seemed a repudiation of the Marines’ original aims in I Corps. “The CAP’s mission was not just military,” one veteran recalls,

it was also pacification. Conceptually, the compound CAP accommodates the “inkblot” scenario, a secure area from which pacification extends. … the CAP Marines themselves understood that a “siege mentality” was not only a deadly error, but one of those habits of the PFs that it was their job to break.\textsuperscript{106}

Without a compound CAP, peasants would not have a central medical facility; local and district chiefs would not have safe havens; and unit supplies would have to be carried, rather than secured locally. By going on the move to reduce their casualties, the mobile CAP Marines effectively abandoned civic action and pacification, marking time until they could rotate home.\textsuperscript{107}

Despite this, “pacification” as an abstract term garnered more attention after the departure of Westmoreland and the Johnson administration in 1968 and 1969. The CAP program continued to enjoy modest growth as a result. Yet its metrics of success – numbers of enemy contacts and kills – had fallen dramatically. This experience was shared by other American units throughout Vietnam and is often cited, particularly by revisionist historians, as evidence that the U.S. strategy was working: the enemy was

\textsuperscript{106} Peterson, \textit{The Combined Action Platoons}, 60-62.

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 62.
hurting, and the war was being won. While it is true that VC forces were hunkered down in a defensive posture, avoiding costly confrontations after the losses they had suffered in the Tet Offensive of 1968, this does not necessarily support the revisionist account.\textsuperscript{108} Having won a moral victory in Tet, undermining American domestic support for the continued war, the enemy's apparent strategy was to wait out U.S. forces until they withdrew, which seemed likely after the 1968 election of Richard M. Nixon to the U.S. presidency. Fall noted that this was General Giap's overarching strategic vision, ever since he had engaged the French two decades earlier: the imperialist enemy's "blitzkrieg," Giap had proclaimed,

will transform itself into a war of long duration. Thus, the enemy will be caught in a dilemma: He has to drag out the war in order to win it and does not possess, on the other hand, the psychological and physical means to fight a long-drawn-out war.\textsuperscript{109}

Giap reiterated this sentiment in his 1968 treatise, \textit{Big Victory, Great Task}: "political success coupled with military stalemate could prove decisive in the long run."\textsuperscript{110} The downturn in violence, then, was likely a vindication of the guerrillas' strategy, not the Americans'.

As it turned out, Giap's estimation of the United States' will to persist was correct. Thanks to their own experiences in I Corps, as well as their intimate understanding of the domestic electorate's role in sustaining a small-war effort, the Marine Corps's senior leadership anticipated the beginning of the end of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. A senior aide to the Marine Commandant reported in 1969 that he and his staff had "adopted ... the idea that we were in the postwar period." As a result, Marines "fought to get their men out of Vietnam first, and won."\textsuperscript{111} Substantial drawdowns of U.S. force levels began in late 1969, and manpower limits were imposed on the I Corps Marines. CAP programs experienced the earliest and most dramatic cuts, since

\textsuperscript{108} Peterson, \textit{The Combined Action Platoons}, 67.

\textsuperscript{109} Fall, \textit{The Two Viet-Nams}, 113.

\textsuperscript{110} Hennessy, \textit{Strategy in Vietnam}, 135.

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 145.
commanders feared eroding the effectiveness of regular line units by depleting their ranks. Over the next year and without much fanfare, the CAP program and its four parent Combined Action Groups were dismantled systematically. On May 17, 1971, the last CAG and its platoons were deactivated in anticipation of a total Marine pullout from Vietnam.\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{112} Peterson, \textit{The Combined Action Platoons}, 82.
CHAPTER 6

DEBRIEFING: AN ASSESSMENT OF CAP WEAKNESSES

There is little question that the CAP program stood outside the mainstream of U.S. military strategy in Vietnam and was consequently under-funded and underutilized. But it is unlikely that more resources and a wider application would have translated into a different outcome in Vietnam. Although combined action exhibited several advantages over conventional counterinsurgent theories, the strategies share several problems, and CAPs carry a few unique ones, as well. These challenges fall into four broad categories: insecurity, cost liabilities, atrocities, and entropy.

Insecurity

"Nothing," states one contemporary political scientist, "provides legitimacy to an occupation more than the provision of security."\(^{113}\) This was the raison d'être of the Marines’ CAP strategy: once residents of a CAP hamlet grew confident that the Marines and their Popular Forces charges could guarantee their safety, intelligence and enthusiasm would flow forth. As Corson put it, "The CAP specifically avoids initiating civic-action projects until the credibility of their military-security efforts has been clearly demonstrated to the people."\(^{114}\) Early on in the war, this gambit appeared to pay off. Throughout 1966, General Victor Krulak’s Pacific Marine command reported that CAP villages were more 60% secure and experienced fewer PF desertions than any other Marine-controlled territory.\(^{115}\) In fact, based on official figures, Marine historians later asserted that CAP-controlled PFs - who constituted 12 percent of all PFs in I Corps - accounted for 29 percent of enemy kills and 40 percent of all weapons seized in the


\(^{114}\) Corson, *The Betrayal*, 188.

region, and that during the Buddhist crisis, when almost 40,000 PFs deserted their posts, not a single CAP PF was reported lost.\textsuperscript{116}

These figures sound incredible, and with good reason: in his conflict with Westmoreland over the Marines’ strategy, Krulak was known to oversell the CAP concept; his monthly progress reports are known today to Marine Corps archivists as “Krulak’s Fables.”\textsuperscript{117} Official numbers notwithstanding, the argument that CAPs held the greatest promise of village security in 1965 and 1966 is plausible; the war’s progress afterward, however, rendered the program unable to deliver on most of its promises in the long term. It was never fated to be more than, as Corson conceded, a “rear-area” program, an intelligence-gathering stratagem that entailed the placement of a small number of non-mobile troops, in close contact with an often-hostile society and resorting to a minimum of firepower: its risks were inherent.

In fact, the CAP program posed a security dilemma for the Marines: If a CAP unit failed to establish local security relatively quickly after moving into a hamlet, it risked being overrun. However, as with the strategic hamlets, if the CAP did make enough security progress to proceed with its civic action campaigns, the insurgents would attack the villages to demoralize them. The Marines’ successful presence in a village could make it a target, even if only for random harassment by mortars, rockets, and booby traps. This might be enough to sour the villagers on an otherwise courteous and productive occupying force. Sustained attacks on a CAP force might also convince PFs to desert and could instill a “fortress” mentality among risk-averse Marines, encouraging them to segregate themselves from the village residents and undermine the interpersonal relationships upon which the pacification strategy was based. This seemed to be the case with the Marines’ move to a “mobile” CAP concept.

Such casualty aversion need not arise among the Marines, and it is important to note that it rarely did in Vietnam. However, domestic political support is key to the waging of a successful long-term pacification strategy, and the electorates of democratic powers especially since Vietnam have exhibited a “Blackhawk Down Syndrome” – an

\textsuperscript{116} Peterson, \textit{The Combined Action Platoons}, 87.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 11.
unwillingness to brook low-intensity conflicts that incur military casualties without obvious metrics of victory.\textsuperscript{118} Given this predicament, a CAP-based military strategy today would be successful only if it sets tangible security goals and promptly achieves them – and even then, a substantial amount of education would be required of U.S. civilians on the home front to prepare them for an increase in casualties in the short- to mid-term. Combined action is a high-risk, high-return strategic investment. It can work, but its practitioners – and its enemies – understand that the American public has grown accustomed to far lower rates of death and injury among its defenders than even a successful CAP program can deliver.

Cost liabilities

Just as combined action entails a greater cost in lives, it also requires a longer occupation than most developed societies are willing to tolerate. As the duration of an occupation expands, the difficulties it faces increase geometrically. Even General Westmoreland understood this; it formed the basis for his consistent objections to the Marines’ “enclave” strategy. The enemy had to be harassed, chased, and destroyed whenever possible in order to conclude the war, in his view. “If we avoided battle,” he wrote, “we would never succeed.”\textsuperscript{119} Conversely, in arguing for their own strategy, the Marines estimated that it would take 20 years for South Vietnam’s pacification programs to work absent direct U.S. military participation.\textsuperscript{120}

Both sides were probably correct. In his account of the war in one province, Hau Nghia, historian Eric Bergerud argues that both strategies - Westmoreland’s and a MACV-approved pacification plan - were tried, and neither was terribly satisfactory because of the limiting factor of time. “Westmoreland’s strategy came unraveled,” he states, “not because the goal of destroying main force units was not worth attaining but rather because it proved impossible to accomplish within an appropriate amount of time


\textsuperscript{119} Hennessy, Strategy in Vietnam, 76.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 96.
and with acceptable losses.” However, “the American experience in Hau Nghia province fosters doubts concerning the wisdom or applicability of the alternative strategy endorsed by [U.S. pacification expert John Paul] Vann … and, later, many others.”

Why? Because by 1966, revolutionaries had essentially purged Hau Nghia of resistance, the VC had reinforced its cadres with new weaponry, and South Vietnamese representatives were loath to move very far for very long in the province. A U.S.-backed enclave could have lasted indefinitely in Hau Nghia, but it could not have effected much change in the status quo.

Time was not the only expense working against the CAPs. The lack of material resources, from armaments to vehicles to sundries to construction equipment, among CAP forces was widespread. Although, as Corson pointed out, the Marines found creative ways to augment their supply stores, the amount of funding and goods needed to implement such a strategy across the entire land area of South Vietnam would have been staggering.

Most critically, however, there was a shortage of manpower to buttress the CAP security program. The bedrock idea of combining operations with the hamlets’ Popular Forces assumed that sufficient numbers of PFs existed, but that was never the case. As one of the Marines’ battalion commanders pointed out, most able-bodied men had left their villages already, either joining ARVN or the VC or simply fleeing to avoid the conflict. The troops that remained did not automatically revert to the Marines’ control. According to one historian,

Reluctant to surrender what PFs were available to the very limited ‘control’ implicit to the CAP concept, few district chiefs ever provided the requisite troops. As originally conceived, the CAP platoons were to achieve a ratio of one Marine to three PFs. The shortage of PFs precluded this ratio from ever being attained. From the high of 1:1.9 achieved in 1966 this ratio declined continually for the remainder of the war.

---


Worse still was the perpetual lack of good Marines to fill CAP billets. Initially, the program sought combat-hardened volunteers from line units. Preferred recruits would be high school graduates with a minimum of two months’ in-country experience who averaged a 4.0 in conduct and proficiency and were “motivated to live and work with the Vietnamese people.”\textsuperscript{123} By 1968, however, rotations of personnel had taken such a toll that the volunteer and experience requirements were dropped. Even then, most CAPs still lacked sufficient strength, and many units had to alter their defenses or planned patrols to compensate for the shortfall.

The caliber of the CAP Marines was suspect, too, especially after the volunteer requirement was dropped. In choosing candidates for the program, commanders of regular line units would spare their most undesirable or ineffectual Marines, while holding on to the men that held a lion’s share of combat experience. Poorly educated men, men with questionable points of character, and ineffective fighters could be particularly damaging in a program that required “grunts” to behave with all the nuances required of statesmen. Writing of a proposed pilot program similar to the CAP concept, Bernard Fall argued that “if any alien soldier, equipped … with a four-week course in Vietnamese history and customs and a 750-word vocabulary, can win over the ever-suspicious South Vietnamese villages, this will have to be reckoned as a major sociological breakthrough.”\textsuperscript{124} It is a testament that the Marine Corps found some such “alien soldiers” in their midst, but it was a truth – then as now – that the service never had enough of them.

**Atrocities**

Perhaps the most novel aspect of the CAP program was its emphasis on the benevolence of the Marines, a fearsome fighting force, when dealing with the residents of their villages. One CAP veteran points out that Binh Nghia, a successful Marine-pacified village, was just a few miles north of My Lai, the site of a brutal massacre of civilians by

\textsuperscript{123} Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 73.

\textsuperscript{124} Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams*, 370.
U.S. Army personnel. “The CAP Marines waged war in the hamlets,” the veteran writes; “The mainforce Army and Marine units all too often waged war on the hamlets.”¹²⁵

In the aggregate, the CAP concept did leave a lighter footprint on the Vietnamese ground. Yet a lack of adequate education or acculturation could easily translate into abuses or excesses among CAP troops. “There were good CAPs and there were bad CAPs,” the veteran continued, but “if a single thoughtless act could undo months of hard work and built-up trust between the Marines and the Vietnamese, one must consider how much more destructive sustained cruelty or callousness could be.” Examples of such behavior were easy to find: residents were “taxed” by their Marine “friends”; they were subjected to interrogation tortures, including simulated drowning and caging; they were pressed into sexual servitude; and in at least one case, a child was murdered in cold blood by Marines sworn to “support and defend” the U.S. Constitution. “The CAP Marines had the power of life and death (or rather, just death),” wrote the veteran, and in that latter case “they apparently felt they could behave in such a way without having to account to any higher authority.”¹²⁶

Even the most well-intentioned pacifiers are tempted to perpetrate such crimes in a guerre sans fronts, where there are no boundaries on imagination and traditional rules of military engagement seem antiquated. The guerrilla’s reliance upon “sneaky tricks” forces counterinsurgent strategists to resort to “expedients” such as free-fire zones, rough interrogations, and the summary execution of prisoners.¹²⁷ Ironically, in a “people’s war,” where abstention from immoral (or at least politically counterproductive) behavior is a necessary condition of winning the battle for hearts and minds, the pressures imposed by insurgent activity make it easier to rationalize and incentivize such excesses. Although most CAP Marines made a more diligent effort to discriminate between combatants and innocents, they still faced the same paradox that counterinsurgents have always encountered: how to be feared by the enemy and loved by the enemy’s people. The hamlet program was an advance, but it still carried the baggage of violent occupation, and

¹²⁵ Peterson, The Combined Action Platoons, 35.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 89.

many Marines acted accordingly. Such examples are why one modern political scientist quips that, “for the vast majority of people in the world, benign domination is an oxymoron.”

Entropy

Under the right conditions - for example, an intervention in a fairly stable theater, with sufficient resources and training - a CAP program may overcome or mitigate all these challenges. But one drawback is inherent to combined action: its tendency to undermine traditional structures of military and political authority. It is a highly decentralized system in which huge amounts of authority are invested in junior and non-commissioned officers, and virtually all of a combined-action unit’s resources are directed to the welfare of the hamlet, often to the detriment of wider goals. The Marines’ drive to establish local order precluded the possibility of order on a national scale.

Many of the CAP’s proponents acknowledged this. “By most of the accepted criteria for an effective military organization a CAP cannot exist,” Corson wrote. “There is no unity of command; discipline is chaotic and arbitrary; the PF is torn between two masters; the GVN treats the PF soldier like a third-class citizen; and so forth. Yet out of this institutional chaos, using patience, example, and tact, the Marine sergeant creates order.” This had been the design of men like Krulak and Walt when they sent their Marines to live with the Vietnamese people with no specific orders. Decentralization of command and the encouragement of innovation were principles held dear by the Marines, and they were the heart of CAP strategy.

The chief difficulty of this approach, though, was one of resources. The Marines showed a remarkable degree of resilience in begging, borrowing, or stealing the goods they needed to survive. Yet in pilfering Air Force lumber or Navy guns, they exacted an opportunity cost on other units that could not access those goods. CAP commanders arrogated their objectives to those of their MACV superiors. Similarly, the dedication of men to the CAP experiment represented an opportunity cost to regular line units who


needed additional forces. Westmoreland continually requested relocation of the “enclave” Marines to areas of enemy strength, such as the DMZ and Khe Sanh, but again the Corps was wedded to its strategy first.

A further problem of the Marines’ decentralized approach was one of quality. Not all Marine sergeants or their squads were created equal; nor were the villages and hamlets they protected. Consequently, individual CAPs displayed a wide variance of means and results in the field. Some found pacification easy and saw no enemy action at all. Some had to contend with a lack of PF soldiers or civilian support. Some were constantly overrun by guerrillas. Some resorted to robbing and brutalizing the people they were tasked with protecting. Command of a CAP unit required far more independent thought than is generally tolerated in a military unit, and even rigorous training and education could not guarantee competency and accountability among the men who fought the “village war.”

Finally, the basic motivation for combined action may actually have undermined U.S. political objectives. The rhetoric of successive presidential administrations stressed the goal of a free, democratic South Vietnamese nation with a modernizing economic structure. This was the aim of projects like the strategic hamlets, but not of the CAPs. Combined action Marines sought to defend the villages’ status quo from communist revolutionaries, not to inculcate the peasants with a competing political ideology. They did not exhibit much expertise at spreading the “oil-spot” of security beyond the individual hamlets and villages they targeted. Rather, the Marines brought local stability through the reinforcement of tribal and regional traditions, which rendered federal control over rural Vietnam less likely. Even when successful, then, the CAP program amounted to village-building, which runs counter to the idea of nation-building.
CHAPTER 7

BACK TO THE FUTURE: THE COUNTERINSURGENT’S RESURGENCE

A tale of two speeches

Shortly after 9 a.m. on June 1, 2002, President George W. Bush stood at a rostrum overlooking the football field at West Point to deliver a commencement message to the United States Military Academy’s senior class. The bicentennial class of the Academy was the first to graduate since al Qaeda had attacked sites in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania with commercial jets, killing nearly 3,000 Americans, the previous September 11. Bush’s administration responded to the attacks by assuming a war footing in Afghanistan, where al Qaeda’s leaders enjoyed the protection of the Taliban, a former insurgent group that had established control over the country and declared it an Islamic emirate. Within a few months, a U.S.-led coalition had smashed the Taliban, scattered al Qaeda, secured Afghanistan, and begun to assist in the creation of a new, stable government. All that remained, it seemed, was to mop up the remaining Islamist pockets of resistance. Yet if any of the Army officers-to-be feared that they had missed out on America’s military response to the 9/11 attacks, the President reassured them:

Every West Point class is commissioned to the Armed Forces. Some West Point classes are also commissioned by history, to take part in a great new calling for their country … History has also issued its call to your generation … Our war on terror is only begun, but in Afghanistan it was begun well.130

For Bush, the threat did not end with al Qaeda; the work of one particular fringe terror group only drew attention to a global phenomenon that had to be confronted:

In defending the peace, we face a threat with no precedent. Enemies in the past needed great armies and great industrial capabilities to endanger the American people and our nation. The attacks of September the 11th required a few hundred thousand dollars in the hands of a few dozen evil and deluded men. All of the chaos and suffering they caused came at much less than the cost of a single tank.\footnote{Bush, "Remarks."}

Yet there was a precedent. Forty years before, on the same campus and in the same circumstances, President Kennedy had decried the low-technology challenge of the revolutionary guerrilla. He derided America’s nuclear-centered security policy and called for “a whole new kind of strategy.” Appreciating the same kind of enemy for the first time, Bush arrived at a similar conclusion to Kennedy’s: Traditional national-security reasoning would have to be discarded for a more responsive strategy. “For much of the last century,” he told the cadets,

America's defense relied on the Cold War doctrines of deterrence and containment. In some cases, those strategies still apply. But new threats also require new thinking. ... We cannot defend America and our friends by hoping for the best. ... If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long. ... We must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans, and confront the worst threats before they emerge. ... In the world we have entered, the only path to safety is the path of action. And this nation will act.\footnote{Ibid.}

Bush’s audience understood that he was referring to Iraq. That summer, perceiving that the job in Afghanistan was essentially complete, the president’s administration had begun to focus on future threats. The brazenness and terrible success of the 9/11 terrorist attacks led U.S. advisors to consider worst-case scenarios. Their conclusion was summed up in Bush’s speech. “The gravest danger to freedom, he said, “lies at the perilous crossroads of radicalism and technology. When the spread of chemical and biological and nuclear weapons, along with ballistic missile technology - when that occurs, even weak states and
small groups could attain a catastrophic power to strike great nations." The Iraqi regime under Saddam Hussein had proven its desire to attain the "weapons of mass destruction" to which Bush referred. Further, Hussein’s past record of intransigence against the U.S. and the United Nations led Bush’s government to believe that the Iraqi leader might also possess the will to use such weapons against the West, or at least the will to distribute them to other anti-Western radicals. The possibility, rather than the likelihood, of a future threat was sufficient to Bush to prescribe military action against Saddam, or anyone else who appeared capable of obtaining mass-terror weapons.

This "new" strategy mirrored the Kennedy preoccupation with low-intensity conflicts in the developing world. For Kennedy, the existence of guerrilla rebels who challenged states’ monopoly on violence and power constituted a global threat to U.S. security. For Bush, the existence of rogue state actors who challenged the West’s monopoly on mass-destruction weapons constituted a similar threat. Both presidents’ proposed solutions - the "Flexible Response" of Kennedy and the "Bush Doctrine" - sounded a "certain trumpet," a clarion call for greater military intervention abroad to remake failing or threatening states in America’s image. Implicit in both was the need for a pacification strategy.

As in Vietnam, the onset of war in Iraq - and its degeneration into a violent occupation - led military and political analysts to consider the importance of pacification after it was too late. Advocates of the Iraq invasion, suddenly put on the defensive by the failure of U.S. forces to stabilize the Iraqi state, made it de rigueur to nostalgically praise CAP-style pacification. Writing in the New York Times in late 2003, neoconservative Max Boot argued that "the biggest error the armed forces made in Vietnam was trying to fight a guerrilla foe the same way they had fought the Wehrmacht" in World War II. If the U.S. had emphasized counterinsurgency over "the army's conventional strategy, it would have fared better in Vietnam. This is worth keeping in mind today" in Iraq, Boot wrote, "as Sunni towns like Fallujah and Ramadi increasingly turn into an Arab version of Vietcong 'villes.'" What was needed in Iraq was "closer cooperation between Iraqi and

133 Bush, "Remarks."
coalition forces, as in CAP," for, after all, "No village protected under CAP was ever retaken by the Vietcong."\textsuperscript{134}

Another think-tank member echoed Boot's analysis and argued that CAPs were not only naturally exportable to Iraq, but necessary to the cause: "Local security forces' increased morale, improved training, successful engagements, greater intelligence-gathering and improved trust from the local population should combine to get tactical trends moving in the right direction again."\textsuperscript{135} Over the next two years, as the security situation in Iraq deteriorated and public support for the occupation eroded, pacification fever began to catch on with administration officials, at least in their rhetoric. In her Oct. 19, 2005, testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice suggested that the U.S. re-orient its Iraq strategy toward pacification: "Our political-military strategy has to be to clear, hold and build: to clear areas from insurgent control, to hold them securely, and to build durable, national Iraqi institutions."\textsuperscript{136}

Unsurprisingly, the Marine Corps had already implemented this strategy. Even before the invasion of Iraq, the service had renewed its interest in combined action as a strategic response.\textsuperscript{137} The Marine Corps Combat Development Command at Quantico opened a Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities and a Small Wars Center of Excellence, encouraging the critical study of the service's past to better position it for the future. As soon as Saddam was toppled from power, Marine leaders formed Combined Action Platoons in Iraq, and returning veterans proved eager to discuss their experiences.\textsuperscript{138} "The reactivated Combined Action Program," boast two junior officers, "has been a relative success in this modern war on terror and should be closely examined


as an option for future conflicts.139 However, these Marines may have oversold the strategy, just as Krulak, Corson and others did in Vietnam. A British reporter embedded with the Iraq CAP Marines in 2004 reported that the strategy did not recommend itself:

Mark II of the CAP programme seems to be running into even greater problems. Across the country American troops work with their poorly equipped Iraqi colleagues in an atmosphere soured by distrust - especially in provinces where the insurgency is at its most intense.140

Such difficulties hardly dented the new widespread faith in a civic-action-based pacification strategy. This faith was hardly limited to the Iraqi theater. In Afghanistan, where U.S.-led forces had so easily routed the Taliban and al Qaeda, the inability of the new government to control the countryside forced U.S. and NATO forces to redouble their anti-insurgent efforts. At the heart of this strategy was the Provisional Reconstruction Team (PRT), a mix of military professionals and civilian developmental experts who stabilized their areas of responsibility, initiated rebuilding efforts, and gleaned intelligence about ongoing enemy resistance.141

Lessons learned: Future CAP considerations

It is encouraging that commentators like Boot tout the Combined Action Program as an example of a more nuanced military strategy to pacify violent societies. As defense analyst Thomas P.M. Barnett argues, “Fighting a conventional military opponent in the desert is one thing, but dealing with insurgents who blend into the dense fabric of urban life ... is quite another.”142 The latter is a way of war that grows in prevalence, while U.S. forces’ approach to the threat appears to remain static. Understandably, the Marine CAP program provides a framework for Boot and others from which a forward-looking grand


140 Adrian Blomfield, “Soldiers fear that they are ‘sleeping with the enemy,’” The Daily Telegraph, October 18, 2004.


142 Barnett, Blueprint for Action, 37.

54
strategy may be carved. However, such advocates exhibit selective memories when they advance the revisionist thesis that more pacification would have “saved” Vietnam and, by extension, Iraq. This was not among the lessons the Marine Corps learned in its combined-action experiment. Rather, it learned a number of rules that ordain the use of pacification – rules that should temper the enthusiasms of an interventionist policy:

1. **Make sure the cause for intervention is broadly justified and stable.** Pacification as the Marines practiced it is essentially a moral and political exercise, an attempt to ease the fears and suspicions of a target population. But it is impossible to “win hearts and minds” if one’s motives for war are suspect: Few world citizens after 9/11 questioned the U.S.’ s motives for intervening in Afghanistan: the transgressions of al Qaeda and the Taliban required punishment, and their future aims required disruption. Such a consensus, however, was lacking on the issue of Iraq. The war was not officially sanctioned with U.N. approval, and America’s *ad hoc* coalition of the willing has lost momentum as the war drags on. Similarly, though the U.S. public initially supported the Iraq invasion, it has grown skeptical of the public rationales for war, which conflated the al Qaeda threat with Saddam and emphasized the latter’s illicit weapons programs. Both justifications have been discredited, eroding support in Iraq and in the U.S. for a continued American commitment.

2. **Prepare the U.S. public and military for a protracted, costly engagement.** One possible reaction to the “Vietnam Syndrome” - the U.S. public’s extreme aversion to sustaining the casualties and costs of war - is to gloss over an engagement’s likely liabilities and present a best-case scenario for public consideration. However, this invariably backfires when reality departs from the best possible case. It is a particularly acute problem in insurgent warfare, where the enemy is usually more driven by ideology than an occupying force or its home society is. As Bernard Fall points out, “A dead Special Forces sergeant is not spontaneously replaced by his own social environment. A dead revolutionary usually is.”\(^{143}\) Even worse, casualty-aversion can spread to military

\(^{143}\) Fall, *Street without Joy*, 375.
institutions, incentivizing behavior that minimizes risk but undercuts pacification goals: the reliance on less discriminate stand-off weapons, for example, or the inculcation of a "citadel" or "mobile CAP" mentality that keeps the troops separate from the people they are supposed to adopt and protect. CAP strategy is inherently dangerous and led to a higher casualty rate in Vietnam than Westmoreland's attrition strategy; if it is to succeed, its practitioners and its domestic beneficiaries must be soberly educated about its risks.

3. **Limit your aims.** "Conflating occupation success with the establishment of liberal democracy and functioning democracies is misguided," states one occupation expert.\(^{144}\) CAP strategy proves relatively effective at village-building, but not at nation-building. In a theater where tribal or ethnic factions fail to reconcile, the best a pacifying force may offer is the institution of a *modus vivendi* between parties; even in a relatively homogenous state where suffrage, universal education, and religious liberty are controversial matters, the best an occupier may do is facilitate the formation of what theorist John Rawls termed a "decent hierarchical society."\(^{145}\) In any case, it is unreasonable to expect Western-style governance from a pacified society. Attempts to institute such reforms entail longer, more heavy-handed occupations, and they run counter to the CAP principle of providing tangible benefits to occupied peoples without proselytizing.

4. **Have a clear end goal and a plan to get there.** CAP Marines, like most forces in Vietnam, grew acutely skeptical that their political overseers could envision an end scenario that would bring them home safe and successful. The military theorist Karl von Clausewitz recognized a basic truth two centuries ago: "No one starts a war - or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so - without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it."\(^{146}\) Yet in his tenure as the head of

---

\(^{144}\) Edelstein, "Occupational Hazards," 50.


U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) in 1999, Marine General Anthony Zinni – a veteran of the Marines' Vietnam campaign in I Corps – realized that that the U.S. “had a plan to defeat Saddam's army, but we didn't have a plan to rebuild Iraq.” He convened a seminar of civilian and military experts to draft a plan called “Desert Crossing” to provide for the reconstruction of a post-Saddam Iraq because, in his words, “I was convinced nobody in Washington was going to plan for it, and we, the military, would get stuck with it.”\textsuperscript{147} Among its conclusions, the “Desert Crossing” study determined that there are differing visions of what a post-Saddam Iraq should look like to various coalition partners. These differences will complicate developing a common coalition end state, much less reaching consensus on such a state. This will delay coalition formation during the critical early stages of the crisis and may complicate exit strategies.\textsuperscript{148}

One might assume that such an analysis might have made Bush administration officials more circumspect when planning for the Iraq War. Yet the CENTCOM war plan approved in August 2002 by Zinni’s successor, Army General Tommy Franks, and forwarded to the White House made no substantial provisions for postwar reconstruction, assuming that only 5,000 U.S. troops would remain in Iraq by December 2006.\textsuperscript{149} Due in no small part to his institutional conditioning as a Marine, Zinni never considered such a lack of reflection possible in war planning. “When it looked like we were going in” to topple Saddam, he recalled, “I called back down to CENTCOM and said, You need to dust off ‘Desert Crossing.’ They said, ‘What's that? Never heard of it.’ So in a matter of just a few years it was gone.”\textsuperscript{150}

5. Go in heavy. Westmoreland was absolutely correct in one criticism of the Marines’ enclave strategy: its emphasis on territory over mobility required far more troops than

\textsuperscript{147} Anthony Zinni, interviewed by Leslie Evans, University of California at Los Angeles, 14 May 2004 <www.international.ucla.edu/bcir/print.asp?parentid=11162> (5 January 2007).


\textsuperscript{150} Zinni, interview.
were available to him. Even the prevailing MACV strategy required more than half a million American servicemen and women in Vietnam. But the problem of boots on the ground is far more dramatic for pacifiers. The very idea of combined action was devised in part to help Marines compensate for manpower shortages by disseminating their squad members throughout the native Popular Forces. It is better to have an excess of soldiers and not need them than to need them and not have them.

6. Establish CAPs where security is already reasonably assured. There is no way to solve many of the security vulnerabilities entailed by an American unit’s living in a native village without relying on counterproductive and inhumane methods. CAPs are constantly in danger of being overrun. Worse, there is always the dilemma that, should CAP strategy display modest success in a region, its encampments become high-value targets for demoralizing attacks. These risks can only be mitigated by insertion into areas where native forces are already trustworthy and relatively effective. Iraq has proven a difficult theater to implement this rule: even in 2004, before the insurgency reached its apex, CAP Marines outside Fallujah grew suspicious of their Iraqi National Guard (ING) counterparts:

“We know when this place is about to come under mortar attack because the ING suddenly disappear,” one marine said, staring across the dusty compound at two guardsmen smoking on a wooden bench. “We are supposed to be fighting together, instead we are sleeping with the enemy.”

7. Concentrate first on rural areas. CAP action is based upon leaving a small footprint among the residents of a theater and eventually effecting small, welcome improvements in the residents’ lives. The less pre-existing infrastructure a region has, the more likely modest civic action is to bring political acceptance of pacifying forces. The greater an area’s population density and infrastructure, the greater cover and targets exist for an insurgent network – and the greater number of opportunities exist for a pacifying force to alienate the populace with house searches, firefight, and the like.

151 Blomfield, “Soldiers fear.”
8. If the rules are not met, avoid overt military intervention. The cumulative effect of these rules, learned by Marines in their Vietnam CAP operations, is to reinforce the fleeting nature of success in pacification. Civilization is as likely to “solve” the guerrilla and terrorist problems as it is to find a “can’t lose” strategy to playing tic-tac-toe. More often than not, the only winning move is to avoid being drawn into a futile game.

The Marine Corps contribution

Irrespective of its battle efficacy, the CAP program was a clear example of Marine nonconformity, born out of a faith to the empirical wisdom that its members had gleaned in their fighting in Vietnam and earlier small wars abroad. Army veterans such as Westmoreland learned one set of lessons from history. But Marines could plausibly argue as Al Hemingway, a CAP veteran, did in the title of his combat memoir: Our War Was Different. In doing so, they perpetuated a mythos of that service as distinguished by its innovation and its refusal to confirm when empirical pressures dictate otherwise.

Thanks to a greater concern with terrorism and “fourth generation warfare,” the Marines’ Vietnam-era pacification experiment is no longer unique to that institution. Yet their experiences complicate the simple thesis that CAP strategy would have won Vietnam or can be a panacea in the War on Terror. This final chapter in history of the combined action concept adds weight to the notion that the Marine Corps’ greatest contribution to U.S. grand strategy is no particular mission, but rather its perpetual ability to look over the horizon and generate future missions for the armed services as a whole. Its sober assessment of what works - how well and at what cost - can convince policymakers to be more cautious in choosing military means to achieve political ends. As the new interest in an old pacification strategy shows, America may well have a vested interest in perpetuating the Marines’ identity as the red-headed military stepchild and harvesting the strategic fruit it bears. If Cicero was correct in asserting that “an army abroad is of little use unless there are prudent counsels at home,” then the United States must continue to rely on the Marine Corps’ minority reports to form its prudent counsels.

REFERENCES


John F. Kennedy. “Remarks at West Point to the Graduating Class of the U.S. Military Academy, June 6, 1962.” Public Papers of the Presidents.


61


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

ADAM WEINSTEIN

EDUCATION

FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
Master of Arts Candidate in International Affairs. Degree date: Spring 2007. GPA: 4.0
Thesis: "Between Grand Strategy and Grandiose Stupidity:
Pacification Strategy in Vietnam and Today."

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy, October 2002. GPA: 3.4

UNITED STATES NAVAL ACADEMY
Bachelor of Science Candidate in Honors History, 1996-1998. GPA: 3.1

RELEVANT EXPERIENCE

2006-present: TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT
Copy Editor/Blogger/Columnist
Proofread, fact-check, and prepare visual layout of world, national, and local news for
Gannett-owned daily newspaper. Write monthly opinion columns.

2005-present: FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY, TALLAHASSEE, FL
Graduate Assistant, Department of International Affairs
Advise prospective and current graduate students. Courses taught/assisted:
British Politics
U.S. Supreme Court

2004-2005: NORTH BROWARD PREPARATORY SCHOOL, COCONUT CREEK, FL
Teacher/Tutor, Department of English
Courses taught or tutored:
SAT Preparation
International Relations
English 10

1997: USS CONSTITUTION, BOSTON, MA
Assistant Public Affairs Officer
Coordinated interviews with print and television media, including CNN, CBS, USA
TODAY, and Boston Globe. Awarded the Meritorious Unit Commendation.

1994-1996: SUN-SENTINEL, FT. LAUDERDALE, FL
Student Staff Writer/Editor
Research and wrote teen-interest articles for daily newspaper. Proofread and edited
related articles and assisted in page layout.

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations (Vol. 8, No. 1).

Corps,” and “Marine Corps Reserve,” in Dennis Spillman, ed., Encyclopedia of

September 11, 2006. “9/11: In the terror, we find connections,” Tallahassee Democrat, 8B.

August 11, 2006. “Our town: SoHo of the South,” Tallahassee Democrat, 5E.


OTHER WRITING


Spring 2006: “A Review of Essential Vietnam Literature.” Dr. Max Friedman, FSU.


CONFERENCES


GRANTS, AWARDS, AND HONORS

2006-2007 Gridley Thesis Fellow, U.S. Marine Corps Museums and History Division
2005 Two-Day “Jeopardy!” Champion
1999-2000 Judith and Merrill Lipsey Scholar, School of General Studies, Columbia University
1997 Naval Order of the United States Current Events Champion, U.S. Naval Academy
1997 Phi Alpha Theta
1997 First-Year Russian Award, U.S. Naval Academy
1996 Novice Champion, Liberty University Policy Debate Tournament
1996 AP Scholar with Distinction