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No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War

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No Sure Victory

MEASURING U.S. ARMY EFFECTIVENESS AND PROGRESS
IN THE VIETNAM WAR

Gregory A. Daddis

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To my father, Robert G. Daddis

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"Then, no matter what we do in the military field there is no sure victory?"

—President LYNDON B. JOHNSON

"That's right. We have been too optimistic."

—Secretary Of Defense ROBERT S. MCNAMARA

White House Meeting, December 18, 1965

Introduction

ON JUNE 6, 1944, American, British, and Canadian forces launched their amphibious invasion against Hitler's Atlantic Wall. Determined to secure a foothold on French soil, Allied soldiers labored through the English Channel's surf, only to be met by mines, obstacles, and the covering fire of German defenders. One American combat engineer in the Easy Red sector of Omaha Beach articulated the fears of many Allied commanders fretting the lack of progress on the 1st Infantry Division assault beaches. "We were really just pinned down and couldn't really see anyone to shoot at. Around ten o'clock things looked hopeless on our part of the beach."¹ By mid-day, Lieutenant General Omar N. Bradley, the U.S. First Army's commander, was becoming increasingly alarmed over stagnating conditions on the beachheads. Fragmentary reports from Leonard T. Gerow's V Corps created added confusion. Bradley recalled that as the Omaha landings fell "hours and hours behind schedule" the Allied command faced an "imminent crisis" about whether and how to deploy follow-up forces. Throughout the day, Bradley and his officers agonized over potential German counterattacks.²

On the beaches, small groups of infantrymen struggled to make their way inland under withering German fire. Carnage was everywhere. A lieutenant in the U.S. 29th Infantry Division estimated that for every 100 yards of beach, 35 to 50 corpses lay slumped on the sand.³ Despite the damage they suffered, the Americans slowly but

perceptibly began pushing back the German defenders. Just before 1:30 P.M. Bradley received his first bit of good news from V Corps headquarters. "*Troops formerly pinned down on beaches Easy Red, Easy Green, Fox Red advancing up heights behind beaches.*"⁴ As midnight approached, the Americans held a tenuous grip on the French mainland. They were, however, still far short of their objectives outlined in the original Overlord plans. The 4,649 casualties sustained in Bradley's First Army on June 6 clearly indicated that putting 55,000 men ashore had been no simple task—despite the beach codenames of Easy Red and Easy Green.⁵ But signs of progress did exist. By the end of D-Day, eight Allied divisions and three armored brigades had made it safely ashore. By D+1, over 177,000 troops had landed on four beachheads secured by an increasingly sturdy defensive perimeter supported by Allied air and naval power.

Over the next few weeks, American and Allied forces made even more tangible progress. After consolidating its hold on the Normandy beaches, Bradley's First Army captured Carentan on June 12, effecting a link-up between the Utah and Omaha beachheads. On June 14, Major General J. Lawton Collins's VII Corps launched an offensive to seize the port facilities at Cherbourg, which fell on June 27. All the while, logistical buildup on the original landing beaches continued at a steady pace, despite severe July storms in the English Channel. As Bradley later wrote, "France was supposed to be liberated in phases and we now stood at the brink of the first: a swift push from the grassy pasture lands of Normandy to the sleepy banks of the Seine."⁶

This next phase in the Allied operation advanced less smoothly than the First Army Commander envisioned. U.S. forces, now confronting Germans defending from a series of hedgerows, bogged down in the French inland *bocage*. Collins, studying the terrain on the VII Corps front, knew his subordinate units were in for "tough sledding," and his calculations proved accurate. The 83rd Infantry Division, leading the corps attack on July 4, lost nearly 1,400 men and failed to achieve its objective of Sainteney.⁷ The Americans made scant progress on the second day, and a sense of frustration began to permeate the Allied high command. Supreme Allied Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower recalled, "In temporary stalemates . . . there always exists the problem of maintaining morale among fighting men while they are suffering losses and are meanwhile hearing their commanders criticized."⁸ For the next three weeks, the Allies measured their progress in the number of hedgerows taken, hardly a basis for sustaining troop morale or displacing the Germans from French soil.

The deadlock finally broke when Operation Cobra, launched on July 25, smashed through the German defenses at St. Lô and beyond. Allied difficulties in establishing and expanding the beachhead and breaking out of the Norman hedgerows

provoked important operational and institutional questions. Combat commanders in particular reflected on how best to assess their effectiveness and progress. In short, how did they know if they were winning? Terrain arguably served as the most visible scorecard. In fact, during the Normandy campaign, unit effectiveness and forward progress could be determined using a number of quantitative indicators—the number of troops or units ashore in France, the amount of territory under Allied control, the number of phase lines passed, or the number of Germans killed, wounded, or captured. American commanders considered their troops effective because they were making progress in capturing territory and killing the enemy, both of which led to ultimate victory.

Less than a quarter of a century after the D-Day landings at Normandy, assessing wartime progress and effectiveness proved much more challenging. When United States Regular Army and Marine forces arrived in the Republic of South Vietnam in 1965 they confronted a war in which useful metrics for success or failure were not readily identifiable. With a ubiquitous enemy and no clearly defined front lines, U.S. soldiers and commanders struggled to devise substitutes for gauging progress and effectiveness. Their conventional World War II experiences offered few useful perspectives. Occupying terrain no longer indicated military success. The political context of fighting an insurgency complicated the process of counting destroyed enemy units or determining if hamlets and villages were secured or pacified. In short, the metrics for assessing progress and effectiveness in World War II no longer sufficed for counterinsurgency operations. Operation Attleboro, fought between September 14 and November 24, 1966, typified the complexities of evaluating unit effectiveness and operational progress in an unconventional environment. It would be a problem that would plague American leaders for the duration of their war in Vietnam.

Dubious Metrics in Vietnam

In February 1966, the commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), General William C. Westmoreland, arrived at Honolulu for a presidential summit meeting to receive formal guidance for the coming year. Westmoreland had been in command for over eighteen months and had supervised the buildup of American forces in Vietnam. In the dark days of 1965, when South Vietnam seemed on the verge of collapse, he had managed the allied riposte to the dual threat of North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units and southern communist revolutionary forces (Vietcong⁹). By year's end, a wave of optimism swept through the American mission in South Vietnam. The U.S. 1st Cavalry Division had won an apparently stunning victory over NVA regulars in the Central Highlands' Ia Drang

Valley. Other American units were aggressively pursuing southern insurgent forces. After a series of coups between 1963 and 1965 that wracked the South Vietnamese government, political stability finally seemed to be emerging in Saigon.

At Honolulu, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and Secretary of State Dean Rusk assigned Westmoreland a number of goals to help gauge American progress for the coming year. Among the primary strategic objectives, increasing the percentage of South Vietnam's population living in secure areas ranked high. So too did multiplying base areas denied to the Vietcong and pacifying high-priority locales. These were hardly new goals. However, with the introduction of American ground combat forces in mid-1965, McNamara and Rusk believed they finally had the tools to make substantial progress in all fields. Westmoreland, though, viewed his overall mission as a sequential process. To MACV's commander, the summit meeting's first strategic objective of "attrit[ing] . . . Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces at a rate as high as their capability to put men into the field" preceded any major efforts toward pacification or population security. While President Lyndon B. Johnson had hoped that the conference would spur social and domestic reform in South Vietnam, military operations took center stage in 1966.¹⁰

Westmoreland set his sights on the northwest portion of South Vietnam's III Corps Tactical Zone. From there, the communists drew strength from their inviolable base areas inside the Cambodian border while maintaining pressure on Saigon.¹¹ Westmoreland's prime target was the 9th People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) Division. A major Vietcong unit supporting the NVA, the 9th had parried local U.S. forces for months. If the division were destroyed, MACV argued, pacification of the countryside could begin in earnest. Preoccupied with searching for and destroying enemy formations, the Americans overlooked that much of the Vietcong's power derived from its political organization in the rural villages and hamlets outside of Saigon. Based on their conventional experiences from World War II and the Korean War, many U.S. commanders viewed attrition of the enemy as a necessary first step to achieving their larger strategic ends. Westmoreland clearly thought along these lines when he ordered Operation Attleboro launched in the fall of 1966.¹²

The battles comprising Operation Attleboro illustrated the ephemeral nature of American gains against the Vietcong. Brigadier General Edward H. de Saussure's 196th Brigade moved into Tay Ninh province in mid-September and immediately began a series of battalion-sized probing operations searching for supply caches and enemy base camps. The 196th had been in country for less than two months, and enemy contact during the campaign's first weeks had been light. On November 3, de Saussure stumbled into the lead reconnaissance company of the 9th Division. Enemy machine gun and rocket fire ripped into the American formations.¹³ De Saussure's

soldiers, slowed by command and control difficulties, groped blindly through the dense jungle, taking casualties from mines, booby traps, and constant sniper fire. For the 196th, the actions in Tay Ninh were a sobering initiation to insurgent combat. Despite these initial troubles, Attleboro quickly expanded into a full-blown search-and-destroy operation. Major General William E. DePuy, commander of the 1st Infantry Division, took control of the fighting as brigades from the 4th and 25th Infantry Divisions rushed into Tay Ninh province. On November 6, artillery and Air Force B-52 bombers pummeled suspected enemy locations. For a loss of one killed and 23 wounded, the Americans had inflicted 170 enemy casualties.¹⁴

Over the next three weeks, the 9th PLAF Division sparred with the growing number of American units inside War Zone C. By Attleboro's conclusion on 24 November, eighteen U.S. and three South Vietnamese infantry battalions, along with twenty-four batteries of artillery, had participated in the operation. The Americans received support from an impressive array of logistical and fire support assets. Nearly 8,900 tons of supplies were flown into Tay Ninh during Attleboro, while U.S. airmen flew over 1,600 sorties and dropped 12,000 tons of ordnance. On one day of fighting alone, November 8, artillerymen fired over 14,000 rounds of ammunition.¹⁵

General DePuy found Attleboro's results extremely satisfying. American units reportedly inflicted 1,016 casualties on the 9th Division during the nearly two-month long battle. Relying on body counts in Vietnam, however, was problematic at best, fraught with intentional inaccuracies at worst. Possible kills, double-counting, estimations, exaggerations, and difficult terrain all made body counting an imprecise technique for measuring progress. In a war partly concerned with enemy attrition, though, there seemed to be few alternatives. As Westmoreland's chief intelligence officer curtly stated, "To obtain the attrition rate, enemy bodies had to be counted."¹⁶

While attrition formed an important element of American strategy in Vietnam, it hardly served as the guiding principle. Westmoreland believed that destroying enemy forces would help lead to larger political ends. Even before Westmoreland's tenure, MACV had realized that quantitative reporting of enemy kills insufficiently measured progress in an unconventional environment. Body counts did not necessarily produce reliable qualitative assessments of the enemy's military and political strength. While General DePuy thought that Attleboro had crippled the 9th PLAF Division, after the first week of November the Vietcong simply refused to fight. They instead withdrew west, closer to their Cambodian bases. Once DePuy's combat units left, the VC quietly returned. Reducing the Vietcong's fighting power had not diminished their political influence within the local hamlets and villages. Killing the enemy was one thing. Defeating him politically was something altogether different. Attleboro did not break the Vietcong's political hold in Tay Ninh province, a point that few American commanders realized at the time.¹⁷

If estimating progress during Operation Attleboro proved difficult, so too did assessing unit and soldier effectiveness in the jungles and dense thickets of Tay Ninh province. During the fighting's opening rounds in early November, American units quickly became separated from one another and disoriented in the harsh terrain. Westmoreland relieved General de Saussure on November 14 and MACV reluctantly concluded that the 196th Infantry Brigade had "cracked" under the pressures of combat.¹⁸ Clearly, unit and soldier performance under fire concerned MACV, but other problems existed as well. If killing the enemy did not translate into political progress, how could MACV accurately measure effectiveness and progress at all? How would MACV know if an area was "pacified?" How should commanders define "security?" If intelligence officers were unable to provide precise assessments of enemy strength levels, how would field commanders know if the Vietcong and North Vietnamese forces were in fact succumbing to attrition? In a counterinsurgency environment, how did American officers and soldiers know whether or not they were making progress over time? It is upon these questions, and most importantly the last, which this study looks to shed light.

Measuring Counterinsurgency Effectiveness

Separating the assessment of military effectiveness from that of operational and strategic progress is critical to both army operations and organizational learning. Progress often validates unit effectiveness, doctrine, training, and an army's tactical approach to fighting. Progress on a conventional, linear battlefield is often clearly discernable. An army on the offense is either moving forward or not, killing enemy troops or not. A defending army is either holding its ground or retiring before the enemy. Progress, of course, is not constant. Stalled offensives can recover momentum, just as crumbling defenses can recuperate after early setbacks. The Allied breakout from the Norman *bocage* region and the subsequent hardening of German defenses along the Siegfried Line illustrated how success and failure can be fleeting. Still, in most conventional operations, progress is tangible—to the combatants, to the civilian populace, and to both sides' political leadership. Such is usually not the case in counterinsurgencies.¹⁹

In fact, the unconventional nature of the Vietnam War created innumerable problems for those measuring progress and military effectiveness. MACV, to its credit, realized early on that it needed to develop assessment metrics for fighting an insurgency. The military staff, however, produced an unmanageable system. MACV's monthly "Measurement of Progress" reports covered innumerable aspects of the fighting in Vietnam—force ratios, VC/NVA incidents, tactical air sorties, weapons

losses, security of base areas and roads, population control, area control, and hamlet defenses. Though kill ratios became a central yardstick for many U.S. combat units, even contemporary officers sensed that they were inadequate. In a 1974 survey of army generals who served in Vietnam, 55 percent noted that the kill ratio was a "misleading device to estimate progress."²⁰

Given the complexities of establishing appropriate metrics in a counterinsurgency environment, this work evaluates how the American army in Vietnam defined and measured its own progress and effectiveness. It argues that the U.S. Army component of MACV failed to accurately gauge performance and progress because, as an organization, it was unable to identify what Scott S. Gartner has called "dominant indicators" within the complex operating environment of Southeast Asia. In developing the dominant indicator approach for assessing wartime effectiveness, Gartner has argued that military organizations often misjudge how they are performing because a host of variable factors influence combat. Contradictory evaluations frequently result. For Gartner, the "modern battlefield produces too much information for individuals to assess fully. So they reduce the available information to specific indicators." Dominant indicators thus "represent an organization's central measure of performance."²¹ While much of the Vietnam historiography maintains that "body counts" served as the U.S. Army's only indicator of success in Vietnam, this argument is too simplistic and unsupported by the vast number of reports generated by MACV in attempting to measure wartime progress.²²

In revealing how American officers and soldiers, particularly those assigned to MACV, assessed both their effectiveness and progress in Vietnam, this study argues that the U.S. Army's ineffective approach to establishing functional metrics resulted from two primary factors. First, few officers possessed any real knowledge on how to gauge progress in an unconventional environment, particularly within the distinct setting of South Vietnam. While officers understood the basics of political-military coordination in countering insurgencies, and faithfully attempted to implement such an approach in Vietnam, the majority held only a superficial appreciation of the intricacies involved in unconventional warfare. Most American officers serving in MACV deployed to Southeast Asia with limited knowledge or practical experience in assessing counterinsurgency operations. They possessed even less understanding of the cultural landscape on which they were fighting. As the Attleboro experience implies, notions of one's own effectiveness mattered as much as the reality of that effectiveness. MACV's process of establishing what was thought to be useful performance metrics thus becomes an important undercurrent within this work.

Second, the U.S. Army in Vietnam often stumbled through the conflict without a consensus on its strategy. In its inability to develop coherent strategic objectives

supporting broad policy goals, MACV never conveyed to its officers in the field how best to defeat the communist insurgency. Almost by default, American combat operations centered on three tasks—search and destroy, clearing operations, and security.²³ While MACV designed these missions to support pacification and the re-establishment of governmental control in South Vietnam, their wide range undermined efforts at measuring progress. Metrics for a search-and-destroy mission in 1966 might not be practical for a pacification mission in 1969. The body count made sense when fighting NVA regiments in the Central Highlands. It served little use, however, in determining how much progress a Mekong Delta village was making in freeing itself from insurgent influence. MACV never articulated how field commanders should prioritize their efforts, for in large part it never agreed on where the main threat lay. Pacification and civic action missions often conflicted with the competing tasks of defeating North Vietnamese main force units. The unresolved debate lasted throughout the United States' involvement in Southeast Asia and left MACV without a clear strategy to assess.

Left with insufficient foundational knowledge of counterinsurgencies and vague strategic objectives, MACV embraced Secretary of Defense McNamara's advice that everything that was measurable should in fact be measured. The problem of gauging effectiveness and progress stemmed not from a lack of effort on the part of army officers or a single-minded commitment to counting bodies. Rather, complications followed from collecting too many data points without evaluating how accurately such data reflected progress on the battlefield. Few within the American mission analyzed the data to develop meaningful trends. Senior officers thus had no way of accurately assessing their level of success in counterinsurgency operations. Rarely did MACV staff officers link their metrics to their strategic objectives. Consequently, MACV—and much of DoD—went about measuring everything and, in a real sense, measured nothing. In the process of data collection, the data had become an end unto itself. Ultimately, this failure in establishing functional metrics of effectiveness and progress played a significant role in undermining the American conduct of the war in Southeast Asia.²⁴

In Search of Relevant Metrics

In the late 1980s, Allan R. Millet, Williamson Murray, and Kenneth H. Watman developed a comprehensive framework for gauging the effectiveness of military organizations. The authors defined military effectiveness as “the process by which armed forces convert resources into fighting power. A fully effective military is one that derives maximum combat power from the resources physically and politically

available.”²⁵ They characterized combat power as “the ability to destroy the enemy while limiting the damage that he can inflict in return.” Millet, Murray, and Watman then outlined a way to assess effectiveness at the political, strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war. Political effectiveness consisted of securing resources in the required quantity and quality. Strategic effectiveness meant the ability to obtain politically derived national goals using those resources. At the operational level, the authors posited that effective military organizations flexibly integrated combat arms to achieve their strategic objectives. Finally, they defined tactical effectiveness in terms of battlefield movement, destruction of enemy forces, and logistical support for tactical engagements.²⁶

While appropriate for conventional military operations such as the 1944 Normandy invasion, the above framework seems insufficient for assessing counterinsurgency effectiveness. Political efficacy has less to do with mobilizing national resources at home than coordinating political and military actions within the theater of conflict. Even the definitions of military effectiveness and combat power appear inappropriate for unconventional warfare. Destruction of enemy forces does not necessarily translate into operational or strategic success. The ability to hold or gain ground—a measure of effectiveness in Trevor N. Dupuy's *Numbers, Predictions and War*—may mean little within the political conflict between insurgents and the population.²⁷

If more recent literature offers little guidance for measuring counterinsurgency effectiveness, Vietnam-era American officers had few historical resources and even less practical experience upon which to draw. This is not to say that counterinsurgency was unstudied in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Changes in U.S. and Soviet Cold War strategies created an upsurge in insurgency literature. In January 1961, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev pledged support to countries waging “wars of national liberation” against Western influence. President John F. Kennedy, Jr., countered, having already renounced the Eisenhower administration's reliance on strategic nuclear deterrence. In its place, Kennedy sought a more balanced approach (flexible response) to the American strategy of containment, increasing conventional ground forces and emphasizing the use of Special Forces.²⁸ The changing political environment encouraged a spurt of treatises and commentary on unconventional warfare. Interpretations of guerrilla warfare and counterinsurgency operations flourished, from Cuban Che Guevara to Briton Robert Thompson and a host of “specialists” in between. The expanding literature provoked Vietnam expert Bernard B. Fall to lament that “too many amateur counter-insurgency cooks have had their hands in stirring the revolutionary warfare broth.”²⁹

Fall himself would maintain “the difference between defeat and victory in Revolutionary War” was that “the people and the army must ‘emerge on the same side of

the fight.”³⁰ This political dimension of insurgency did not lie outside the intellectual capacity of U.S. Army officers in the early 1960s. Several commentators thought the French had lost in Indochina during the 1950s because of their inability to gain the political support of an increasingly nationalistic civilian population.³¹ British experiences in Malaya and the U.S. advisory role in Greece also seemed to indicate that revolutionary warfare would be an essential part of modern conflict and that strategy must include more than military elements.³² Reflective officers grasped the need to coordinate military and political actions. The answer, wrote Major General Edward G. Lansdale in 1964, “is to oppose the Communist idea with a better idea.”³³ For commanders on the ground, however, implementing such a proposal was not so straightforward. How could a division commander devise and offer a “better idea” once he was deployed to Southeast Asia and engaged in combat operations? Once occupied in searching for and destroying enemy units, there often seemed little incentive to devote time and resources away from actual fighting.

American officers largely dismissed British and French experiences for their seeming irrelevance to tactical combat operations in Vietnam. Westmoreland believed that Malaya’s unique environment and political situation offered few lessons for MACV.³⁴ Thus, despite a rising interest on the subject, U.S. officers came across few suggestions for measuring success in counterinsurgencies. Most understood the political element of unconventional warfare but struggled to find advice on integrating military operations into the larger political context of fighting against insurgencies. In spite of the mass of counterinsurgency writings, military officers possessed few practical texts on the political-military relationships of revolutionary warfare. Even fewer sources discussed measuring effectiveness once military units were engaged in fighting insurgents.

Given the dearth of resources on measuring counterinsurgency effectiveness, it seems no wonder that U.S. officers found it difficult to evaluate their efforts in Vietnam. Achieving political objectives using military tools was a complicated task. Most officers deploying to Vietnam knew population security to be an important task within the political realm of counterinsurgency. The question remained of how commanders could discern whether their units were making progress. Robert Thompson illustrated the problems in establishing criteria based on hostile incident rates. A decrease in enemy incidents might mean the government was in control but might also mean the insurgents were so established politically they no longer needed to fight. Thompson did propose that the quality of information voluntarily gained from the population was an important gauge, perhaps indicating that qualitative standards were more important than quantitative ones in determining progress. As he noted in 1969, “In the end an insurgency is only defeated by good government which attracts voluntary popular support.”³⁵ For young American officers and

soldiers hardly operating in the same political universe as Vietnamese villagers, such metrics certainly were difficult to measure accurately.

The nature of combat in Vietnam compounded these difficulties. No two battles or engagements were identical. Environmental, behavioral, and political circumstances all varied in ways that may have seemed haphazard to Americans unfamiliar with unconventional warfare.³⁶ Further muddying the waters was the “mosaic” nature of revolutionary warfare in Vietnam. As Westmoreland’s chief intelligence officer persuasively asserted, depending on the balance between military and political struggles, insurgents often avoided combat in one area while seeking it in another. Consequently, what might have been an effective counterinsurgency technique in one province or district might be irrelevant or even counterproductive in another portion of the country.³⁷ This mosaic nature, which many American senior officers seemed to have overlooked, made assessing army progress in Vietnam all the more daunting.

So too did the nature of the American military experience in Southeast Asia. U.S. Army policies for the rotation of personnel did little to promote either transmission of lessons or thoughtful analysis of unit effectiveness. As one observer noted, the “shortness of tours for staff and commanding officers (while sound for the troops on grounds of morale), together with the conformity of the system, led to a dependence on statistical results.”³⁸ The validity of these statistics often depended entirely upon the reporting commander. With tours of duty rarely extending beyond one year, a commander’s perceptions could be a significant variable in determining organizational effectiveness.

No less important was the MACV change of command between William Westmoreland and Creighton Abrams. While many accounts overstate the differences between Westmoreland and Abrams, an important point remains. Shifts in command focus and in national strategy objectives required changes to metrics for determining the effectiveness of MACV’s own operational plans. Since MACV never made such modifications, its system for measuring progress and effectiveness became increasingly irrelevant as the war proceeded.³⁹

Doctrinal gaps added yet another element of uncertainty. Commanders could not even turn to their own field manuals to determine military effectiveness in a counterinsurgency environment. Department of the Army Field Manual 31-16, *Counter-guerrilla Operations*, while comprehensive, offered scant advice on how to gauge progress in an unconventional war. The manual did counsel commanders and staffs to develop detailed estimates of both the civil and military situation in their areas of operation. This included analyzing weather and terrain, the population, the guerrilla forces, and what resources the host country could offer. The doctrine counseled staffs to assess the effectiveness of the guerrilla, his relation to the population, and

the effectiveness of his communications and intelligence networks. At the same time, FM 31-16 recommended that planners assess the "effectiveness of measures to deny the guerrilla access to resources required by him."⁴⁰ Left unanswered was the question of "how?"

As the war proceeded, few if any Americans truly knew if they were winning or losing. Operating blindly made it nearly impossible for MACV to make prudent adjustments to tactical and operational procedures. Such confusion made it equally difficult for administration officials to provide strategic focus as the war proceeded. Frustration became palpable at the highest levels of command in Vietnam. Major General Frederick C. Weyand, commander of II Field Force, offered his assessments to a visiting Washington official in late 1967. "Before I came out here a year ago, I thought we were at zero. I was wrong. We were at minus fifty. Now we're at zero."⁴¹

A Framework for Assessment

All this raises the question of whether one can even quantify something as abstract as a counterinsurgency campaign. In such an environment, what is a measurable standard? One could make the argument that metrics in counterinsurgency operations are pointless. Political will, loyalty of the population, and an individual's sense of security cannot be accurately measured. But if there are no measurable standards in a counterinsurgency operation, do senior officials simply measure progress based on a military commander's instinct within his area of responsibility? This appears problematic, regardless of how much senior officers trust their subordinate leaders' judgments. Certainly commanders' personal assessments are important, but relying solely on intuition in determining progress is just as troubling as relying exclusively on statistics such as body counts.

In revealing how American officers and soldiers assessed their effectiveness and progress in Vietnam, this study looks beyond body counts. MACV established a host of other metrics that often contradicted one another and provided a false sense of progress. General DuPuy's evaluation of Operation Attleboro suggests that relying on the wrong indicators can result not only in contradictory assessments but inaccurate ones as well. Reports exaggerated the damage inflicted on the 9th PLAF Division, damage that hardly upset the Vietcong's political hold in Tay Ninh province. This relationship between indicators and resultant staff estimates and command decisions serves as the principal framework for analysis of this study. It will examine three main areas in which officers and soldiers defined and evaluated their effectiveness in counterinsurgency operations during their time in Vietnam.

The first area of analysis can be defined as *metrics of mission success* and takes a broad interpretation of combat power, expanding the definition to include political, social, and cultural aspects. Naturally, the overall objective of military operations in Vietnam was important for measuring mission success. As historian Russell Weigley stressed, "to answer the question of whether an institution is effective, we must first ask the further question: effective in pursuit of what purposes?"⁴² Even while prosecuting his strategy of attrition, Westmoreland argued that pacification efforts remained the crucial element of American policy. Despite this assertion, body counts seemingly became the prominent index of progress in a war without front lines and territorial objectives.⁴³ This study uncovers the host of other metrics used by MACV to measure its progress. It examines how officers defined and measured pacification security, how they evaluated the effectiveness of their Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) training programs, and how they assessed the damage being inflicted on the enemy's political infrastructure.

Finding dominant indicators for mission success became increasingly difficult as MACV added further metrics to evaluate local support and popular attitudes. In exploring these metrics, this study will consider how MACV measured the population's trust and cooperation. It probes how U.S. officers assessed voluntary aid from villagers and to what extent local residents trusted their governmental officials or feared insurgents, who so often reemerged when American forces departed. This study additionally reveals the problems MACV faced in rating its performance in winning the intelligence war, arguably a prerequisite for winning the larger war in Vietnam. Army officers too often stressed quantity over quality in their reporting systems. In the process, they at times missed the importance of information being voluntarily provided as a metric of mission success. Villagers trusting U.S. advisors enough to identify insurgents within their hamlets seemed an important indicator of progress. If American forces were pursuing insurgent units without local assistance, conceivably their offensive operations mattered little. Broken Vietcong cells simply would be replaced by a sympathetic or frightened population.

Perhaps clear measures of ineffectiveness were equally as important as measures of success. *Metrics of mission failures* thus comprise the second area in which this study analyzes MACV's system for assessing effectiveness and progress. Such metrics should have covered a wide range of potential missteps—unwarranted "collateral damage," wrongful detentions, or civilian deaths based on faulty intelligence, or enemy initiated battlefield contact. While arguably a negative approach to gauging progress, it seems a vital element of confronting an insurgency. U.S. strategy in Vietnam depended on units operating within legal boundaries to maintain legitimacy among the population. Contemporary counterinsurgency literature discussed the importance of operating within these bounds, and keeping track of transgressions

may have helped to refine military operations in a given area. Surely it would have been advisable for officers to measure untoward acts of violence on those civilians they were charged to protect.

The final area of analysis can be described as *metrics of organizational effectiveness* and considers how the U.S. Army assessed itself as an institution. Both historians and former officers have held varying perspectives on the army's performance during the Vietnam War, especially in the conflict's latter years. This study probes that debate, asking if the quality of American ground combat troops eroded over time. This institutional-based metric rests largely on factors internal to the U.S. Army, such as morale, unit cohesion, and the will to fight. As such, commanders' assessments of their units loom large. Determining a unit's level of motivation and morale were among the most intangible aspects of assessing military effectiveness in Vietnam. These are critical areas to explore, however, because they affected the army's capacity to accomplish its assigned missions.

Measuring organizational effectiveness is further warranted because of its relationship to the metrics of mission success and failure. Here, one must distinguish between—and separate—the terms “effectiveness” and “progress,” especially for counterinsurgencies. As this work demonstrates, the two concepts, while related, are not the same. American commanders in Vietnam, however, often conflated and confused the terms. Throughout the war, they trumpeted the combat effectiveness of their troops on the battlefield, believing that such effectiveness equated to progress in the overall war effort. Yet in the complex political-military environment of Vietnam, effectively killing the enemy did not guarantee progress toward strategic objectives. Therefore, this study explores not only how MACV defined and perceived organizational effectiveness but how senior officers related these notions to their broader evaluations of progress.

Finally, this last area of analysis investigates whether there was a decline of unit effectiveness within the U.S. Army over time. Poor race relations, drug problems, and contentious officer-enlisted relations epitomized the final years of American involvement in Vietnam. This study asks if these issues truly eroded the army's effectiveness. It seems important to ask if ostensible changes within the U.S. Army's ranks in the early 1970s altered how senior officers wrestled with measuring success.

Limits of the Study

Counterinsurgencies are complex affairs. Former advisor Dave R. Palmer claimed that the American war in Vietnam in 1966 included four components: “the air campaign against North Vietnam; a nation-building effort within South Vietnam; a

diplomatic offensive to put pressure on Hanoi to cease its aggression; and Westmoreland's ground battle in the South.”⁴⁴ While modern ground combat rarely, if ever, occurs in a vacuum, this study will limit its focus to the U.S. Army experience during the Vietnam War. External variables such as air power and the performance of ARVN allies certainly influenced the U.S. Army's ability to achieve its objectives. However, these areas will be considered only to the extent that they shaped the army's perceptions of its own progress and effectiveness. As an example, this study will not evaluate air power effectiveness in Vietnam. Rather, it will assess how army officers viewed air power as a means for increasing their own effectiveness in winning the war.⁴⁵

Clearly, U.S. Army combat units were not the only American forces operating in South Vietnam. American advisors, working with both ARVN units and local district and provincial chiefs, were intricately involved in missions of pacification and Vietnamization. Their efforts in measuring effectiveness had a marked influence on command and staff perceptions at MACV. The Hamlet Evaluation System (HES), established in January 1967, attempted to gauge progress in the pacification effort and fed directly into the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) directorate at MACV. While a thorough discussion of the American advisory effort falls outside the parameters of this study, U.S. district and provincial advisors and those training ARVN units supplied a wealth of data to MACV. How well MACV thought evaluation tools such as HES helped assess overall progress during the war is crucial to understanding the relationship between pacification programs and American strategy.

U.S. Marine Corps operations also fall outside the purview of this study, even though the Corps operated under the MACV command structure. Despite their influence on certain campaigns and battles, and their oftentimes innovative way of approaching pacification missions, the marines ultimately did little to alter the course of American strategy or the way in which the command measured progress and effectiveness. They often served only as an auxiliary to MACV planning and operations. As an example, the pioneering approach of Combined Action Platoons, a combination of marine volunteers and Vietnamese militia living inside villages and working primarily on civic action projects, failed to take hold at the strategic level. More importantly, the marines were responsible for a limited geographical area and could not affect the insurgency's attack on large portions of the country or the stability of the Saigon government. Though the marines offered creditable alternatives to fighting the insurgency in Vietnam and fought valiantly in some of the heaviest fighting of the war, their efforts, from MACV's perspective, too often remained of a secondary nature.

In the end, this is a study of how the U.S. Army component of the Military Assistance Command in Vietnam assessed its progress and effectiveness throughout a

long war in Southeast Asia. Without existing evaluation models for counterinsurgency operations, the army struggled to measure if and how much progress was being made against an enemy committed to revolutionary warfare. Searching always for discernible signs of progress, either on the military or political front, MACV and its field commanders labored to develop accurate metrics of success for an unconventional environment. They never succeeded. The conventional benchmarks of World War II no longer applied. That the army never could determine if it was winning or losing goes far in explaining the final outcome of the war in Vietnam.