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Eating Soup with a Spoon: The U.S. Army as a "Learning Organization" in the Vietnam War

Gregory A. Daddis

Abstract

Standard Vietnam War narratives often argue that the U.S. Army lost the war because it failed to learn and adapt to the conditions of an unconventional conflict. Based on a reappraisal of learning processes rather than on the outcome of the war, this essay argues that as an organization, the U.S. Army did learn and adapt in Vietnam; however, that learning was not sufficient, in itself, to preserve a South Vietnam in the throes of a powerful nationalist upheaval. A reexamination of the Army's strategic approach, operational experiences, and organizational changes reveals that significant learning did occur during the Vietnam War despite the conflict's final result.

Introduction

One of the dominant narratives of the Vietnam War in the last quarter century has centered on the argument that the U.S. Army, often broadly defined, lost the war because it failed to learn and adapt to the conditions of an unconventional conflict. In fact, denunciations of the Army's willingness to learn appeared even before the final collapse of South Vietnam in 1975. Critics pointed to a system which rewarded those who "practiced conformity . . . and encouraged officers to

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hide mistakes" and to a service culture riven by corruption.[1] Postwar expositions, especially from disgruntled officers, followed suit. One commentator argued that the "Army chose not to adapt to the unique environment of Vietnam," narrowly employing a flawed strategy of attrition while failing to understand the need for pacification. So obdurate had the Army's leadership become that it even "ignored calls for change that came from within."[2]

Influential histories of the war seemed to reinforce such interpretations. In *America in Vietnam*, Guenter Lewy maintained that the U.S. Army futilely pursued attrition while neglecting the more important goal of population security. Andrew Krepinevich's *The Army and Vietnam* went further, arguing that the Army failed "primarily because it never realized that insurgency warfare required basic changes in Army methods to meet the exigencies of this 'new' conflict environment."[3] This narrative of unsuccessful military learning became fashionable with publication of John Nagl's well-received *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, a cautionary tale linking learning to victory. For Nagl, the British Army won in Malaya because it was a "learning organization." The U.S. Army lost in Vietnam because it was not. "The United States Army," Nagl averred, "resisted any true attempt to learn how to fight an insurgency during the course of the Vietnam War, preferring to treat the war as a conventional conflict in the tradition of the Korean War and World War II."[4]

Some historians, such as Lewis Sorley, contend that the Army did learn, especially under the leadership of Creighton Abrams, who took command of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) in mid-1968.[5] Here, though, standard historiography of the war offers somewhat of a false dichotomy. Either the U.S. Army failed in Vietnam because it refused to learn and adapt, or it did learn and succeeded militarily, only to have the fruits of victory traded away in political negotiations. This essay offers the more nuanced explanation that while much of the Army proved capable of learning and adapting throughout its time in Vietnam, too often factors outside of the Army's influence vitiated its efforts. In short, the fact that the U.S. Army lost in Vietnam fails to prove that it did not learn.

1. Edward L. King, *The Death of The Army: A Pre-Mortem* (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972), 75. William R. Corson, *Consequences of Failure* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1974), 100–101.

2. Cincinnatus, *Self-Destruction: The Disintegration and Decay of the United States Army during the Vietnam Era* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1981), 9–10.

3. Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 82–85. Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 259.

4. John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), xxii.

5. Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999). Sorley more recently has argued that Gen. Westmoreland, Abrams's predecessor, failed to learn (or at least "it is not clear what he learned") during his tenure as COMUSMACV; Sorley, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 117.

As an organization, the U.S Army did learn and adapt in Vietnam; however, that learning was not sufficient in itself for securing victory. By focusing on the process of learning, rather than on the war's outcome, this article examines elements of American strategy, operational innovations, and organizational change to suggest that American defeat in Vietnam cannot be explained by reluctance, even resistance, to learning about the complexities of unconventional warfare.

War and Learning in Vietnam

Crucial to any assessment of military learning is comprehending how armies draw conclusions from their own experiences and those of others, particularly the enemy, while engaged in combat. Organizational learning theorists caution that it is individuals acting as agents of organizations, rather than organizations themselves, who learn. Certainly, institutions establish systems which either facilitate or impede the learning process. Organizational culture, biases, and rewards all shape the practice of learning. Individuals, however, frame problems, design solutions, and act to solve problems.[6] This seemingly small point can illuminate studies of the U.S. Army in Vietnam. Changes in doctrine, alterations to organizational structure, and modifications to the employment of force all took place in a dynamic wartime environment which changed over time and varied widely from province to province. Charges that the Army failed as a "learning organization" often underrate the mosaic nature of Vietnam while overvaluing the influence of a constraining organizational culture.

Acknowledging this caveat, Harvard Business School's David A. Garvin usefully defines a learning organization as one "skilled at creating, acquiring, interpreting, transferring, and retaining knowledge, and at purposefully modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights."[7] Garvin's characterization implies a dual process of intellectual growth and behavioral change. In assessing the U.S. Army in Vietnam, one thus must observe not only patterns of learning but also adaptation on the battlefield. In this sense, adaptation is a manifestation of learning and suggests that learning may be meaningless, at least in war, unless it is demonstrated in practice. Of course, not all organizational change stems from learning.[8] All armies at war respond to stimuli, both internal and external, and such responses can be divorced from a formal learning process. To evaluate if an

6. Chris Argyris, *On Organizational Learning* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993), 8, 123. Bo Hedberg, "How organizations learn and unlearn," in *Handbook of Organizational Design*, vol. 1, *Adapting organizations to their environments*, ed. Paul C. Nystrom and William H. Starbuck (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 6.

7. David A. Garvin, *Learning in Action: A Guide to Putting the Learning Organization to Work* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000), 11. In terms of gaining and retaining knowledge, it is important to note that Nagl argues that the Army "had neither the knowledge nor the desire to change its orientation away from conventional wars"; Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, 126.

8. Jack S. Levy, "Learning and foreign policy: sweeping a conceptual minefield," *International Organization* 48, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 288.

army truly is learning, however, it seems necessary to evaluate the linkages between intellectual processes and the military innovations or adaptations produced by the addition of new knowledge.[9]

Certainly, many of MACV's officers imperfectly made such linkages. Historians like Andrew Krepinevich and Loren Baritz highlight culture's role in undermining the connections between learning and progress, arguing that a rejection of counterinsurgency stemmed from institutional rigidity and an organizational desire to fight conventional warfare in Europe. One former U.S. Army officer even has maintained that the average American soldier was "not well suited" for counterinsurgency in Vietnam since it was "not in keeping with the traditional American way of war."[10] Arguing, however, that culture limited learning to such a degree as to cause failure appears exaggerated. Surely Army culture in the early 1960s produced biases and predispositions in officers already inclined to conventional warfare based on their organization's recent history in Korea and World War II. Yet even if military organizations learn within existing intellectual constructs, cultures can and do change. Hardly does an organizational, or even national, culture solely determine policies as other variables, especially in wartime, always are at play.[11] Recent scholarship even indicates that the explanatory power of culture diminishes for armies actively involved in war.[12]

Further complicating any analysis of Army learning in Vietnam is the war's outcome. Ignoring Clausewitz's warning against making "judgment by *results*," critic John Nagl assessed organizational learning in Vietnam from 1965 to 1972 by asking the question "Did the U.S. Army develop a successful counterinsurgency doctrine in Vietnam?"[13] Such outcome-based analysis fails to acknowledge the possibility that the Army could learn and still lose. In equating learning with winning, Nagl also discounted the prospect that both the regular North Vietnamese

9. Dima Adamsky discusses the linkages between the nature of military organizations and the innovation produced in *The Culture of Military Innovation: The Impact of Cultural Factors on the Revolution in Military Affairs in Russia, the US, and Israel* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Security Studies, 2010), 7.

10. Adrian R. Lewis, *The American Culture of War: The History of U.S. Military Force from World War II to Operation Iraqi Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 225. Loren Baritz, *Backfire: A History of How American Culture Led us into Vietnam and Made us Fight the Way We Did* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 233. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 5.

11. Richard Lock-Pullan, *US Intervention Policy and Army Innovation: From Vietnam to Iraq* (London: Routledge, 2006), 8. See also Henry Mintzberg and Frances Westley, "Cycles of Organizational Change," *Strategic Management Journal* 13 (Winter 1992): 40. On military organizations learning within their own cultures, see Brian M. Linn, *The Echo of Battle: The Army's Way of War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

12. Patrick Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern War Through Western Eyes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 15–16.

13. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, 174. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Everyman's Library, 1976, 1993), 194.

Army (NVA) and the largely unconventional forces of the National Liberation Front (NLF) might have learned at a faster rate throughout the war than their American adversaries. In this sense, Garvin's definition of learning organizations is significant. Process matters. Acquiring, interpreting, and transferring knowledge, as well as modifying behavior, constitute a progression of actions that cannot be explained only by an organization's end state.

Setting aside the issue of defeat or victory in Vietnam, the U.S. Army's process of learning in the years following World War II illustrated an organization committed to altering routines and practices based on the experience of combat. In 1951, soon after the Chinese entered the Korean War, the Army's Office of the Chief of Information distributed a series of pamphlets titled *Army Troop Information Discussion Topics*. That same year the Army staff published a special regulation, *Processing of Combat Information*, which systematized procedures for capturing and institutionalizing combat lessons from Korea. The Army's Assistant Chief of Staff, G3, now responsible for compiling training and operational lessons, oversaw the implementation of "lessons learned" from the front lines into training programs throughout the service. This coordinated, and fairly comprehensive, reporting and processing system sought to improve combat effectiveness by candidly sharing the experiences of veterans. As General John R. Hodge commented in the introduction of the March 1953 issue of *Combat Information*, "lessons learned" bulletins brought out "some of the more important deficiencies in our infantry operations in Korea."[14]

The Army's headquarters codified this process of recognizing challenges and confronting them with institutional learning in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In 1959, Army Regulation (AR) 525-24, *Combat Operations—Command Report*, established guidelines for the "rapid and effective collection, evaluation, and application of specific lessons learned in combat operations."[15] One year later AR 525-60 prescribed explicit procedures for the processing of combat operations. By May 1966, six months after American soldiers first grappled with NVA regulars in South Vietnam's Ia Drang Valley, the Department of the Army had established a foundation for organizational learning which would remain in place for the remainder of the Vietnam War. AR 1-19, *Operational Reports—Lessons Learned*, instituted a "system for the collection, recording, evaluation, and appropriate corrective action for operational requirements contained in operational reports."[16] These OR/LLs

14. Hodge quoted in Dennis J. Vetock, *Lessons Learned: A History of US Army Lesson Learning* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: US Army Military History Institute, 1988), 85; on Korean War "lessons learned" processes, see 79–86. On changes in organizational routines and practices, see M. Leann Brown, Michael Kenney, and Michael Zarkin, eds., *Organizational Learning in the Global Context* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2006), 4.

15. Department of the Army, AR 525-24, *Combat Operations—Combat Report*, Washington, D.C., 29 October 1959.

16. Department of the Army, AR 525-60, *Combat Operations: Processing of Combat Information*, Washington, D.C., 17 February 1960 and AR 1-19, *Operational Reports—Lessons Learned*, 26 May 1966. Ronald H. Spector notes that the "lessons learned" process was an imperfect one

constituted a major aspect of unit life in Vietnam and arguably set the conditions for intellectual growth and behavioral change required of learning organizations.

In South Vietnam, the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam wasted little time in establishing a process for collecting and disseminating combat lessons. Formed on 8 February 1962, MACV issued its first "lessons learned" report on 30 March, an account of Heliborne Operation Cai Ngay in An Xuyen province. A steady stream of reports soon followed. The MACV staff shared knowledge on Vietcong (VC) ambushes, "clear and hold" operations, population and resources control, and defeating the VC political infrastructure.[17] Both the Army and MACV OR/LL processes indicate that an operational feedback loop existed, allowing commanders and their units to profit from the combat experiences of others. The content of these reports certainly was important, but so too was the learning process itself. Rather than rejecting new ideas about fighting in an unconventional environment, many commanders purposefully shared evaluations of their unit's performance in combat. Brigadier General Ellis W. Williamson of the 173rd Airborne Brigade believed that his recurring *Commander's Combat Note* encouraged his officers and soldiers "to continue those things that were proven to be good and to avoid repeating our mistakes."[18]

Williamson's emphasis on interpreting, sharing, and then applying new information implies that MACV's commanders learned both inductively and deductively. As seen below, many U.S. Army officers underwent a deductive learning process, studying broad conceptual ideas on counterinsurgency and unconventional warfare and then attempting to apply those lessons on the political and military battlefields of Vietnam. Officers like Williamson also made use of inductive learning skills. Gathering new knowledge by observation and experience, these "reflective practitioners" actively sought to improve their effectiveness by expanding their understanding of the war through doctrinal revisions, through professional journal articles, and in the OR/LLs themselves.[19]

Of course, inductive learning in Vietnam could be exceedingly difficult. Commanders faced numerous problems in assessing the impact of their operations. The results of their efforts were not always visible. Unit commanders like General

at best. "Those commanders who had the time or inclination to read such publications were always perfectly free to disregard them"; Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 218.

17. Lessons learned index in Headquarters, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), "Combat Experiences 5-69," 6 January 1970, p. 11-8, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa. (hereafter cited as MHI).

18. Williamson quoted in Vetock, *Lessons Learned*, 106. Certainly, it might be suggested that this was a self-fulfilling prophecy. Williamson wrote the commander's notes, so he was predisposed to viewing them as useful. On the importance of both content and process, see W. Warner Burke, *Organization Change: Theory and Practice* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2002), 14.

19. Reflective practitioners in Léon de Caluwé and Hans Vermaak, *Learning to Change: A Guide for Organization Change Agents* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2003), 267. On inductive versus deductive learning, see Mintzberg and Westley, "Cycles of Organizational Change," 41.

Williamson might aspire to sustain proven techniques, but the complexities of fighting in Vietnam often precluded a true assessment of what worked well in terms of counterinsurgency operations. When the 173rd launched Operation New Life in Long Khanh and Binh Tuy provinces in late 1965, the brigade set three ambitious goals of destroying local VC units, assisting farmers with their rice harvest, and restoring governmental control to the area. Such wide-ranging missions—covering the military, economic, and political aspects of the war—created enormous problems for those attempting to measure progress and effectiveness. How, as an example, could the 173rd truly know when the South Vietnamese government had wrested political control from the enemy?[20]

The 173rd Airborne Brigade's experiences in Operation New Life are instructive for gaining insights into the Army as a learning organization in Vietnam. The unit's three-fold mission suggests that commanders in MACV understood the multifaceted nature of a conflict that simultaneously was a civil, revolutionary, international, conventional, and guerrilla war. MACV's September 1965 directive on the employment of U.S. forces in Vietnam specified that the "war in Vietnam is a political as well as military war. It is political because the ultimate goal is to regain the loyalty and cooperation of the people, and to create conditions which permit the people to go about their normal lives in peace and security."[21] Without question, MACV's officers and soldiers oftentimes imperfectly applied their newly acquired knowledge in such a complex operational environment. To argue, however, as does Nagl, that the U.S. Army failed to learn in Vietnam depreciates the ways in which reflective practitioners adapted to the demands of unconventional war in Southeast Asia. A preference for conventional war surely did not prevent learning about unconventional war.

Confronting Counterinsurgency

A basic pillar of the Vietnam War's accepted narrative is the contention that the U.S. Army only poorly understood, if not consciously resisted, counterinsurgency in the early 1960s. Despite the newly inaugurated John F. Kennedy administration's emphasis on political and social reform as key elements in countering insurgencies, a culturally constrained army, so goes the argument, remained wedded to viewing unconventional warfare through a very conventional lens. While offering an

20. Operation New Life in John M. Carland, *Stemming the Tide: May 1965 to October 1966* (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2000), 92–93. On problems evaluating data, see Burke, *Organization Change*, 16; and Garvin, *Learning in Action*, 23. On the more general problem of assessing American operations in Vietnam, see Gregory A. Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

21. Headquarters, MACV, Directive Number 525-4, "Tactics and Techniques for Employment of US Forces in the Republic of Vietnam," 17 September 1965, In-Country Publications Folder, Historian's Files, U.S. Army Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as CMH). On the multifaceted nature of the war, see Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 2.

attractive, simple explanation of American defeat in Vietnam, such a theory does not acknowledge contemporary writings which considered insurgent threats in the larger Cold War context. In fact, the intellectual aspects of warfare in the age of national liberation did not escape the Army's officer corps. While one needs to take care when speaking of the "officer corps" as a single entity, evidence suggests many officers realized that both atomic weaponry and decolonization in the wake of World War II were having an impact on the conduct of war. Without question, the U.S. Army made an enormous intellectual and matériel investment in limited atomic warfare throughout the 1950s. Yet despite this focus, one officer writing in the professional journal *Military Review* surmised that the "tactics of limited war" used by "indigenous guerrillas may actually predominate" in future conflicts.[22]

Mao Tse-tung's writings on protracted warfare and the Chinese civil war further influenced U.S. Army officers' conceptions of armed conflict in the post–World War II era. One lieutenant colonel thoughtfully outlined the relationship between communist guerrilla warfare and the need for political sympathy from the local civilian population. Recalling the French experience in Indochina, the colonel highlighted how "peaceful peasants" in daytime could become "guerrillas . . . under the cover of darkness."[23] Another officer, in an award-winning article, found "no apparent distinction of any great significance . . . in Communist military thought between a political struggle and one involving the smell of gunpowder."[24] If some officers were reluctant to study any military thought which departed from conventional operations—and certainly, some were—many others displayed a keen appreciation for the complexities of warfare in the first decades of the Cold War era.

A review not only of professional journals, but also of the Army's doctrine and its professional education system, indicates that many among the officer corps were neither seduced by the prospects of nor culturally constrained by their preference for conventional war in Europe. Counterinsurgency, especially after 1960, became a topic worthy of study and debate. Officers deliberated the paramilitary, political, and civic actions required to defeat a subversive insurgency.[25] They reflected on how best to coordinate military and non-military measures when committed to a counterinsurgency effort. As one lieutenant colonel argued, "political, sociological, and economic measures which we may take to counter insurgency will prove only to be sterile efforts if they are conducted from a position of military weakness and within an inadequate security base."[26] Clearly not all officers subscribed to the ideas

22. Robert K. Cunningham, "The Nature of War," *Military Review* 39, no. 8 (November 1959): 56. On the Army and limited war, see Christopher M. Gacek, *The Logic of Force: The Dilemma of Limited War in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 138.

23. George B. Jordan, "Objectives and Methods of Communist Guerrilla Warfare," *Military Review* 39, no. 10 (January 1960): 54.

24. Carl M. Guezlo, "The Communist Long War," *Military Review* 40, no. 9 (December 1960): 22.

25. Jonathan F. Ladd, "Some Reflections on Counterinsurgency," *Military Review* 44, no. 10 (October 1964): 73.

26. Gustav J. Gillert, Jr., "Counterinsurgency," *Military Review* 45, no. 4 (April 1965): 29.

of unconventional warfare—one believed the counterinsurgency mission should be given to the Marine Corps—but enough professionals seriously pondered such theories to raise questions about the Army's supposed disinterest in learning about new and unfamiliar concepts.[27]

Doctrinal concepts mirrored the complexities being discussed in the Army's professional journals. Though Army field manuals often conflated terms like insurgent, guerrilla, and irregular forces, a continual revision process throughout the 1950s and mid-1960s ensured that the theoretical underpinnings of unconventional operations remained current. Field Manual (FM) 31-21, *Guerrilla Warfare*, declared in May 1955 that for anti-guerrilla actions to be successful, they "should be based on a detailed analysis of the country, national characteristics, the customs, beliefs, cares, hopes, and desires of the people."[28] In early 1961, doctrine introduced terms such as "ideological bases of resistance" and "civic action" to its readers. The February 1963 version of FM 31-16, *Counterguerrilla Operations*, noted that "counterguerrilla warfare is a contest of imagination, ingenuity, and improvisation by the opposing commanders."[29] The manual likewise counseled that "conventional intelligence techniques must be adapted to the situation and tailored to exploit the characteristics, capabilities, and limitations of the particular area of operations and enemy being encountered."[30]

While Army doctrine alluded to the importance of learning and intellectual adaptability, field manuals advocated a holistic approach to the problems of countering internal subversion and insurgencies. The 1963 version of FM 31-16 warned against operations focused solely on enemy combat units. Effective counterinsurgency operations also required "appropriate action against the civilian and underground support of the guerrilla force, without which it cannot operate."[31] Thus, FM 31-16 spent considerable time on issues of population control, civil improvement, and the use of existing police forces and intelligence nets. Importantly, both the 1963 version of FM 31-16, and its March 1967 revision, discussed the importance of an integrated training approach to prepare for the complexities of countering insurgencies. As the revised manual perceptively argued, such operations "normally are long-term with a complicated interplay of tactical operations, populace and resources control operations, and concurrent psychological, intelligence, and advisory assistance operations, and military civic action."[32]

27. On the U.S. Marine Corps taking over counterinsurgency, see Walter Darnell Jacobs, "This Matter of Counterinsurgency," *Military Review* 44, no. 10 (October 1964): 85.

28. Department of the Army, Field Manual 31-21, *Guerrilla Warfare*, Washington, D.C., May 1955, 53. The manual also stressed the importance of synchronizing efforts among various governmental agencies.

29. Department of the Army, Field Manual 31-15, *Operations Against Irregular Forces*, Washington, D.C., May 1961, 4, 18, 25; FM 31-16, February 1963, 2.

30. Department of the Army, Field Manual 31-16, *Counterguerrilla Operations*, Washington, D.C., February 1963, 94.

31. Ibid., 20.

32. Department of the Army, Field Manual 31-16, *Counterguerrilla Operations*, Washington, D.C., March 1967, 147.

Professional military education within the Army school system followed the path of counterinsurgency doctrinal development if at a somewhat slower pace. In 1958, the Army's Command and General Staff College (CGSC) at Fort Leavenworth established a Department of Unconventional Warfare and revised its curriculum to incorporate lessons on insurgencies. By the 1959–1960 academic year, CGSC students were receiving 33 hours of instruction on unconventional warfare during the thirty-eight-week course. (By 1969, instruction had increased to 222 hours.)[33] The Infantry School at Fort Benning waited until 1962 to begin presenting information on Vietnam, yet quickly began integrating counterinsurgency lessons into curricula. Vietnam veterans spoke as guest lecturers, faculty modified small arms instruction to better prepare soldiers for jungle ambushes, and by 1965 the Infantry School had constructed two mock South Vietnamese villages for instructional use.[34] That year, the Armor School's Officer Candidate Course at Fort Knox was using Bernard Fall's *The Two Vietnams*, George Tanham's *Communist Revolutionary Warfare*, and Truong Chinh's *Primer for Revolt* in its insurgency lessons.[35]

Despite their responsibilities to master conventional fighting on a potentially nuclear battlefield, officers increasingly accepted unconventional warfare into their doctrine, educational venues, and professional journals. Even at commissioning institutions like the United States Military Academy, unconventional warfare became part of the curriculum. West Point Superintendent William C. Westmoreland established a Counterinsurgency Training Committee in April 1962 and instituted mandatory counterinsurgency training for all cadets. The Academy's Counterinsurgency Committee found that the "interdisciplinary nature" of the subject required cadets to study the "political, military, economic, psychological and sociological aspects" of unconventional conflict.[36] Cadets studied the theoretical works of Mao Tse-tung and Vo Nguyen Giap while exploring the histories of revolutionary struggles in the Philippines, Malaya, and

33. On CGSC course subjects in the 1959–1960 school year, see "Summary of the 1959–1960 Regular Command and General Staff Officer Course," Special Collections, Combined Arms Research Library, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. On 1969 course hours, see Boyd L. Dastrup, *The US Army Command and General Staff College: A Centennial History* (Manhattan, Kans.: Sunflower University Press, 1982), 111. There were over 1,100 hours in the total CGSC curriculum.

34. Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942–1976* (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2006), 264–65.

35. "Increased Emphasis—Counterinsurgency and Unconventional Warfare Instruction," *Armor* 73, no. 1 (January–February 1964): 58. Program of Instruction (POI) for Associate Armor Officer Career Course, August 1964, and POI for Branch Immaterial, Officer Candidate Course, 29 September 1965, in Special Collections, U.S. Army Armor School Library, Fort Knox, Kentucky.

36. Michael S. Davison, "Report of Counterinsurgency Committee," 19 June 1963, Training Operations Files (Counterinsurgency Committee), Special Collections, Jefferson Library, United States Military Academy, West Point, New York. Cadet training in Samuel Zaffiri, *Westmoreland: A Biography of General William C. Westmoreland* (New York: William Morrow, 1994), 96.

Indochina. Westmoreland himself would visit Malaya prior to arriving in Vietnam as MACV's deputy commander in 1964 in an effort, he recalled, to "learn from an earlier pacification experience."[37]

The implementation of this knowledge undeniably met with limited success in South Vietnam. Americans in a foreign land struggled when applying conventional tactics which often were irrelevant or even counterproductive. Both doctrine and OR/LL reports continued to emphasize hard-hitting military operations and maintaining the initiative against the guerrilla. One battalion "lessons learned" report argued that the "old slogan 'Find 'Em—Fix 'Em—Fight 'Em and Finish 'Em!' is as true today as it was the first time it was spoken."[38] These evocations of conventional warfare gave ammunition to critics who, oblivious to Army efforts at learning, railed against the aggressiveness "of the American character which gave added impetus to their impatience and impulse." Journalist Frances Fitzgerald, highlighting the cultural aspects of the war, likened American GIs to an "Orwellian Army [which] knew everything about military tactics, but nothing about where they were or who the enemy was."[39] Several officers even contended that successful training programs need only focus on adaptation to fighting in a jungle environment.[40]

Despite some officers' narrow conceptions of how best to counter political-military insurgencies, to argue, as does General Dave R. Palmer, that "many professional officers did not even recognize the term 'counter-insurgency'" ignores the many who did.[41] Learning within the officer corps did occur. Professionals did conceive of counterinsurgency as something more than just a military affair for soldiers.[42] The Army's doctrine on unconventional warfare recognized the importance of political, economic, and social aspects. Europe may have remained the preferred theater of conflict within the larger Cold War context—and arguably the most dangerous—yet the Army's officer corps earnestly wrestled with the

37. William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976) 82. Westmoreland recalled, rightly so, that "Although it was an enlightening visit, so many were the differences between the two situations that we could borrow little outright from the British experience." Cadet studies in Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine*, 261.

38. Battalion report quoted in Headquarters, Department of the Army, Pamphlet No. 350-15-9, *Training, Operations—Lessons Learned*, 1 April 1968, p. 32, MHI.

39. Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), 370. American character in Robert Thompson, *No Exit from Vietnam* (New York: David McKay, 1969), 126.

40. Ron Milam, *Not a Gentleman's War: An Inside View of Junior Officers in the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 95.

41. Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: U.S.-Vietnam in Perspective* (San Rafael, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1978), 24.

42. William Colby saw "the basic American misconception of the war as an affair for soldiers on both sides, rather than a political attack by the Communists, supported by military forces." Colby with James McCargar, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago and New York: Contemporary Books, 1989), 184.

problems of counterinsurgency. Far from being culturally wedded to conventional concepts, many serving officers willingly pondered, debated, and learned about how best to adjust their approach to war in an unconventional setting. It was a practice that would be replicated in South Vietnam as MACV's senior military commander developed a campaign strategy for a new kind of war.

Strategic Learning and the Myth of Attrition

"Attrition" is the ubiquitous and pejorative label for American strategy in Vietnam. Critics of the war maintain that as the U.S. Army prosecuted its ground campaign in South Vietnam, it employed a flawed strategy of attrition, concentrating, at the expense of all other missions, on killing enemy soldiers. Such narratives argue that General William C. Westmoreland, MACV's commander from 1964 to 1968, focused on the "traditional attack mission of the infantry—to find, fight and destroy enemy forces."[43] Hypnotized by the prospects of high body counts and seduced by visions of decisive battlefield victories, officers like Westmoreland led the Army to failure because they failed to better employ a counterinsurgency strategy. Instead, they opted for attrition and in the process squandered their chances for victory.

Alluring as such arguments are, they fail to consider Westmoreland's own views on "the importance of the people deciding which side they wanted to support." Even in the wake of the Ia Drang battle in late 1965, MACV's commander concluded that the "most significant development" of the war would be the Vietnamese population supporting the Saigon government.[44] Hardly wedded to a so-called Army concept which saw the application of firepower as the surest path to victory, Westmoreland spoke early on of civic action, food distribution, and medical care as the central feature of operations designed to restore governmental control to former VC areas.[45] Though grounded in conventional operations with service in World War II and the Korean War, Westmoreland, much like the Army from which he came, accepted the idea that opposing revolutionary wars of national liberation in the late 1950s and early 1960s required more than just military power.

Certainly, criticisms of American strategy in Vietnam are not groundless. According to a 1974 survey of general officers, more than one-third of respondents thought U.S. objectives in Vietnam were "rather fuzzy" and "needed rethinking as the war progressed." The Joint Chiefs of Staff failed to develop a coherent

43. Lewy, *America in Vietnam,* 46. For other traditional narratives on a strategy of attrition, see George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979, 2002), 179; and Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941–1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 182.

44. General Westmoreland's History Notes, 31 December 1965, in *The War in Vietnam: The Papers of William C. Westmoreland*, ed. Robert E. Lester (Bethesda, Md.: University Publications of America, 1993), text-fiche, Reel 6, Folder 3, 27 Dec 65–1 Jan 66.

45. Gen. Westmoreland to Gen. Wheeler, cable, 11 November 1965, Pacification Folder, Box 4, Paul L. Miles Papers, MHI.

plan for Vietnam that fit within a larger national grand strategy, leaving Westmoreland, according to one senior American officer, "to invent his own strategic concept."[46] Furthermore, the MACV strategy aimed to accomplish lofty goals. The U.S. Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC) directed Westmoreland to achieve the daunting political-military objective of a "stable and independent noncommunist government" in South Vietnam.[47] (Nearly a decade of war would demonstrate the incapacity of American military might to achieve such a goal.) To accomplish such a broad mission, Westmoreland necessarily developed an all-encompassing concept of operations that sought not only to destroy enemy forces but also to expand the percentage of South Vietnam's population under the Saigon government's control.

General William C. Westmoreland, 21 September 1967, Vietnam [ARC #530616, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, Texas]

In early 1965, this appeared a formidable—some officials worried an unachievable—task. Most American estimates of the situation inside South Vietnam painted a grim picture. Political instability wracked the Saigon government. NLF insurgents posed both a political and military threat in the countryside and increasingly demonstrated a willingness to confront South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) units in battle. Political subversion, assassination of government officials, and attacks on infrastructure continued at an alarming rate. Equally grave, American intelligence analysts picked up indications of regular Army units from North Vietnam infiltrating into the south.[48] Westmoreland, believing the American advisory effort had done all it could to

46. Bruce Palmer, Jr., quoted in *The Second Indochina War: Proceedings of a Symposium Held at Airlie, Virginia, 7–9 November 1984*, ed. John Schlight (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1986), 155. Survey data in Douglas Kinnard, *The War Managers: American Generals Reflect on Vietnam* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1977; New York: DaCapo Press, 1991), 24.

47. *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking in Vietnam*, Senator Gravel ed., 5 vols. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971–1972), 4:300.

48. Westmoreland to Joint Chiefs of Staff, telegram, 7 June 1965, in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, 34 vols. (Washington: U.S. Government

support the teetering Saigon government, recommended the introduction of ground combat troops. On 26 June 1965, the Lyndon B. Johnson administration authorized MACV "to commit U.S. ground forces anywhere in the country when, in his judgment, they were needed to strengthen South Vietnamese forces." The number of American forces rose precipitously. At the opening of 1965, 23,000 U.S. troops were in Vietnam. One year later the number soared to 184,000 troops.[49]

In June 1965, Westmoreland outlined his concept of operations which noted clearly that the "insurgency in South Vietnam must eventually be defeated among the people in the hamlets and towns." The MACV Commander went on to speak of two types of security—from "large, well organized and equipped forces" and from "the guerrilla, the assassin, the terrorist and the informer."[50] The population thus had to be secured from both insurgents and regular military formations. Westmoreland likened the political subversives to "termites" which were eating away at the foundation of the Saigon government. Concurrently, main force units, or "bully boys," waited for the opportune moment to strike at the weakened structure with crowbars. As Westmoreland recalled, if the Americans and their South Vietnamese allies were to be successful, "Neither facet could be ignored."[51]

Westmoreland's analogy of termites and bully boys might be dismissed as simplistic, but evidence supports the argument that the general realized attrition of enemy main force units could not be achieved at the expense of pacification or counterinsurgency. The opposite also held true. Westmoreland could not conduct operations against insurgents while ignoring the conventional threat. All the while, American forces needed to aid their South Vietnamese allies in pacifying the countryside and provide some sense of security to the rural population. Certainly, Westmoreland used the word "attrition" in both his memoirs and in his correspondence with senior and subordinate commanders. Such communications, however, suggest the general was focused less on killing the enemy and more on intimating to those directing the war effort that the conflict in Vietnam would not be concluded swiftly. Attrition emphasized that the war would be prolonged. As Westmoreland wrote to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in June 1965, "the premise behind whatever further actions we may undertake . . . must be that

Printing Office, 1992–2006): 2:733–34 (hereafter cited as *FRUS*). See also Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962–1967* (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2006), 203; and John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945–1975* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 116.

49. Herbert Y. Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), 27. Troop numbers in Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, 183.

50. Westmoreland, "Concept of Operations—Force Requirements and Deployments, South Vietnam," 14 June 1965, Folder 04, Box 02, Larry Berman Collection (Presidential Archives Research), Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas (hereafter cited as TTUVA).

51. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 175.

we are in for the long pull. This struggle has become a war of attrition. . . . I see no likelihood of achieving a quick, favorable end to the war."[52]

Westmoreland's sobering appraisal, so early in the war, reveals a commander less worried about destroying enemy forces and more concerned about the staying power of his own armed forces and nation. He surely appreciated the complexity of his task. As his chief intelligence officer recalled, "Westmoreland had not one battle but three to fight: first, to contain a growing conventional threat; second, to develop the Republic of Vietnam's Armed Forces (RVNAF); and third, to pacify and protect the peasants in the South Vietnamese countryside."[53] Both the threat and the mission required a broad concept of the operations, one that a simple word like attrition could not characterize fully. In fact, the complexity of fighting in South Vietnam caused immense problems with strategic articulation. The military lexicon of the day was unsuited to Westmoreland's manifold tasks. Lacking precise terminology to describe the three battles MACV simultaneously fought, any broad strategic concept came with the risk of ambiguity. If attrition of enemy forces had been the guiding light of American strategy in Vietnam, one might expect more certainty among the Army's senior leaders. Westmoreland's panoptic strategy, however, left many American field commanders in doubt as to how their units would achieve such far-reaching objectives.

The tasks associated with Westmoreland's expansive strategic concept—what he would call a "three-phase sustained campaign"—reflected an army willing to learn about and adapt to the unconventional environment of South Vietnam. Phase I visualized the commitment of U.S. and allied forces "necessary to halt the losing trend by 1965." Tasks included securing major military bases, defending major political and population centers, and preserving and strengthening South Vietnam's armed forces. In Phase II, Westmoreland sought to resume the offensive to "destroy enemy forces" and reinstitute "rural construction activities." In this phase, aimed to begin in 1966, American forces would "participate in clearing, securing, reserve reaction and offensive operations as required to support and sustain the resumption of pacification." Finally, in Phase III, MACV would oversee the "defeat and destruction of the remaining enemy forces and base areas." It is important to note here that Westmoreland's official report on the war included the term "sustained campaign."[54] The general was under no illusions that U.S. forces were engaged in a conventional war of annihilation aimed at rapid destruction of the enemy. Attrition suggested that a stable South Vietnam, capable of resisting

52. Westmoreland to Wheeler, cable, 24 June 1965, Historian's Files, US Strategy, Vietnam, 1965–1975, CMH. Westmoreland describes a "war of attrition" in *A Soldier Reports*, 185.

53. Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History: 1946–1975* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1988), 354.

54. U. S. Grant Sharp and William C. Westmoreland, *Report on the War in Vietnam* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969), 100. Command History, United States Military Assistance Command, 1965, pp. 141–43, Entry MACJ03, Box 2, RG 472, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland; *The Pentagon Papers*, 4:296.

the military and political pressures of both internal and external aggressors, would not arise in a matter of months or even a few years.

Nor should Westmoreland's use of the word "attrition" validate assertions that the American campaign strategy in Vietnam was singularly focused. In fact, it seems plausible to argue that MACV's commander formulated a "one war" approach without using the label later popularized by his successor. Abrams understood the political-military interrelationships of war in Vietnam, but so too did Westmoreland. "Probably the fundamental issue is the question of the coordination of mission activities in Saigon," the general opined in early 1966. "It is abundantly clear that all political, military, economic, and security (police) programs must be completely integrated in order to attain any kind of success in a country which has been greatly weakened by prolonged conflict and is under increasing pressure by large military and subversive forces."[55] Far from being an officer unwilling to learn about unconventional warfare, Westmoreland thoughtfully considered the issues of land reform, improving the South Vietnamese armed forces, limiting civilian casualties, and facilitating population security in the countryside.[56]

The implementation of such an all-encompassing strategy would have been exceedingly difficult for any Army. Unsurprisingly, American commanders found it nearly impossible to translate military success into political progress. Military operations often caused depopulation in the countryside, contradicting goals of developing a sense of political stability among the people. Tactical successes oftentimes achieved only temporary results. Not all unit commanders embraced the ideals of population support and governmental reform as necessary ingredients for overall success. These failures in implementation, however, did not result from whole cloth resistance to learn on the part of the Army.[57] From a strategic perspective, Westmoreland's concept of operations indicated a willingness to modify the Army's behavior. MACV's strategy actually mirrored conceptual insights derived from Army doctrine and professional journals. So too did unit employment on the extended political-military battlefields of South Vietnam.

Learning on a Convoluted Battlefield

In the early 1960s, the U.S. Army component serving in Vietnam gradually transformed from an advisory role to an active participant in the war. The incremental change required a reorientation away from conventional, if not linear, operations and tactics to an emphasis on area coverage, reconnaissance, and population security. Critics argue that "the Army did not change orientation

55. Westmoreland to Collins, cable MAC 0117, 7 January 1966, Pacification Overview/Conclusions Folder, Historian's Files, CMH.

56. Cosmas, *MACV*, 140.

57. On general difficulties with implementation, see Morton H. Halperin, Priscilla A. Clapp, and Arnold Canter, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*, 2d ed. (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), 251.

to the fundamentally new tasks of counter-insurgency."[58] Even when the Army did innovate, such as adjusting airmobile tactics for use in a counterinsurgent role, commentators saw little more than helicopters "rattle-assing around."[59] A more analytical approach of what the Army did on a daily basis, however, reveals an organization far more open to shifting operational perspectives. When employing their units in South Vietnam, commanders consciously readjusted their approaches to decision-making and action. Divisional units, operating across the mosaic of South Vietnam's diverse provinces, actively chose to reframe their ideas on fighting in an unconventional environment.

The 1st Cavalry Division perhaps best exemplified both the potential and problems of learning and innovating in Vietnam. Conducting operations in the Central Highlands, the 1st Cavalry deployed to Southeast Asia as the Army's first airmobile division in August 1965. Less than three months later, elements of the division fought a fierce battle against North Vietnamese regulars in the western highlands' Ia Drang valley. Westmoreland deemed it an "unprecedented victory" by highlighting the 634 dead NVA soldiers and a further 1,215 "estimated" enemy killed in action. Historians subsequently have pointed to this first full-fledged battle as an action which inhibited learning since it validated the Army's conventional concept of warfare. As Andrew Krepinevich has maintained, "Standard operations were working; therefore, no alternative strategies needed to be explored. No more feedback was required for MACV save the body counts that measured the attrition strategy's progress."[60]

The 1st Cavalry, however, did explore ways to increase its effectiveness in the aftermath of the Ia Drang battles. A review of the division's OR/LLs in 1965 and 1966 reveals an organization willing to experiment and reflect on its operational practices. After-action reports discussed how the conduct of military operations in inhabited areas "where VC and innocent women and children are intermingled continues to be a problem." (Even before Ia Drang Westmoreland was instructing commanders to use "utmost discretion and restraint" so as not to cause noncombatant casualties.)[61] Other 1st Cavalry reports noted the difficulties of coordinating artillery and ground fire with the entirely new concept of airmobile operations, the complexities of which are too often overlooked in many histories. By

58. Lock-Pullan, *US Intervention Policy*, 31. On Army reorientation, see Vetock, *Lessons Learned*, 97.

59. Malcolm W. Browne, *The New Face of War*, rev. ed. (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), 78.

60. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 169. Westmoreland quoted in "Westmoreland Surveys Action," *New York Times*, 20 November 1965. Assessment of Ia Drang body counts in Daddis, *No Sure Victory*, 80.

61. Headquarters, 1st Cavalry Division, "Lessons Learned, 1 Oct–30 Nov 65," p. 3, Box 1, Operational Report/Lessons Learned, 1st Cavalry Division, MACV Command Historian's Collection, MHI. Gen. Westmoreland to Gen. Wheeler, cable, 28 August 1965, R.O.E. Jul-Sep 1965 folder, Box 5, Miles Papers, MHI.

November 1966, the division's OR/LL was distilling lessons related to civil affairs, construction projects, public health, and agriculture. That month the 1st Cavalry reported on Operation Good Friend, the purpose of which was to "build good will, a better relationship with the local civilians, enhance intelligence gathering sources and intice [*sic*] local VC back into the Government of Vietnam control." The division did conduct military operations during this time period—Operation Jim Bowie was a major search and destroy undertaking in March 1966—yet the unit complemented such maneuvers with other, nonmilitary missions.[62]

The experience of the 1st Infantry Division implies that most divisions experienced a fairly steep learning curve upon deployment in Vietnam. Arriving in 1965, the "Big Red One" served in the III Corps Tactical Zone, operating mostly in the Binh Long, Binh Doung, and Tay Ninh provinces. Soldiers struggled assimilating to jungle fighting, and early "lessons learned" reports drew attention to their difficulties. Simply gaining the initiative against a committed and experienced enemy proved challenging. Conducting combined operations with its South Vietnamese allies, the division found its tactical plans, submitted in advance to ARVN units, often compromised. Intelligence collection on the NLF insurgency proved equally, if not more, problematic. Report after report spoke of the difficulties in pinpointing enemy units, employing long range reconnaissance units, and exploiting captured documents for information of tactical value. Acknowledging the importance of intelligence gained from the civilian population, 1st Infantry soldiers still found the reliability of local Vietnamese sources questionable.[63]

Despite these challenges, the 1st Infantry reflected on its experiences and experimented with new ideas. The division found "saturation patrolling," which included both day and night missions, to be an effective means of hindering VC activities in populated areas. It also employed "mobile interrogation teams" to conduct interviews with the local populace in hopes of improving its intelligence picture.[64] In early 1966, the division's 1st Brigade launched Operation Rolling Stone, what it considered to be a "classic counterinsurgency operation in the Vietnam environment." Rolling Stone "incorporated the interrelated fields of Civic Action, Psychological Warfare and Ground Combat Operations." While the operation resulted in 142 enemy dead, it also illustrated limitations with the

62. Department of the Army, "Operational Report/Lessons Learned, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile)," 28 November 1966, p. 31, Box 1, Operational Report/Lessons Learned, 1st Cavalry Division, MACV Command Historian's Collection, MHI. Operation Jim Bowie report in Headquarters, 1st Cavalry Division, "Combat After Action Report," 8 May 1966, ibid.

63. Headquarters, 1st Infantry Division, "Lessons Learned," 15 March 1966, Box 1, Operational Report/Lessons Learned, 1st Infantry Division, MACV Command Historian's Collection, MHI. "Operational Report/Lessons Learned," 17 June 1966, ibid. On problems assimilating to jungle warfare, see Shelby L. Stanton, *The Rise and Fall of an American Army: U.S. Ground Forces in Vietnam, 1965–1973* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1985), 87.

64. Headquarters, 1st Infantry Division, "Operational Report—Lessons Learned," 1 May–31 July 1966, pp. 23–25, 1st Infantry Division File, In-Country Documents, Historian's Files, CMH.

Army's effectiveness in Vietnam's political-military environment. Ultimately Rolling Stone did little to dislodge NLF forces from Binh Doung province. More significantly, the 1st Infantry Division operation failed to increase the level of popular support for the Saigon government.[65] Even improved operational practices could achieve only so much in a war for the allegiance of the civilian population.

This contest for control of the Vietnamese population extended to the southernmost portions of the war-torn country. In the fertile and heavily populated Mekong Delta, the 9th Infantry Division began operations in early 1967. The delta consisted of a vast network of waterways, rivers, and tributaries posing unique problems for the newly arrived division. Noting earlier French experiments in riverine operations, the MACV staff formulated an innovative concept to create a Mobile Riverine Force. For the first time since the American Civil War, the U.S. Army began using an amphibious river force operating completely afloat.[66] "Lessons learned" reports discussed issues in coordinating U.S. and Vietnamese navy assets, integrating helicopters into riverine assault operations, and rotating troops regularly to prevent immersion foot and skin infections. The riverine force even designed and constructed six barges capable of carrying 105mm howitzers to provide artillery support for the division's waterborne forces. "Patrol and blocking operations" became a mainstay of the riverine force in an attempt to disrupt enemy traffic along the delta's spider web of waterways.[67]

Far from focusing solely on tactical issues, the 9th Infantry leadership worked to integrate combat operations with pacification efforts. The division staff utilized Hamlet Evaluation Survey (HES) data, designed to gauge progress in pacification to coordinate combat missions with their own civic action and South Vietnamese programs. The 9th also instituted an Integrated Civic Action Program (ICAP) to "collect information on the enemy while providing humanitarian assistance and attempting to improve GVN [Government of South Vietnam] acceptance in local hamlets [and] villages."[68] As with other American programs, the results were debatable. Division commander Major General Julian J. Ewell was an active proponent of kill ratios as a measure of success, even earning the nickname "the Butcher of the Mekong Delta." Thus it was no surprise when John Paul Vann,

65. Headquarters, 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, "Combat Operations After Action Report," 28 March 1966, Folder 58, Box 1, William E. LeGro Collection, TTUVA.

66. Shelby L. Stanton, *Vietnam Order of Battle: A Complete Illustrated Reference to U.S. Armed Combat and Support Forces in Vietnam, 1961–1973* (Mechanicsburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 2003), 77. The challenge was in surprising the enemy since they often knew riverine forces were coming.

67. Headquarters, MACV, "Combat Experiences 3-69," Section III, MHI. Headquarters, Department of the Army, Pamphlet No. 350-15-10, *Training, Operations—Lessons Learned*, July 1968, Appendix V, MHI. Ira A. Hunt, Jr., *The 9th Infantry Division in Vietnam: Unparalleled and Unequaled* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 36.

68. Hunt, *9th Infantry Division*, 86, 90. See also Headquarters, 9th Infantry Division, "Operational Report of 9th Infantry Division for Period Ending 31 January 1969," 15 February 1969, p. 29, Box 2, Operational Report/Lessons Learned, 9th Infantry Division, MACV Command Historian's Collection, MHI.

senior advisor in IV Corps, criticized the 9th Infantry for alienating civilians in the delta, believing the division's presence counterproductive to pacification efforts. HES figures supported Vann's allegations. By the end of 1969, less than 50 percent of the hamlets in both Dinh Tuong and Kien Hoa provinces were under government control.[69] Perhaps learning had its limits when it came to operational effectiveness.

Tactical revisions made by MACV in the aftermath of the enemy's countrywide 1968 Tet offensive emulated those in the 9th Infantry Division. Among the more contentious debates in the war's historiography, the question of how much American strategy and tactics changed after Creighton Abrams took command of MACV in mid-1968 likely will be disputed for some time. Lewis Sorley, a strident Abrams admirer, contends there was "a dramatic shift in concept of the nature and conduct of the war, in the appropriate measure of merit, and the tactics to be applied." Andrew Birtle, however, argues persuasively that Abrams's campaign "differed from Westmoreland's activities more in emphasis than in substance."[70] The key point here is that most all of MACV's officers realized the war itself was changing in the aftermath of Tet. Forced to recover from the high casualties sustained in early and mid-1968, both NVA and NLF forces altered their tactics to avoid allied advantages in firepower. Perhaps more importantly, American goals shifted with the decision to "Vietnamize" the war and withdraw U.S. forces from Vietnam.

Abrams thus confronted a shifting external environment which forced changes upon MACV's mission, if not entire approach to the war. To support President Richard M. Nixon's policy of Vietnamization, in which the South Vietnamese once again shouldered the entire war effort as the Americans departed, Abrams concentrated on training ARVN, supporting pacification, and continuing offensive operations against the enemy. In the process, MACV adapted to its new operating environment. Abrams spoke of the challenges "of continuing progress towards total Vietnamization in a climate of declining U.S. resources, competing demands on RVNAF [South Vietnam's Armed Forces], and limited time."[71] As Nixon ordered incursions into Laos and Cambodia in 1970 and 1971 to forestall future enemy offensives, Westmoreland, now the Army's chief of staff, asked Abrams for a "review of the lessons learned" from these operations that might "facilitate improvements in our concepts and doctrine."[72] Even with the war winding down, officers like Westmoreland understood the importance of reflection and objective review.

Key to understanding wartime Army learning is the diversified nature of the American experience in Vietnam. Both Westmoreland and Abrams realized their limited ability to control and influence U.S. forces operating across the breadth of

69. Daddis, *No Sure Victory*, 165.

70. Sorley, *A Better War*, 17. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine*, 367.

71. Gen. Abrams to Gen. Clay, cable, 5 July 1971, Abrams Messages #10163, CMH. Headquarters, MACV, "One War: MACV Command Overview, 1968–1972," pp. 2-17 to 2-18, Historian's Files, CMH.

72. Gen. Westmoreland to Gen. Abrams, cable, 7 April 1971, Abrams Messages #9870, CMH.

South Vietnam. As General William E. DePuy recalled, "Everybody recognized that there were several levels of war going on simultaneously, all the way from the very quiet subversive political war and war of terror down in the hamlets and villages, all the way up to the main forces and everything in between."[73] The level of organizational learning consequently depended on those unit commanders operating in the distributed, decentralized environment of Vietnam. Unsurprisingly, the quality of leadership, and thus learning, varied from province to province. The temperament of commanders became a crucial factor in both learning and adaptation. As one senior officer maintained, "Some were sensitive to community relations and the political, economic, social, psychological impact of military operations on attainment of US objectives whereas others, less sensitive, failed to recognize that military operations could negate progress in winning support of the people."[74]

Learning and Organizational Change

Support of the Vietnamese people constituted a vital element of MACV strategy from the very beginning. Both Westmoreland and Abrams understood the importance and difficulties of linking the local population to the central government in Saigon. Both pursued attrition and pacification simultaneously. In fact, even before Westmoreland took command of MACV, "lessons learned" reports spoke of "clear and hold" operations which were conducted "in direct support of province rehabilitation with the mission of clearing and denying an area to the enemy."[75] At no time during the war did MACV, in balancing military operations with the pacification effort, fully embrace one mission to the exclusion of the other. Changes in emphasis certainly did occur over time, and in 1967 MACV even carried out a significant organizational restructuring to meet the needs of pacification.

Mobilizing popular support for the Saigon government remained a frustrating aspect of American strategy in 1965 and 1966. By early 1966 Washington officials could no longer ignore the inadequacy of governmental coordination in achieving the goals of pacification. Confusion reigned over who was responsible for the growing number of military and civilian agencies operating inside South Vietnam: MACV, the Agency for International Development (USAID), the United States Information Agency (USIA), and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). As one

73. William E. DePuy, interview by Bill Mullen and Les Brownlee, 26 March 1979, p. 11, Box 1, Oral History, William E. DePuy Papers, MHI. On limited command influence, see Spector, *After Tet*, 216.

74. Willard Pearson in memorandum for W. C. Westmoreland, "Post Mortem on Vietnam Strategy," 6 September 1968, p. 4, US Strategy, Vietnam 1965-75, Historian's Files, CMH. See also Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995), 222.

75. Headquarters, U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam, "Lessons Learned Number 35: Clear and Hold Operations," 10 January 1964, Gen. Westmoreland Reading File—Jan. 1964, Box 1, Miles Papers, MHI.

colonel noted, "everybody is wandering around without any clear-cut direction and management."[76] In March 1966, the Army staff published a report on the war titled "A Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam." PROVN for short, the report charged that "interagency competition" within the American mission in Vietnam was a major obstacle hindering the achievement of U.S. objectives.[77] Westmoreland tracked along similar lines, placing command emphasis on revolutionary development and civic action programs and noting in his strategic guidance for 1967 that the pacification effort should "properly dovetail the military and civil programs."[78]

With pressure for organizational change coming from the White House, a reluctant U.S. Embassy in Saigon created the Office of Civil Operations (OCO) in November 1966. Though embassy officials feared that OCO would lead to a military takeover of civilian programs—Westmoreland supported MACV serving as the "single manager" for pacification—the new office directly improved supervision of the pacification effort's civil side.[79] OCO unified interagency direction and created a pacification chain of command from Saigon to the countryside's districts and provinces. Senior officials working on pacification, from the CIA to USAID, now worked together in a central location, facilitating planning and coordination. OCO now managed refugee programs, revolutionary development cadre training, psychological operations, and public safety planning. The military side of pacification, however, remained outside of OCO's purlieus. Thus, while the office served as the first full step towards a new pacification organization, the "other war" remained separated from those military operations being conducted by MACV. Less than six months later, American officials, citing a visible lack of improvement in the field, dismantled OCO and incorporated it into a new organization.[80]

Despite its size, OCO simply did not have the resources to implement the programs for which it provided oversight. Westmoreland's strategic concept for 1967, considering more than just attrition of enemy forces, left OCO increasingly unable to cope with the coordination of civil and military efforts. Westmoreland

76. Colonel Wilson quoted in Robert W. Komer, *Organization and Management of the "New Model" Pacification Program—1966–1969* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1970), 17.

77. PROVN report in *FRUS, 1964–1968*, 4:596. See also Andrew J. Birtle, "PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal," *Journal of Military History* 72, no. 4 (October 2008): 1213–47.

78. For Westmoreland's views, see "Command Emphasis on Revolutionary Development/ Civic Action Programs," 22 October 1966, in Lester, *The Papers of William C. Westmoreland*, text-fiche, Reel 7, Folder 10, 18–29 October 1966; "Strategic Guidelines for 1967 in Vietnam," 14 December 1966, Reel 18, CSA (W.C.W.) Statements Folder, October–December 1966; and Sharp and Westmoreland, *Report on the War in Vietnam*, 132.

79. On the single manager concept, see Cosmas, *MACV*, 357. Embassy fears in George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 77–78.

80. OCO evolution in Hunt, *Pacification*, 82–84; Thomas W. Scoville, *Reorganizing for Pacification Support* (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1999), 44–46; and Schlight, *The Second Indochina War*, 131.

Robert Komer and President Lyndon B. Johnson, 16 November 1967 [ARC #192537, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, Texas]

recalled that as "the American military effort expanded, so did the programs managed by AID, CIA, and USIA, so that in time all agencies were competing for resources and scarce South Vietnamese manpower."[81] The problem simply was too large and complex for OCO to handle alone. If OCO did not have the capabilities or resources to support pacification, it increasingly became clear that only one component of the U.S. mission in Vietnam did have such means.[82]

On 9 May 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson made MACV the "single manager" of pacification in South Vietnam. The president appointed Robert W. Komer, a longtime CIA analyst and National Security Council staff member, as Westmoreland's deputy for pacification. As Johnson declared, this "new organizational arrangement represents an unprecedented melding of civil and military responsibilities to meet the overriding requirements of Viet Nam."[83] Holding ambassadorial rank, Komer assumed control of the newly created Office of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) and reported directly to Westmoreland. The new CORDS chief was not an advisor or coordinator but rather held broad authority to manage the American pacification effort. Every program relating to pacification, whether civil or military, now fell

81. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 255. On inability of a civilian-led program to cope, see Dale Andrade and James H. Willbanks, "CORDS/Phoenix: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam for the Future," *Military Review* 86, no. 2 (March–April 2006): 12.

82. Cosmas, *MACV*, 354. Scoville, *Reorganizing for Pacification Support*, 54.

83. National Security Action Memorandum No. 362, 9 May 1967, in *FRUS, 1964–1968*, 5:398.

under the supervision of Komer and his office. As Westmoreland recalled, it was an "unusual arrangement, a civilian heading a military staff section with a general as his deputy, and a similar pattern of organization was to follow down the chain of command." Thus, the president's "single manager" concept guided reorganization at every level of the U.S. effort in South Vietnam.[84]

Unlike its predecessor, CORDS incorporated civilians into the military chain of command. The former OCO staff director, a civilian, headed the CORDS office in MACV while a brigadier general served as his deputy. (Komer even received authority for civilians to write performance reports on military personnel.) The main CORDS staff, operating alongside more traditional staff sections like intelligence (J2) and operations (J3), oversaw a wide venue of programs. To make the transition easier, Komer maintained the six field program divisions established under OCO. His reach over pacification programs, however, expanded greatly. "Personnel," Komer recalled, "were drawn from all the military services, and from State, AID, CIA, USIA, and the White House."[85] CORDS assumed responsibility for coordinating rural development programs, conducting village and hamlet administrative training, and overseeing agricultural affairs and public works projects. The integrated, interagency office handled research and development planning, wrote MACV policy directives on pacification, and advised military commanders on civic action programs. Komer even assumed the job of training and equipping South Vietnamese regional and popular forces to provide local security for pacification programs.[86]

It was here, at the local level, that Komer sought to address the fundamental problems of pacification support through reorganization. The new ambassador assigned each of MACV's corps headquarters a deputy for CORDS, usually a civilian, who outranked the corps commander's chief of staff. Similarly, Komer appointed an advisor to each of South Vietnam's forty-four provinces. Illustrating the collaborative approach of CORDS, twenty-five provincial advisors were military personnel; the other nineteen, civilians. These province teams reported directly to the corps deputies while coordinating local military operations with the entire array of pacification programs.[87] The sheer breadth of pacification requirements,

84. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 260. "Single manager" concept in Komer, *Organization and Management of the "New Model" Pacification Program*, 55. For background on Komer, see Frank L. Jones, "Blowtorch: Robert Komer and the Making of Vietnam Pacification Policy," *Parameters* 35, no. 3 (Autumn 2005): 103–18. On CORDS responsibilities, see Hunt, *Pacification*, 89–90.

85. R. W. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1972), 115. On CORDS staff, see Scoville, *Reorganizing for Pacification Support*, 66–67; and Cosmas, *MACV*, 361.

86. CORDS programs in Schlight, *The Second Indochina War*, 133; and Hunt, *Pacification*, 90–94.

87. Corps organization in Hunt, *Pacification*, 94. Civilian and military advisor numbers in Chester L. Cooper et al., "The American Experience with Pacification in Vietnam, Volume III: History of Pacification," March 1972, p. 271, Folder 65, U.S. Marine Corps History Division, Vietnam War Documents Collection, TTUVA.

however, strained the capacity of Americans in the field. Reorganization coul accomplish only so much. One American colonel, advising a South Vietnames infantry division, noted the extent of effort required by pacification. Once unit had established security, they then had to "determine the people's needs, act a a link between the higher governmental agencies and the people, see that th people's needs were met, inform the people, organize hamlet self-governmen assist the people in agricultural and economic development, establish intelligenc nets, detect and eliminate the Viet Cong infrastructure, and eventually restor the legitimate government in the hamlet."[88] Establishing a "single manager" fo pacification surely made sense, but coordinating the vast number of program under that manager proved extraordinarily difficult.

Still, the chief contribution of CORDS was to pull pacification's numerou activities under one centralized command. At its peak, CORDS employe roughly 5,500 officials to support its wide range of programs. External pressur to reform certainly encouraged the reorganization process. So too, howeve did the support of William Westmoreland. The MACV commander gracefull endorsed an arrangement which made few distinctions between civilian an military officials and backed Komer's ambitions of enlarging the role CORD played in local population security. As Westmoreland recalled, "Who headed th program at each level depended upon the best man available, not whether h was military or civilian."[89] MACV's commander committed himself to facilitatin the implementation of CORDS rather than serving as an obstacle. If CORD represented the single most important managerial innovation during the Vietnan War, Westmoreland's support played a decisive role in the organization's inceptio and survival.[90]

Conclusions—When Learning May Not Matter

CORDS certainly streamlined the process of pacification for MACV bu Westmoreland's (and Abrams's) strategy still required resolving a wide range o military, political, economic, and social problems. Too often in South Vietnan military operations worked at cross-purposes with pacification. Success in on area did not equate to advances in the other. In truth, CORDS, like so many o the U.S. Army's programs, never came to grips with the underlying problems o the war inside South Vietnam. This crucial point suggests that one aspect of th war's historiography is, in a sense, flawed. A reexamination of the U.S. Army' strategic approach, operational experiences, and organizational changes reveal that learning did occur during the nearly decade-long struggle in South Vietnam

88. John H. Cushman, "Pacification: Concepts Developed in the Field by the RVN 21s Infantry Division," *Army* 16, no. 3 (March 1966): 26. While Cushman's experiences pre-date CORDS, the requirements of pacification had not changed between 1966 and 1967.

89. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 260. Numbers of officials in CORDS from Herring *LBJ and Vietnam*, 81.

90. Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance, 1950 t Present* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 240. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, 64.

Far from being culturally constrained and bound to conventional war concepts, the Army deliberately underwent a process of self-examination, evaluation, and adaptation. In Vietnam, the U.S. Army *was* a learning organization.[91]

Critics might argue that given its superior resources, the U.S. Army should have been able to learn to overcome any problem posed by the enemy. Such claims, however, do not account for an enemy who was also learning and, as a result, constantly changing the problem and making it more difficult. In war, learning cannot be measured simply by an outside standard, but relative to the opponent. Moreover, there is the possibility that the war was not fully about the U.S. Army, the possibility that the outcome of the war rested on events and consequences outside of American capabilities or influence. Disgruntled officers might complain of being "fatally handicapped by a strategy of passive defense," but such arguments presuppose that U.S. military capability had no limits.[92] In fact, the Army alone could not solve fundamental weaknesses of the Saigon government or bridge the chasm between the Vietnamese people and their political leadership. Tactical success, whether in combat or civic action, too often did not yield increases in popular support for the GVN.

The U.S. Army's experience in Vietnam indicates that military organizations can learn and still lose. Even with satisfactory institutional learning, victory can elude leaders committed to changing their organization's behavior based on observations and experiences.[93] Recognition of success and failure was a complicated affair in Vietnam where there were no front lines to mark progress. In short, it was difficult to learn. Commanders struggled to determine what was most important, how to prosecute a war in which political action frequently trumped military force, and how to make sense of an exceedingly complex conflict. As one division commander lamented, "In no other war have we been deluged by so many tidbits of information, for we have been accustomed to an orderliness associated with established battle-lines."[94] Still, neither a devotion to conventional warfare nor an inability to understand counterinsurgency prohibited the U.S. Army from learning in Vietnam. As an institution, it systematically reflected on new concepts, experimented with new ideas, and shared new methods and practices among its leaders. In the process of losing a long war, the U.S. Army had exhibited the traits of a learning organization.

91. Vetock, *Lessons Learned*, 104.

92. Bruce Palmer, Jr., *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 178. See also Phillip B. Davidson, *Secrets of the Vietnam War* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1990), 146. On limits, see James H. Lebovic, *The Limits of U.S. Military Capability: Lessons from Vietnam and Iraq* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 37.

93. Levy, "Learning and foreign policy," 297.

94. Harris B. Hollis quoted in Thomas C. Thayer, *War Without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1985), 4.