

THE U.S. ARMY CAMPAIGNS OF THE VIETNAM WAR

# DEEPENING INVOLVEMENT 1945-1965



Cover: A U.S. Army Special Forces soldier gives instruction on the carbine to trainees of a Civil Defense Group in the Province of Thua Thien, 22 July 1963. (*National Archives*)

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# DEEPENING INVOLVEMENT 1945 - 1965



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# Introduction

To many Americans, the war in Vietnam was, and remains, a divisive conflict. Now almost fifty years after the beginning of major U.S. combat operations in Vietnam, the war has faded from much of America's consciousness. Over half of the U.S. population was born after the war and has no direct memory of the conflict, yet this does not lessen its importance. The massive American commitment—political, military, and diplomatic—to the independence of South Vietnam beginning in the 1950s and continuing with U.S. direct combat operations in the 1960s and early 1970s makes it important to remember those who served.

U.S. involvement in this corner of Southeast Asia began after World War II when Vietnam was fighting for independence from France. Although generally favoring Vietnamese independence, the United States supported France because the rebels—or Viet Minh—were led by Communists and in the days of the Cold War U.S. officials considered any and all Communists to be little more than the puppets of Moscow and Beijing. France's defeat in 1954, the bifurcation of Vietnam into a Communist North and non-Communist South, and America's assumption of the job of training the armed forces of the newly created non-Communist Republic of Vietnam pulled the United States deeper into the conflict. Framed primarily as a fight to defend democracy against the forces of international communism, the United States gradually committed more troops and materiel to fight Communist-led Southern guerrillas (or Viet Cong) and the regular military forces sent to South Vietnam by the politburo in Hanoi.

By the time President Lyndon B. Johnson committed major combat units in 1965, the United States had already invested thousands of men and millions of dollars in the fight to build a secure and stable South Vietnam. That commitment expanded rapidly until by 1969 the United States had over 365,000 soldiers in every military region of South Vietnam with thousands of

other servicemen and women throughout the Pacific area in direct support of operations. The war saw many technological innovations including the massive use of helicopters, wide-scale use of computers, sophisticated psychological operations, new concepts of counterinsurgency, and major advances in military medicine. Yet, as in most wars, much of the burden of battle was still borne by the foot soldiers on the ground who slogged over the hills and through the rice paddies in search of an often elusive foe. The enormous military and political effort by the United States was, however, continuously matched by the determination of North Vietnamese leaders to unify their country under communism at whatever cost. That determination, in the end, proved decisive. Negotiations accompanied by the gradual withdrawal of American forces led to the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973, effectively ending the U.S. military role. The continued existence of an independent South Vietnam, however, was of short duration. Two years after the American exit the North Vietnamese Army overran South Vietnam and sealed its victory in April 1975.

The vast majority of American men and women who served in Vietnam did so in the uniform of the United States Army. They served their country when called, many at great personal cost, against a backdrop of growing uncertainty and unrest at home. These commemorative pamphlets are dedicated to them.

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## **Deepening Involvement, 1945–1965**

The triumphant end of World War II for the forces of the United Nations (principally the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union, France, and China) seemed to usher in a new era of international cooperation. However, the alliance that conquered Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan soon fractured over a host of issues that the necessity for unity in the face of a common threat had only papered over. The expansion of world communism at the point of Red Army bayonets into Eastern Europe and the rapid fall of the Nationalist Chinese government of Chiang Kai-shek to the forces of Mao Zedong's Communist guerrillas seemed to portend the reawakening of a monolithic Communist threat intent on world revolution. These events coincided with the rapid collapse of the empires of Britain, France, and the Netherlands that between them dominated much of the remainder of the globe. The United States found itself inheriting both the struggle against a resurgent Communist movement and the destabilizing problems of decolonization that provided fertile ground for Communist and Communist-inspired movements to seize more and more control over those new states and their natural resources. Nowhere would this dilemma be more acute than in French Indochina where the forces of nationalism and communism combined to oppose the re-establishment of French control after the defeat and withdrawal of the Japanese occupation forces.

The Japanese had occupied French Indochina in 1940–1941 as part of their expansionist moves into Southeast Asia. They were hungry for the oil and rubber of the region and needed bases as they moved south against the Dutch East Indies (later Indonesia) and the United States in the Philippines. For a time,

the French flag still flew over Indochina despite the Japanese occupation, but in March 1945 the Japanese took total control over the region and killed or captured much of the French garrison. Because France was by now one of the Allied powers, the first direct actions of the United States in the region were to support the remnants of the French forces with airpower and advisers as they tried to fight the Japanese (*Map 1*).

With the Japanese surrender in September 1945, the United States pushed for, and achieved, the movement of a Chinese corps into northern Vietnam to disarm the Japanese while the British Army performed a corresponding mission in the half of the country below the 16th Parallel. Members of the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS), some of whom had parachuted into northern Vietnam to work with the French forces retreating from Japanese attacks in early 1945, worked with the Chinese to attempt to recover Allied prisoners and disarm the Japanese. Other OSS personnel had joined members of the native Vietnamese resistance movement against the Japanese known as the *Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi*, or Viet Minh, led by a dynamic Communist who called himself Ho Chi Minh. The United States found itself caught between the Viet Minh, with links to the Communist international movement, and its French allies who were intent on re-establishing their hold over the colony. Both sides took advantage of the

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Ho Chi Minh (*standing, third from left*) at a farewell party for the OSS in 1945





Map 1

unsettled nature of the immediate end of the war to build allies and construct political agreements to weaken the other entity. The result was open warfare between the returning French forces and the Viet Minh by November 1946. The United States, not wishing to oppose an ally who was crucial to the U.S. position in a vulnerable Europe, was also reluctant to support an independence movement that was obviously controlled by Communists. As the Truman Doctrine began to take shape in response to Communist attempts at subversion in Eastern Europe and Greece, the view that the Viet Minh were simply additional players in the worldwide Communist movement, controlled directly from Moscow, was only strengthened.

In the end, U.S. policy toward Indochina during France's attempt to retake and pacify their colony from 1946 to 1954 remained ambiguous. The United States provided financial support and military aid to France in small amounts, but much of its support was focused on building up the French forces in Europe. However, in March 1950 the French asked directly for military equipment to assist in their fight against international communism while simultaneously rebuilding their empire in Indochina. With the Cold War now in full swing, the United States determined that such aid was critical in the fight against Communist aggression. In September 1950, the United States established the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), Indochina, in Saigon to supervise the flow of that aid.

## **STRATEGIC SETTING**

From the establishment of the MAAG in 1950 until the end of French rule in Indochina in 1954, the United States was increasingly engaged in providing military equipment, development aid, agricultural assistance, and economic support to Vietnam to assist the French effort to defeat the Viet Minh. The Viet Minh, on the other hand, increasingly turned to the Chinese, now ruled by the Communist dictator Mao Zedong, for military aid and advisers. With the United States fighting the Chinese in Korea from 1950 to 1953, the war in Indochina was seen as a crucial test of western resolve, and the aid flowed correspondingly. As U.S. fears of direct Chinese intervention in the conflict grew, and thus concerns also grew about the fall of yet another "domino" to the forces of international communism, American engagement in the fate of Indochina deepened.

The MAAG was initially staffed with only a handful of U.S. officers and men—less than eighty personnel in all. It engaged France's military and helped determine their requirements in equipment, supplies, and expertise; forwarded their requests back to Washington; and then supervised the arrival and distribution of the supplies to the French Army. Once the equipment and supplies were in Vietnam, U.S. personnel were supposed to monitor their use and inspect them for long-term maintenance requirements. However, the lack of effective French equipment accountability methods, poor maintenance procedures, and ill-disguised resentment of U.S. personnel by the French colonial authorities at having to ask for help interfered with attempts at improving the situation.

French dislike and distrust of U.S. military support diminished somewhat in the fall of 1950 and early 1951 when the Viet Minh unleashed a major ground offensive that captured several French outposts in the Tonkin region of Vietnam near the Chinese border and near the Hanoi-Haiphong region. In January, two Viet Minh divisions attacked the town of Vinh Yen northwest of Hanoi, and only the use of American-supplied napalm bombs (a form of jellied gasoline) and artillery staved off a shattering defeat. As the flow of American materiel increased in early 1951, it was obvious that only French superiority in aviation, artillery, and mobility that resulted from that flow was keeping the Viet Minh at bay.

Despite American assurances that the aid would continue, there was deep concern that French unwillingness or inability to create an effective national Vietnamese Army would undermine all attempts at defeating the Viet Minh. MAAG personnel suggested on numerous occasions that U.S. equipment should flow directly to Vietnamese units (many of which were still officered by the French) to bolster the idea of an independent, non-Communist, nationalist alternative to the Viet Minh. However, French authorities rejected such ideas out of hand. Rather than contemplate such a development, which would obviously have been fatal to their hopes of restoring their colonial empire, the French threatened to pull out of Vietnam completely and abandon the struggle against Communist aggression. The United States could not easily consider such a development in 1951 with the Communist Chinese on the offensive in Korea and war-torn Europe under threat from potential Soviet aggression.

Even more important than equipment, in the eyes of the U.S. State Department, was the need to build up a Vietnamese National Army separate from the French-officered units. American pressure and French battlefield reverses in 1952 combined to force the French to agree to a plan to create forty light battalions of Vietnamese infantry. U.S. Army Chief of Staff General J. Lawton Collins approved of the proposal and further urged the French to develop a more robust training system modeled on the schools developed for training South Korean troops. However, despite U.S. support and the promise of additional aid to make the forty battalion program viable, French resistance to the idea of creating institutions that might make Vietnamese independence a reality effectively crippled the plan.

By early 1953, and the arrival of Dwight D. Eisenhower's administration, U.S. aid to the French in Indochina totaled more than 150,000 tons of equipment including 900 combat vehicles, 15,000 other vehicles, 2,500 artillery pieces, 75,000 small arms, 24,000 automatic weapons, and nearly 9,000 radios. The Air Force provided France 160 F6F and F8F fighters, 41 B-26 light bombers, and 28 C-47 transports along with massive amounts of spare parts, maintenance assistance, and bombs. Yet it seemed as if the French were no closer to victory over the resilient Viet Minh than they had been in 1946 when the war started.

American concerns about France's ability to defeat the Viet Minh led to the dispatch of a special mission headed by Lt. Gen. John W. ("Iron Mike") O'Daniel, a distinguished combat veteran of World War I, World War II, and Korea. O'Daniel's mission was to glean additional information about how the French planned to conduct military operations—the French seldom provided much information to the United States on the specific uses of all of its operational aid—while encouraging them to be more aggressive against the Viet Minh. Arriving in June 1953, General O'Daniel and his team seemed to make progress; they were presented with an aggressive new plan by the French commander in Vietnam, Lt. Gen. Henri Navarre. The Navarre Plan included a number of offensive operations and accelerated moves to build up the Vietnamese National Army, long a sore point between the United States and France. The O'Daniel mission, and a follow-up mission in November, generated renewed hope in the French Army's ability to reverse the tide of events on the battlefield. This hope was not shared by the MAAG or by Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) advisers who knew how difficult it was for the French Army to



French machine gunners have just enough time to throw themselves on the ground and put their weapon in play as Viet Minh soldiers attack.

implement grand plans with its limited resources and decreasing support from its government and people.

#### DIEN BIEN PHU: THE GAMBLE

On 20 November 1953, French paratroopers jumped into a valley deep in Vietnam, almost to the Laotian border, near the small village of Dien Bien Phu. The plan was to establish a heavily fortified installation deep in enemy territory to support counter-guerrilla operations and draw enemy main force units out in the open where French firepower and air support could destroy them. The French succeeded in drawing out enemy main force units. Over the next few months, the Viet Minh moved four infantry divisions and an artillery division onto the hills surrounding Dien Bien Phu and sustained them using an army of porters, bicycle transports, and handcarts. Quickly cutting off all land supply lines and then neutralizing the French artillery, the Viet Minh turned the fortress of Dien Bien Phu into a trap. It could only be resupplied with men, ammunition, and food by a long and tenuous air line of communications. Despite mobilizing all of their air transport fleet and obtaining the support of a number of United States Civil Air Transport C-119 Flying Boxcar transport aircraft (a CIA-run airline that painted French markings on the planes), supplies quickly ran short in the cutoff outpost as the Viet Minh



General O'Daniel (*right*) inspected the Dien Bien Phu outpost in February 1954 and was encouraged by the impression of French strength.

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drew the noose ever tighter. Attempts to parachute in reinforcements only trickled in small packets of soldiers.

At first it seemed as if despite its isolated position, French firepower might yet prevail. On a visit to the outpost in February 1954, General O'Daniel noted a number of flaws in the French deployment of forces, but he also saw extensive bunkers with interlocking fields of fire and left encouraged by the overall impression of French strength. By then, however, the buildup of Viet Minh forces outside the besieged position numbered over thirty-five thousand soldiers with at least a hundred artillery pieces on the high ground overlooking the fortress. Beginning on 13 March, the Viet Minh launched a series of attacks against the French strong points that protected the main position and quickly overran them. This reverse marked the beginning of the end for the French fortress.

While assisting France with providing supplies for their cutoff troops at Dien Bien Phu, the United States faced a series of deeper questions: Should it directly intervene militarily to prevent a French defeat? If it did not, what effect would this have on the global struggle against communism? Conversely, if the United States did intervene, how would it do so, in what strength, with what goals, and with what chance of success? Would it have the desired effect or just throw good money after bad? These were

policy issues that had no easy answers. The Eisenhower administration did not want to appear “soft on communism” (candidate Eisenhower had, after all, campaigned on a promise to “roll-back” Communist gains around the world). The administration had no desire to expand the U.S. Army by the hundreds of thousands of troops that would be needed to engage in a military intervention in Indochina or expend huge amounts of money in a gamble. Or, if the intent was simply to unleash U.S. airpower against the Viet Minh, where were the hard targets and how effective would airpower really be against a mainly guerrilla force? The Viet Minh had no cities or factories or supply lines that could be attacked effectively by air. Speculation to this day wonders what would have happened if the United States had directed B-29 Superfortress attacks against the Viet Minh troop concentrations surrounding Dien Bien Phu. Even assuming the air attacks were completely effective (some policymakers were even considering the possible use of nuclear weapons to increase the odds of success), the remarkable motivation of the Viet Minh and their persistence in providing replacements and resupply might have made such a major effort useless in the long run. The fortress could still have fallen, making the United States seem weak and ineffectual and giving the forces of communism around the world a huge psychological boost. The United States could not discount the possibility of direct Chinese intervention with ground forces as a result of such actions, especially given the example of Korea.

It seemed as if all possible avenues were fraught with danger. The French position in Indochina would either be lost, and with it the fight in that region against worldwide Communist aggression, or the United States would find itself bogged down in a lengthy, expensive commitment in Asia. A commitment in Asia had the risk of direct confrontation with the Chinese and their Soviet patrons that might result in a wider conflict. What was Indochina worth? What was the support of a North Atlantic Treaty Organization ally worth?

The fall of Dien Bien Phu on 7 May 1954 and the conclusion of the Geneva Agreements on 21 July put an effective end to speculation on whether or not to intervene to save the French who were clearly defeated and had no further political or military stomach for the fight. Their forces were to withdraw to the south, leaving the area north of the 17th Parallel to the triumphant Viet Minh. The treaty was to be supervised by an International Control



French soldiers escort Viet Minh into Hanoi, October 1954

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Commission consisting of representatives of India, Poland, and Canada, and free elections were to be held in North and South Vietnam in July 1956. The United States did not concur in the final declaration but pledged to “refrain from the threat of the use of force to disturb” the agreements while warning that it would not stand idly by at any renewal of attacks in violation of the agreements. The outcome was nothing less than a major defeat for France, the United States, and the free world. The Geneva Agreements ceded half the country to Ho Chi Minh’s Communist-controlled Democratic Republic of Vietnam, with its capital in Hanoi. This left South Vietnam under the weak remnant of a government headed by the last Vietnamese emperor Bao Dai and his new prime minister, Ngo Dinh Diem, with its capital in Saigon.

## OPERATIONS

The final collapse of the French in Indochina, even with the establishment of a non-Communist zone in the southern half of Vietnam, also signaled the collapse of U.S. policy in the region, which had focused on bolstering France’s position. All arguments about direct U.S. military intervention, either by bombings in support of the French at Dien Bien Phu or even the direct involvement of up to seven divisions of American combat troops in the Red River delta region (up to five more in the event of Chinese



South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem

intervention), founded on the simple fact that the Eisenhower administration did not have the money or the forces to pursue a policy that had so little chance of success. Yet the impulse to oppose the further expansion of Communist influence in Asia was powerful. What, then, was the United States to do now?

The decision to expand American advisory efforts to assist the new South Vietnamese government was made even before the signing of the Geneva Agreements.

In May, the French, reeling from their defeat at Dien Bien Phu, had consented to the placement of U.S. advisers with Vietnamese units to train those units as well as to ensure the proper maintenance and use of U.S.-supplied equipment. This had been a longstanding request and only desperation had moved the French to accept it. The total collapse of France's effort in 1954 prevented any implementation of this initial advisory effort and postponed any further initiatives until after the creation of South Vietnam.

The fledgling South Vietnamese government under Prime Minister Diem soon turned to the United States for help, asking for assistance in moving eight hundred thousand refugees from North Vietnam to the south as permitted by the Geneva Agreements. President Eisenhower endorsed Diem's request and dispatched a fact-finding mission on military aid led by former Chief of Staff of the Army General Collins. This group recommended an expansion of the U.S. training mission to build a new South Vietnamese Army. On 12 February 1955, the new MAAG chief, General O'Daniel, assumed full responsibility for the organization and training of the South Vietnamese Army. In the eyes of many Vietnamese, however, the French colonial masters had merely been replaced by Americans (*Map 2*).

General O'Daniel's new Military Support Mission (later called the Training Relations and Instruction Mission [TRIM])



Map 2

incorporated approximately 200 French officers who had been previously attached to South Vietnamese units along with 68 U.S. officers with 149 being added over the next few months. The French continued to provide officer and specialist training for the South Vietnamese Army while the Americans established basic training centers and schools. However, there was no small amount of friction between the U.S. and French advisers and instructors and between the French and their South Vietnamese counterparts who resented continuous French criticism of their new army. It was not a congenial arrangement.

The awkwardness of the continuing French advisory component was aggravated by the presence of three French combat divisions. Diem considered them an unnecessary relic of the colonial past that served only as a propaganda tool for the Vietnamese Communists to exploit. He therefore withdrew from the French Union, restricted special French commercial benefits, and abolished the monarchy before the end of 1955. The French took the hint, and by May 1956 had withdrawn virtually all troops and advisers from South Vietnam, leaving the advisory effort completely to the

Americans. General O'Daniel departed in October 1955 and was replaced by Lt. Gen. Samuel T. ("Hanging Sam") Williams, who created a new Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), Vietnam.

One of the first challenges faced by General Williams was accounting for the vast amount of U.S. equipment that had been supplied over the past ten years to the French in Indochina. Much of the equipment, in dubious states of repair, had been dumped on the unprepared South Vietnamese as the French departed. With only a rudimentary army and no established logistical, maintenance, repair, or depot storage

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Lt. Gen. Samuel T. Williams



system, much of that equipment was unusable. The U.S. advisers, only 342 strong by the end of 1955, slowly began to establish a system to deal with this flood of material while also advising on the formation and training of a completely new South Vietnamese Army. In excess of \$700 million in American equipment, desperately needed for that army, was rapidly vanishing without a trace.

The solution was to dispatch a team of 350 additional U.S. officers and men to South Vietnam to form a Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission (TERM). In addition, the MAAG gained another forty-eight permanent spaces to assist in handling the expanded workload. The TERM team members began arriving in June 1956 and were fully integrated into the MAAG's advisory and training effort. In fact, most of the members of TERM were quickly diverted to the operational and staff training missions of the MAAG. Only seven team members were directly working on equipment recovery issues by the end of 1957. All pretense as to the team's real purpose was dropped in 1959, and the TERM team was fully absorbed by the advisory group, a major expansion of the MAAG size and mission.

MAAG, Vietnam, operated under two chains of command. As part of U.S. forces in the Pacific region, the advisory group reported to the Commander in Chief, Pacific, on all operational matters. The group also reported to the U.S. ambassador to Vietnam on all policy matters involving the implementation of the in-country military assistance program. As such, the MAAG was part of the ambassador's Country Team, a loosely structured committee headed by the ambassador that included representatives dealing with all aspects of U.S. support to a country. The Country Team was meant to impose some manner of cooperation and coordination on the various American initiatives, but the loose structure and lack of clear lines of authority often prevented a truly integrated approach. As was often the case, the military and the State Department did not always agree on policy, leaving the MAAG chief caught in the middle.

Along with the MAAG, the Country Team in Vietnam included representatives of the CIA, which gathered intelligence and provided advice and assistance on building South Vietnamese national police and intelligence capacity; the United States Information Service, which handled information and propaganda

issues; and the United States Operational Mission (USOM—later the International Cooperation Agency and later still the United States Agency for International Development [USAID]), which handled socioeconomic development, governmental capacity-building in the provinces, and assistance to police and paramilitary organizations. With oft-competing agendas and the ability to appeal any local decisions back to their cabinet-level superiors in Washington, different parts of the Country Team frequently worked at cross purposes.

By 1960 the MAAG had grown in size to about 685 U.S. military personnel. Although most of the men were from the Army, there were also around one hundred Air Force, eighty Navy, and a few Marine Corps personnel at the headquarters and in field advisory posts. American advisers were also assigned to an Army basic training center at Quang Trung near Saigon, a military college for senior officers in Saigon, the National Military Academy (a basic officer training center) at Da Lat in the Central Highlands, a ranger and noncommissioned officer school at Duc My near Nha Trang, the Cay Mai intelligence and psychological warfare school in Saigon, and several branch schools near Saigon. Building on earlier attempts at gaining control over the U.S. equipment in South Vietnam and rationalizing the logistical structure, by 1961 the MAAG had also assigned a number of logistics advisers to the four major depots in South Vietnam in Saigon, Nha Trang, Qui Nhon, and Da Nang.

In August 1960, General Williams was replaced as chief of MAAG, Vietnam, by Lt. Gen. Lionel C. McGarr, a 1928 West Point graduate who had commanded the 30th Infantry Regiment in Europe during World War II and had been the assistant division commander of the 2d Infantry Division in Korea. To General McGarr, the challenge facing his organization was clear:

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Lt. Gen. Lionel C. McGarr (shown as a major general)



“The problem confronting Vietnam today is one of a political-military-psychological-economic nature which *cannot* [his emphasis] be resolved by military means alone.” The solution, he believed, lay “in the coordinated use of additional military, political, social, economic, and psychological power . . . with the objective of *truly* winning over and motivating the population to a common purpose.” However, McGarr also acknowledged that the critical situation challenging the Diem regime in 1960 was such that military measures had to be the first priority or there would be no time to pursue any long-term goals of economic or social reforms. At every turn successive U.S. commanders and diplomats had to recognize both the military dimensions of the threat to South Vietnam and the constant need to balance those security activities with aid and pacification operations. Unfortunately, the enemy, in this case the North Vietnamese, always had a vote as to which dimension to emphasize at any given moment, and thus was often able to force South Vietnam and its U.S. supporters to react to his initiatives.

The North Vietnam–inspired and –led insurgency within South Vietnam against the nascent Diem regime had continued to gain ground from its initiation in 1955. Diem, with little popular support and facing internal challenges from political and religious factions and from his own generals, had initially been slow to recognize the threat. He chose individuals to be senior province leaders and high military officials from those whom he felt he could trust, regardless of their ability or their susceptibility to corruption. Rather than try to win over the people with a serious effort at land reform, Diem sought to turn back the clock by returning thousands of acres of the most fertile land in the Mekong Delta to a handful of rich families who had fled the region during the long war with the French. Another of Diem’s attempts to help improve the security of his country against Communist subversion seemed to create more local animosity than security. He tried to create fortified villages in the Central Highlands region of the country but in doing so directly threatened the interests of the mountain tribes of Vietnam. These tribes, collectively called Montagnards (mountain-dwellers), by the French and *moi* (savages) by the Vietnamese, were of a Malayo-Polynesian and Mon-Khmer racial stock and practiced slash-and-burn agriculture in the jungles of central Vietnam. They had never gotten along with the ethnic Vietnamese, and the French had capitalized on this dislike by playing one off against the other. Rather than recruiting them as allies in his fight against the Vietnamese

Communists (Viet Cong), Diem's policies threatened to drive them wholesale into the arms of his enemies.

Through a ruthless campaign Diem was initially successful in rooting out many insurgents. However, he faced a renewed campaign of violence in 1959 and 1960 as Viet Cong agents began an assassination campaign against government officials in the hamlets and villages. The campaign of terror also was directed against teachers, village elders, clergymen, and landlords who might be expected to support the government. The Viet Cong would then establish their own webs of control, recruit the young men of the villages into their own guerrilla and main force units, collect food and taxes from those villages, and begin to set up a shadow government that directly opposed the Saigon government.

By 1960, the successes the Viet Cong guerrillas had achieved were the result of a well-laid plan orchestrated by the North Vietnamese Communist party. To support the growing insurgency, the North had established a special logistical unit in early 1959 tasked with building a network of trails and roads through the jungles of Laos and Cambodia to the porous border of South Vietnam. This network, known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail, was the lifeline of the

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Bicycles are used to transport supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.



U.S. Army Transportation Museum

insurgency and permitted the movement of troops and growing quantities of supplies and equipment from the North to the South despite all attempts at interdiction. In 1959, the North Vietnamese Communists infiltrated 1,600 small arms, 50 tons of supplies, and 500 party cadre and soldiers with another 3,000 personnel the following year. These men were highly trained officers, noncommissioned officers, technicians, and political leaders who specialized in organizing, indoctrinating, training, and leading South Vietnamese recruits and organizing them into an effective fighting force.

This resurgent force began a series of military operations that almost immediately threatened the survival of the Diem regime. In one of the most serious incidents, a Viet Cong squad attacked the quarters of the American detachment advising the South Vietnamese 7th Infantry Division in Bien Hoa on 8 July 1959. Sneaking through barbed wire and past inattentive South Vietnamese guards, the six-man squad attacked the mess hall where the U.S. advisers and some guests were watching a movie. The Viet Cong raked the room with automatic weapon fire. Two Americans were killed and one wounded out of the thirteen Americans in the advisory team. Maj. Dale R. Buis and M. Sgt. Chester M. Ovnand were the first advisers to die by enemy action in South Vietnam. In another attack early in the New Year—this time on the command post of a South Vietnamese regiment near Tay Ninh City, a provincial capital northwest of Saigon near Cambodia—300 Viet Cong killed or wounded 66 South Vietnamese soldiers. The Communists also destroyed five buildings and seized large quantities of arms and ammunition before escaping virtually unscathed.

Violent incidents increased throughout the country including terrorist bombings and assassinations. There were 180 such separate incidents in January 1961 and 545 in September. Increasingly, Viet Cong units began to take on regular army formations and not just conduct raids on small outposts guarded by poorly trained militia, police, or the paramilitary Civil Guard units. Despite the continuing difficulty of infiltrating large numbers of operatives into Saigon, the Viet Cong were steadily growing stronger in the countryside throughout 1960 and 1961. By 1961 the Viet Cong claimed to control up to one-third of the South's 13.2 million to 15 million people. Even U.S. intelligence figures were only slightly more optimistic with strong evidence that 20 percent of the population was controlled outright and another 40 percent was under varying degrees of influence by the Viet Cong. In the rice-rich Mekong Delta, for example,

the Communists probably controlled seven of the thirteen provinces. There were few rural areas of South Vietnam where the Viet Cong could not operate, especially at night.

#### GOVERNMENT SECURITY AND MILITARY FORCES

The mission of the MAAG, Vietnam, was to help the South Vietnamese create a military and security structure that could fight back against guerrilla units, give the Diem regime a “breathing space” to gain its footing, and then assist in the long, slow climb to stability and prosperity. The challenge was formidable, given the strong enemy forces and their increasing support from the north, but also because of the poor quality of the South Vietnamese security and military structure.

In the countryside, where the threat was arguably the most imminent, the government seemed to have few forces at its disposal, and most of those were poorly armed, led, and trained. Each hamlet had a handful of part-time militiamen to serve as a security force but little more. These guards would probably notice if the hamlet was being visited by Viet Cong recruiting parties, cadre, or taxmen but could do little about it. The next higher administration element, the village, may only have had one full-time policeman and a squad (10–15 strong) of Self-Defense Corps soldiers, a part-time paramilitary organization under the Interior Ministry. At most there were about 45,000 part-time security men in the entire country. Spread as thin and nearly as ill-trained and equipped as the militia, the Self-Defense Corps was a regular target of the Viet Cong. The Viet Cong could concentrate their forces quickly and attack a Corps outpost—seizing their weapons, inflicting casualties, and then melting away—almost at will.

At the province level, the most significant security forces available were the Civil Guard. This full-time, paramilitary organization was administered, like the Self-Defense Corps, by the Interior Ministry but was controlled by Vietnam’s thirty-eight province chiefs. Organized into companies and platoons, the 55,200-man guard was better armed and motivated than other police and paramilitary forces available in the provinces but suffered from lack of transport. The Civil Guard was often engaged in static defense missions and was not generally able to react to Viet Cong attacks quickly enough to be decisive.

The lack of effective local security forces was just one problem facing Diem. The South Vietnamese military was also thrown into

the fight against the insurgency and it was far from ready for battle. Built largely on the remnants of French-trained colonial forces, the Vietnam Armed Forces (VAF) consisted of an army, navy, marines, and air force numbering approximately one hundred fifty thousand. By early 1961 the largest of these elements was the Army of the Republic of Vietnam with 138,000 soldiers. It was organized into seven infantry divisions of three infantry regiments and two artillery battalions each and a mix of combat support and combat service support units. In addition to the divisions, the Army had a ranger command consisting of sixty-five separate ranger companies, an airborne brigade of five battalions, five separate infantry battalions, eight field artillery battalions (three with 105-mm. howitzers and five with 155-mm. howitzers) and four armored regiments. The small navy of 3,200 sailors with 30 seagoing vessels and about 200 smaller craft was mostly engaged in coastal patrolling. South Vietnam also had a marine corps of 2,200 troops organized into three battalions and a 4,400-man air force. The air force operated a squadron of fighter-bombers, some liaison and observation aircraft, two transporter squadrons, and a squadron of light and medium helicopters.

Like the nation's police and paramilitary formations, the Republic of Vietnam's armed forces looked formidable on paper. Four institutional problems proved particularly vexing: a convoluted chain of command, uneven quality of officers, intelligence gathering and sharing, and tactical inflexibility. The first was a convoluted chain of command. On paper, authority extended downward from the office of the president through the Ministry of Defense to a Joint General Staff, headed by the army chief of staff, and then to the senior officer in charge of the field command, all of whom were headquartered in Saigon. Below the field command were five generals and their staffs who administered five geographically based military regions: Military Region II in the northern provinces nearest to the Demilitarized Zone, Military Region IV in central Vietnam, Military Region I in the provinces immediately north and east of Saigon, Military Region V in the Mekong Delta, and the Capital Military Region, which encompassed Saigon and the immediate area (*Map 3*). Three of those officers were also corps commanders equipped with a distinct corps staff—the headquarters of I Corps was based in Military Region II, II Corps was based in Military Region IV, and III Corps was based in Military Region I—that developed plans to be used in the event of a cross-border



Map 3

invasion. The commanders of divisions, separate regiments, and smaller independent units reported directly to the military region or corps commander.

In reality this chain of command operated in a highly irregular fashion. The South Vietnamese president, who also held the post of minister of defense, frequently devised and executed military operations without consulting the Joint General Staff. The highest army headquarters, the field command, had no combat units under its control because Diem refused to let any of his generals have operational authority over the entire army. The next lower echelon, the regional military and the corps commanders, had only tenuous control over subordinate units, as the division commanders could easily evade orders from above with an appeal to the president or by his prior instruction. In fact, Diem freely reached over intermediate commands to detach battalions and companies from regular army units for indefinite periods, to the detriment of unit cohesion.

A further complication arose from the fact that Diem assigned primary responsibility for South Vietnam's internal security to the nation's thirty-eight province chiefs and not to the military. Province chiefs, often former military officers chosen for their political loyalty, were outside of the military chain of command and frequently communicated to Diem on security matters without consulting local army commanders. Not only did each province chief have his own private army entirely outside of armed forces control in the form of the Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps, but the chiefs also controlled army units detached to assist them in maintaining security and could even block military operations in their jurisdictions.

The second major weakness affecting the military's performance was the uneven quality of South Vietnam's officers. While the best commanders had proved themselves in battle, first against the Viet Minh and later against the Viet Cong, others had used political connections rather than military skill to attain their rank. Diem controlled the selection and promotion of all officers above the grade of captain, and loyalty rather than talent was often a key criterion for advancement. He seemed unconcerned by the rampant corruption in the military and actually welcomed the rivalry between his generals because it reduced the chance they would form a junta to overthrow him.

If politicization undermined the cohesiveness, efficiency, and discipline of the officer corps, so too did other factors. The relative

newness of the South Vietnamese Army, when coupled with the fact that the French had permitted relatively few Vietnamese to obtain senior rank during the colonial era, meant that many high-ranking officers had little experience in commanding large formations. Because higher education was a prerequisite for officer-ship—15 percent of field grade officers held doctorates—officers tended to be drawn from Vietnam's relatively small urban middle class. Many of these individuals were unfamiliar with the jungle, mountain, and swamp terrain in which much of the war would be fought and were unsympathetic to the plight of the rural peasant. They were similarly indifferent to the welfare of their own soldiers, a fact that did not help unit morale. Finally, the South Vietnamese style of command, in which junior officers were expected to wait for direction and to follow orders literally, discouraged initiative in a war that required rapid decisions and aggressive, independent actions at the junior officer level.

A third institutional problem was intelligence. Eight separate agencies had their own networks for gathering and analyzing information that often overlapped and competed with one another. The different groups operated with little or no coordination, and several, including the Political and Social Research Bureau and the Military Security Service, specialized in political surveillance designed to ensure loyalty among officials and to counter dissidents rather than in gathering intelligence on the Viet Cong. The best intelligence probably came from agencies that had operatives among the people—the police, civil government, Self-Defense Corps, Civil Guard, and the *Surete* (secret police). Most of these agencies reported either to the province chief or to their respective administrative headquarters in Saigon and were loath to share information with the military. When information was shared, the lengthy communication and coordination process often meant that the information was out of date by the time it got into the hands of a commander who could act on it. The Army's own intelligence apparatus, beginning with the Military Intelligence Service (J-2) of the Joint General Staff and extending down to intelligence officers on headquarters and unit staffs, was poorly trained, woefully understaffed, and unable to transmit information rapidly and securely.

Tactical inflexibility was the armed forces' fourth major problem. Despite having motorized units, government troops were often less mobile than the Viet Cong because the South

Vietnamese troops relied heavily on the limited network of roads. Traveling light on foot and often in small groups, the Viet Cong could converge on targets from several directions and then disperse quickly. When the Army responded to those attacks by sending truck-mounted reinforcements, the soldiers often arrived several hours too late because the Viet Cong had mined the road or set an ambush to delay their advance. Unlike the enemy, the Army rarely operated at night. That fact alone meant that government forces yielded the initiative to the Viet Cong on a regular and predictable basis.

Despite its numerical superiority, the South Vietnamese Army often lacked sufficient strength to mount effective mobile operations against the Viet Cong because nearly 40 percent of its units were tied down in static positions guarding bridges, population centers, or military installations. Similarly, although the army enjoyed a tremendous superiority in firepower over the guerrillas, the inefficient command structure and a lack of communication equipment often meant that hours or even days would pass between a request for air strikes or artillery support and the delivery of that support. This situation, when coupled with the guerrillas' ability to pick and choose when and where to strike, greatly negated the Army's superiority in materiel.

Finally, the South Vietnamese Army was poorly trained. Few South Vietnamese officers exhibited much interest in training, and the heavy operational and pacification requirements imposed by the escalating insurgency meant that by 1961 many units had received little or no training. This lack of training was especially critical in infantry units. Although a majority of military personnel were long-service volunteers, these individuals tended to coalesce at the higher echelons and in service and support units where their technical knowledge could best be put to use. In contrast, up to 60 percent of Vietnamese soldiers in combat units were poorly paid, poorly educated, unmotivated, and inexperienced eighteen-month conscripts. Vietnamese soldiers would repeatedly prove that they were capable of great feats of courage and endurance when properly trained and led; however, all too often these vital ingredients were missing.

#### THE ADVISORY EFFORT

The task of training the Army of the Republic of Vietnam to fight the Viet Cong and their North Vietnamese masters fell squarely

on the shoulders of the Military Assistance Advisory Group led by General McGarr. The MAAG advisers faced a number of challenges in accomplishing this awesome task, not least of which was the ongoing effort to truly understand what was happening in the countryside. MAAG was not authorized or staffed to collect its own intelligence, so almost all of its information came from the South Vietnamese. Few advisers had any language capability and could not gather direct, unfiltered information from their counterparts in the army or from sources in the countryside.

The effectiveness of the advisory effort was also handicapped because most advisers served only a one-year tour. Building trust and rapport was challenging enough, but with American personnel rotating through their positions each year, it was even more difficult to build a strong relationship with their counterparts. In addition, many South Vietnamese had been fighting, with greater or lesser effectiveness, for many years and they did not relish getting advice on organization, tactics, or operations from foreign officers, many of whom were junior to them with no combat experience.

Central to the advisory effort was the establishment of a comprehensive training program for the South Vietnamese Army. The program included sending senior officers and enlisted men to U.S. schools and military courses in the Philippines and Japan while creating an effective training establishment inside Vietnam. When professional schooling was matched with properly organized units and supervised by a network of U.S. advisers attached to those units, the United States felt confident that the result would be an effective army capable of defending South Vietnam against any conventional or unconventional foe.

There were four major military school systems in Vietnam by the early 1960s. There was a basic training center at Quang Trung, near Saigon, that turned out some nine thousand recruits in its standard sixteen-week course. Senior officers attended a military college in Saigon that had both a staff officers' course for junior officers and a commanders' course for field grade officers. At Da Lat, about 150 miles northeast of Saigon in the II Corps area, the South Vietnamese Military Academy provided basic officer training. The major branch schools—armor, infantry, transportation, signal, administration, engineer, ordnance, artillery, and quartermaster—were located at the Thu Duc School Center, a few miles northeast of Saigon. In addition to these complexes, the advisory group established a physical training center and ranger



Cadets at the Da Lat Military Academy

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training school at Nha Trang where some of the early training teams from the U.S. Army Special Forces conducted their first missions in Vietnam. Special Forces provided a critical component of training to the South Vietnamese armed forces.

Supporting police and local security forces was initially the responsibility of the United States Operations Mission. The directors of USOM considered the local security forces, such as the Civil Guard and militia Self-Defense Corps, police forces rather than military forces and thus were their responsibility. Since those organizations belonged to the Ministry of the Interior, they were not eligible for U.S. military advisers, equipment, ammunition, weapons, or training support. However, it cannot be said that the USOM did much to train these police forces in the 1950s, even after the United States agreed to provide some equipment support in 1959. It was not until 1961 that the Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps were transferred to the Vietnamese Ministry of Defense and were eligible for full support from the military advisory and assistance effort (and the money and equipment that flowed with it). Only then was any serious and systematic attempt made to build

up these essential organizations that were often the first line of defense against the Viet Cong.

Perhaps even more central to the challenge of improving the ability of the armed forces of South Vietnam to counter a wily and aggressive foe was the difficulty of getting the Diem regime to agree to administrative, economic, and political reforms to undercut the Viet Cong's revolutionary plans and gain more support from its own people. Diem was not interested in any reforms that had, in his mind, the potential to loosen his grip on the military or government, and he resisted all attempts by the United States to force his hand. Even the promise of additional aid did not serve as adequate leverage for the United States to use over this sovereign government that it was publically committed to support. When United States Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow presented a comprehensive Basic Counterinsurgency Plan to Diem on 13 February 1961, he tried to make Diem agree that in return for the \$42 million worth of additional aid he would have to undertake key political and economic reforms. Diem drew out the discussions for three months as he attempted to prevent or delay many of the required reforms. While interested in aid, Diem saw that maintaining his own freedom of action and political autonomy was more important. While he delayed, the insurgency in the countryside only grew worse. It seemed that the United States had no reasonable alternatives to Diem who was, despite all of his flaws, an aggressive anti-Communist. This was no minor consideration as the situation elsewhere in Southeast Asia threatened to spiral out of control.

#### THE PROBLEM OF LAOS

As threatening as the situation in South Vietnam appeared to Washington officials in the early months of 1961, events in the nearby country of Laos seemed far worse. A small, mountainous kingdom set in the heart of Indochina, Laos occupied a strategic position between Communist China and North Vietnam on the one side and non-Communist Thailand, Cambodia, and South Vietnam on the other. Because neither side in the global Cold War could abide having Laos fall into the hands of the other, the signatories of the 1954 Geneva Agreements had agreed that Laos should be neutral territory. This proved impossible, and soon a bloody three-way civil war between pro-Western, neutralist, and pro-Communist factions engulfed the country. By January 1961, the situation seemed to be coming to a climax as the Communist

Pathet Lao faction, backed by North Vietnam, launched a major offensive. A Communist victory in Laos would undermine the morale of pro-Western forces throughout Southeast Asia. More significantly, a Communist Laos would permit North Vietnam to convert the still primitive Ho Chi Minh Trail into a major thoroughfare for the infiltration of men and supplies into the beleaguered South. In the minds of many strategists, the fates of Laos and South Vietnam were inextricably linked.

If the challenge was clear, the solution was not. One alternative was military intervention, either unilaterally or as part of a multinational effort under the aegis of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. The Lao people displayed scant unity, and their national army was neither well trained nor motivated. Laos' mountainous, landlocked terrain would make movement and supply difficult. The country's common border with China posed the threat of a Chinese intervention against the introduction of any American forces as had occurred in Korea in 1950. To make matters worse, in March the Joint Chiefs of Staff placed the troop strength required to stop the Pathet Lao and to parry a potential Chinese intervention at sixty thousand men.

Daunted by the prospect of becoming embroiled in a Laotian war, the newly inaugurated U.S. President, John F. Kennedy, sought to strengthen pro-Western forces by means short of outright intervention. In March he authorized Operation MILLPOND, which expanded several clandestine efforts that were already under way in Laos (Army Special Forces had been engaged in training the Royal Laotian Army and indigenous Hmong tribesmen since late 1959 working with the CIA). On 19 April, Kennedy then signaled his determination to prevent the collapse of Laos by transforming the covert American military aid organization in Laos—the Program Evaluation Office—into an overt Military Assistance Advisory Group, Laos. The situation in Laos, however, continued to deteriorate.

In late April, the Ambassador to Laos, Winthrop G. Brown, forced Kennedy to revisit intervention when he requested air strikes against the Pathet Lao. Brown further warned that the United States would probably have to follow up the strikes with combat troops. Presidential adviser Walt W. Rostow, backed by Ambassador-at-large W. Averell Harriman, recommended a limited troop deployment to Thailand. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara went further, stating that “we must take any



President Kennedy discusses Laos during a press conference at the State Department in 1961.

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Secretary of Defense McNamara (*seated, fourth from the left*) meets with members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon in 1961.



military action required to meet the threat.” McNamara recommended that the president directly intervene in Laos. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Lyman L. Lemnitzer agreed, but the rest of the Joint Chiefs were divided about the wisdom of a major ground intervention—an action that they now believed would require 140,000 men as well as the possible use of nuclear weapons. Congressional leaders likewise opposed intervening in Laos.

Torn by diverging advice, President Kennedy stuck to his preferred position of avoiding intervention. This decision received a significant boost in early May when the Pathet Lao agreed to a cease-fire and the initiation of a fourteen-nation conference in Geneva to settle Laos’ future. Yet the situation remained perilous—the outcome of the negotiations was uncertain, the Laotian government remained weak, and the Pathet Lao flagrantly violated the truce. Stung by the failure of his proxy invasion of Cuba in April, Kennedy and his advisers felt that the United States had to demonstrate that it could fight the Cold War effectively, and if Laos was not the proper venue for that fight, then the United States needed to find one that was. The worsening situation in Laos during the winter and spring of 1961, and its implications for the situation in Southeast Asia, paradoxically helped propel the president to deepen the nation’s commitment to saving the Diem regime.

#### STRATEGIC HAMLETS

While the U.S. advisory effort focused its attention on building up the conventional South Vietnamese Army and major elements of the local security forces, Diem was developing his own plans to establish control over the villages and hamlets of his country. In 1959 he initiated a relocation program that attempted to solve the problem of security by picking up whole communities and moving them to safer locations. These rural settlements were called *agrovilles* and were meant to be protected centers where the government could offer a wide range of social services such as schools and medical facilities while offering a full menu of economic development opportunities for the villagers. Poor planning and inadequate financial support, coupled with the deep reluctance of the Vietnamese people to leave their ancestral lands, quickly doomed the program.

In 1961, Diem inaugurated the strategic hamlet program, which attempted to implement lessons that the British had



A strategic hamlet in Long An Province in 1963

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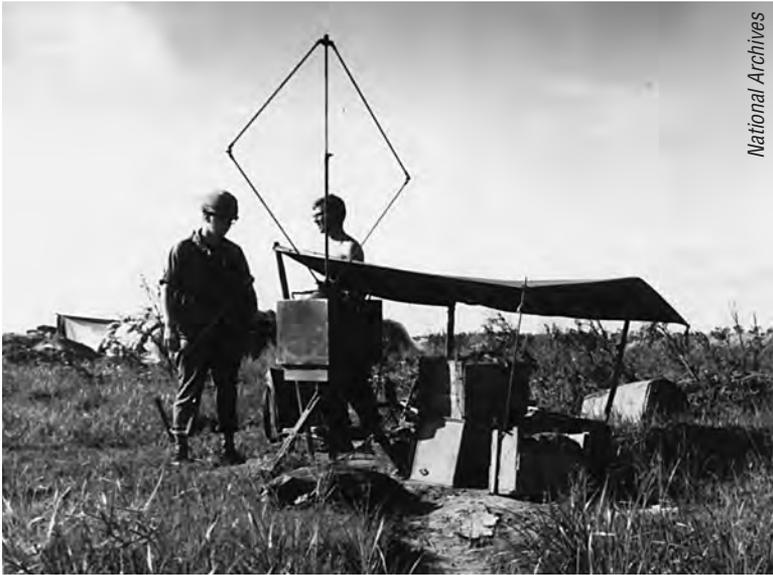
learned in their successful counterinsurgency campaign in Malaya. Sir Robert Thompson, head of the British advisory mission to Vietnam, had been one of the planners of that campaign and provided advice on the importance of rural security in isolating an enemy guerrilla force. Unfortunately, rather than building the hamlets slowly outward from a central, expanding base, Diem tried to build thousands almost simultaneously throughout the country with insufficient plans to link them together for security purposes. He hoped to complete seven thousand strategic hamlets by early 1963 and another five thousand by the following year. However, the program again uprooted farmers and their families and the government's development and security aid often proved inadequate. Therefore, the program was only partly successful.

While Diem was experimenting with various hamlet and village security initiatives, the United States implemented a number of programs that President Kennedy had approved in the spring of 1961. This included augmenting the MAAG with additional training and operational personnel. First to arrive were ninety-three men of the 82d Army Security Agency (ASA)

Operating Unit, who landed at Tan Son Nhut airfield outside of Saigon on 14 May. Working under the code name of the 3d Radio Research Unit (ASA units maintained this “cover” throughout their involvement in the Vietnam conflict), the ASA soldiers were charged with intercepting Communist electronic communications and then using direction-finding equipment to locate enemy radio transmitters. These operations began the following month at Nha Trang, Vung Tau in Phuoc Tuy Province, and Ha Tien in Kien Giang Province (later relocated to Bien Hoa air base in Bien Hoa Province), with Vietnamese soldiers providing security. Initial results were not promising. The Army’s AN/TRD-4 direction-finding equipment had been designed to locate radios operating behind enemy lines as would be the case during a conventional war, not transmitters located in friendly positions as was the situation in the unconventional conflict in Vietnam. This fact, combined with the particular radio frequencies used by the Viet Cong, made locating enemy transmitters difficult, and the unit was unable to provide fixes with any certainty. To compensate, the unit—which would grow to 150 men by year’s end—began using truck-mounted PRD-1 direction finders, but this equipment needed to be fairly close to an enemy transmitter to locate it, a dangerous proposition. Just how dangerous became clear in December, when guerrillas ambushed a 3d Radio Research Unit truck, killing one American and nine South Vietnamese soldiers.

#### UNITED STATES SUPPORT GROWS

In late 1961, the United States took steps to reorganize the MAAG to provide more direct advisory support to Vietnamese headquarters and tactical units. In April an inspection team from Pacific Command had noted disapprovingly that only a fraction of MAAG officers actually served in the field. General McGarr agreed that reorganization was needed but had decided to wait until the United States and South Vietnam had actually begun to implement some of the core elements of the counter-insurgency plan. In August McGarr reduced the administrative staff and expanded the number of advisers in the field. By the fall, when the MAAG’s assigned strength had increased to 792 people (77 Navy, 86 Air Force, and 629 Army), 594 personnel performed advisory duties, while 198 served in staff and support functions. This was a favorable ratio, though many of the



Radio direction finder in Vietnam

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advisers at MAAG headquarters probably spent more of their time doing staff work than actually advising the Vietnamese. Even after the reorganization only about 30 percent of MAAG personnel actually served with troop formations; most advisers continued to work at schools, training centers, and with higher command, staff, and logistical elements, many of which were located in and around Saigon.

Under the new structure, the MAAG assigned between fifty and seventy advisers to each Vietnamese corps: ten advisers at the corps' headquarters, twenty at the corps' regimental training area, ten to twenty with the corps' logistic command, and nine advisers with each of the corps' infantry divisions. The typical division advisory detachment consisted of a senior adviser (colonel or lieutenant colonel) and five majors or captains acting as advisers in the areas of artillery, signals, ordnance, engineering, and staff. Rounding out the division advisory team were three regimental advisers (lieutenant colonels or majors), each of whom advised one of the division's three infantry regiments.

By the fall of 1961, despite the reorganization of the MAAG and the increase in American advisory support, the situation in

Vietnam continued to deteriorate. Communist attacks were up and government casualties, despite some isolated tactical victories, were on the rise, with 477 dead in September and 539 killed in October. The provincial capital of Kontum Province had been overrun the night of 1–2 September by one thousand Communist fighters—two battalions of khaki-clad, well-armed soldiers that just a few days before had infiltrated into the South from Laos. Viet Cong agents in the garrison opened the gates and the enemy easily penetrated the security positions without firing a shot. They mauled a Civil Guard relief force and ambushed the 1st Battalion, 40th Infantry, quick reaction force as it tried to reach Kontum the following day. It was not until late on 4 September that two battalions arrived from the general reserve in Saigon, over two hundred miles away. Only then was the government able to retake the city. By that time the Communists had disappeared, only to strike more outposts in Darlac, Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, Phuoc Vinh, and along the Laotian border.

A rattled Diem, aware now of the extent of the danger, asked for a bilateral defense treaty with the United States and requested combat troops to assist him, a position he had refused to take for many years. However, Washington was not ready to take these steps. Instead, the MAAG recommended that the United States provide additional radios to facilitate coordination between Vietnamese units, a critical capability for units in far-flung counterinsurgency operations or those conducting rapid reaction operations. In addition, the United States sent a special U.S. Air Force unit, the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron (nicknamed Jungle Jim), under the code name FARM GATE. Although the squadron's initial mission was to train the South Vietnamese Air Force, American pilots quickly began flying combat missions, always being careful to take along a South Vietnamese passenger to maintain the fiction that the planes were merely on training missions. Finally, President Kennedy sent an interagency team led by his personal military adviser, General Maxwell D. Taylor, to take a fresh look at the situation in Vietnam.

General Taylor, accompanied by Walt Rostow of the National Security Council and more than a dozen other personnel, held extensive discussions with U.S. and South Vietnamese officials. The mission concluded that the situation was serious but not hopeless and highlighted the issues within the Diem government that stood in the way of progress: inefficiency, corruption, over



General Taylor (*center*), with President Kennedy and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, during his swearing in as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 1 October 1962

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centralization, and nepotism. The mission also recommended more U.S. civilian and military advisers throughout the government of South Vietnam along with additional communications and support personnel. President Kennedy accepted the recommendation but rejected a further suggestion that he send eight thousand combat troops into the embattled Mekong Delta. Diem opposed many of the proposed reforms, arguing that they were either unnecessary, unrealistic, or would have the effect of turning South Vietnam into a protectorate of the United States. Vietnamese pride and American caution thus slowed the pace of U.S. involvement, but regardless of concerns on both sides, on 4 January 1962, a new partnership between the two countries was announced.

While all services contributed to the new partnership by offering additional equipment and advisers (in what was called Operation BEEF-UP), the U.S. Army provided the most by sending, for the first time, units that would help conduct combat operations.



H-21 "Flying Banana" helicopters unload South Vietnamese soldiers in 1962.

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General McGarr believed that greater mobility was essential if South Vietnam's overstretched security forces were to take the war to the enemy as well as to respond to his far-flung attacks. Because the South Vietnamese had not used their helicopter assets effectively and because it would take time to train and equip additional Vietnamese helicopter forces, the United States decided to send Army aviation units to Vietnam. The initial commitment was sixty-eight fixed-wing aircraft, most of them for observation, and three companies of transport helicopters, one for each corps tactical zone. The first contingent arrived on 11 December when the aircraft carrier *USS Core* tied up at Saigon's docks bearing 32 H-21C Shawnee helicopters (popularly called flying bananas because of their distinctive shape) and 400 men assigned to the U.S. Army's 8th and 57th Transportation Companies (Light Helicopter). Additional aircraft, including the third helicopter company, the 93d Transportation Company (Light Helicopter), arrived in January 1962. After a short shakedown period, the helicopter units immediately went to work training South Vietnamese soldiers and transporting them on operations.

McGarr next turned his attention to intelligence. Two incidents that occurred in November and December demonstrated the merits of having an efficient intelligence system. In the first, word that the Viet Cong were going to be celebrating the recent capture of a government official enabled the South Vietnamese to vector two AD-6 (later redesignated AE-1) Skyraider attack aircraft to the celebration site twenty miles east of Tay Ninh City, Tay Ninh Province, on 30 November. The ground troops who

arrived shortly after the strike found fifty-two corpses, took sixty prisoners, and collected numerous arms and documents. Several days later, information gathered from a Viet Cong prisoner allowed government paramilitary troops to crash a Communist Party meeting in the southwestern delta province of An Giang. The soldiers killed twenty-eight insurgents and two local party commissioners. Unfortunately, such incidents were rare, as the manner in which the Vietnamese government collected, processed, and distributed intelligence caused many operations to fail.

To remedy the situation, McGarr suggested that the Pentagon redraft MAAG's terms of reference to allow it to actively gather and analyze intelligence, functions not normally performed by military advisory groups. He also asked that the Defense Department augment the 25 intelligence personnel on his staff by 150 more. The additional manpower would be used to post intelligence operators and advisers in every province, regiment, division, and corps; to bolster a newly formed intelligence evaluation center designed to share information between American agencies; and to create a proposed combined U.S.-Vietnamese intelligence organization. General Taylor endorsed all of these as well as other intelligence reform measures, and in December Diem agreed to integrate U.S. intelligence advisers throughout his military chain of command. Meanwhile, in December the Department of the Army ordered the Army Security Agency to send an additional 288 soldiers to Vietnam to improve MAAG's ongoing efforts to intercept enemy communications.

The increase in intelligence personnel was just one part of Operation BEEF-UP's program to improve the Vietnamese armed forces. In addition to the 318 new advisers already scheduled to arrive by year's end, General Taylor recommended that the Pentagon deploy over 400 more by 31 March 1962. Along with the extra personnel would come new terms of reference permitting American forces to participate fully in the planning and execution of Vietnamese operations. Noting that the United States currently posted only one adviser to each South Vietnamese infantry regiment but that the war was largely prosecuted at the battalion and company levels, Taylor also proposed that the United States assign advisers to smaller tactical units. President Kennedy was lukewarm to a suggestion that would surely lead to American casualties but ultimately approved the idea in lieu of sending

combat forces to Vietnam. The president's decisions marked an important milestone in U.S. involvement in combat and combat support operations.

#### THE BUON ENAO EXPERIMENT AND CIVILIAN IRREGULAR DEFENSE GROUPS (CIDG)

The increased level of Viet Cong attacks and the expanded U.S. support led to an initiative that would provide better local security and an improvement of the government's position in the Central Highlands. The need to prevent the Viet Cong from gaining a foothold with the Montagnard population in that critical region created an opportunity for a new organization to show what it could do: the U.S. Army Special Forces. Special Forces was created in 1952 to serve as an irregular warfare force capable of creating and sustaining an insurgency behind Soviet and Warsaw Pact lines in the event of World War III in Europe. By the late 1950s, the highly trained men of Special Forces were increasingly recognized as also being the nucleus for a counterinsurgency capability. Organized into small, self-reliant teams (an A team consisting of twelve men skilled in communications, demolitions, weapons, intelligence, and medical treatment was supported by larger B and C teams for command and control), Special Forces units were seen as ideal for going into rural areas, working with the people, and training them in security operations while providing them basic civic action assistance. Despite some experience in Korea in 1953 and extensive exercises in Europe, the Pacific, and South America, Vietnam would be the first large-scale test of these units.

In late 1961 and early 1962, under an initiative begun by the CIA, Special Forces personnel of Team A-35 of the 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) supported by Vietnamese Special Forces personnel (*Luc Long Dac Biet* or LLDB) entered the small village of Buon Enao, a highland community of the Rhade tribe. They quickly gained a measure of trust from the villagers. Special Forces helped establish local self-defense forces, worked with them to identify Viet Cong infiltrators, and began to equip the villagers with firearms. The soldiers lived with the villagers, ate with them, worked with them to build defenses, set up medical aid and training programs, and reinstated a number of civic action projects. The initiative quickly spread from Buon Enao until 40 villages and 14,000 Rhade were included by the middle of 1962. Expanding further, new complexes were established using the

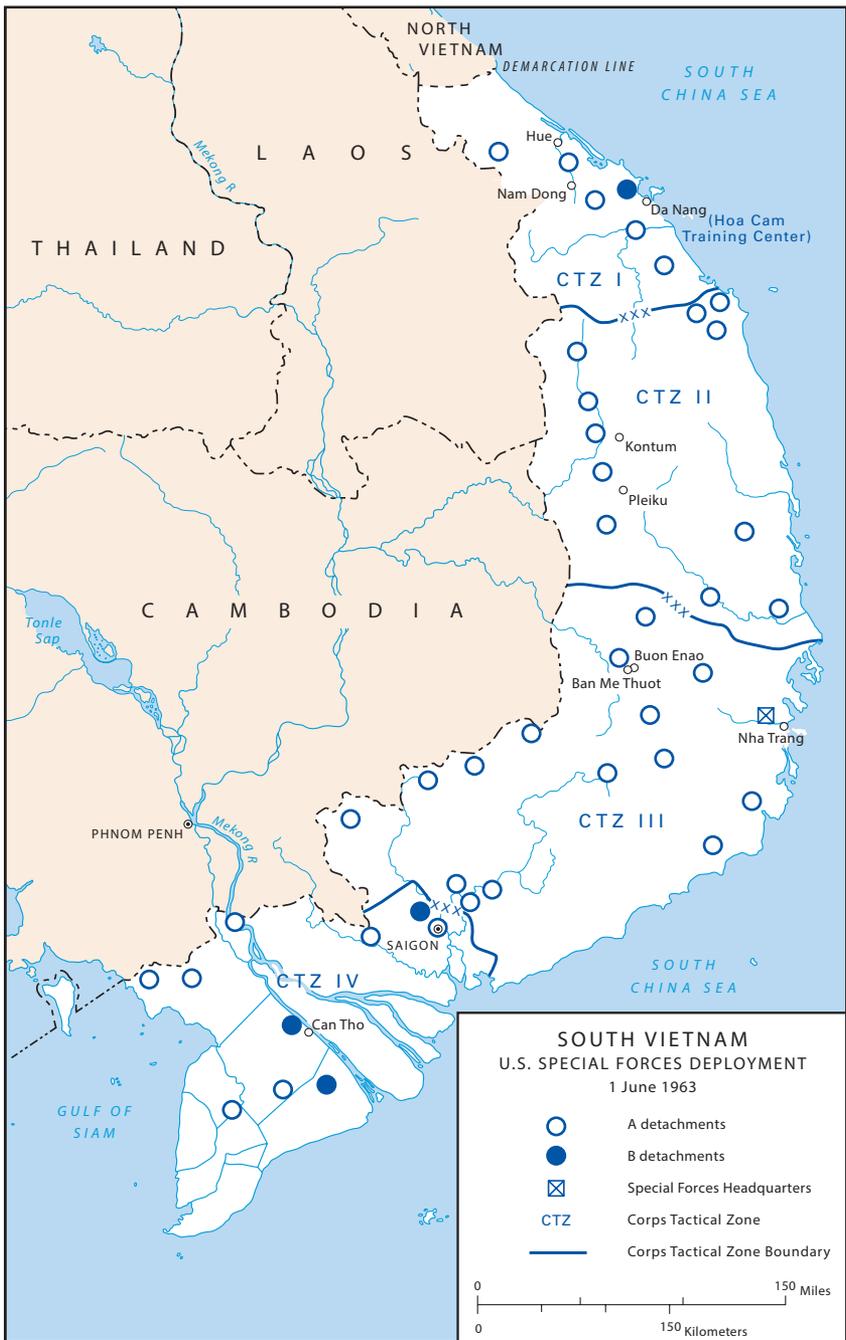


Special Forces medics check a Montagnard baby as part of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group program in 1963.

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same model until 200 villages were included and 60,000 people were effectively being protected from Viet Cong attacks and thus were counted as being in support of the government. By September 1962, the program was so large and absorbed so many military resources that the Kennedy administration transferred it from CIA to Army control in what was called Operation SWITCHBACK. The Army activated a new headquarters in Saigon (later moved to Nha Trang), U.S. Army Special Forces (Provisional), and gave it control over the twenty-four Special Forces detachments in the country, many of which were engaged in what was now called the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) project (*Map 4*).

Although there continued to be many challenges with the CIDG program, not least of which was the continuing mutual suspicion between the lowland Vietnamese and the highland Montagnards, the program was a major success. With the use of fairly limited resources, entire regions of the Central Highlands that had been rife with Viet Cong influence were resisting that pressure. If they were not actively providing thousands of troops for the Vietnamese Army, and not fully supportive of the South Vietnamese government, they were at least defending their own



Map 4

villages with their own men and not calling on extensive detachments of government troops for help. In addition, as time went on and the Special Forces established closer bonds to the tribesmen, often being initiated into the tribes as members, the elite troopers were able to create small strike force units (nicknamed MIKE forces) to serve as mobile-ready reaction teams. They also proved highly capable as border watchers and in reconnaissance and patrol units. While not without problems, the CIDG program demonstrated what could be done in the rural areas if the government was able to work with the people to help provide the security and economic aid they needed.

By the end of 1961, the American presence in South Vietnam had grown dramatically. There were almost one thousand U.S. Army personnel assigned to the MAAG along with another one hundred fifty personnel working in mobile training teams, as technicians, or in the military attaché's office. In addition, over 500 soldiers were in Vietnam as part of the helicopter units and another 380 in radio and signals intelligence operations. Add to this another 1,000 personnel from the other services and there were over 3,000 U.S. military personnel in South Vietnam with plans to expand that number to almost 7,000 by the middle of the next year. Aid was growing as well, with \$65 million worth of military equipment already delivered and more on the way allowing the number of men in the regular South Vietnamese armed forces to rise to nearly 180,000 soldiers and the number of men in the police, militia, and paramilitary forces to climb to about 159,000. The hope was that such an expansion in men, advisers, equipment, and training aid would lead to a successful push to pacify the country.

Unfortunately, as they would do for the remainder of the war, the North Vietnamese matched American troop increases with comparable number of infiltrated soldiers, cadre, and equipment. The Ho Chi Minh Trail complex allowed the movement of an additional 7,664 men into the South along with 317 tons of weapons and equipment by the end of 1961. Anticipating increased U.S. support, the North Vietnamese leadership also planned to expand the movement of forces south, approving plans to send another 30,000 to 40,000 soldiers to South Vietnam by the end of 1963. Escalation matched escalation as each country grappled with the need to change the balance in South Vietnam to its favor.

In December 1961, President Kennedy stated that he regarded Vietnam as "a laboratory, both for training our people, and for

learning the things that we need to know to successfully compete in” revolutionary warfare. Just a few days after the president made this remark, the Army conducted the first major experiment in its new laboratory. Acting on a tip from U.S. signals intelligence as to the location of a Viet Cong radio transmitter, on 23 December 1961 twenty H-21 helicopters drawn from the 8th and 57th Transportation Companies ferried 360 South Vietnamese paratroopers of the 5th Airborne Battalion to five locations near Duc Hoa, Long An Province, west of Saigon. Flying at treetop level and without a preliminary bombardment that might tip off the enemy, the raiders surprised the guerrillas, killing one, capturing forty, and seizing both documents and radio repair equipment. The radio itself, however, eluded the searchers. One helicopter from the 57th Transportation Company crashed, killing two paratroopers, wounding a third, and injuring three U.S. Army aviators. Communist rifle and mortar fire impeded efforts to salvage the downed helicopter, so the crew destroyed it to keep it out of enemy hands. The first test in combined operations under the new “limited partnership” thus proved inconclusive. Whether the outcome was a harbinger of things to come remained to be seen, but over the ensuing months the Army would push to complete Operation BEEF-UP and lay the foundations for more robust experimentation in the crucible that was Vietnam.

#### MACV: A NEW LEADER AND A NEW COMMAND

The rapidity with which General McGarr put the newly arrived helicopters to the test belied the many obstacles that needed to be overcome before the effects of the American initiative could truly be evaluated. One of the first things that needed to be accomplished was to create an organizational framework to oversee the United States’ expanding involvement in Vietnam. On 8 February 1962, General Paul D. Harkins took command of the new vehicle for U.S. military activities in Vietnam—the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). General Harkins came to Vietnam from Hawaii, where he had been serving as the deputy commander in chief of United States Army, Pacific. During World War II, he had served under General George S. Patton Jr. in North Africa and Sicily before becoming Patton’s deputy chief of staff during the Third Army’s drive across France. Nicknamed “The Ramrod” for his determination to ensure that Patton’s orders were executed, Harkins was a talented planner who, unlike his patron,

could be quite diplomatic, an important quality given the nature of his new assignment.

If Harkins had any illusions about the challenges that lay ahead, they dissipated on his first day on the job when the commander of the South Vietnamese I Corps urged him to support the overthrow of Diem. As Harkins traveled the country he found that “everybody clamped up tight and tense, and it was a ticklish situation.” Recognizing the obstacles before him, Harkins decided he needed to assume “an optimistic attitude,” for as he explained to Ambassador Frederick E. Nolting Jr., he believed it was necessary to “whistle while we work” so as to sustain “our own and everyone

else’s morale here.” Harkins’ optimistic demeanor would become a sore point with those who thought he was either naive or deliberately deceitful, neither of which was the case.

Harkins’ task, like that of the MAAG under McGarr, was “to assist and support the government of Vietnam in its efforts to provide for its internal security, defeat Communist insurgency, and resist overt aggression.” However, he was not in a position, anymore than previous advisers, to dictate to the South Vietnamese. He had to use the American aid programs as leverage to achieve military and political goals. Still, Harkins would enjoy advantages that McGarr had not. In addition to exercising operational command over the growing swell of U.S. soldiers and units that were flooding into Vietnam as part of Operation BEEF-UP, Harkins had authority to coordinate all U.S. military intelligence activities in South Vietnam, an important asset in a war of shadows. As the commander of a subordinate unified command under Pacific Command, he also had direct access not just to its commander, Admiral Harry D. Felt, but to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the secretary of defense. Last but not least, in recognition of the increasingly important role of



General Paul D. Harkins

the military adviser to success in Vietnam, the Kennedy administration made Harkins coequal with the U.S. ambassador in Vietnam.

Despite the formation of MACV and the arrival of additional advisers and administrators of military aid programs, the efforts to improve the armed forces and to take the fight to the enemy still progressed slowly. Regular and paramilitary strength grew by 100,000 from 1962 to 1963, communications networks were installed and manned, and new weapons and equipment added to the firepower and mobility of the South Vietnamese military. Yet that force continued to be, in the words of one U.S. senior adviser in IV Corps, “poorly organized, poorly trained, poorly equipped and poorly led.”

Poor leadership was demonstrated by the performance of the South Vietnamese Army during an engagement near Ap Bac in the Mekong Delta province of Dinh Tuong on 2 January 1963. During that battle, about twelve hundred soldiers drawn from the South Vietnamese 7th Division and provincial forces trapped over three hundred main-force Viet Cong. The Viet Cong fought the South Vietnamese to a standstill. The outmatched Viet Cong then slipped away in the night after killing 63 government troops and 3 American advisers while wounding 100 other government soldiers and shooting down 5 U.S. helicopters. Although the allies estimated that the Communists had lost an equal number of men, the disappointing results seemed to indicate that even years of training and assistance were not making a difference where it counted: on the battlefield.

Compounding the frustration of the American advisory effort was Diem's tone-deaf response to calls for reform. He did not listen to popular grievances and seemed no closer to winning the loyalty of his own people than when he had come to power in 1954. His perceived favoritism to family members and Catholics created a host of enemies, including some Buddhist monks who deeply resented Catholic influence. Beginning in early 1963, Buddhist radicals led a number of anti-Diem rallies, some of which ended in gunfire and the death of the protesters. In a series of spectacular and well-publicized suicides, Buddhist monks poured gasoline on themselves and set themselves on fire. Seeing the protests as a direct threat to his regime, Diem and his powerful brother-in-law, Ngo Dinh Nhu, conducted



A young Buddhist monk performs a ritual suicide, by self-immolation, in the central market square of Saigon on 5 October 1963.

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a series of raids against Buddhist pagodas. The United States began to lose faith in the ability of Diem to rule his own people, let alone conduct vigorous operations against the Viet Cong insurgents.

#### THE DOWNFALL OF DIEM

The Buddhist protests seemed to many South Vietnamese and American military personnel to be the last straw in dealing with Diem. Many of the more active South Vietnamese officers saw the favoritism and corruption of the Diem government and knew that it was standing in the way of victory. Others saw the removal of Diem as a way to enhance their own personal agendas. Maj. Gens. Duong Van Minh (known to the Americans as “Big Minh” because he was quite tall for a Vietnamese) and Tran Van Don led the conspirators who included many members from the Joint General Staff and other Saigon headquarters. They turned to the Americans for support after the August raids on the pagodas. The United States, with a new ambassador on station (Henry Cabot Lodge had recently replaced Ambassador Nolting), began to listen to the generals’ proposals.



Maj. Gen. Duong Van Minh

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Henry Cabot Lodge

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Over the next few months, senior U.S. policymakers debated the pros and cons of supporting the coup plotters. A number hoped to use the threat of a coup to force Diem to distance himself from Nhu and repudiate his policy of confrontation with the Buddhists. Others wanted to give the plotters a green light to overthrow Diem without overt American assistance. This would keep U.S. hands “clean” and might lead to a new and more popular government. Ambassador Lodge, who favored Diem’s ouster, and General Harkins held opposite views, and relations between the two quickly soured. In the end, covert assurances by certain State Department and CIA officials that the United States would not oppose a coup led to the generals moving against Diem on 1 November 1963. By the next day, the rebels had captured the palace and murdered Diem and Nhu. The generals established a provisional government on 4 November consisting of a Military Revolutionary Council with General Minh as chief of state and a mixed civilian-military cabinet.

The fall of Diem ushered in an era of debilitating instability. In January 1964, Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khanh overthrew Minh. A dizzying number of plots, counterplots, and changes of govern-



The bodies of Diem (*right*) and Nhu lie in an armored personnel carrier shortly after they were killed on 2 November 1963.

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ment and personnel followed over the next year. This led to near paralysis in government programs in the countryside and to continuing ineffectiveness of the military. Diem, for all his faults, was an unquestioned patriot who had succeeded in maintaining control and creating a functioning—if inefficient—regime. His removal created a crippling vacuum that no one seemed able to fill.

With American support, General Khanh tried to re-energize the effort to build up the armed forces and restore government authority throughout the embattled countryside, but the results were minimal. Meanwhile, the United States—reeling from the assassination of President Kennedy on 22 November 1963 and the swearing in of Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson as president—attempted to improve the way it provided support to South Vietnam and to develop new and more comprehensive plans for conducting the counterinsurgency and pacification effort. The result was additional tendrils of U.S. commitment and responsibility working their way deeper into the South Vietnamese military and civil establishment.

#### A NEW COMMANDER FOR MACV

The coup against Diem had another unintended consequence for U.S. support to South Vietnam. General Harkins' opposition to the coup had poisoned his relationship with



President Johnson and Secretary McNamara confer at the White House in 1964.

Ambassador Lodge. Desiring a unified team, on 25 April 1964, President Johnson announced that Harkins' deputy, Lt. Gen. William C. Westmoreland, would soon replace General Harkins as commander of MACV. The Pentagon recalled Harkins almost immediately, with Westmoreland serving as acting commander until 1 August when he formally assumed command and pinned on his fourth star.

General Westmoreland was an experienced and decorated combat commander from World War II. He had transferred to airborne troops after the war and commanded the 101st Airborne Division, served as superintendent of the United States Military Academy at West Point, and commanded the XVIII Airborne Corps. He seemed ideal for the position, combining combat experience,

General Westmoreland tours the village of Vam Lang in May 1964.



administrative skill, and advanced business management training. At nearly the same time, Ambassador Lodge resigned to take part in the U.S. presidential election and was replaced by recently retired Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Taylor. An entirely new team was in place by the middle of 1964; however, they faced the same daunting task of improving the provision of American assistance and the effectiveness of the South Vietnamese government and military against an expanding enemy.

#### RIGHT HAND AND LEFT HAND: OPLAN 34A

As MACV increasingly absorbed the training mission and, eventually MAAG, it also involved itself in a series of shadowy operations against North Vietnam and into Laos and Cambodia. Expanding on an ongoing CIA effort, MACV prepared a list of reconnaissance, sabotage, intelligence, and psychological operations against the North under the general heading of Operation Plan (OPLAN) 34A. The plan was prepared in December 1963 and its first activities were approved by President Johnson to begin on 1 February 1964. To accomplish these tasks, General Harkins established a Special Operations Group, later renamed Studies and Observations Group (SOG). The headquarters of MACV-SOG was initially small, only ninety-nine military personnel and thirty-one civilians and was commanded by an Army colonel. The MACV commander had operational control but the final selections of its missions were made by the White House and State Department due to their sensitivity.

Many of the initial operations of this highly secret organization, especially those that involved actions in North Vietnam, were conducted using South Vietnamese personnel to ensure some measure of American deniability. Despite the shortage of trained personnel, by mid-1964 MACV-SOG was conducting propaganda and psychological warfare activities inside North Vietnam. Some of these operations included small amphibious raids and bombardments of shore targets along the North Vietnamese coast by fast, armed motorboats. These operations in the Tonkin Gulf would eventually have some dramatic, unintended consequences.

While MACV-SOG conducted operations in North Vietnam, other MACV personnel began working closely with South Vietnamese military forces to plan a series of reconnaissance missions and raids into southern Laos against the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Although the Geneva Agreements of 1962 prohibited the

operations of foreign troops in Laos, the North Vietnamese were flagrantly ignoring the treaty, prompting the government of Laos to allow the South Vietnamese to conduct limited operations on its territory. The MACV-J-5 (Plans) section developed Operation LEAPING LENA, which conducted aerial surveillance and ground patrols of South Vietnamese Special Forces inside Laos. United States Special Forces teams worked with their South Vietnamese counterparts at Nha Trang to train and prepare the teams but did not accompany them across the border. The first teams entered Laos in June 1964, but the soldiers lacked motivation and dynamic leadership, and the raids were disastrous. Moves to turn over the mission entirely to U.S. Special Forces CIDG elements were contemplated, but it would take time to train the Montagnards for the assignment. For the time being, occasional air interdiction missions had to suffice. Nevertheless, the precedent of ground operations into Laos had been set.

#### VALOR AT NAM DONG

In early July 1964 an attack on an obscure South Vietnamese outpost near the Laotian border set in motion a chain of events that would lead to much greater public attention on the simmering conflict in Southeast Asia. On 6 July, a reinforced Viet Cong battalion almost a thousand strong hit the small CIDG camp of Nam Dong defended by approximately three hundred South Vietnamese and their U.S. and Australian advisers. The attack began just before dawn and raged for five hours with heavy casualties on each side. Special Forces team A-726 from the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) was commanded by Capt. Roger H. C. Donlon who quickly organized the defensive effort. According to a later citation, Donlon personally neutralized an enemy demolition team and was severely

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Captain Donlon



wounded in the stomach but continued to direct the fight, rescuing his wounded team sergeant. Wounded again, he fought on using small arms, mortar rounds, and recoilless rifle fire, sustaining a third wound. The enemy finally retreated. For his actions that day, Captain Donlon received the nation's highest award, the Medal of Honor, the first such award for operations in Vietnam and the first to a soldier while serving in the Special Forces.

The resultant publicity of the Nam Dong action and the subsequent Medal of Honor recommendation highlighted to the American people that the United States was fighting a war in the shadows in an obscure country that most Americans could not locate on a map. That conflict was soon to hit the headlines of every paper in the United States because of what appeared to be unprovoked attacks by North Vietnamese patrol boats on U.S. naval elements in international waters. Those incidents, real and illusory, were to send the conflict in Vietnam in an entirely new direction.

#### THE TONKIN GULF INCIDENT

In early 1964, President Johnson and Secretary of Defense McNamara ordered the U.S. Navy to step up its longstanding Desoto Patrol operation. The Desoto Patrol employed destroyers in intelligence-gathering missions in international waters along the coasts of the Soviet Union, China, North Korea, and North Vietnam. In early August 1964, the destroyer USS *Maddox*, under the operational control of Navy Capt. John J. Herrick, steamed along the coast of North Vietnam in the Gulf of Tonkin gathering various types of intelligence. Unknown to Herrick, shortly beforehand South Vietnamese patrol boats participating in an OPLAN 34A operation had bombarded shore targets just to the south of *Maddox's* patrol area (*Map 5*).

North Vietnam's leaders, who knew from their own intelligence sources about the American connection to OPLAN 34A, were determined not to bend to U.S. pressure. Hanoi directed its navy, which had not been able to catch the fast South Vietnamese patrol boats, to attack the slower U.S. destroyer. On the afternoon of 2 August, the North Vietnamese dispatched three Soviet-built P-4 motor torpedo boats against the *Maddox*. Torpedoes launched from the P-4s missed their mark. Only one round from enemy deck guns hit the destroyer, lodging in the ship's superstructure. The North Vietnamese naval vessels were not so fortunate. Shellfire from the *Maddox* hit the attackers. Then F-8 Crusader



Map 5



*The Tonkin Gulf Incident* by Edmond J. Fitzgerald, January 1965. This painting depicts the engagement between USS *Maddox* and three North Vietnamese motor torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin on 2 August 1964.

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jets dispatched from the aircraft carrier USS *Ticonderoga* strafed all three P-4s and left one boat dead in the water and on fire. With the action over, *Maddox* steamed toward the mouth of the Gulf of Tonkin and supporting naval forces. The president and his national security advisers were surprised that Ho Chi Minh had not only failed to buckle under U.S. military pressure but had reacted to it in such a bold way. President Johnson, Admiral Ulysses S. G. Sharp, the commander of American military forces in the Pacific, and Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, decided that the United States could not retreat from this clear Communist challenge. They reinforced *Maddox* with the destroyer USS *Turner Joy* and directed Captain Herrick to continue his intelligence-gathering mission off North Vietnam.

On the night of 4 August, the warships reported being attacked by several fast craft out at sea. Officers in the naval chain of command and U.S. leaders in Washington were persuaded by interpretation of special intelligence and reports from the ships that North Vietnamese naval forces had attacked the two destroyers. Analysis of that data long after the purported attacks, and additional information gathered on the 4 August episode, throws doubt on these claims. It now seems apparent that North Vietnamese naval forces did not attack *Maddox* and *Turner Joy*



President Johnson signs the Tonkin Gulf Resolution on 10 August 1964.

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that night in the summer of 1964 although the attacks on 2 August were quite real. However, Washington policymakers believed the North Vietnamese had attacked U.S. destroyers again and were determined to do something about it.

In response to the actual attack of 2 August and the suspected attack of 4 August, the president ordered Seventh Fleet carrier forces to launch retaliatory strikes against North Vietnam. On 5 August, aircraft from the carriers *Ticonderoga* and USS *Constellation* destroyed an oil storage facility at Vinh and damaged or sank about thirty enemy naval vessels in port or along the coast. Of greater significance, on 7 August the U.S. Congress overwhelmingly passed the so-called Tonkin Gulf Resolution, which enabled President Johnson to employ military force as he saw fit against the Vietnamese Communists.

#### AFTERMATH OF TONKIN GULF

Except for the very tangential role in providing support for the Studies and Observations Group operations as part of OPLAN 34A, MACV had little to do with the events of 2–4 August 1964 in the Gulf of Tonkin. However, those naval engagements had a major impact on MACV planning and operations. Almost immediately the command began preparing the ground for the expected

air strikes against the North. In addition to helping plan potential targets, MACV personnel had to prepare for the possibility that the Viet Cong inside South Vietnam would strike back at U.S. and South Vietnamese installations in retaliation for attacks on North Vietnam.

American aerial and naval forces immediately began to move into Southeast Asia in greater numbers. Two squadrons of Air Force B-57 Canberra jet bombers moved to the Bien Hoa air base north of Saigon and two additional squadrons of interceptors and fighter-bombers deployed to the Tan Son Nhut and Da Nang airbases. Other Air Force, Navy, Marine, and Army personnel were put on alert for potential deployment to the region. General Westmoreland asked for a Marine Expeditionary Brigade and either the 173d Airborne Brigade on Okinawa or a brigade of the 25th Infantry Division in Hawaii to be prepared for immediate deployment to Vietnam along with two HAWK (Homing All the Way Killer) air defense missile battalions. However, Ambassador Taylor withheld his support for the request, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff put all such movements on hold while reinforcing emergency reaction plans already in place.

The Viet Cong did not take long to react to the escalation of tensions in the region. They launched a number of terrorist and sabotage attacks against U.S. facilities during the rest of the year. Bars, restaurants, stadiums, and other places visited by Americans were hit by grenade attacks. On the night of 1 November, Viet Cong saboteurs infiltrated the sprawling air base at Bien Hoa and launched a series of mortar attacks against the American bombers and personnel stationed there. In the course of about thirty minutes the Communists killed four Americans, wounded seventy-two others, and destroyed most of a squadron of bombers. On 7 February 1965, Viet Cong raiders hit the U.S. barracks and helicopter base near Pleiku, prompting immediate retaliatory airstrikes against the North Vietnamese, code-named **FLAMING DART**. A vicious cycle of attack and counterattack seemed to be under way and threatened to spiral out of control.

To ratchet up the pressure even more, U.S. strategists were in the final stages of developing a sustained air campaign against North Vietnam, code-named **ROLLING THUNDER**. Planned for early March 1965, the first strikes were canceled because of bad weather, but it was apparent to the MACV staff that such escalation was imminent. Therefore, MACV moved to bring in additional Air



National Archives

U.S. Air Force B-57 destroyed by the Viet Cong mortar attack on Bien Hoa Air Base

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National Archives

Marines wade ashore at Da Nang on 30 April 1965.

Police to help guard U.S. airplanes at Bien Hoa, Tan Son Nhut, and Da Nang. Then, to further secure the air bases against the expected enemy retaliation, General Westmoreland asked for and received permission to land the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (minus) at Da Nang to protect the airfield. The brigade landed on the beach on 8 March 1965 and took positions on the airfield perimeter and on the hills immediately to the west of the base. They began short-range patrols but made no immediate enemy contact. Nevertheless, a major watershed had been reached. United States ground troops were now in a position where direct engagement with the Viet Cong was probable. America was now committed in a more decisive way than ever to the survival of South Vietnam and the prosecution of the war to protect it and U.S. interests. The Rubicon had been crossed and there was no going back.

## **ANALYSIS**

It is impossible to understand the deepening U.S. involvement in Indochina and South Vietnam from 1945 to 1965 without recognizing that the region was viewed as another test of American resolve in the context of the Cold War against international Communism. While one cannot discount the forces of nationalism and anticolonialism as contributing factors in the struggle between North Vietnam and South Vietnam, there is nonetheless little question that North Vietnam viewed itself as the vanguard of the international Communist revolution and the United States was initially right to consider them as part of the worldwide Communist movement. Because of Soviet expansionism and the fall of China to the Communist forces of Mao Zedong, the United States viewed the entire world through the lenses of Greece, the Philippines, and Korea, where the forces of international communism—directed, as the United States believed, from Moscow—were attempting to subvert and overthrow the governments of the free world. The United States felt that it could not afford to lose another country to communism but at the same time it was reluctant to confront Moscow or Beijing directly with all the risks that would have entailed. Even though a Sino-Soviet split began to unfold in the late 1960s, the rifts in international communism were not yet apparent. The context of U.S. involvement in building up South Vietnam to withstand Communist subversion and destruction was deeply rooted in the belief that the forces of the Communist world, of which North Vietnam was only a part, were unified, aggressive,

expansive, and centrally directed. The U.S. government under President Johnson felt that it could not stand idly by in the face of such a threat to our national interest.

Within this Cold War context, the United States attempted initially to provide only minimal support, first to the French and then to the new government of South Vietnam. Unlike in Europe, which was seen as the vital theater to contain Soviet power, the Far East and especially the handful of new countries on the mainland of Asia that resulted from the collapse of European colonial empires, were not viewed as critical to U.S. policy. The United States supported France so the French would remain strong in Europe against the Soviets and not because it cared about the re-establishment of their empire. U.S. leaders resisted deeper commitment for years because the cost of intervention in support of the French, or later of Diem, seemed to be greater than any result would have been worth. Only when it appeared that Communist infiltrators from the North were determined to force the reunification of Vietnam under Communist control did America ramp up the flow of aid. Only after the United States perceived that its naval forces had been deliberately attacked in international waters did it seek to intervene decisively with air and naval power and then just defensively and reactively. Again, this was done less to save South Vietnam, either under Diem or the later generals, than it was done for the principle of not losing another country to Communist aggression. U.S. interests were paramount, and America could only achieve its goals if it invested enough time, resources, equipment, and finally ground troops to support an admittedly weak South Vietnamese government.

The United States in the 1950s and early 1960s worked hard to pressure Diem to get his house in order, eliminate corruption, and rally his people behind his regime. While the results were not all that the United States wished, Diem was a tough anti-Communist with a substantial power base of support. He was, for all his flaws, the face of South Vietnam for nine years and provided a stability that was henceforth to be lacking. When the United States tacitly allowed the generals to overthrow Diem, the administration was left with a version of the “Pottery Barn Rules” attributed to Secretary of State Colin Powell in 2003 in a later foreign policy initiative: “You break it; you bought it.” The United States helped “break” the government of Vietnam and thus “bought” the responsibility for it. For the next ten years, the U.S. tried with only some success to fix it.

The roots of American involvement in an ever-expanding war were set deep in the 1950s and 1960s as the United States slowly but inexorably provided more aid, more advisers, and more equipment until finally troops

were needed to protect U.S. air and naval bases as air attacks were launched against North Vietnam. Once U.S. troops were on the ground and advising South Vietnamese units, it was only a short step to participating in combat operations, piloting helicopters, gathering intelligence, and conducting defensive and offensive patrols. It would be hard to state with any clarity a specific moment when it was apparent that the United States had passed the point of no return. It could have been when the United States committed to the survival of an independent South Vietnam in 1954 and 1955. Perhaps it was only when America began to expand the number of U.S. advisers in the late 1950s in an attempt to create a professional South Vietnamese Army. It could have been when the United States began active operations to ferry South Vietnamese troops into battle on American helicopters in 1961. Or when the United States sent warplanes onto air bases in that Southeast Asian country, which then necessitated providing ever-increasing security forces, including marines, to protect those assets. Or it could have been when President Johnson began the series of retaliatory air raids into North Vietnam. None of these decisions seemed to commit the United States to limitless support, yet each one drew the nation deeper and deeper into the conflict. By the spring of 1965, the United States found itself deeply entrenched in South Vietnam and morally and practically committed to its survival as a free nation. The prestige and power of the United States was on the line in another battlefield of the Cold War and it appeared almost as if neither the Johnson administration nor America was entirely sure about how they got there.

## The Author

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