"INTO THE DRAGON'S LAIR": CULTURE, COUNTER-INSURGENCY, AND THE COMBINED ACTION PLATOONS IN VIETNAM

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Aaron Thomas Peterka

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"INTO THE DRAGON'S LAIR": CULTURE, COUNTER-INSURGENCY, AND THE COMBINED ACTION PLATOONS IN VIETNAM

The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in History.

________________________________________
George Dehner, Committee Chair

________________________________________
John Dreifort, Committee Member

________________________________________
Wilson Baldridge, Committee Member
ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis was to examine the development of the Marine Corps' Combined Action Program (CAP) during the Vietnam War and determine if the CAP would have been the war-winning strategic formula. In an attempt to wrest control of Vietnamese villages from the Viet Cong, the CAPs engaged in a combination of aggressive patrolling and civic action operations that brought the Marines involved into extremely close contact with the intricacies of counter-insurgency and Vietnamese culture.

It was concluded that given the nature of the program's development, the American emphasis on overwhelming force, the complicated strategic duality of the Vietnam War, and the deep complexity of the Vietnamese culture, the Combined Action Platoons would not have altered the war's outcome. However, this project also determined that the knowledge acquired by the CAPs could serve as a foundation for the continued development of counter-insurgency operations that might prove applicable to current and future operations.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: SAME DANGER. DIFFERENT FACE

August 2003: Samarra, Iraq. A US Army convoy snakes its way through the city’s streets, its two Abrams tanks, two Bradley fighting vehicles, and one armored Humvee flexing its muscle in a show of force meant to pacify any potential foes. A powerful blast erupts, crippling one of the Bradleys. In the manhunt that follows, American soldiers turned up a motorcycle-borne RPG team that simply dropped their weapons and disappeared. Later investigations pointed to two Iraqi men who worked as laborers at a nearby US base as the convoy’s shadowy assailants. As the Iraqi insurgency intensified during that year, American forces kicked in doors, raided homes, and pursued this enemy in places like Samarra, Baghdad, Tikrit, and Falluja. While some officers contended that large sweeps through insurgent-infested areas would break the guerrillas' backs, others, like one US Army scout in particular, saw a much different picture taking shape, because every time the Americans "raid one of their houses, we make a new enemy," and when the soldiers charge into "a wedding, we make dozens" more.1

The more the insurgents ambushed, the more roadside bombs they deployed, the more the United States responded with F-16 fighter jets and Air Force gunships. When insurgents launched a mortar, it immediately drew a howitzer’s riposte. Nevertheless, this strategy only provoked the enemy to acquire more sophisticated methods and weaponry, and his attacks became bolder as a result. Four years later, in 2007, the United States found itself locked in combat with this same foe with no apparent end in sight, a scenario that re-ignited the raw images of another war from America's past, when the United States confronted an elusive adversary that dragged the war into an interminable abyss despite the Americans' obvious

military power. That same year, 2007, a Marine Corps Reserve lieutenant-colonel named Kurtis P. Wheeler arrived at Camp Hurricane Point, a Marine base in Ramadi, the capital of Iraq’s restive al-Anbar Province.²

On February 17, 2007, Lt. Col. Wheeler sat face-to-face with Lieutenant-Colonel William M. Jurney, the commander of the 1st Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment to discuss the Marines' approach to the war in Anbar Province. For Jurney's Marines, the war was not just a matter of kicking in doors and hunting down terrorists, but building relationships. Jurney described his battalion to Wheeler as "a combined action battalion," that employed a Military Transition Team of "11 quality Marines and a sailor" that would eat, sleep, advise, train, and live with their Iraqi charges at the platoon level. Whether coordinating with an Iraqi battalion staff or local Iraqi police, these Marine teams were building "the trust, and respect, and friendship of those that they work with because they live there 24-7." While Jurney conceded that he was "not some cultural guru," he insisted that for this strategy to work, "[y]ou just can't show up every now and then and expect to get anything." Coordination and cooperation, not gunships and artillery that was Jurney's plan for rooting out Iraq's insurgents and eventually turning over security responsibility to Iraqi government forces. Ironically enough, Lt. Col. Jurney drew the inspiration for this counter-insurgent antidote from the very war whose memory so haunted American policymakers and the public they served. He called his battalion a "combined action battalion," and directly connected the work his Marines were doing to pacify Ramadi's dust-swept streets to "the old CAP platoons [combined action platoons] of Vietnam." It was Jurney's hope, and that of like-minded officers, that resurrecting a Marine Corps pacification strategy from a war in a different country and a different time would provide a clue into cracking Iraq's

insurgency. This leads one to ask what was the CAP and what were their tactics that now grabbed the US military's attention in Iraq and Afghanistan?³

The Combined Action plan in Vietnam can be packaged into six words: deny, build, combat, intelligence, civic action. Their tactics rested on the precept that aggressive, round-the-clock patrolling would ensure local security by denying the communists access to the villages, and as those successes multiplied, the Americans believed more villagers would step forward with valuable information that would further the pursuit of the Viet Cong. Once accomplished, these US Marine teams would engage in civil action projects to repair/build village infrastructure. In addition, the Marines would combine with the Vietnamese villagers "instead of beating the bushes on their own looking for VC," by placing in the villages "...a group of Marines and Viets who would eat, sleep, patrol, and fight as one unit-not two." The belief was that improved security and raising the local quality of life would inspire local trust in the Saigon government and stonewall communist insurgents' attempts to dominate the countryside. Just like Jurney's comments over forty years later, the crux of the CAP relied on building relationships and fostering trust, not just heavier firepower.⁴

These relationships and their importance to the CAP strategy are perfectly reflected in the scenes from a patrol conducted in the program's earliest days in 1966. In it, Marine Corps corporal William Beebe led one of these American-Vietnamese contingents through one of the numerous rice paddies near Binh Yen Noi village, when the quiet night erupted into total havoc. Viet Cong bullets cleaved the air in a lethal crisscross, pinning the polyglot patrol until its leader radioed for artillery. As the projectiles thundered into the area, Corporal Beebe privately

lamented the destructive symphony. He later learned to his horror that among the civilian fatalities caught in the devastating crossfire were relatives of the very Vietnamese who had accompanied him on the patrol. What author F.J. West observed of such incidents was that these "Marines saw too much of the villages, and lived too closely with them, not to be affected by their personal grief." For the CAPs, this war could not be won by jets and cannons, but with the rifle and cunning. "Friendly fire" incidents such as these only served to undermine the fragile progress gained at such a painstaking price.  

Despite its hard-charging, straight-up the middle reputation, the Marine Corps championed this particular pacification strategy in Vietnam based on its experiences from previous counter-guerrilla campaigns in American history. In the twentieth century, the United States began to encounter more insurgencies in places like Nicaragua and Haiti, and the branch that found itself forming the tip of America's counter-insurgency spear was the United States Marine Corps. Their participation in these small wars (sometimes called "banana wars") gave them what author and former CAP Marine Michael E. Peterson called "an appreciation of the localized nature of guerrilla warfare."  

When rampant political unrest threatened to tear Haiti apart in 1915, President Woodrow Wilson dispatched US Marines there in order to safeguard US interests on Hispaniola, an assignment that soon committed the Americans to a mission that lasted well into the 1920s. While the Leathernecks held sway over the civil responsibilities in their respective localities, such as overseeing education, sanitation, and road maintenance, they also bore the burden for establishing and training a national Haitian constabulary force that would eventually take over Haiti's security. The ideal gendarme that could deal with such complexities was someone "with

'exceptional tact, judgment, and patience,'" virtues that CAP advocates later proclaimed to be of the utmost importance in their own campaign. Military historian Allan Millett commented on this tremendous task by pointing out that the Marines “often called papa blanc by the peasants, were often the sole government representatives in the back country." The same held true for the CAPs of Vietnam, who often worked alone among the villagers, and were many villages' only physical link with the South Vietnamese cause.7 

One also finds elements of the CAPs' origins in the Haitian Gendarmerie's Provisional Company A, led by future general Lewis B. Puller, and the Nicaraguan Guardia Nacional. Both combined American Marines with local recruits who were trained and used to hunt down guerrilla bands in the interior, whether they be the Haitian cacos or Sandino's Nicaraguan insurgents. In these tropical environs, these Americans acquired the know-how to "hunt the hunter" by patrolling at night, moving in small groups to avoid detection, and living off the land. Just like in Haiti, the Marines were responsible for both security and the Nicaraguan Guardia's training, a mission that lasted from roughly 1926 to 1933. These experiences led to the appreciation of which Peterson speaks, a far cry from the US Army perspective, which advocated overwhelming firepower over pacification. Just as US military planners looked back at Vietnam in order to find an answer for Iraq and Afghanistan, Leatherneck commanders drew upon the banana wars of the early twentieth-century for solutions to the insurgency raging in Vietnam. The result was the Combined Action Platoon.8 

In May 1965, the Marines of the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment cleared the remote hamlet of Le My and its surrounding environs of Viet Cong communists in the I Corps Tactical 

Zone, or "Eye Corps" to its American residents. On the surface, such an operation would have grabbed newspaper headlines as an unmitigated success, but for the battalion's commander, something absolutely vital was missing. With Marines picking through the detritus of battle and drifting about the ramshackle huts, Lt. Col. David Clement took stock of Le My and "realized almost instinctively that his strenuous efforts would be negated unless continuing pressure was brought to bear on the remnants of the Viet Cong infrastructure in Le My village." A major problem, as Clement and like-minded officers determined, lay in their enemy's phantom nature. Even though the Americans physically exorcised the Viet Cong fighters from the village, their infrastructure, recruitment, propaganda, and political systems remained intact throughout the area. Even worse for the Americans was the hard reality that the Viet Cong's expulsion in no way reversed the population's "apathetic attitude towards the government." This attitude and its potential ramifications hardly went unnoticed by the Marine Corps command in Vietnam. In fact, its presence taunted I Corps' topmost Marine Corps commander's strategic thinking, daring him to solve the complex riddle that confronted the Americans.⁹

General Lewis Walt stood alone as the highest-ranking Marine in Vietnam, and from 1965-1967, he bore the burden of taming a ten-thousand square mile jungle expanse in South Vietnam's five northernmost provinces containing over two million Vietnamese inhabitants who lived in villages infested with a virulent communist insurgency and the threat of infiltrating North Vietnamese regulars. If this task did not seem daunting enough, Walt found himself thrust into a delicate situation with very little direction as to how to accomplish his mission. In an interview with LIFE Magazine's Colin Leinster in 1967, Walt summed up his early days in Vietnam by stating matter-of-factly: "I just fooled and floundered around." In the midst of

"fooling" and "floundering," Walt concluded "that the civil war in South Vietnam would not be won by the Marines' historic method of wresting terrain objectives from the enemy's armies." As fate would have it, Walt's epiphany appeared in the same boondocks village where Lt. Col. Clement had been wrestling with his own strategic demons.\textsuperscript{10}

Walt embarked to Le My to review his Marines' handiwork where he happened upon an elderly Vietnamese couple. Striking up what he initially believed to be a brief exchange, the conversation ended up lasting roughly three hours. The couple provided Walt with a window into their world, describing village life, not just at that present moment, but under Saigon, the Viet Cong, and even the French. That conversation, Walt maintained years later, marked the turning point in his approach to the Vietnam War. With Viet Cong controlling many villages throughout I Corps, including every single one in Quang Ngai Province, and because these villages housed the greatest percentage of South Vietnam's population, Walt determined to challenge the Viet Cong for the villages' souls, and the CAP was to be the weapon. Walt's Marines would bring both the olive branch and the sword to these villages, where they would drive out the Viet Cong and at the same time provide the necessary security and civic action to rebuild the village and the villagers' trust in Saigon. Just three months later, on August 3, 1965, the first CAP team made its first patrol.\textsuperscript{11}

Nevertheless, the US forces in South Vietnam still found themselves fighting a dual war against North Vietnamese regulars and the grass-roots Viet Cong insurgents. Before President Johnson ever committed large numbers of US ground troops to Vietnam in 1965, American military and foreign policy experts struggled to settle on a cohesive strategy that would address the vexing nature of Vietnam in the present, as well as other counter-insurgency campaigns that may be encountered in the future. As the events of the past fifteen years have demonstrated, that struggle still continues to the present day. With the United States's recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and its re-engagement in the Middle East with the campaign against the Islamic State in

Iraq and Syria, the history and potential lessons of the Vietnam War's CAP teams becomes even more relevant with each passing day.

In this spirit of re-visiting and re-examining Vietnam's counter-insurgency tactics and how it could be applied to the current world situation, one cannot help but ask about the CAPs' success in its own time. How effective were these counter-guerrilla squads, and could the CAP concept have been the silver bullet that would have prevented the communists' ultimate takeover of South Vietnam? To attempt to add to the ongoing hunt for the answer to this question, this project will utilize a wide range of primary and secondary sources, from combat chronologies done by the Marine Corps during the war to analyses conducted by the RAND Corporation that sought to understand the Viet Cong from the inside. Furthermore, this project will draw upon the perspectives of counter-insurgency experts and State Department officials, like Sir Robert Thompson, Douglas Pike, and Roger Hilsman, as well as the perspectives of historians looking back on the CAPs/US counter-insurgency in Vietnam, such as Dale Andradé, Frances J. Fitzgerald, and George C. Herring to name a few. The combination of these sources with first-hand accounts penned by CAP veterans twenty and thirty years after the war, along with current re-visitations conducted by contemporary US military officers, will allow this project to take a core sample of the arguments made upon this question over the years, as well as provide a historiographical frame of reference into which this project will fit.

To effect this, the first half of the thesis will furnish the necessary background information so as to better prepare the reader for a more detailed discussion of counter-insurgency in Vietnam. Chapter 1 will look into Vietnam's culture and customs, especially in the villages, as that was where the CAP Marines carried out their mission. This chapter will employ cultural analysis from the 1960s as a means to see how the Americans embarking on this mission
would have viewed the Vietnamese, and vice versa, as well as the cultural mores and nuances of which Americans in Vietnam were advised to be particularly aware. Cultural descriptions from subsequent decades will help to create a much broader view of Vietnam's culture, thus painting a more complete picture of the various cultural perceptions over the course of time. Also included in the chapter will be a discussion of the emergence of the Viet Cong in South Vietnam. Overall, the aim of Chapter 1 is to provide the reader with a general understanding of Vietnamese culture and village life so as to illuminate the type of environment in which the Marines were operating, while also demonstrating how Ho Chi Minh molded communism to fit into his nationalist agenda by conforming it to Vietnamese cultural understandings.

The second chapter will move from the cultural to the colonial scene, focusing on French counter-insurgency tactics during the French-Indochina War of 1945-1954. Its purpose is to expose the reader to the different approaches the French military used in combating the Viet Minh, notably the mobile commando teams, Jean Leroy's UMDC, the French tache d'huile strategy, as well as the experiences of the Foreign Legion. In addition to this, the project seeks to examine the effectiveness of these tactics, their conduct, and their vulnerabilities. This chapter will help to lay the groundwork for a more detailed analysis of future counter-insurgency efforts in Vietnam by presenting tactical and strategic similarities that draw a parallel between the French and the American operations that followed them. This look into France's anti-guerrilla campaign and its subsequent failure will segue into the third chapter's examination of US counter-insurgency theories in the early 1960s, and how the Combined Action Platoons developed.

Chapter 3 covers some of the more prominent anti-insurgency theories of the early 1960s, notably the ideas of Professor Walt Rostow, Roger Hilsman, and U. Alexis Johnson.
Furthermore, this project will take a look at the Strategic Hamlet Initiative, one of the largest pacification operations launched prior to the US military escalation in Vietnam. Once again, the project will attempt to include a broad vision of historical perspectives on these theories, and how historians have come to view these strategies' efficacy. Another purpose of this chapter is to present the recurring theme of winning over the rural populace throughout these doctrinal formulas, a theme crucial to any understanding of the CAP mission. In connection with the aforementioned theme, this chapter will explore the CAPs' ad hoc evolution, as well as their missions and their successes. Finally, this component of the thesis will conclude with an introduction of the Combined Action Concept's earliest use in Vietnam. After such introductions have been made, one can now proceed into a fuller investigation of this project's central question.

The final chapters will revolve around resistance to the CAP concept, and a village/jungle level view of the CAPs: their training, missions, and experiences in the villages. Chapter 4 specifically deals with US government and military resistance to the pacification, paying particular attention to the struggles of General Victor Krulak, USMC, to overcome military and political indifference toward what he believed to be the true objective of the war: the villagers' trust and goodwill. Chapter 5 analyzes the platoons themselves, so that the reader will acquire a closer look at the challenges they faced. Furthermore, no review of any military strategy would be complete without an appraisal of the enemy's reactions and counter-measures. Therefore, chapter 5 will examine the reality of life in the platoons, paying particular attention to the Viet Cong's counter-CAP campaigns, as well as villager-perception of the Americans' presence. Once all the parts are fixed in place, this thesis project can now attempt to answer its central question, continually debated in the years since Vietnam's conclusion: Was the Combined Action Program
the silver bullet that could have dispelled the Viet Cong from the villages and prevented their fall to communist forces?

Using the roadmap presented in the paragraphs above, this project seeks to add to this debate by demonstrating that due to the cultural realities on the ground in Vietnam, an indifference to the reality of guerrilla warfare, even within the Marine Corps, the dual nature of the war, and the precariousness of pacification's successes, the CAPs' ultimate goal would have been virtually impossible to achieve. These points connect to another statement this project hopes to make: in the end, the indigenous population must make the effort that will ultimately determine if a counter-insurgency is successful. Unfortunately, that did not happen in Vietnam. However, this statement does not intend to promote the notion that the CAP concept was useless, in fact, its lessons ought to be heeded by present and future policymakers. To discard these lessons and tactical wisdom gained during Vietnam, which the US military did following the war, would be to discard potential insight into counter-insurgency techniques which might, and have, proven relevant to the current crises in the Middle East.

With the thesis objective clearly stated, one must now embark upon the quest to discover how and why, and one must begin by taking a look into the world that was the Vietnamese village. It was here that the CAP Marines lived, worked, fought, and for some, died. It was here where young Americans raised with the unlimited prospects promised by the American Dream would have to personally guide Vietnam's villagers along a path totally foreign to their way of life, and that meant marching into an alien world unlike any they had ever known before.
CHAPTER 2
A BLENDDED CULTURE AND A SHADOWY FOE

One cannot underestimate the challenge faced by Americans as they arrived on Vietnam's shores, and eventually in Vietnam's villages. In addition to the two cultures being vastly different in many respects, the Americans' counter-insurgency plans would have to take into account the varieties that made up the Vietnamese world; a task far easier said than done. To the casual observer, it is easy to ascribe a one-size-fits-all description of Vietnamese cultural life, but the reality could not be farther from the truth. In fact, one might say that the CAP Marines' first battle was not against the Viet Cong, but the incredibly complex nature of Vietnamese village and national identities.

When the United States first intervened, the country was split between two Vietnams, the North and the South. However, according to author, professor, and founder of the U.S.-Indochina Educational Foundation Mark Ashwill, most Vietnamese see their nation as being three distinct countries. Ashwill states that Vietnam's internal distinctions evolved from historical divisions that resulted from wars and conquests, most notably the French colonization in the 19th century that saw the Viet lands divided into Tonkin (North), Annam (Centre), and Cochin-China (South). Northern peoples are seen as frugal and as more conservative than their southern-brethren. They also have a reputation for planning and a strong ethic, which Ashwill attributes to the austere political and economic environment that dominated North Vietnam for so long.12

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The central region is marked as one with few natural resources with a tough climate noted for natural disasters and an infertile soil. Because of the agriculturally adverse conditions, most residents leave the villages for the cities, and while most Vietnamese see them as successful citizens, they boast a reputation for ungenerousness. However, such adversity is cited as the reason central dwellers possess a strong will and are "unafraid to go assume responsibility."

Ashwill notes that many Vietnamese leaders hailed from central Vietnam, and their personalities were directly influenced by the region of their birth. The south, dominated by the Mekong Delta, by contrast is known for its rich soil and is the rice bowl of Vietnam. Because of such
agricultural plenty, southerners acquired a more easy-going personality, while at the same time being credited with the virtues of obeying the law and courage. Furthermore, southerners tend to be more direct in their relations with others, a trait other Vietnamese point out as a hold-over from the south's days as a French colony and its close interaction with Western peoples. However, Vietnam's distinctiveness does not stop at mere generalizations. It is reflected in other aspects of the country as well.\textsuperscript{13}

In his article concerning the issues of continuity and change in Vietnam, Ralph Smith distinguishes Vietnam through the cultural and religious make-up of its people. Smith writes that culturally, "the North was the most strongly 'Confucianized' area of Vietnam," and also the more likely to be literate, while the central region experienced more cultural fragmentation, notably the presence of the Cham, Khmer, and Indian Mahayana peoples. Moreover, Buddhism tended to have a more influential presence here, especially Mahayana Buddhist practices, and in keeping with Ashwill's assessment of the Centre, this area proved the most resistant to French colonialism. The South, meanwhile, holds the largest concentration of Chinese residents in the country, a result of centuries of Chinese migration that began long before Vietnamese armies ever conquered the southern delta region. One should note that this does not even include the highland peoples who reside in the hill country of the Central Highlands, like the Hmong tribes for example, who are a non-Vietnamese ethnicity that has violently clashed with Vietnamese settlers, even after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. With such a rich blend of peoples, it is logical to arrive at the conclusion that this kaleidoscopic combination extends into other realms

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 72.
of Vietnamese society, something that scholars are coming to understand as an unshakeable truth as time has passed.\(^\text{14}\)

In many ways, the village served as the bedrock of Vietnamese society. In the 1960s, approximately 90% of Vietnam's people performed agricultural labor, primarily rice farming. A rigid social hierarchy rooted in Confucian principles placed scholars on a pedestal, but the villagers were hardly non-essential. An old Vietnamese proverb illuminates their importance to the nation's survival: "Scholar ranks first, then comes the peasant. But when rice runs out, and you run wildly about, the peasant comes first, and scholar second." Noted Vietnam scholar Frances J. Fitzgerald described Vietnam's peasant society in her acclaimed account of the war, *Fire in the Lake*, as closed and almost static. Her portrayal of the villages presents them as closed from the outside world behind bamboo gates, living simply in homes constructed of bamboo, wood, straw, and even mud. According to author Ellen Hammer, the typical Vietnamese peasant and his family labored each day, year after year, under the sweltering sun or in the face of driving rains to sow the rice paddies. This was the villagers' way, and this rigorous, harsh existence inured many to hardship and pain. Most expected very little from life, and there was little point in changing it, for stability and continuity defined every facet of the village.\(^\text{15}\)

However, Hammer's view of Vietnamese village life, while valuable, does leave out some key elements that have been taken into account since her 1966 study. Once more, Smith, writing thirty years later, states that historians and anthropologists cannot yet piece together a full picture

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\(^\text{14}\) Ralph Smith, "Vietnam from the 1890s to the 1990s: Continuity and Change in the Longer Perspective," *South East Asia Research* Vol. 4, No. 2 (September 1996): 201-203.

of the typical Vietnamese village. As he puts it, "beneath the broad picture of institutional conformity there was probably considerable diversity in actual village arrangements." He states that some villages had a strong tradition of communal landownership, while other villages saw that practice fade. Dr. Insun Yu, a professor of Vietnamese in South Korea, pointed out that past scholars relied heavily on colonial-era depictions of the Vietnamese village, as well as the composition of the 19th-century hamlets, to form the idea of a traditional rural community. Yu called this an overemphasis of the "traditional nature of the village" that overlooked "the fact that as times and court policies change, then so will the face of the village." This oversimplification can be applied to rural land use as well. Fitzgerald's account shows villagers acting as custodians who dedicated their lives to cultivating and preserving the land for the next generation, not developing it for their own interests. Land's purpose was to serve "as the source of life" and "the basis for the social contract between members of the family," and therefore few real landowners existed in rural villages, at least in the traditional Western sense. However, more recent research paints a more diverse picture.16

According to Smith, some villages employed a diversified economic system, conducting manufacturing alongside their agricultural activities, something more common in northern Vietnam's lowland areas. This notion reinforces David Hunt's 1982 argument that not all villages were closed, tightly-bound communities, particularly in southern Vietnam. While its northern neighbors were classified by the French as protectorates, Cochin-China (southern Vietnam) was directly ruled as a colony, and as result, the French imposed its economic model most profoundly on that region, specifically the plantation/estate system. Hunt argued that the French canal-building projects and the rise of the rubber plantation system opened up more land

for rice cultivation and economic growth, thereby drastically altering the traditional patterns of village agriculture. Thus the rise of the private landowner system in southern Vietnam, which Hunt holds responsible for the villages becoming "agglomerations counting up to ten thousand inhabitants, living in as many as ten separate hamlets." He goes on to state that these villagers' goal was to become landowners themselves, whereas the communal village system was more common in the north, where roughly 20% of the land was held in this manner. It appears these diversities are still being uncovered as time goes on.  

To reinforce the ongoing re-characterization of the Vietnamese village, anthropologist Hy V. Luong writes how scholar Gerald Hickey determined northern and central villages to be a community of small-landowners "in a subsistence-oriented economy," while southern hamlets embraced a "cash-crop system with marked landholding inequality." Vietnam anthropologist Terry Rambo once argued that "it is not fruitful to classify all peasant communities on a single continuum," since regional differences were the result of "an adaptation to ecological and larger sociopolitical environments in the two regions" in Vietnam. Luong's own research led him to agree that there "are generally quantitative differences among communities in different regions" of Vietnam, and that those differences played a key role in those communities' reactions to political policies and foreign interventions. Another example of this phenomenon is Andrew Chovanes's description of variations in villages' "social strength of the subsistence ethic," as villages whose traditions had not been overrun by colonialism tended to be more generous in its dispositions to the poor. These villages tended to exist in north and central Vietnam, the French

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17 Smith, "Vietnam From the 1890s to the 1900s," 207; David Hunt, "Village Culture and the Vietnamese Revolution," Past and Present No. 94 (February 1982): 134.
protectorates as opposed to the colonized southern region. In short, Vietnam is hardly uniform in its make up, and the same can be said of Vietnamese spirituality.18

In the past, Vietnam has been described as Confucian, Buddhist, or a combination of various religions, but as researchers have come to find over the years, Vietnam actually blends various beliefs ranging from animism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Catholicism into its identity. In 1966, Ann Caddell Crawford repeatedly stressed the Confucian philosophy's importance in Vietnamese society; declaring its precepts as being responsible for the Vietnamese's strict code of filial piety, ancestor veneration, adherence to duty and hierarchy. Bruce Matthews concluded that Buddhism was Vietnam's largest religion, because "almost all Vietnamese feel they are Buddhist," and with Catholicism coming in second. Others argue that this takes an overly simplistic view of Vietnam's religious scene. Vietnam scholars Mark W. McLeod and Nguyen Thi Dieu contend that it "is impossible to say with certainty the numbers of followers of particular faiths in any era, past or present." Mark Ashwill describes the practice of a "triple religion" of blended Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Still, if any one belief transcended all faiths in Vietnam, the authors maintain, it is ancestor worship.19

Scholar Gerald Cannon Hickey's 1964 Vietnam village study observed that for "the villager, immortality lies in his undying lineage, but bliss in the after-life can be attained only by proper cult veneration." In a refutation of Matthews's assertion, Kristin Pelzer countered that such rigid beliefs are hold-overs from the unrest of the 1960s, when the Catholic Diem regime cracked down on Buddhist monks who feared Diem was trying to make Vietnam Catholic. In

actuality, according to Pelzer, the "core religion of most Vietnamese from villagers to government officials is the veneration of ancestors-family, local, and national." When she discusses Sino-Vietnamese cultural connections, Pelzer attributes Confucian and Taoist practices in Vietnam to be the result of "a combination of cultural assimilation and the rejection of foreign practices," and that animism, the worship of nature, was and remains the dominant spiritual outlet for Vietnamese peoples, past and present. Due to the Communist regime's desire to highlight their country's "high culture," Pelzer maintains that these "primitive beliefs" have been repressed due to the risk of the international community viewing Vietnam from a colonialist perspective. Nevertheless, one finds animism's and ancestor worship's presence cannot be denied.20

Every village possessed a dinh, or temple, where village housewives made offerings to a guardian spirit, or thanh hoang, in return for its blessings and protection against natural disasters. According to the beliefs in the rural hinterland, everyone bore three souls or nine "vital spirits," and that if any one of them departed the body, then illness, or worse, ensued. The peasants worshipped "the physical environment" as well as "family, local, and national ancestors." Even cats, dogs, and livestock harbored eternal souls, and legend had it that a farmer tarrying from the fields at nighttime risked tripping over the cats and dogs whose souls zig-zagged across the dusty roads. Many spirits in the village pantheon remained relatively benign, but others were fiercely sinister, especially without proper veneration. One example in particular involves villagers whose lot had become so poor that they actually hired themselves out as suicides. In return for the payment going to their destitute family, an individual literally hanged himself outside the house of their "employer's" enemy, that way his angry spirit would haunt the home. As far as the

villagers were concerned, magic, spirits, demons, and destiny governed their world, not political ideology. According to the cult of veneration, after a person dies, the supernatural soul lives on, and if not given the proper funerary rites and rightful ancestor veneration, that soul will wander the afterlife in torment. For this reason, villagers worshipped at least four generations of their deceased ancestors. Peasants fervently believed their loved ones' ghosts played a direct role in their daily lives, as well as the lives of future familial generations. McLeod refers to these spirits as *vong ha*, or "wandering souls" whose bodies died far from home, and because of their demise are filled with wrath.\(^\text{21}\)

Among the most feared were drowning victims, since their deaths placed a curse on the family. Even more frightening, these tortured souls, or *ma da*, lurked in the waters, waiting for a victim, even a family member. Only by claiming another life to endure their torment could these souls find peace. The *ma troi*, or errant and malevolent spirits, also wandered the afterlife due to lack of a proper grave and veneration. In some cases, only the village healer had the power to cast a spell that would summon the damned soul from its foreign resting place and give it peace by capturing it in a jar and placing it on the family's ancestral altar. This practice even persists to this day. It is not uncommon to find highways lined with small shrines and altars dedicated to car crash victims, so that their souls may find peace. After years of repression, ancestor worship has staged a revival in Communist Vietnam, thus illustrating Pelzer's point of local and national worship, as shown with the Ho Chi Minh Museum's bust of the late leader atop an altar adorned with offerings to his memory. The same can be said of Trieu Au, considered to be the Vietnamese "Joan of Arc," who waged a spirited rebellion in the 200s A.D. against Vietnam's

Chinese overlords at the tender age of twenty-three. Rather than accept her defeat, the young warrior took her own life as a matter of honor, and to this day, the Vietnamese people continue to worship her memory, thus keeping her spirit alive according to their understanding.  

The other religions existing in Vietnam reflect even further the blended nature of the people's culture. In his 2000 CrossCurrents article discussing Buddhism, Robert Topmiller traces Buddhism's Vietnamese influence to China, and states that the Vietnamese practice of Buddhism "absorbed elements of Taoism, Confucianism, and ancestor worship along with the veneration of local deities." Author Nguyen The Anh related this same theme when he noted that during the medieval Le dynasty, Buddhism was "becoming associated with magic and medicine and miracles, with dreams and dragons, derived from traditional beliefs." Topmiller asserts that in the 1990s, most Vietnamese Buddhists believed that their actions in the present determined their fate in the future, and in a departure from the Western tradition, the Vietnamese laity still recognized "a world inhabited by spirits that can wreak great havoc on those who do not appease them."  

Taoism, with its "concepts of using purification and incantations to manipulate the universe's forces or to invoke its spiritual inhabitants," fit easily into the country's religious vortex. It stands to reason that the animist tradition of nature worship and ancestor worship prevalent in Vietnam provided a perfect avenue for Taoism’s assimilation, especially due to the fact that Vietnamese soothsayers and mediums still practice its precepts to this very day. Vietnamese spiritual beliefs' reliance on the supernatural also made Catholicism palatable to a number of Vietnamese villagers in the 19th century, with French missionaries' tales of miracles

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being the most appealing aspects, and while some earlier scholars have branded Vietnam a
Confucianist country, one sees its assimilation into their society as well.\textsuperscript{24}

An important part of Confucianism is the "correct position" and the "Mandate of
Heaven." Essentially, the "essence of the gentleman is that of wind; the essence of small people
is that of grass. And when a wind passes over the grass, it cannot choose but bend." Herein lays
the key to understanding the Mandate of Heaven. As Fitzgerald explains, the village peasants, or
"the small people," will follow the dominant political authority without question if it appears the
regime possesses Heaven's blessing, which usually comes in the form of civil stability, bountiful
harvests, and relative harmony between the government and the people. However, if war,
famine, and civil strife run amok, then the Mandate has been revoked, and the villages will no
longer recognize the regime's legitimacy. This may come in the form of outright rebellion on the
part of the peasants, or should a rebellion spread to other regions, and their village is occupied,
the villagers will follow the new power. All of this is based on the premise that Heaven clearly
supports this regime change, otherwise Fate would not have put them in authority. Summarizing
this idea, Fitzgerald claimed that Vietnamese do not believe political change to be the result of
"human effort," but is the subject of an inscrutable mysticism surrounding Fate. Furthermore, to
win this Mandate and achieve the "correct position," one must dutifully worship their ancestors
as well as adhere to this Will of Heaven. Another central tenet of Confucianism lay in the
precept of duty, especially to family and the greater whole.\textsuperscript{25}

The society into which the American Marines were marching valued the group above all
else. The personal pronoun that defines the American way of life, "I," does not even exist in
Vietnamese, rather, one refers to oneself according to one's relationship to the person to whom

\textsuperscript{24} McLeod, \textit{Culture and Customs of Vietnam}, 48, 54.
one is speaking. Duty, not individuality, held precedence in this culture, thus reflecting Vietnam's Confucian influence. An individual "was less an independent being than a member of a family group that included not only living members, but also a long line of ancestors and of those yet to be born." The father ran the household and determined the futures of his sons. The sons' lot was obedience, at least according to this tradition. As Ashwill notes, "family and que huong ("home village"); ... are high priorities for Vietnamese; these concepts, which permeate daily life and language, play a more important role in Vietnam than in most Western cultures."

Social scientist Roy D'Andrade determined in a 2008 study that Vietnamese tended to be more collectivistic than Americans, and believed that traits like creativity and openness are more easily reached by the group, not the individual. In Vietnam, "everyone has his place," although Ashwill maintains that this is hardly a formalized hierarchy, but a "complicated web" of relationships, reflecting yet again the complexity of Vietnamese cultural reality. In fact, in recent years, Vietnamese family life has been described as "modest in size, and nuclear family households are the most common." According to McLeod, this family nuclearization is partly responsible for ancestor veneration's revival, as more families attempt to hold on to the memories of their larger family. While highly influential, Confucianism's tenets, like much else in Vietnamese society, is hardly fixed in Vietnam's societal stone.26

Author Ellen Hammer once stated that in the countryside, "generation after generation of teachers indoctrinated village children" with Confucian principles of duty and filial piety, teaching "them about the social hierarchy in which each man had to know his place and to behave accordingly." While Hammer conceded that much of this teaching was very elementary,

she maintained that the villages' Confucian curriculum allowed for it to become deeply embedded in the rural psyche. However, McLeod contended over thirty years later that Confucianism's zenith rested primarily with the Vietnamese governing elite just prior to the French arrival in the 1800s, thus challenging Hammer's earlier assertion. In fact, when the mandarins held sway, the villagers remained largely "attached to Mahayana Buddhism, popular Taosim, and Animism." By the 1920s, Confucianism's power was fading, political and cultural ferment roiled colonial Indochina and a new doctrine emerged: Marxism. Nevertheless, such a diverse background was bound to produce many misunderstandings, especially with a society like the United States.²⁷

A major threat looming over the Marines' mission was not just the Viet Cong, but lack of understanding. Vietnam scholar Neil Jamieson insisted that too many Americans linked their understanding of Vietnam and its woes to the turbulence it was undergoing during the 1960s, but "often failed to realize how deeply the core values of traditional Vietnam remained embedded in the hearts of almost all Vietnamese." In 1972, Frances J. Fitzgerald echoed this when she observed the wide gulf between the two cultures. Fundamentally, the United States believes in constant progress and upward mobility in what he labeled a "replaceable society," while Vietnam venerates the past. Hammer adds to this too, stating that many Western frustrations in Vietnam originated from the "failure to look beyond a veneer of Westernization in language and education to more fundamental aspects of national character." Often times, Vietnamese social norms were just as diverse as their cultural background, and it often clashed with Western mores.²⁸

One complaint that many a Vietnamese peasant and urbanite held against the Americans was their shallow depth of character, most notably, the idea of "Keeping up with the Joneses."

Since Confucian traditions mandated strict humility as a key component of an individual's character, many Vietnamese villagers failed to grasp the hyper-consumerist mentality that gripped these latest Western arrivals. Vietnamese scholar Tran Long boasted of the great pride "Easterners" take in their culture and customs, and that humility is so ingrained in their personality that "international comparisons are particularly odious." Americans' value on competition and free-market principles were meaningless to the peasants, since competition never held any significant standing in village society. In fact, a competitive attitude, just like the accumulation of wealth, was actually disdained, which should come as no surprise due to the villages' insistence that every member "make some direct contribution to the sustenance of the group." It must be noted, however, that the above trait was most common among the poorest villagers, which, as Gerald Cannon Hickey related in 1964, comprised the largest segment of village society. 29

Another odious trait was open criticism; a trait many Eastern cultures deem to be extraordinarily rude, and one that Americans often times do not note. Tran Long advised Americans in Vietnam to refrain from "giving advice too freely and too frequently," nor should they "push his listener into a new venture too rapidly," since many villagers looked upon any outsiders with suspicion. Despite this reaction, however, many peasants eagerly learned and adapted any outside tools or techniques that they saw to be to their benefit, but only they were allowed to come to that conclusion. Nevertheless, attempting to force a new idea upon them only yielded a polite nod, giving the speaker the impression that they have successfully convinced them of the correctness of the new methods, when in fact, the villagers were politely giving them the brush off. Even in more contemporary times does this attitude persist, as some

29 Thuy, Getting to Know the Vietnamese and Their Culture, 37; Sully, We the Vietnamese, 87; Hickey, Village in Vietnam, 244-45.
Vietnamese note that some foreigners still feel "that they are more important than us," and that the Vietnamese "will do everything they want if they pay us well." Another pointed dislike from the present that illustrates the precariousness of dealing with such a foreign culture was foreigners so fixated on the infallibility of their ways that they hardly considered the local atmosphere, and therefore, made their Vietnamese counterparts "feel like what they had done to us was giving us favors." Furthermore, one is bound for failure should one arrive with "a superiority complex and a missionary spirit," thus leading to a dangerous underestimation of the Vietnamese, and the ultimate failure of any hope of conducting business across the cultural chasm. This segues into yet another cultural staple: conflict aversion.30

Many Americans came to understand, perhaps too late, that many Vietnamese were telling them what they wanted to hear. When the Americans confronted one district chief about why he assured them he controlled most of the twenty-four villages in his area, when he actually only held sway in three, he replied simply that he recognized the US Secretary of Defense's love of statistics, and he can have all he wants. If he wanted the numbers to go up, they will, and if they needed to go down, the chief said he could do that too. The chief's behavior derives from the same idea as humility and abstaining from open criticism, combined with an aversion to open confrontation. Some Vietnamese hide their feelings, and as Vuong Thuy puts it, "might reluctantly do something which deep in their hearts they would prefer to avoid. They do it because they are afraid of displeasing you or because they want to avoid confrontation." On top of this, confrontation produces displays of emotion, and such displays are completely unacceptable in Vietnamese society. Such a trait hardly registers in America's expressive society and has been a barrier between foreign and Vietnamese interactions. Cultural misunderstandings

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like these were omnipresent obstacles to the American effort in Vietnam, and more so for the Marines' quest to pacify the hamlets. Any chance of success hinged on the Americans' ability to establish a trust and build a connection with the villagers before any meaningful progress could be achieved. However, the Marines not only faced a cultural chasm, but a culture that had been undergoing significant disruptions for years, and the Americans were not the only ones attempting to bring a new way of life to the Vietnamese village.\(^3\)

Insurgency's seeds germinated once more in South Vietnam in 1959, when southern communists officially declared guerrilla war on Diem's regime. Following France's withdrawal from Indochina and the 1954 Geneva Accord's partitioning of Vietnam along the 17th Parallel, roughly 100,000 former Viet Minh soldiers returned north of the demarcation line. However, not everyone complied, as many others "simply hid their weapons," and remained in the south. With Diem’s crackdowns on civil unrest and his consolidation of power in the later 1950s, along with the influx of American aid to prop up his regime, the Central Committee of the Communist Party began to marshal its forces for the coming showdown, as more and more of "the hundred thousand who had moved north in 1954 now percolated back to their old homes." As for the old Viet Minh who had stayed behind, they too began to stir when "Southern communists who had regrouped in the DRV began to infiltrate the South and existing NLF military units became active." Their first feeble attacks against Diem in 1959 heralded the resumption of their war for unification, only now they marched with a new *nom de guerre: Viet-nam Cong-san*, or "Vietnamese who are Communists." Although the insurgents never referred to themselves by that name, but as the NLF (National Liberation Front), their name's contraction soon became

\(^3\) Thuy, *Getting to Know the Vietnamese and Their Culture*, 34; Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, 523; Ashwill, *Vietnam Today*, 137.
indelibly etched in the memories of an entire generation of Americans and Vietnamese: Viet Cong.  

North Vietnam, whose red legions marched under the command of France's old nemesis General Vo Nguyen Giap, envisioned a "people's war" that allowed them maximum flexibility. Central to this "people's war" was a guerrilla force that wreaked havoc upon their capitalist foes in the countryside, eventually uniting with a conventional force from the north. Once together, their final push would topple the "puppet regime" in Saigon and bring an end to over three decades of warfare. For Giap, the war against the Americans had to be fought "by the entire people, a total and protracted war" that aimed to nullify the United States' tremendous material and technological advantages with political superiority. Therefore the peasants played just as much of an integral role in Giap's plans as they did in American counter-insurgency. Giap declared in his 1970 work entitled The Military Art of People's War that "...as a result of the political struggle of the masses combined with vigorous and extensive guerrilla warfare, liberated zones have come into being and are expanding, playing an increasingly important role in bringing about victory." Moreover, the rural zones' strategic importance rose exponentially when one factored in the ample supplies of food, and the topographical variety that offered perfect haven for stealthy raids and concealment. For this reason, the communists' gun sight settled upon the hamlets.  

The obstacle was the villagers themselves. Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk reflecting upon Vietnam's turmoil in 1967, stated that when it came to the peasantry, "the majority of them

do not know what communism is." When taking this into consideration, one cannot help but wonder how the Viet Cong penetrated village society so deeply and maintained any semblance of support during the war. When Truong Nhu Tang, one of the Viet Cong's charter members, lived and worked alongside the guerrillas in 1968, he too realized this same truth. He made sure the VC cadres in his charge did not receive the same heavy Marxist indoctrination to which North Vietnamese regulars were subjected, for he noted that most of them cared little about ideological matters, and should he attempt this task, the southern guerrillas "would have considered it worse torture than the regime [Saigon] could possibly devise for them." That did not mean, however, that the Communists had no inroads to the villages.34

Truong first crossed paths with Ho Chi Minh when he was an aspiring pharmaceutical student in 1946 Paris. From the start, Truong was entranced by Ho's gentle demeanor and nationalist fervor, which awakened in him a deep patriotic spirituality. Ho spoke of a Vietnam taking its place among the world's nations by applying itself to education and its people contributing to "the national family." Truong still remembered in 1985 how "Ho had created for us an atmosphere of family and country and had pointed to our own role in the great patriotic endeavor." One must remember that Ho Chi Minh was first and foremost a Vietnamese nationalist, and that communism simply provided him with the de-colonialist engine needed in his quest for Vietnamese independence. To achieve this with a population indifferent to ideology, a different approach was needed; one that fused communism and culture into something that could be readily understood.35

35 Truong, A Viet Cong Memoir, 12-13, 165.
In his 1969 RAND study, Konrad Kellen concluded that the Viet Cong-village interactions allowed for support to work both ways, and he postulated that even peasants who held a jaded view of the guerrillas may yet support them for nationalistic or sentimental reasons. Author and social scientist Dr. Ralph K. White conjectured that some of that sentimentality derived from the fact that both Vietnams regarded Ho Chi Minh as a legendary hero. As a group of insurgents explained to a Vietnamese reporter for the New York Times in 1964, they listened to Hanoi Radio because "it has a lot of sympathy for our great task."

Furthermore, the Viet Cong's Viet Minh origins and the mystique surrounding their great victory over the French also gave the communists an advantage when it came to village support. Still, the village society cared little for political theories, and with popular support essential to their revolution's success, it became necessary to create a construct that could win that support.

Author David Hunt maintained that the villages' fragmentation across Vietnam as a result from decades of colonial disruption, along with Vietnamese successes against Japan in World War II and France in the subsequent French-Indochina War, provided a springboard for the Viet Cong's appeal among the peasants. However, this alone was not enough. Therefore, Ho Chi Minh intentionally crafted the Viet Minh as a union "of various groups under Communist domination." In this way, Ho "de-emphasized class struggle to render" the revolution "more palatable" by "striking nationalist themes and stressing its ability to provide services." Such nationalism is evident in the language of a Viet Cong poem titled "The Experiences of Several

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36 RAND (Research and Development) Corporation conducted studies on the Viet Cong infrastructure during the 1960s at the behest of the US Department of Defense and the South Vietnamese government. Their goal was to ascertain the nature of the insurgency's inner workings, while emphasizing a military intelligence approach to their data collecting.

Autumns of Resistance," where fighters from all over Vietnam meet "each other in the greater family, guerrilla troops, the troops of liberation. When near each other, we live happily in a feeling of love." Ho even appropriated the Confucian "correct position" lesson to buttress his nationalist argument by declaring the correct position to be an accord between "the laws of history and the present and future judgment of the Vietnamese people." Fitzgerald explained this fusion as one that does "not form an 'ideology' in the Western sense, but the elements of a Tao," but just like the Vietnamese countryside, this message was not always uniform, nor was it carried to the villages in the same manner.  

In order to recruit and retain enough fighters, the Viet Cong employed a varied methodology, sometimes sentimental, other times coercive. South Vietnam's peasantry, Giap wrote, boasted a proud resistance spirit when it came to defying a foreign occupier, and with "vital interests" under threat from the US and Saigon, the peasants could form "a mighty force to wage long resistance war," but to achieve this end, communism must appeal to the peasantry in a very real way. It had "to improve the people's livelihood." Just like the CAPs, the Viet Cong sought to "gain the allegiance of the South Vietnamese population," and there was no shortage of arrows in their quiver to carry out their mission.

Viet Cong recruiters oftentimes relied on the direct approach. According to psychologist James O. Whittaker, the VC organized village rallies complete with music and entertainment, followed by a presentation of communist aims and propaganda. These presentations "contained literally 'something for everyone,'" ranging from women's rights to college education opportunities, and land reform. When the guerrillas initially expanded their campaign and became more aggressive militarily, some took great pains to ensure that they provoked no

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animosity. John C. Donnell documented a case where an insurgent leader actually explained to a young Vietnamese boy their reasons for assassinating his father, who had served as GVN hamlet chief. The Party chieftain personally visited the boy, who was understandably "very hurt and angry with them for killing my father." Undeterred, the VC chief calmly articulated the boy's father's betrayal of his people and his class by working with the enemy, and the punishment that warranted, but only upon him, not his son. The Viet Cong's powers of persuasion proved too strong, as the boy recalled him talking "to a point where I felt that they were right. I no longer felt hurt... I came to hate my father even though I didn't know [exactly] what he had done." In short, the Viet Cong managed to convince some villagers that the "imperialists" were actually guilty of their crimes.  

Another guerrilla among the group interviewed in 1964 said that they never forced anyone into the movement, but they did "kidnap some people from time to time, but not to draft them," but to show them "what is wrong and what is right" before releasing them. Despite claims to the contrary, other statements made by the fighters pointed to coercion. One VC said he was angry at the constant VC attacks, and that he "had to go along with them," but all seemed to agree that the South Vietnamese government's inability to protect their villages led them to believe that "maybe the Liberation Front people were the ones who were right." While the Communists did in fact resort to coercive tactics, like the kidnapping denied by the aforementioned insurgent, they also made a direct appeal to the peasants' desires by exploiting the ongoing disruptions affecting village life.  

As has been shown, hamlet life was never uniform. Inequality existed, there were village elites who held more authority over others, as well as differences between gender status and

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generations. Understanding these nuances only too well, the Viet Cong attempted to enlist people to their cause by playing upon these themes and the promise of a better future. Like all civil wars, Vietnam was not only divided between north and south, but also along numerous lines that the communists hoped to exploit to the utmost.

Hunt illustrates a scene of rural inequality at traditional festivals where everyone brought their best foods and offerings. For the rich, this was an opportunity to showcase their status, and for the poor, a chance to curry favor with the wealthy. However, Hunt notes that this inequality proved to be a painful embarrassment for poor families, who actually avoided wealthier families' parties if possible so as not to incur any stigma. This economic imbalance, Hunt declares, fueled a bitterness that the Viet Cong played upon. In these cases, some communists preached the need for a cultural revolution, one that would overturn the established order and level the field. Especially in the south, where colonialism produced a private-landownership system, peasants desired their own land for their own use, as well as equality with their former landlords. As Hunt put it, they "no longer had to offer their best food to the rich's ancestors. They were equals."

Such die-hard insurgents even took aim at established customs that they viewed as perpetuating this imbalanced and outdated order.42

Wedding customs where a bride bows to her in-laws to signify her submission, or the groom giving gifts, money, and free labor to his prospective bride’s family before marrying were often targeted by the communists. VC guerrillas exhorted women to leave their homes and join the NLF, urging them to "obtain equality with men," and "to abolish the system whereby men were respected and women despised." They beckoned young people to defy the older generations by joining their movement, thus triggering a generational conflict that tore families

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42 Hunt, "Village Culture and the Vietnamese Revolution," 141.
apart. Older villagers tended to look upon some of the guerrillas with disdain, faulting them for abandoning the virtues of Confucius and ancestor veneration, whereas some Viet Cong purists declared the elders to be antiquated "feudalists" whose traditions perpetuated "the ways of wicked landlords." Hunt likens these communist purists to the iconoclasts of the French Revolution who wanted to erase from French culture every facet of its pre-Revolutionary character, especially since these Viet Cong sought to overhaul the "old attitudes" of "landlord over tenant, parent over child, man over woman."

The insurgents also manipulated the educational desires of the younger generation of Vietnamese to their advantage. Here the communists executed a time-honored tactic of psychological infiltration: the sales pitch. One peasant who later defected from the VC expressed his motivations for joining as a matter of funding his aspiration for a nursing career, after a communist recruiter promised him that they would send him to medical school after the war. Another defector lamented the dull routine of life in the rice paddies. He watched his friends go off to higher schooling, but because of his meager means, he remained behind. He only joined, he said, because the Communists "promised me to let me go to school." The same occurred in the case of a young woman who was recruited after she failed her secondary school exams and desperately wanted to run away from her former life. Furthermore, there were "all kinds of people in the Front," such as aspiring students, ARVN deserters, and draft dodgers, thus revealing the wide net cast by the guerrillas. In short, the common theme of persistent inequality in the villages, and the lack of any meaningful rectification by Saigon made such people easy

\[43\] Ibid., 140-143.
targets for the communists' recruiting efforts. Nevertheless, not all the insurgents aimed to split village societies apart with such hardline attitudes.\footnote{Donnell, \textit{Viet Cong Recruitment}, 139-40; Denison, \textit{Some Observations on Viet Cong Operations in the Villages}, 94-96.}

Even though tensions ran deep along these generational lines, the Viet Cong still sought to engage as many members of Vietnamese society as possible in their revolution, and with the intensification of the war, notably the bombing and shelling of rural areas in an attempt to forcibly separate the peasants from the insurgents, some villagers were persuaded that the guerrillas were the better choice. Hunt describes a tug-of-war between older village traditionalists and the younger activists seeking to revolutionize Vietnam's society. Many elders saw their revolutionary zeal as a threat to Vietnamese culture, but "as bombing and shelling increased and many peasants moved away," the guerrillas appeared to be "the ones who stayed behind," fighting for both revolution and "the survival of an autonomous Vietnamese culture in the countryside." Hunt illustrates that the Viet Cong cadres, like the French Revolutionaries of 1789, could not destroy village traditions and culture in its entirety "without destroying a part of themselves," thus leading to a blended relationship with village authorities in communist-controlled zones.\footnote{Hunt, "Village Culture and the Vietnamese Revolution," 145-146.}

While some cadres completely ignored the elders, others at least put on an air of respect, and even still, some insurgents formed a tight bond with traditionalists. In a tactic strikingly similar to the CAP concept, "village guerrillas" were literally assigned a village in which to reside permanently. There, the cadres created village militias and "a series of other organizations" like the Liberation Farmer's Association, the Liberation Women's Assosication, and the Liberation Youth Assocation. Distinct from the guerrillas, these village organizations "contributed to destroying the GVN's political organizations by offering a more immediate
political alternative," while maintaining the Communists' grip on the local population. Some Viet Cong regularly dined or had tea with council elders so as to form a strong relationship with them, that way village authorities would be more amenable to communist designs. One defector recalled that the communists, after forming these connections, "went to see the old notables to ask them not to prevent their relatives from joining the Front forces or from paying their taxes."

In the end, a sort of alliance formed between the "antique" elders and the "renegades" out of what Hunt called a "mutual need and of a common fate" that "held local militants and elders together." Nevertheless, the Viet Cong resorted to other means in order to maintain their grip on the countryside, and they were hardly above using terror.46

On December 12, 1965, AK-toting guerrillas stormed into a pagoda and massacred twenty-three civilians while they slept. Their crime: constructing a canal for the GVN. Another time, an elderly peasant witnessed the brutal executions of four of his fellows at the hands of a communist patrol who insisted the men had been paid informants; the residents could not "figure out whether that was true or not," but nobody challenged it, for no one dared utter a word.

Author Jay Mallin captured this fearful feeling perfectly when he wrote that a "man in fear of his life, or the lives of his wife and children, will be most reluctant to point out the guerrilla in his village or hamlet-a person who, clad in the traditional black pajamas and industriously tilling the rice paddies" is actually a lethal killer. As the war dragged on after the American intervention, Viet Cong attacks began targeting more indiscriminately. For example, communist insurgents murdered an entire village council for collaborating with the Americans, and another saw several people wiped out simply because their relatives worked for the South Vietnamese army. Beheading suspected spies became the Viet Cong's calling card, as many communists later

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claimed that these acts were "for the good of the People." In reality, terrorism was a weapon unto itself meant to convert locals to the communist cause by targeting those connected with the US/Saigon war effort, and if that was not possible, then paralyze the non-committed population through fear.⁴⁷

By the time the Americans began to fan out across the countryside, the Viet Cong already had at least six years to entrench themselves. US troops would have to fight an elusive enemy that was deeply interwoven into a complex and foreign culture; a culture whose understanding was vital to any success in the future. Also important was an understanding of the recent past. Pacification operations were not new to Vietnam by the time of the Americans' arrival, for the French had waged their own counter-guerrilla campaigns in Indochina during their own war there from 1946-1954. Its lessons would be of great consequence to the latest war in Southeast Asia.

CHAPTER 3
LA CONNECTION FRANÇAISE

From January 20, 1961, to the fateful Friday in Dallas on November 22, 1963, the nation's hope and promise came to be personified in its 35th president. Although elected by a narrow margin in 1960, John Fitzgerald Kennedy appeared to represent the youthful vitality that characterized the United States at the dawn of the twentieth century's seventh decade. His call for Americans to "pay any price and bear any burden" resonated with many young Americans, inspiring many to some sort of national service, especially in his newly formed Peace Corps. With a charismatic leader at the country's helm and a burgeoning economy that seemed to defy any major headwinds, the America at the beginning of the 1960s would be unrecognizable to the country that found itself embroiled in foreign and domestic conflagrations by 1969. This "Camelot" was a time when the US mission in Vietnam was an advisory one, before the fierce battles of Ia Drang, Khe Sanh, and Tet; before America's cities tore themselves apart in raging seizures of protest. Behind the early 1960s' pristine façade, the United States began its journey down a long dark path that came to dominate the decade.

The international scene remained fraught with tension and peril by the time Kennedy took office in January 1961. From the Fulda Gap to the Balkans, the "Iron Curtain" incarcerated almost half of Europe within the Soviet sphere. While brinkmanship's perilous nature always revolved around Europe, a new front in the Cold War emerged as the sun began to set on Europe's rule over Africa and Asia. Kennedy acutely detected the shift in the strategic winds. De-colonization, fused with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's pledge to support "national wars of liberation," produced a unique conundrum that US nuclear superiority alone could not rectify.
The president envisioned a Third World tug-of-war where "the local conflict they [the USSR] support can turn in their favor through guerrillas or insurgents or subversion ..." It also became clear "that this struggle in this area of the new and poorer nations will be a continuing crisis of this decade." Well aware that Viet Minh legions in Indochina triumphed over French colonial forces in 1954, the young president anxiously desired to take steps toward countering communist subversion's growing menace to US national security. Attestiing to the president's sense of urgency, Kennedy advisor Roger Hilsman recalled Kennedy asking his National Security team point-blank: "What are we going to do about guerrilla warfare?" To understand his concern with guerrilla war and Vietnam, one must briefly peer back into Vietnam's recent history, when France faced the same shadowy adversary that later confronted and confounded the US.48

The French experience in Vietnam does not begin in 1945, nor does it start in the twentieth century, but rather in the nineteenth. Beginning in the 1820s and culminating in the 1880s with the establishment of their control over Indochina, the French domain in Vietnam gradually expanded across the often-fractured Vietnamese kingdom through a combination of exploiting internal dissensions, religious missions, military campaigns, and political maneuvering. However, the fact that the French spent the majority of the 1800s attempting to secure this hegemony gives testament to the Vietnamese's fierce resistance to colonization. In the 1960s, North Vietnam claimed this insurrectionary heritage as its own, declaring the Democratic Republic of Vietnam to be the "heir to a millenary tradition, continuing a fight begun by various patriotic movements." Historians trace the anti-French movements to the 1820s and 1830s, citing various imperial edicts that incited the people to rise up. Emperor Minh-menh's 1825 anti-

Catholic missionary decree accused the French missions of making "the people's hearts crooked, thus destroying our beautiful customs," and so as to halt any further destruction, "we must accordingly completely eliminate these abuses." Eventually the emperor proscribed Vietnamese Catholicism in 1833. Furthermore, race added fuel to the Vietnamese's rebellious fire, as another edict, this one announced by the emperor Gia-long, pointed out that Europeans "are not of our race, and so their minds are completely different from ours. They should not be allowed to reside here." At this racial concept's core lies Vietnamese Confucianism's influence, as Vietnam historian Mark W. McLeod reveals.\textsuperscript{49}

In the fifteenth century, Vietnamese Confucians adopted the Chinese definition of cultural superiority, or "\textit{noi ha}," or 'those at the center of civilization,' Mandarins scathingly labeled foreigners, "be they other Southeast Asians or Europeans, as 'man di' or 'da man,' 'barbarians' or 'savages.'" The mixtures of both these political and racial atmospheres in nineteenth-century Vietnam led to repeated nationalist insurrections throughout the century. One French officer named Masson recalled the interrogation of a Vietnamese prisoner during the 1886-87 siege of Ba Dinh that illustrated the natives' single-minded devotion to rebellion: "'You are wasting your time trying to ask us for information we don't want to give you, for we consider it prejudicial to the interests of our country. Do what you will with us.'" This spirit endured well into the next century, and from 1945 to 1954, it inspired fierce resistance against the visions of a revitalized French empire.\textsuperscript{50}

In its post-World War II attempt to reassert its colonial dominance, France encountered a situation not too dissimilar from the one the Americans would find over a decade later. Like the


United States, France faced a dual war where the lines between conventional and irregular warfare often blurred; where adaptation and flexibility were key. For the French, pacification centered upon Cochin-China, the southern regions of Vietnam, due to the Viet Minh regular army's sparse presence in that area. Like the Americans, the French hardly lacked precedent when it came to battling insurgents, since their guerre révolutionnaire doctrine rested heavily upon principles laid down by the generals Joseph Gallieni and Hubert Lyautey and their colonial experiences in Madagascar and North Africa. Compounding France's Southeast Asian conundrum, however, was the stark reality that what might have worked in parts of Africa might have zero applicability in Indochina. In 1966, former French Army officer and French-Indochina veteran Jean Ferrandi published a book detailing France's Vietnamese war, which included the development of a counter-insurgency plan. Ferrandi writes that one French official explained in blunt terms that "'We couldn't limit ourselves to traditional actions, relying on centralized power, continuous rhythm, and infantry operating in close cooperation with other arms (artillery, air force, etc.), and maintaining an occupation.'"51 In short, the French found themselves in a war that defied the conventional military tactics that dominated Western military doctrines, and if the French were to have a chance at success in Indochina, they would need to adopt a strategy that addressed the insurgent warfare's unpredictability.52

Historian Ronald Spector noted in 1985 that, contrary to French and American perceptions in the 1950s, the French were somewhat at a disadvantage when it came to the Indochinese war. When it came to the French supply system, "the road-bound French supply convoys, with hundreds of trucks constantly exposed to ambush, were far more vulnerable and

51 "Nous ne pouvions nous limiter à des actions traditionnelles, reposant sur la puissance centralisée, au rythme continu, l'infanterie opérant en liaison étroite avec les autres armes et tendant à l'occupation du terrain.'" Translation by the author.
less flexible than the primitive Viet Minh supply services." Furthermore, Spector illustrated how the Viet Minh peasant-soldiers utilized their simple system of porters and their detailed knowledge of the terrain to travel along concealed supply routes, giving them a greater mobility than the "road-bound" French, despite their clear superiority in "trucks, tanks, planes, and helicopters." Charles Schrader echoed a similar sentiment when he stated that the French Army's efforts were "hampered by the application of organizational structures, equipment, and tactics better suited to the conventional European battlefield than to a guerrilla war in Southeast Asia." However, he adds that "in a few areas, French Union leaders in Indochina were able to devise successful means of countering the Viet Minh threat," specifically the creation of counter-insurgency forces that focused on becoming a guerrilla threat unto themselves.53

Just after the war's outbreak in 1946, General Etienne Valluy of the French Expeditionary Force in Indochina reached back to France's colonial wars in North Africa hoping to find the strategic combination to victory. Valluy determined that French forces should secure the main roads and lines of communication by establishing strongpoints throughout the country, while occupying the major cities as well. Furthermore, French units were to be assigned a particular area of responsibility that was to be divided amongst them into squares, a practice called quadrillage. Next came ratissage, the clearing operations. Mobile detachments were to comb their designated zones, "attacking, ambushing, patrolling, searching, establishing an intelligence system and, perhaps most important, contacting and assisting the people." The French also envisioned elite commandos striking out at communist forces from established bases and securing communist-controlled areas, thus creating a strong French presence in the hinterland, which was to be followed up by civil action teams whose aim was to create a functional legal system for the local population.

system, tax code, and infrastructure. The French called this strategy of permeating the Vietnamese political and social fabric by the same name that Generals Gallieni and Lyautey had bestowed upon their own plans years before: *tache d’huile*. Ferrandi added that a key feature of these commando squads was that they "responded, in effect, to the necessity to play the same game as the adversary." Indeed, in 1946, some French began to see counter-insurgency's merits; seeking to restore colonial control by adopting the very guerrilla tactics that had made the Viet Minh such a formidable foe. To achieve the "*conquête des masses,*" the French mobile units needed to take the war to the countryside, defeat the Viet Minh at their own game, and prove to the peasants that their destiny lay with France. In the end, however, "the people themselves had to be the real work force behind any pacification effort," and this challenge would prove to be one of the most vexing.

After the French Army swept through one of its assigned squares, the *Groupes Administratifs Mobiles Opérationnels* (GAMO) entered the newly liberated villages in their wake. These civil action teams had the unenviable task of rooting out the remaining Viet Minh infrastructure, thus completing the actual pacification of the area. Principally, their duties consisted of establishing a viable local administration, and providing food, clothing, medical assistance, and shelter for the war-ravaged villagers. Local security would be achieved by training a local self-defense force. Furthermore, the GAMO squads scoured the area for intelligence, interviewing villagers and following up leads in an attempt to identify anyone and everyone who might be a suspected Viet Minh agent. This was easier said than done, especially since the peasants were known to keep watch for the guerrillas and alert them to impending danger, or assist them in the construction of tunnel networks. It stands to reason, therefore, that

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54 "répondait en effet à la nécessité de pratiquer le même jeu que l'adversaire." Translation by the author.
dissuading the peasants from supporting the Viet Minh proved just as frustrating, if not more
so.\textsuperscript{56}

Robert B. Asprey identifies a severe lack of credibility with the local populace as one of
the GAMO teams' greatest shortcomings. French civil action troops attempted their own
propaganda campaign by personally engaging villagers and telling them that the Viet Minh were
evil and sought only to achieve their own ends at the villages' expense, but as Asprey points out,
the French hardly possessed any political credibility or appeal among the peasants in order to
back up such claims. Although support for the Viet Minh varied (some regions staunchly
supported them, others not at all), the communists strived to weld together a nationalist coalition
centering on the theme of doc-lap, or independence. In what Asprey calls "the Communist
version of Lyautey's civil-military task forces," Viet Minh cadres appeared to be concerned for
the people's welfare, condemning "high rents paid by peasants, usurious interest on loans, the
lack of food that plagued the land," and "they told the people that doc-lap, by returning the land
to the people, would erase such injustices." On top of this campaign, the Viet Minh organized,
albeit painstakingly over time, internal security units that maintained communist influence in the
villages, like the Cong An, a civilian secret police force embedded in the native population that
facilitated internal control. While such a deeply ingrained network would be difficult to root out
on its own, "inept French tactics" that resulted in physical damage to villages and crop land,
along with civilian casualties, "greatly aided the Viet Minh in their efforts to win the people's co-
operation." Taken all together, a simple talking-to was not going to clear the way for trust.\textsuperscript{57}

Due to the French credibility deficit, most peasants ignored their clumsy propaganda,
believing that at their worst, the Viet Minh could not be any worse than the French. Moreover,

\textsuperscript{56} Asprey, \textit{War in the Shadows}, 510.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 491-492, 494-495.
the GAMOs failed to make up ground in the hearts-and-minds war, as they were unable to deliver any of the proposed infrastructure and foodstuffs that were so vital to the effort's success. In reality, most GAMO teams had little, if any, idea on how to effectively wage a psychological campaign, and when it came time to re-build village infrastructure, the teams realized that there existed too few of them in order to pull off the superior services necessary to build a rapport with such suspicious locals. In fact, not only were there few qualified GAMOs, but the teams that operated in the field required extra protection from the mobile forces. Due to a scarcity of adequate mobile reserves in Indochina, many GAMOs were at the mercy of Viet Minh raids, which quickly unraveled any progress that had been made up to that point. However, there did exist a force that proved itself to be more in line with what Schrader was describing: the *Groupements de Commandos Mixtes Aéroportés*.58

In 1946, French historian Philippe Devillers, who accompanied the French forces to Indochina at the war's outset, lamented that if they (the French) "'departed, believing a region pacified, they [the Viet Minh] would arrive on our heels,'" and re-establish themselves. Frowning upon this situation, Devillers saw only one solution: "'to multiply the posts, fortify them, to arm the villages, and to train them for a coordinated and enlightened self-defense.'" Such a mission would have to be accomplished by a unique force. In 1947, such a force began to come into existence when Sergeant Georges Grillot, a French Marine NCO, organized a group of partisans in the Mekong Delta comprised of former Viet Minh prisoners who had forsaken their communist allegiances to join forces with the French. Grillot saw this force as ideal for intelligence and infiltration, and he sought to use political, psychological, and guerrilla warfare tactics to create disorder among the Viet Minh rank-and-file. This concept became official when

58 Ibid., 510.
General Jean de Lattre Tassigny ordered the creation of the groupements de commandos mixtes aéroportés (GCMA) on April 7, 1951. These commando teams were to parachute into Viet Minh territory and "create in their rear a state of permanent insecurity." The GCMA mission objectives orbited around establishing a collaborative effort with non-Vietnamese peoples and becoming "informed on the population, their morale, their sentiments and attitudes towards the Viets." In this manner, the GCMAs would construct a guerrilla force "in country under Viet Minh occupation or organization" and disrupt the enemy's rear, thereby furthering French control. Liberated from the roads, the commandos became guerrillas themselves.

One French commando commented after the war that he and his fellow operators never returned to their rear base for six months, a shocking prospect to the ordinary French rifleman who remained inextricably attached to the large bases that dotted the landscape. Another bush veteran believed bases were synonymous with "l'inaction militaire," since large bases prevented any real method from being applied upon the guerrillas, not to mention the fact they made convenient targets. Shock tactics, guerrilla strikes, surprise attacks, de-centralized command style, these were the keys to combating the communist insurgents, not a wholesale occupation of every spit of dirt and jungle. In an interview, another former commando walked Ferrandi through their "routine": "One never rested: as soon as one operation ended, you needed to start another right away, as soon as a battalion had finished an operation, it readied itself for a new one. The day was an exhausting march through dikes, on trails, in the mud or in the bush; at night, one had to keep watch, make patrols and set up the classic ambushes."

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59 Mixed Airborne Commando Groups.
61 Ferrandi, Les Officiers Français Face au Vietminh, 172. "On ne se reposait jamais: dès qu'une opération était terminée, il fallait en recommencer une autre au plus tôt, dès qu'un bataillon avait terminé une opération, on se
The GCMA commandos, like the American CAPs, were a polyglot force. Towards the end of the war, over 6,000 commandos roamed Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, and roughly 300 of them were French, the rest of the force being comprised of Vietnamese and other indigenous peoples. At first, a typical cadre numbered 100 troops, with one French officer, four French non-commissioned officers, and eight indigenous non-commissioned officers. This command hierarchy oversaw a total of eighty enlisted personnel, all of whom were Vietnamese, Montagnards, or Laotians depending on the area of Indochina in which that particular commando group was operating. Later, some GCMAs included well over a hundred men, even several hundred in some cases. The French, ever mindful of their ancestors’ machinations during their 19th-century conquest of the Vietnamese realm, sought to resurrect a tried and true scheme that had served them well in the past. Just like before, the Europeans attempted to manipulate the cultural sensitivities that characterized Vietnamese society. Chinese, Thai, Montagnard tribes like the Nungs, Thos, Man, and Meo were but a few of the myriad of cultures that made up Indochina’s ethnography, and the GCMAs specifically targeted regions where sizable minorities dwelled. Drawing on his experience as an intelligence officer, Ferrandi once observed that “l’Annamite serait déjà un élément susceptible d’être exploité en notre faveur,” meaning “Annam was already a susceptible element to be exploited in our favor,” no doubt due to the many Montagnard tribes who inhabited Annam's Central Highlands.62

French Special Forces squads played on Montagnard hostility to ethnic Vietnamese, especially in areas where the Viet Minh conscripted large numbers of these peoples. By establishing contact and building a rapport with the tribes, the French believed they could

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62 Schrader, A War of Logistics, 34; Ferrandi, Les Officiers Français Face au Vietminh, 177.
channel ethnic hostilities into an effective guerrilla force that would wreak havoc in the Viet Minh rear. Evidence exists to support the claim that the French actually succeeded to some extent in this venture, as "GCMA operations began to gain strategic importance by the end of 1953." In fact, other units were proving their worth before the fall of that year.  

In April 1953, Viet Minh forces invested the Tranminh plateau in Laos only to be halted by the French Army's unexpectedly quick reaction. Even before the communist assault crashed to a halt, the French realized the GCMA teams' intrinsic value, as they disappeared "into the storm" of the Communist assault, and if the Viet Minh still held any part of the area, they remained largely unable to extend their control over traditionally hostile tribes.  

As the Viet Minh faced the gathering French counter-stroke, their rear bristled with hostility thanks to GCMA activity. The combined French and Meo force provided "a large contribution" to the ensuing Tranminh's re-conquest "through observation and intelligence," thus allowing French forces to accurately size up their communist foes. They acted as guides, thereby augmenting the French's knowledge of the terrain and enhancing security. Moreover, the maquis méo laid lethal ambushes along enemy supply routes, thus disrupting their re-supply operations and cutting their communications. So valuable were these contributions, the Tranminh campaign's commander, Colonel Kergaravat, wrote: "Here more than anywhere else, boldness is the rule, for we must

64 Ibid., 85-86. "Le coup de boutoir donné par le Viet-Minh au Tranninh au début de 1953 avait servi de révélateur: les maquis auraient pu disparaître dans la tourmente; ils avaient au contraire tenu, et si les Viets occupaient encore certaines portions de la zone, ils étaient loin d'avoir réussi à étendre leur influence et leur contrôle sur les populations." Translation by the author.
seek the population's help in the event of failure."

Having an invisible ally deep in enemy territory paid dividends for the French in other locations too.\(^{66}\)

The combined mobile forces acquitted themselves well yet again on October 3, 1953, during a major raid on Viet Minh bases. After parachuting into enemy territory, over 600 Meo and T'ai fighters, along with French support, struck hard against supply depots and enemy camps in the vicinity of Lao-Kay, Vietnam, and Coc-Leu, China, a city just across the border that served as a communist haven. The raiders achieved total surprise, wiping out depots and reportedly "inflicting about 150 communist casualties" before disappearing into the nearby mountains. Such raids even led some French military commanders to attempt to use les maquisards to create chaos among the Viet Minh forces laying siege to Dien Bien Phu, but that outpost fell before any real action could be launched. In the case of the Lao-Kay raids, so maddening were the maquisard machinations that General Giap actually appealed to the Chinese for assistance in order to “liquidate the underground in the region of Lao-Kay.” Still, even though the French Union scored some successes with the GCMA, the Viet Minh continued to find a way to resist. While the French found no shortage of local peoples who despised ethnic Vietnamese, they faced great difficulty in inciting any cohesive uprising against the Vietnamese communists. As it turned out, the Viet Minh tried to guard against the ethnic wedge the French were trying to drive by largely steering clear of heavy-minority-populated regions. For this reason they never bothered launching any major campaigns in Vietnam's upper northwestern zones, so as to avoid giving local tribes anymore incentive to take up arms against them.

\(^{65}\) Ibid., 85-86.  "'Ici plus qu'ailleurs, l'audace est de règle, car on trouvera l'aide de la population en cas d'échec.'"

Translation by the author.

\(^{66}\) Ibid., 85-86.
However, despite its successes, the GCMA was never totally accepted nor was its potential ever fully appreciated.\textsuperscript{67}

One problem with the GCMA was the nature of the mission. Critics deemed the GCMA to be a superb guerrilla force, but unable to actually stand up to a well-organized conventional attack. The reason was a persistent French colonialist belief: the ability to square off against a traditional armed force "would have required a level of tactical training and coordination that could not reasonably be expected from primitive tribesmen." In short, racist perceptions helped to stunt any major development of the GCMA program, and just as racial preconceptions continued to dominate the French, so did entrenched military doctrine.\textsuperscript{68}

It cannot be stressed enough that France fought the same type of dual war that the United States came to face in the next decade, and as long as Viet Minh regulars remained in the field, traditional military doctrine seemed to be the viable strategy. In the beginning, General Valluy realized the need for pacification, but even he could not resist the temptation to drive at the Viet Minh field army. Asprey claims that Valluy tried to do too much by engaging in both a conventional campaign in northern Vietnam and a pacification effort in southern Vietnam. As he puts it: "Valluy would have had his hands full in consolidating a strategic base in Cochin-China alone." General de Lattre, who took command of French Union troops in 1951, was an advocate for units like the GCMA, but insisted that they be part of his larger framework: securing Tonkin and denying the area to the Viet Minh. His line of fortified outposts stretched his available forces to their limits, often producing nothing more than isolated and vulnerable targets. Michel David reinforces this when he stated that the major powers never grasped the importance of psychological and political actions. Instead, they relied on the numbers of enemy dead,

\textsuperscript{68} Cassidy, "The Long Small War," 51.
wounded, captured, and weapons recovered, all markers that later became points of obsession during the American intervention as well. This conventional mindset, when pitted against an insurgent enemy, resulted in the French forces being spread too thin in an attempt to defend everything against an enemy who could literally strike anywhere at any time. As Giap once exclaimed, "The enemy is everywhere and nowhere." 69

As the French-Indochina War ground on from the forties into the fifties, Jean Leroy, a French colonel of mixed European and Vietnamese descent, assembled a force that bore a striking similarity to the GCMA and the future Combined Action Platoons. Organized into sixty-man teams, called brigades, and originally drawn from Vietnamese Catholics, the Unités Mobiles pour la Défense de la Christianité (Mobile Units for the Defense of Christendom) challenged the Viet Minh for control of Cochin-China's hamlets through aggressive patrolling and persuasion, combined with training a local force that would eventually take over village security. After the teams purged Viet Minh operatives from the area, the UMDC organized elections for a local assembly, and to win the people's support, land rents were cut in half. In theory, this allowed the UMDC to move on to other contested areas. Still, the plan's execution yielded tenuous gains at best. Leroy returned to France in 1952, and with his departure, the UMDC fell into disarray. Viet Minh forces seized upon this weakness and rapidly unspooled the UMDC's progress. In short, the "fledgling local self-defense forces could not contain" the Viet Minh onslaught. Furthermore, it should be noted that militias such as Leroy’s did not imply total loyalty to the French. French historian Jacques Dalloz describes Colonel Leroy as “one of those charismatic personalities,” and an “enlightened socio-feudal warlord” whose territory eventually encompassed around a half-million people. Fredrik Logevall gives substance to Dalloz’s

testimony by chronicling an event on a lake island where Leroy "ordered built a bar lit all night by neon lights," and "he poured brandy down the throats of women" to his guests' great amusement. Still, despite the presence of these irregular units, generals and enlisted alike shared a deep hatred of the "hearts and minds" concept.\textsuperscript{70}

Ordinary French foot soldiers expressed extreme disgust with the whole idea by 1953. One hapless infantryman complained how they "'get shot at every time we pass by on a highway,'" and that he really did not "'feel like losing a good platoon for the sake of mopping up a bunch of mud huts.'" Even though the native populace must support pacification, by the same token, so must the troops who have been tasked with performing this delicate operation, but a soldier who believes that they should "'get the Air Force into this and just wipe 'em off the map'" will prove just as detrimental to the effort as any enemy. Nevertheless, other schemes were concocted as the French military attempted to find a winning strategy. One other elite unit that fanned out over Indochina still stands among the most storied military forces in history: the French Foreign Legion.\textsuperscript{71}

Renowned throughout the world for its ruthless discipline and combat skill and romanticized for its numerous military adventures from North African deserts to Latin America, the French Foreign Legion counted among the French Army's elite units that gave chase to the elusive Viet Minh. In Indochina, however, some legionnaires drew the task of manning the many isolated outposts that made up the French defensive lines throughout Tonkin and its delta region. According to author Douglas Porch, nothing depressed a foreign legionnaire more than having to languish in some remote camp, while some of his more fortunate comrades marched off into the hinterland with the \textit{groupes mobiles}. Following along the same lines as Valluy's

\textsuperscript{70} Andradé, \textit{Ashes to Ashes}, 18-20; Ferrandi, \textit{Les Officiers Français Face au Vietminh}, 171; Dalloz, \textit{The War in Indochina 1945-54}, 112; Logevall, \textit{Embers of War}, 299.
\textsuperscript{71} Andradé, \textit{Ashes to Ashes}, 21.
thinking, General Jean de Lattre Tassigny established a series of French strongpoints throughout Tonkin Province in northern Vietnam so as to gradually wrestle the province from Viet Minh control. The concept of the mobile unit was initially brought to Indochina by General Boyer de la Tour, but by 1951, de Lattre authorized the development of the groupes mobiles (mobile groups) in order to provide a reserve for the far-flung posts and act as an alternative to the lack of French air power in the region. By the end of the French war, around 18 mobile groups, some of them Vietnamese, served the French Union, and while some legionnaires resented their comrades' good fortune in drawing that assignment, experience proved to be a ruthless instructor.72

Although adequate as intervention forces, Porch writes that French Army mobile groups "...did not prove to be a war-winning formula," primarily due to their cumbersome nature. The groups hugged the paved roads in Indochina with long trains of heavy vehicles and supply trucks that left the groups woefully vulnerable to ambush when venturing into the jungle. Unlike the GCMA teams that could disappear into the bush and launch potent strikes all around the enemy, the mobile groups lacked serious mobility, thus leading one to ponder how they lived up to the moniker "mobile units" when their heavy vehicles bogged them down in Vietnam's tropical terrain. So slow were these groups when alerted to relieve a besieged base that "it often found a smoking ruin with its garrison lying dead," if it survived the trip into the combat area at all. A famous example of this vulnerability can be found in Bernard Fall's classic account of the French Groupe Mobile 100 (GM 100) in Street Without Joy, where the groups' road-bound vehicles suffered a devastating Viet Minh ambush in the Central Highlands of central Vietnam that cost the French 1,200 lives and the loss of all their equipment and artillery. On November 14, 1952,

the Viet Minh mauled *groupes mobiles* 1 and 4 during *Operation Lorraine*, trapping them for an entire day before they fought their way out at the cost of 300 casualties. Another example that affected the Foreign Legion's First Parachutist Battalion occurred in October 1950 when the legionnaires joined French forces retreating from Na-Keo. Acting as a rear-guard, and true to its die-hard military tradition, the paratroopers fought off repeated and cunningly laid Viet Minh ambushes as the column slashed its way across rugged hills and dense jungle at a frightening cost: one captain and twenty-eight enlisted survivors out of a battalion of over 400 paratroopers. It was this lumbering characteristic, among others, that caused Foreign Legion *groupes* to develop a healthy skepticism of the whole concept.73

The same problems that plagued the Legion in the mobile units also haunted them, and the rest of the French army, throughout the war. Chief among them, as has been mentioned, was the fact that should the group engage the Viet Minh, and they slip away, the Legion lacked an effective method of pursuit. Moreover, many Legion group commanders complained of shortages in men and material, most notably experienced non-commissioned officers to lead their teams in the field. In November 1952, Captain Masselot of the 1st Battalion, Fifth *étranger* complained that the French Army expressed a bias towards the Legion that hampered its effectiveness.74 He contended that reinforcements and equipment due the Foreign Legion were purposely re-directed to other "more prestigious" mobile groups in order to enhance their reputations. Furthermore, observers noted the foreign legionnaires' low-morale and exhausted demeanor. It turned out that rotating Legion officers would drive their men beyond exhaustion in order to add luster to their own personal records, and upon their departure, leave the group


74 The French word "étranger" is short for "Foreign Legion Regiment," in this case, even though the literal translation would simply be "Fifth Foreign." In French, the complete name would be *cinquième régiment étranger*, but the Foreign Legion simply refers to it as the *cinquième étranger*. 
spent and dejected for the incoming commander. However, during these hard-charging
operations, the Legion wielded an iron-fist, and with civilian and foe all mixed up, the
consequences became disastrous.\(^75\)

A memorandum dated February 1962 from the US Navy's top officer in the Pacific to the
US advisory command in Vietnam illustrates two clashing views within the French Army in
Indochina as to the proper application of force. One side took into account the indigenous
population and the necessity of "not alienating friendly peoples by making them victims of
unjustifiable air attacks," while the other view, "an extension of a common Foreign Legion
attitude," advocated a more draconian approach. In short, the Legion did not believe in
"purposeful restraint," therefore, the entire population must be made to realize that "innocent and
guilty alike would suffer when Viet Minh were detected in their midst." While this view was not
limited to the Legion, author Adrian D. Gilbert supports this by portraying “the French attitude
to the Vietnamese population” as “at best, indifferent. Little or no attempt was made to
distinguish between civilians and combatants, and atrocities were common place.” One Legion
officer exalted over their success after following up a lead that led to an ambush of a Viet Minh
meeting. When the legionnaires sprung their trap, the communists hurled themselves into the
Saigon River to escape the pursuing French, who “shot them like so many rabbits.” However,
this officer acknowledged the shortcoming of their method’s indiscriminate nature when he
commented how it was not “only the full-blown Viets that we kill. We only know afterward, and
not always then. Often, they are just villagers, people’s militia, half or even only a quarter Viet.”
Legionnaire Henry Ainley recalled how “rape, beating, burning and torturing on entirely
harmless peasants and villagers were of common occurrence” during French sweeps, and the

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 547.
prevailing attitude was one of "'Who the devil cares, anyway?'" or "'they are only 'bounyouls' [natives]." Gilbert pointedly writes how the "fundamental counter-insurgency principle that 'the people are the prize' was lost on the French," and not only did this drastically alienate the locals, but also made it supremely difficult to train a national Vietnamese army.\textsuperscript{76}

Manpower shortages remained a chief problem that habitually hobbled the French war effort. Out of a peak strength of approximately 500,000 French Union soldiers, roughly 325,000 of those were Indochinese. With Paris reluctant to commit more men to the fight and a scarcity of French troops in Indochina, General de Lattre implored the French-installed Vietnamese emperor Bao Dai to assist in raising a national army to be trained by French forces in order to augment the French Union. Furthermore, de Lattre wished to "see the 'loyal' Vietnamese participate more directly in combat," thus leading to \textit{jaunissement}, an unflattering term meaning "yellowing," which the French gave to their effort to "Vietnamize" the war. Clearly drenched in racist overtones, other terms reflected the Legion's lack of enthusiasm for the project. Another example was "parasite battalions," which the French used to describe Vietnamese troops attached to Legion units as part of their training. Although more prevalent among the Legion's officer corps, such racist sentiments added more difficulty to an already burdensome job that was compounded by the acute manpower shortage the program was designed to solve.\textsuperscript{77}

Already lacking essential non-commissioned officers, the French Army assigned roughly 400 officers and sergeants to train the Vietnamese National Army, and to speed the process along, the French High Command ordered all Foreign Legion regiments to "form composite


battalions" merging 534 legionnaires with 292 local troops. As Robert Cassidy states, this "experiment increased the number of troops available to fight the war, and some Vietnamese formations acquitted themselves with honorable military performances." While covering the French-Indochina War in 1952, Howard Simpson witnessed the "flaxen-haired Germans, stolid Slavs, a scattering of Italians, Spaniards, Hungarians, and numerous Vietnamese" of the Legion's Second Parachutist Battalion march into the Na-San garrison. He recalled how the "Vietnamese seemed submerged by their equipment and helmets, periodically breaking into a trot to keep up," but oddly enough, the scene left Simpson with the impression "of cohesion as a fighting unit," rather than a ragtag army of mercenaries and ill-trained natives. Simpson stated how he "slept better knowing the 2nd BEP was on hand" manning Na-San's perimeter. However, not everyone in the Legion shared Simpson's feeling.

Overall, many French remained skeptical of their Vietnamese counterparts. Disorganized training was rampant as French forces charged with training also had to fight an ongoing war at the same time with few resources at hand. For example, in the Third étranger, 1500 legionnaires were responsible for 2500 Vietnamese trainees, but there was no augmentation in the number of NCOs vital to such a training mission. Those who were present encountered an extreme "language problem" that made the task even worse "because many of the foreign NCOs did not speak French much less Vietnamese." Moreover, French soldiers constantly griped about the Vietnamese newcomers' quality. Most resigned themselves to the commonly held belief that the Viet Minh had already recruited the cream of the crop into their ranks, therefore only the physically and mentally unfit dregs of Vietnamese society were left. The French-backed emperor Bao Dai reinforced this perception when he refused to call to service any of the young.

78 BEP, or Bataillon Etranger Parachutiste, meaning "Foreign Legion Parachute (Paratrooper) Battalion."
able-bodied middle-class university students, thus leaving the national army's ranks to be filled with a group that oftentimes cared less about the war, and these complaints continued even after the French and Vietnamese ventured into the bush.\textsuperscript{80}

Racism colored many French officers' opinions, leading some to claim, as Lieutenant-Colonel Pelleterat de Borde of the Second étranger did in March 1951, that Vietnamese soldiers were "good only to carry arms or work as coolies." Legion officers of German, Hungarian, or Slavic origins tended to take a condescending view of the Vietnamese, believing that the Vietnamese presence was sulling the Legion's homogeneity; a curious claim for an organization composed of men from nations all across the globe. Furthermore, it did not help matters when one considers that some of those same officers had been veterans of the Third Reich. Following along this colonialist vein, other French commanders declared that French and Vietnamese combat styles were totally incompatible; their specific citation being that forces like the Legion or other French units were "heavy but reliable," and the indigenous personnel were "irresolute" and "capable of slipping away if the combat gets off to a bad start." Once again, this is a curious remark when French mobile units could not always be relied upon to relieve a stricken outpost due to their bulky and sluggish characteristics. Another legionnaire attached to the Third étranger voiced a similar sentiment of the Vietnamese when he lamented how "'a quarter fight, half go over to the other side, the last quarter waits to see who is the winner.'" Even General de Lattre gave vent to such feelings, fuming that too many Vietnamese, the emperor Bao Dai in particular, were attestistes, or fence sitters, who waited to see who the stronger force was before making a commitment.\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{80} Porch, \textit{The French Foreign Legion}, 551-552.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 275-276, 552-554.
Author Douglas Porch stakes the claim that, overall, the French-Vietnamization experiment proved successful because it "helped the Legion attenuate their manpower shortage and probably improved their efficiency." Moreover, he notes that local units were far more effective when searching villages. Frederik Logevall conceded that the Vietnamese army "though still a weak entity, showed at least fleeting signs of becoming a legitimate fighting force," when one Vietnamese unit actually fended off a major Viet Minh assault just south of Hanoi in 1952. In the end, however, Logevall contends that training programs and counter-insurgency plans like *tache d’huile*, while giving Ho Chi Minh cause for concern, begat modest gains. Overall, the French commitment to pacification, even in the early 1950s, proved "fitful at best," and seasoned French officers realized "that what worked in the Sahara ... might not work so easily in Indochina." Nonetheless, by 1954, French efforts to eliminate the Viet Minh did not deliver the victory they sought, with the communists scoring such a decisive victory over de Castries at Dien Bien Phu that it sealed the fate of France's hopes for colonial revival.\(^{82}\)

Ultimately, French pacification stalled for several reasons. First, the manpower shortage made it difficult to carry out conventional operations, let alone the intricate and time-consuming efforts required to win over local people. On top of this, French counter-insurgency, like the oil-spot method, bore a "one-size-fits-all" approach that was never adapted to conditions in Indochina, and even though some anti-guerrilla units proved their worth, like the GCMA for example, there was no substantial uprising that truly threatened the Viet Minh's existence in Tonkin or other areas. As Logevall wrote about tribes in northern Tonkin, "the local tribal population here was much less pro-Viet Minh than elsewhere in Tonkin," but they "hardly seemed all that pro-French either." This, in turn, segues into counter-insurgency's greatest

\(^{82}\) Ibid., 553; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 332.
challenge, that of convincing the native people "to feel that an army of occupation is its friend," and with the conventional war raging in Indochina at that time, this was problematic at best.\(^{83}\)

Perhaps the greatest hindrance was the French insistence on conventional warfare rather than counter-guerrilla strategies. General Valluy, who initiated some of France's earliest pacification efforts in Cochin-China in the 1940s, still stormed into Tonkin. General de Lattre used the *groupes mobiles* to act as a mobile reserve to relieve pressure on his defensive lines rather than focusing them upon the Viet Minh as a mobile guerrilla force. Nothing proves the French mindset's rigidity more than the *groupes mobiles* themselves, who were ironically deprived of their mobility by their large trucks and dependence upon roads. In effect, the dual wars waged in French Indochina pulled French strategists in two very different directions, with the tried-and-true methodology winning out in a war that defied the traditional doctrines to which the French were accustomed, and when the French diverted their meager resources to supplement their conventional attacks, the Viet Minh simply shifted gears and focused on infiltrating the French De Lattre Line and evading a major engagement. Nevertheless, units like the GCMA had produced a certain degree of success. At the very least, they manifested themselves in the Viet Minh's eyes as a threat, and it would not be the last time in Vietnam's turbulent decades of warfare that such units would attempt to win the peasants' loyalty.\(^{84}\)

When the American Marines arrived in South Vietnam in March 1965, the United States took its first steps into a major combat phase whose length remained unrivaled until the recent Afghanistan and Iraq Wars. In the earliest battles between Marine and Viet Cong, some Marine officers, one of whom oversaw all Marine forces in the Pacific, another all Marines in Vietnam,

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\(^{83}\) Logevall, *Embers of War*, 332-333.

\(^{84}\) Ibid., 324.
became convinced that a different weapon would be needed if America were to triumph where France failed. The Combined Action Platoon was to be that weapon.
The best term to describe the Combined Action Platoons' origins is ad hoc, for it was not born from a standardized doctrine or policy, nor was the concept that spawned it confined to the 1960s. To trace one conceptual origin of the "other war" that would be waged in Vietnam, one must travel back nine years before the first CAP patrol.

In September 1956, Senator John F. Kennedy rose before a sea of attendees to deliver his thoughts on an issue that few Americans at that time cared to acknowledge as integral to their country's security and prestige. Standing before a conference for the American Friends of Vietnam, Kennedy smoothly articulated his rationale for greater investment in what many ordinary Americans viewed to be a land as remote as Oz. While praising South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem for averting a communist takeover, Kennedy diagnosed a major flaw in US foreign policy that could spell disaster if it remained uncorrected. With his Massachusetts accent and Harvard refinement, he likened the United States to a “volunteer fire department” that rode throughout the global neighborhood putting out one communist conflagration after another, and he argued that the effort to combat the “communist arson” only “halts, but rarely prevents, fires. It repels but rarely rebuilds; it meets the problems of the present but not of the future.” Vietnam, the senator declared, was democracy’s Asian proving ground in the face of growing Chinese Communist influence, and more pressingly, “a test of American responsibility and determination” on the Asian continent. For these reasons, Vietnam was of vital importance in
US affairs. Kennedy reckoned that should US support flag and Vietnam fall, American prestige would sustain a traumatic blow that it could ill-afford.\textsuperscript{85}

Simply "warning of the evils of Communism and the blessings of the American way of life" were not enough, especially "in a country where concepts of free enterprise and capitalism are meaningless, where poverty and hunger are not enemies across the 17th parallel but enemies within their midst." To swing Vietnam from communism's deceptive allure, Kennedy advocated for multi-level action: "What we must offer them is a revolution-a political, economic, and social revolution far superior to anything the Communists can offer." When Kennedy assumed the Office of the Presidency following his 1960 election, his "whiz-kid" administration theorized on how such a revolution could be brought about in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{86}

Kennedy's undersecretary of State for Political Affairs and veteran US Foreign Service Officer U. Alexis Johnson saw US counter-insurgency doctrine as "all-inclusive in scope," combining military, political, economic, and social programs into a cohesive strategy. Two prominent aspects to his approach stand out. First was the need to use a blend of military and civilian advisors to train local forces. Secondly, Johnson realized that part of the Viet Cong's effectiveness lay in their ability to swim in what Mao Tse-tung called "the peasant sea," thus highlighting the urgent need to take the struggle into the villages. The villages lay at the crux of the encrypted Vietnam code, and Johnson advised US policymakers to focus on the Viet Cong's ability to create economic instability and garner popular support. There existed one caveat, however: brute force could not succeed.\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 146.
Kennedy aide Roger Hilsman devised a construct that he hoped would eliminate the need for such brute force. As the chief of the US State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, he and his analytical teams determined that the most effective way to combat the Viet Cong was by ambushes and guerrilla-style raids. In essence, one literally became the guerrilla in order to defeat him. Drawing upon his World War II service in Burma as an OSS guerrilla-warfare specialist, Hilsman down-played the military's role in counter-insurgency operations. From his perspective, military reserves could serve as a blocking force that cut off Viet Cong escape routes, but South Vietnam could not rely on regular forces to be the strategy's centerpiece. In order for government influence to have a chance at expanding in contested areas, the military's scope must be limited, since conventional forces are "road-bound, unwieldy, cumbersome," and are not fit for guerrilla warfare because they broadcast "their movements to the elusive guerrilla," as was demonstrated by the French experience. However, during the US advisory period, Hilsman feared that the South Vietnamese, backed by their like-minded American mentors, were too reliant on heavy firepower, which in turn undermined the delicate pacification process, while defying the assumptions that "low-intensity" tactics were feasible, and necessary social, political, and economic reforms would be achieved. Further buttressing this small-war concept, Hilsman and US planners also concluded that a Vietnamese version of a British plan executed in Malaya could be the catalyst for that reform that would secure the countryside from Communist incursion.88

According to Sir Robert Thompson, one of the architects of Great Britain's successful and lengthy Malaya pacification, South Vietnam's Strategic Hamlet Initiative "was the forerunner of all pacification programmes in Vietnam." After a trip to South Vietnam in 1961, Kennedy

advisor Walt Rostow argued that Viet Cong recruits fought because "they were dislocated, rootless young men who wanted above all to become part of a larger, modern institution." Hoping that converting "'traditional' peasants into 'modern citizens'" by physically separating them from the guerrillas, the US launched an ambitious project that would be "the centerpiece of its nation-building efforts" in Vietnam. Modeled after Thompson's Malay resettlement strategy, the Strategic Hamlet Initiative involved re-locating peasants from their traditional lands into roughly 12,000 "fortified hamlets" that would permit tighter security. In addition, US-supported Vietnamese civic action teams were to "build an 'essential socio-political base'" by establishing ties between villagers and Saigon and facilitating "the flow of information on village needs and problems upward and the flow of government services downward." As Michael E. Latham related, the "government provision" of foodstuffs and aid were intended to "transform rural consciousness" so that once isolated communities would now identify with a South Vietnamese nation and turn their backs on communist revolution. On March 22, 1962, under US auspices, the South Vietnamese commenced its first pacification effort under the moniker "Operation Sunrise" in the province of Binh Duong, 35 miles north of Saigon. Although begun with the highest hopes, those hopes quickly diminished.⁸⁹

Seven years later, Sir Robert Thompson ruefully lamented that had "the programme been properly implemented and strategically directed, it is unlikely that more than a few hundred thousand people would have been moved." While many experts at the time deemed the concept to be sound, *New York Times* reporter Homer Bigart presented a different image of the strategy's

execution. According to his March 29, 1962 report, most Vietnamese villagers resisted the ARVN, adamantly refusing to give up the lands that held their ancestors' bones. South Vietnamese soldiers cordoned off villages, not to provide protection, but to ensure that no men slipped their grasp. Any families that willingly departed received transport to the strategic hamlets, which one US military advisor described as a "stockade" where over 600 Vietnamese civilians sat in squalor. Latham recounts that the SHI's inaugural operation in Binh Duong managed to persuade only 70 families to move, "while 140 others were resettled at gunpoint." Afterwards, the soldiers put the villages to the torch, and the newly resettled peasants found that not only must they financially contribute to their new homes' construction, but also build those homes themselves. Thompson linked Vietnam's refugee crisis in 1969 to "the inevitable result of the failure of the strategic hamlet programme." What began as a promising venture quickly morphed into a horrid nightmare.

The SHI's prospects dimmed for a variety of reasons, the first being protection. Hilsman, who was one of the program's earliest planners, recalled feeling surprised at Thompson's initial support for SHI during his 1962 fact-finding sojourn to South Vietnam authorized by President Kennedy. He believed Saigon was building hamlets at a detrimentally frenetic pace, with many lacking adequate defenses and policing. In February 1962, Hilsman advised that "each strategic village will be protected by a ditch and a fence of barbed wire," with sentry posts and booby traps, and most importantly, "a self-defense corps' of 75 to 100 men." What he found were defenses so porous that "when the Saigon government started to establish strategic hamlets, the Viet Cong succeeded in building underground networks in these also. The inside agents then helped personnel from the outside to infiltrate at night." Latham adds weight to this observation,

90 Army of the Republic of Vietnam.
citing a report detailing how one "hamlet hall was burnt down by the VC ... All the members of the service administration, the hamlet council and all the hamlet armed forces cannot carry on any more work because there is no security and their morale is rather confused, being afraid of enemies." Hilsman also warned Saigon and Washington of their impatience, stressing that only a gradual expansion from areas devoid of "Viet Cong salients or pockets" would yield any lasting progress. Because of these failings, Hilsman withheld any endorsement of the SHI in his report to Kennedy, which also noted rampant confusion within the program when it came to applying counter-insurgency concepts. In the end, Thompson admitted that protection, or lack thereof, helped to doom the SHI, while also acknowledging that a lack of strategic direction fed directly into "the result that strategic hamlets were created haphazardly all over the country," leaving them vulnerable to the Viet Cong. Intended to filter the peasantry from the guerrillas, the SHI drove many villagers to them, as military-aged men "vanished into the forest to join the Viet Cong."92

Saigon's draconian removal operations and their insistence that displaced villagers financially contribute to the hamlets' maintenance infected the villagers with a deep hostility towards Diem's government. Moreover, by December 2, 1963, the date SHI ground to a halt, South Vietnam announced that a variety of government service branches would oversee the existing hamlets' consolidation and actually deliver the promised social and civil services. However, the damage had already been done to the SHI, as "corruption, coercion, and the lack of security from the South Vietnamese military would ensure that these hamlets were anything but strategic or safe." As Latham writes about the SHI, "in the end, Vietnamese society, culture, and

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nationalism were not so malleable," thus undercutting the prevailing belief that US pacification policies could be applied "without conflict or contradiction across a broad spectrum of nations, races, and cultures." Therefore, US officials clung to the misguided idea "that it was possible to 'give a people as rooted in history as the Vietnamese a ready-made set of beliefs.'" By the time the United States escalated its military presence in Vietnam, US officials believed that adding overwhelming military force would settle the Southeast Asian question. However, not long after the first US Marines splashed ashore at Da Nang on March 8, 1965, some Marines began to question this appraisal, realizing that the shadow war's realities would not disappear in the face of an awesome advantage in technology. It was from the Marines' initial experiences in the jungles that led to their strategic re-appraisal, and from this re-appraisal, the CAP was eventually born.\footnote{Sobel, \textit{South Vietnam: US-Communist Confrontation in Southeast Asia}, 85; Hilsman, \textit{To Move a Nation}, 425-26, 451-452; Hennessy, \textit{Strategy in Vietnam}, 19-20, 22; Michael A. Cohen and Jeff Danziger, "The Myth of a Kinder, Gentler War," \textit{World Policy Journal} Vol. 27, No. 1 (Spring 2010): 81; Latham, "Redirecting the Revolution?," 39; Christopher T. Fisher, "The Illusion of Progress," \textit{Pacific Historical Review} Vol. 75, No. 1 (February 2006): 28.}

One beginning for the CAPs is in mid-1965 in the dense jungles surrounding the Marines' air bases. Following their March arrival that heralded the United States' commitment to Vietnam's war, the Marines set about their task, which the US government called "simplicity itself." The initial orders, as stated by the \textit{Pentagon Papers}, were "to secure enclaves in the northern region of Vietnam containing air and communications installations." While such a mission may sound straight-forward from a military point-of-view, the document goes on to mention that the Marines "had changed their mission considerably, and to a degree then unequalled among other American units" after roughly eleven months following the commencement of their Vietnam mission. However a series of events coalesced to give
substance to what became the Combined Action Platoons, and one of those beginnings was at the Chu Lai airfield in August 1965.94

The name "Chu Lai" happened to be the Chinese phonetic spelling for the name of the Marine Corps' top general in the Pacific; a general who became one of the earliest advocates for the CAP concept. A hardened Pacific War veteran whose nickname "Brute" gave testament to a long combat career, General Victor Krulak personally observed what author Neil Sheehan described as "the first hard fight" around Chu Lai. Surrounded by thick jungle, Krulak watched "the battle with the 1st Viet Cong Regiment in which fifty-one of his Marines died amid the hedgerows and bamboo thickets near the airfield." Although Krulak had witnessed countless battles throughout his career, this particular engagement forever cemented his perception of this new war's nature. For him, the battles around Chu Lai contained all the ingredients called for in a recipe for strategic disaster.95

General Krulak, once an adherent of the same "attrition" policies so vigorously pursued by MACV, disavowed those policies by 1965.96 What the Chu Lai battle confirmed for Krulak was the disturbing method to the Communists' strategy in South Vietnam, leading him to pen his ideas in a seventeen-page policy paper. In it, Krulak explained that the US and Communist strategies were virtually identical, because the "Communists were 'seeking to attrit U.S. forces through the process of violent, close-quarters combat,'" thereby nullifying the Americans' significant firepower advantage. Moreover, the old Leatherneck saw a dangerous parallel with France's defeat, announcing in no uncertain terms that General Giap had correctly gambled that

96 Military Assistance Command Vietnam. The formal name of the US military command that oversaw all US forces in Vietnam during the war.
if they forced France to spend enough blood and treasure, then the French will-to-fight would ultimately collapse. Reflecting upon the current US strategy, Krulak feared that Hanoi was setting the same trap for the Americans, and the US was taking the bait. Indeed, Vietnamese history reveals a long and stubborn struggle against foreign powers, something the North's revered leader Ho Chi Minh capitalized upon when he defiantly declared "... our people and army, united as one man, will resolutely fight until complete victory, whatever the sacrifices and hardships may be." Even more damning was Ho's apocryphal vision of a war "that may last ten, twenty years, or longer. Hanoi, Haiphong, and other cities and enterprises may be destroyed, but the Vietnamese people will not be intimidated." If the Americans were to defeat such a foe, another way had to be found.  

The general's research zeroed in on an all too common theme, one that Leroy, the French commandos, or Kennedy would have instantly recognized. "The Vietnamese people are the prize," the general wrote, for when everything was weighed in the balance, the Americans' conventional pursuit of the Communist forces "could move to another planet today, and we still would not have won the war." Furthermore, Krulak saw an inherent connection between ordinary Vietnamese and the communist Viet Cong and their North Vietnamese Army allies (NVA). Ordinary villagers served as the backbone of the Viet Cong insurgency, willingly or not, and their physical, material, and intelligence support provided the communists with a solid foundation that made possible both the guerrilla and regular military operations conducted by the communists. As the general saw it, knock out that support structure by winning the villagers over, and local Viet Cong power will ebb, and without a strong presence, NVA regular forces would have a difficult time infiltrating, let alone operating, in South Vietnam. To achieve this

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coup, the general recommended that the United States force Saigon to enact the necessary economic and land reforms, while emphasizing village security. Moreover, Washington needed to "put all applicable U.S. resources into the pacification process." Interestingly, while Krulak unleashed his administrative salvo in Washington, those fighting in and around the contested villages ironically began to formulate similar ideas.98

In September 1965, General Krulak reported from his Pearl Harbor headquarters that a shift was taking place on the ground in Vietnam itself. While acknowledging that the Marines' initial assignments limited them to securing their airfields, Krulak mentions how those very orders segued into the Marines' pacification transformation. The more the Leathernecks pursued the elusive Viet Cong, the more they realized the villages' intrinsic value to their campaign, and "largely on its own," the III MAF "entered the pacification program."99 The efforts of which he speaks provide yet another window into the evolution of this "other strategy's" origins. While top brass commenced battle in the Pentagon's corridors, some Marines mired in sweltering jungles were changing their tactics in an attempt to adapt to a strange world.100

Deep in the Vietnamese bush, Marines and their officers were instinctively coming to grips with the very notions that Krulak spent copious hours trying to articulate through research and writing. At first glance, being spread across the I Corps in relatively isolated positions with the unenviable task of securing supply and communications lines to air bases hardly seems to be fertile ground for a pacification program, but the civic action plan that became the CAP began in these isolated posts by simple and "spontaneous acts of commiseration and charity," such as handing out candy to village children. Attempting to counteract the omnipresent Viet Cong

99 The Third Marine Amphibious Force, the official name for the US Marine Corps command in Vietnam.
100 United States Department of Defense, The Pentagon Papers, 534.
propaganda characterizing the Americans as abusive imperialists who enslaved the south to serve their own interests, Marine patrols hoped these random acts of goodwill might foster some form of trust with wary villagers. Still, as sincere as many of these actions may have been, much more needed to be done on top of "handing out soap and pink pills" if the Americans were going to break the Viet Cong's vice-like grip on the people.\(^{101}\)

Lt. Colonel Clement's and the 2/3 Marines' travails at Le My mentioned in the Introduction stand as a perfect example of the CAPs' spontaneous creation, but another origin that complements this idea of an ad hoc organization lies within the Third Battalion, Fourth Marines, which operated in the vicinity of the Phu Bai air base in 1965. Their battalion chief, Lieutenant-Colonel William Taylor, fumed at the scant manpower at his disposal that was supposed to secure a ten square-mile zone that contained four villages and approximately 14,000 people. According to Marine Major Curtis L. Williamson, Taylor's adjutant and Civil Affairs officer, Captain John Mullen, Jr., "theorized that by marrying the two forces [US and Vietnamese Popular Forces] into one, the battalion could effectively provide security within their area of operations." While analyzing the CAPs in 1990, Major Charles Driest agreed that the Marines' pacification effort "was driven by one simple need, more people to cover more ground" before it ever evolved into a strategy intent "on defeating the Viet Cong insurgents." Just as the French sought to do in the 1950s, the Americans also saw this emerging concept as a means to "get the Vietnamese involved in fighting for their country at the grass roots level." As a result, the first CAP patrol took place on August 3, 1965, when a young lieutenant named Paul Ek led a combined group of Americans and Vietnamese in the inaugural attempt to pacify the area surrounding Phu Bai. By dividing his men into three squads and parceling them out among the

Popular Forces, Ek strived to sway the locals "on a person-to-person basis" by integrating himself and his men into the villages and proving that these Marines are not just "a large impersonal group" that was simply passing through. Nevertheless, the teams' spontaneous development ensured that no strategic or even physical cohesion existed.  

Because of this spontaneous creation, the earliest CAP units actually fell under the jurisdiction of their parent battalions, thus the reason for their lack of a centralized command structure in the war's early years. However, the program began to gain more formal recognition in January 1966 after General Walt proposed to ARVN I Corps commander General Thi that the squads be expanded to all the major enclaves within the corps tactical zone. On July 17, 1967, the Combined Action Program became its own command under the purview of the III MAF, with its own program commander, thus marking the formal adoption of the concept into the official Marine Corps command hierarchy. That same year, 1967, also witnessed the creation of CORDS, a separate command subordinate to MACV that oversaw all civilian/military pacification programs in Vietnam, including the CAPs.  

CORDS's creation replaced CAPs' ad hoc nature with a structured arrangement that "simply adopted or superseded" the CAPs' previous arrangements. Although CAP chronologies did not exist prior to 1968, they still provide a glimpse into what kind of war the CAPs had been waging and what weapons they had at their disposal, especially the all-important MEDCAP.  

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103 CORDS: Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support.  
As Vietnam's sweltering heat climbed ever upward during the summer of 1965, so too did America's military escalation. Tens of thousands of American troops poured into Vietnam, while Navy and Air Force jets roared across the horizon like rolling thunder, inching ever closer to the war's first set-piece battle with the NVA at the Ia Drang. In the remote hamlets, however, a different type of war began to take shape. Instead of bullets arrived bandages. In the place of mortars, medicine, and the first of what later became known as MEDCAPs rolled into the countryside. US Navy corpsmen attached to Marine platoons, and eventually the combined action forces, treated all sorts of maladies, wounds, and ailments, performing what a 20th-century American would have considered to be a routine physical and dental check-up on villagers who had never before seen a stethoscope. Not only did many Vietnamese men, women, and children receive proper medical care for the first time, but these treatments also served a pacification purpose by providing the Americans with the opportunity to routinely interact with a large number of villagers. CAP Echo-2 in Hoa Hiep village reflects this very fact, since its corpsman, Robert Miller, treated roughly 300 patients per week when they set up a medical station, which the Americans opened to village patients every other day. As the war, and the Marines' efforts, expanded, so too did the MEDCAPs' impact.

The 1st Combined Action Group's combat chronicles from July 1 to October 31, 1968, captures just how expansive and numerous the MEDCAPs' activities were. Operating in both Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces, the 1st "CAG" reported conducting "98,125 MEDCAPS, 829 DENCAPS [dental check-ups]," and "560 medical evacuations" of Vietnamese civilians to nearby hospitals. The command chronology for the 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines

105 Medical Civic Action Project.
106 Corpsman, a synonym for medic. Unlike the Army, the Marine Corps does not have medics, therefore US Navy personnel who are trained as combat medics are assigned to Marine infantry units to perform this function.
reported similar mercy missions, including their effect on the locals: "A medical team from 3 Med and on rein plat (reinforced platoon) of Co L departed at 0830 for a 'people to people' medical assistance visit to the village of CHIET BI HA. The team was well received, and treated approximately 130 persons, mostly for minor skin rashes, etc." Armed with "Terramycin, malaria pills, aspirin, and bandages," corpsmen provided on-site medical care treating headaches, delivering babies, and binding up wounds. Military historian John Southard recounts a case where "CAP corpsman Gary Evins performed a tracheotomy with a ballpoint pen." As the cases mentioned above indicate, corpsmen encountered a wide range of cases, from the mundane to the extreme. These nascent operations proved a step in the right direction, but to critics, they were "less a calculated effort at supporting local government and more an enthusiastic, irregular effort at medical assistance, support for local orphanages, efforts to improve communications, and various other activities." Nevertheless, MEDCAPs and CAP corpsmen addressed a very pressing need in the villages.  

Southard describes diseases like typhoid and cholera running "rampant in villages," and how villagers frequently washed clothes and dishes in waterways containing human and animal feces, and even "the occasional dead body," thus multiplying the risk of an outbreak. One CAP corpsman in December 1968 "treated more than two hundred persons infected with plague." Since showering was a foreign concept, curious peasants often gathered in large crowds to see US GIs showering in monsoon rains or underneath drainage spouts, and with no proper waste disposal methods or hygiene practices, "Americans in CAPs made attempts to increase the

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general sanitation" of the villagers, therefore making soap the most requested civic action item during the "other war." As the CAP medics did battle with germs, they also contended with traditional Vietnamese medicinal practices, which oftentimes bordered on the bizarre. One American colorfully described a certain village healer prescribing "chicken shit as a medicine for cuts and bruises." Navy corpsman Jack Broz remembered village elders "heating shards of broken glass and cutting small incisions down the spine" of a PF militiaman suffering from a fever, before proceeding to pour some strange liquid onto the cuts and making the man swallow a concoction of "bird's nest, a spider web, and a wasp nest" mixed together in boiling water.

CAP corpsmen maintained a respectful distance so as not to inflame any cultural sensitivities, for it was usually only a matter of time before the villagers turned to the Americans once an infection or illness became too much for their remedies to control.\(^\text{109}\)

Among the Navy corpsmen's other duties were immunizations and basic hygiene, two things considered routine in the United States but sorely lacking in Vietnam's countryside. One particular group of corpsmen inoculated over 1400 villagers in one month alone and held classes to educate people in both first aid and basic cleanliness, and both Marines and corpsmen alike hosed down schools, huts, even whole villages, with gallons of disinfectant. Some villagers developed a healthy opinion of the Americans as a result of these, and other, services, especially after one corpsman in Echo-2 "won the respect of one village by delivering four babies; when one of them wouldn't start breathing he used Marine ingenuity and shocked the infant into life by slapping a chunk of ice on its behind." Such actions helped to build a bond between peoples of two distinctly different worlds, a bond that was essential to thwarting any Communist infiltration. Still, dispensing medical assistance alone could not root out the Viet Cong

infrastructure. The Americans possessed great military and medicinal abilities, but only the locals themselves could actually make pacification stick. To do that, the locals had to stand up and face the feared Viet Cong.  

The key lay in the Vietnamese Popular Forces, and the only way the Americans were going to unlock this door was through "the actual presence of American fighting men" training and teaming with local hamlet forces. These local fighters, bearing the official moniker "Popular Forces," were once described by General Walt as both the worst off and the most important of all South Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam. In a way, the Popular Forces were analogous to "citizen-soldiers," part-timers who remained in the area around their localities for self-defense. Their compensation amounted to roughly $20.00 per month, barely half of what government police and ARVN units earned, but Walt reasoned that with the proper training and "orientation toward families, ancestors, and hamlets," the PFs would resolutely defend their homes, while providing essential cultural and linguistic support that the Americans otherwise lacked without such inside connections. The final equation added these elements to American firepower and leadership expertise in a bid to make war inside the villages instead of making war on the villages. Still, not just any Marine or soldier could be trusted with a complicated and delicate task like training and working side-by-side with foreign soldiers. That took a special type of Marine. 

Ideally, a CAP Marine had to qualify under the following standards: he must be a volunteer; he must have combat experience, usually a minimum of four months' time in a rifle company; he must be highly recommended by his superior officer; he must not have a record of

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any disciplinary actions; and above all else, he cannot under any circumstances be xenophobic towards the Vietnamese people. Such cultural insensitivity would assuredly obliterate the entire purpose for the program. Colonel Byron Brady, who in 1968 served a tour as the commander of all CAP forces in Vietnam, surmised that "a good CAP leader was a 'tough Marine sergeant who has a PhD in social anthropology.'" However, Southard cites the Personal Response Project conducted by Navy Lieutenant-Commander Richard McGonigal in 1965-1966 to ascertain just how much of a PhD a Marine had to be in order to be involved in combined action. The data revealed "that persons with more than sixteen years of education tended to be more critical of the Vietnamese than those only with a high school diploma." McGonigal singled out doctors and dentists who were used to sanitary facilities rather than the primitive, disease-ridden hamlets as the worst offenders. Southard also notes that "many of the teenaged enlisted personnel in CAPs had never graduated from high school" thus challenging Colonel Brady's assessment. Still, PhDs notwithstanding, some Marines who initially volunteered for this new assignment did so based upon the mistaken belief that life in the villages would be simple, easy duty bereft of the hardships of war and the military's regimentation. As the program launched, the thought of "no mud, dust, ants, vipers, or first sergeants" tantalizingly drew some recruits into the program's ranks, but as history has shown, many a soldier who march off to a mission believing in its ease oftentimes encounter a much different reality.112

The first sergeant whose omnipresence loomed large over the regular rifle companies never appeared in the CAPs. In fact, as the program continued, not even commissioned officers served directly in the squads. Colonel Corson justified this removal since "the people associate

them [officers] with corruption," however, Major Williamson contends that this aspect of the CAP concept actually hindered it in the long term. His reasoning rests on the idea that seasoned officers on site might have been able to prevent incidents of extortion, rape, and mistreatment of the villagers that damaged US-Vietnamese relations at the hamlet level. Incidentally, some CAP Marines were not above absconding with the locals' chickens so as to supplement their diet. Such thefts added to the air of mistrust, especially due to the fact that the peasants considered chickens to be a precious source of income, therefore in their minds, the Americans might as well have been guilty of robbing a bank. On top of this, the lack of senior sergeants and officers greatly lowered the average age within the platoons. Southard states that in July 1969, "the average CAP leader was twenty-one years old," and "nearly 40 percent of all CAP leaders carried the enlisted rank of corporal or lance corporal, which meant that many of the combined units had either eighteen- or nineteen-year-old commanders." Therefore, these Marines, most barely out of high school, confronted both mistrust and the Viet Cong, and this mistrust multiplied due to the simple fact that the Americans' arrival inspired among the villagers more anxiety and fear than it did feelings of liberation.113

When one CAP comprised of fifteen American Marines and thirty Popular Forces set up shop in My Thuy Phuong village just four miles north of the US base at Phu Bai in August 1965, the villagers warily straddled the proverbial fence. Scholar James Walker Trullinger, Jr., credited the CAP with bringing essential medical and civil assistance, but he noted that they "also brought disruption and fear to village life." For many peasants, the Americans' presence meant that the war's awful hell came with them, and this feeling paralyzed villager and Popular Force soldier alike. Fearing the guerrillas, the Popular Force soldiers dared not venture outside

their compound's concertina wire perimeter, and they questioned the Marines' ability to protect them as well as the village itself. In places like My Phuy Thuong and elsewhere, local police forces burrowed deep into reinforced concrete bunkers and compounds, believing aggressive patrolling to be tantamount to suicide. This reasoning further dictated that such operations ought to be left to the South Vietnamese Army, which as has been shown, was an army that cared about as much for these patrols as the police. Because of their weak village presence and their insistence on restricting their activities to the daylight hours, Saigon's forces effectively ceded the night and the villages to the Viet Cong. Even Saigon's daylight hold was tenuous, as is shown by a Viet Cong strike in Tri Binh village.  

In that village and in broad daylight, a Viet Cong assassination squad very publicly executed a village elder for collaborating with the South Vietnamese government. The Cong forced the poor soul to his knees, bound his hands behind his back, and wrapped the South Vietnamese flag around his head before dousing it with gasoline. An insurgent then demonstrated to the village the price of collaboration by dropping a lighted match onto the elder's head. Other hallmarks of Viet Cong power included large placards dangling from the necks of slain youths that threateningly read: "This, or worse, if you or your neighbors go to the voting place on Election Day!" With the onset of the CAPs, most villagers doubted how the Americans planned to re-take the night and the day from the Communists given the poor ARVN track record, let alone the Americans' effort to dig up the very hamlet roots that anchored this insidious presence.  

Nevertheless, breaking the Viet Cong's hold meant aggressively seeking out and ambushing the communists, and the Marines hoped that this, combined with their permanent

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presence, would help convince skeptical villagers to come off the fence once they saw that the Viet Cong were not invincible, therefore providing the intelligence required to further their pursuit of the communists. In short, the Marines brought the olive branch to the villagers and took the sword to the jungles.

However, due to its untried and highly specialized nature, the program expanded its numbers and its reach gradually, inserting its platoons into areas where the US command and village and district chiefs had requested them. To illustrate this, one ought to consult the multi-volume analysis of the Marines' Vietnam service entitled *US Marines in Vietnam*. Its pages show a program growing from a mere seven platoons consisting of eight to fifteen Americans in January 1966, to thirty-eight platoons in July, and then fifty-seven by New Year's Day 1967. At the apex of the United States’ engagement in Vietnam in 1968, over 100 Combined Action Platoons lived and fought in I Corps’ villages and hamlets. By 1970, considered to be the program's height, 2,050 enlisted Marines, forty-four officers, and 126 Navy corpsmen, served in the pacification platoons. Despite its expansion, however, the program's growth and progress came at a painstakingly slow pace against an adversary that refused to break. Usually, "six months passed in the average CAP before villagers approached the Americans with intelligence." As a result, the CAPs needed to fight harder and faster.116

Viet Cong fighters believed their rule of the jungle was total, and French journalist Fernand Gignon reinforced that same idea in 1965 when he declared, "In this jungle kingdom,

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the Viet Cong rule as absolute master." That feeling permeated a Viet Cong platoon led by veteran communist commander Pham Van Thuong in the twilight hours of November 29, 1965 as it marched through the jungles hugging Phu Bai. As he and his comrades proceeded through the darkness, "small arms fire from the CAC-3 ambush at the bridge shattered the Viet Cong platoon. Fortune was not with either Thuong or his men. The latter fled southward where they were hit by CAC-4. Then they headed westward into the hills passing through blocking artillery fires on the way." The Marine Corps report detailing this action gave high praise to the "Marines and Popular Forces" who "had worked together for almost four months" in perfecting this kind of cohesion and mutual support. It appeared that Walt's vision of Americans and Vietnamese working and fighting in tandem had been achieved as "the combination of Marine Corps firepower and discipline and Vietnamese familiarity with the terrain had become literally a killing one." Other platoons launched devastating ambushes as well, sometimes disrupting entire offensives.

In August 1968, with US battalions spread to their limits throughout I Corps, the Viet Cong announced the liberation of the Song Tra Bong Valley in southern Quang Ngai Province to be at hand. One US-PF force identified as "CAP 1-3-3" sat directly in the Communist bullseye, as the Viet Cong catapulted two companies against Phuc Hoa village where the CAP operated. For one month they endured nightly enemy attacks "of varying degrees." Despite relentless persistence, the Viet Cong effort fell short, as the Americans parried the Communists' thrusts with a lethal sequence of "saturation patrols and ambushes to give early warning and deny the enemy access to the area." Nor did Phuc Hoa's villagers fall victim to the onslaught. Even though the Marine Corps described the Communists' propaganda campaign as "intensive and

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skillful," by and large the villagers did not bite the Viet Cong lure, and instead, provided intelligence that allowed the Americans to stymie the assaults. Like most military reports, the Phuc Hoa report dryly concludes with the terse statement: "The Viet Cong took heavy casualties and made no gains." Contrary to many Marines' initial beliefs, these types of "contacts" demonstrated the deadly nature of CAP service in the countryside.119

From mid-summer to the fall of 1968 in Quang Nghai and Quang Tin provinces, the First Combined Action Group conducted over 8,000 patrols, and of those, 387 resulted in combat. It is not surprising that 302 out of the 387 were initiated by the Americans, thus reflecting quantitatively the CAP Marines' emphasis upon venturing "outside the wire" and falling upon potential Communist infiltrators. Unlike many South Vietnamese units, every platoon regularly engaged in "a minimum of two night patrols or ambushes and one daylight patrol each day" with their PF charges, so as deny the Viet Cong any sanctuary, day or night. Sometimes, in order to widen the dragnet and when circumstances permitted, multiple CAPs joined forces in numbers that exceeded 100 men, and when armed with knowledge of "the terrain and habit pattern of the people better than the enemy," the pacifying warriors seemingly "moved at will throughout" the countryside. Many pacification advocates like Colonel William Corson pointed to this type of accomplishment, like the ambush described above near Phu Bai, as proof that "we know how to defeat the communists in an insurgency environment." In some cases, it certainly appeared that Corson had a point.120

That most certainly appeared to be the case a year later in July 1969. In the Second Combined Action Group's Quang Nam stomping grounds, Marines, Popular Forces, and local inhabitants formed an effective triumvirate that blocked and repelled communist attempts at

120 Ibid., 9-10; Corson, The Betrayal, 184.
invasion and subversion. The invaluable relationship contributed village-based intelligence that led to the discovery of hidden food and weapons caches, while allowing the Americans and PFs to apply an intensifying pressure that forced the Viet Cong to re-organize their logistics system. However, seasoned combat veterans hardly expected the Viet Cong to simply throw up their hands every time a patrol nabbed a supply dump. In fact, as the pressure upon the Communists increased, many CAP Marines reported a corresponding increase in enemy ambushes and attacks towards the end of that month. Proponents like General Walt saw this increase as a succulent opportunity to expose "the enemies [sic] false claims by effectively demonstrating to the people their abilities, as military professionals, in carrying out their stated intention of protecting the people." Moreover, Walt became convinced that the CAPs had done serious damage to the Communist cause, since "ratcheting up of combat action in a defensive arena reflected frustration on the part of the VC." According to the official command chronology, the more the Marines pressed against the Viet Cong and withstood their retaliation, trust and dissemination of information began to take root between CAP and peasant, but in order for this to be established, the village had to see the VC fall.\footnote{2nd Combined Action Group Command Chronology, July 1-July 31, 1969, 17; Williamson, "The U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Program," 24.}

On July 6, 1969, CAP 2-5-1 captured two VCS (Viet Cong Sympathizers) in a hut where one of the walls bore a rendering of the Phu Bai airbase's runway lighting patterns. On another patrol, CAP 2-3-1 located and destroyed a series of Viet Cong bunker complexes in the vicinity of Dien Ban village on July 8, the same day that another CAP unit tripped an enemy ambus seven kilometers southwest of Da Nang that slew four NVA, and netted three AK-47s and two ChiCom grenades.\footnote{ChiCom was short for "Chinese Communist," and referred to military equipment shipped from the People's Republic of China to North Vietnam.} Combat operations like these produced a noticeable effect on both
Communist infiltrators and villagers alike, as Trullinger illustrates through a couple of incidents that took place in My Thuy Phuong.\textsuperscript{123}

One particular mission caused the demise of several local Viet Cong leaders, while another CAP sweep killed five out of the twenty communist guerrilla agents in the area. The eliminations, Trullinger relates, gave several families pause, and a few "pro-NLF families" withheld their support from the local communists rather than suffer their fate.\textsuperscript{124} Just as the Communists attempted to use the family as a source of persuasion, so too did the Marines, who literally went from hut-to-hut to discourage potential subversion. When the Americans identified a suspected or confirmed Viet Cong, they approached their family and tried to convince the relatives of the futility of their relative's cause so they might turn their loved one from the guerrillas. If not, the Marines issued the family a warning worthy of Puzo's \textit{Godfather}: if communism was in fact the business their loved one had chosen, they must be aware that the CAP will hunt down and destroy any and all Viet Cong in the village. Actions like these were designed to dry up support for the communists, while emboldening others to come forward after witnessing the persistence and permanence of US resolve.\textsuperscript{125}

On the night of August 12, 1968, PFs received word from local inhabitant that a Viet Cong meeting was to be held in Van Tuong. Acting upon this lead, the CAP enveloped the communist con-fab and ended up killing 15 guerrillas. That same endgame occurred a month later when villagers informed the Marines directly of the Viet Cong's presence near an ambush site, which allowed the Marines to send out another team that hunted down the would-be hunters. In Tien Dao village, CAP 1-3-6 caught a tip that six Viet Cong had infiltrated the village, thus

\textsuperscript{123} 2nd Combined Action Group Command Chronology, July 1-July 31, 1969, 34.
\textsuperscript{124} NLF, or National Liberation Front, was the official name of the communist insurgency in South Vietnam.
\textsuperscript{125} Trullinger, \textit{Village at War}, 120; Corson, \textit{The Betrayal}, 189-190.
prompting an immediate sweep that sent the VC running for safety. The Marines apprehended two Viet Cong and three of their local allies. Even more valuable was the information given to a group of PFs working alongside the Americans that indicated that the Communists were entrenching on a hill just outside the CAP compound. An assault backed by gunships and armored personnel carriers swept the VC off the hill. Still, this warrior approach was only half of the equation, for the CAPs also employed a variety of peaceful means that tried to wall off the peasant from the insurgent.126

On one occasion, CAP Marine Barry Goodson ruefully watched as young Vietnamese boys played a war game. It pained him to see these innocent children growing up in the middle of such hellishness, and when he asked his PF counterpart about what Vietnamese children did for fun, the PF looked at him as if he had pointed ears. When Goodson explained the concept enough for the Vietnamese soldier to grasp, the man nodded and replied laconically, "No play. No games. Only goof off from work." Shocked by this revelation, the Marine realized that any one of the Americans in Vietnam could recall a treasure-trove of playful memories from their childhood, but for these Vietnamese it was tragically different. Here, the boys were "unknowingly preparing themselves for mortal combat or, to simplify it - to kill." While he longed to teach the boys some of his childhood games, he could not bring himself to do it. Others in I Corps did.127

They brought games and a host of other things, including something the Second Combined Action Group referred to as the "little brother program." When CAP Marines arrived in a village, they looked like fierce jungle soldiers, but as curious children gathered around them, they traded their rifles for baseball bats. Teaching the children the fine points of America's

126 1st Combined Action Group Command Chronology, 19, 24-25.
127 Goodson, CAP Mot, 70-71.
pastime, the Americans developed close ties with the locals, and before too long, Major League Baseball invaded the hamlets. The baseball program spread to nearby villages where other CAP units trained their "little brothers" to function on the ball field, and when they were proficient enough, the Americans began improvising leagues between the villages. So complete was the baseball revolution that the Marines even introduced the Vietnamese peasants to baseball's concession stands. It was not uncommon to see middle-aged Vietnamese farmers, their conical hats blocking the searing sun, munching away on a Frankfurter after the Americans arranged to have hot dog stands set up before the games. Another Marine, a staff sergeant named Pat Finton, introduced his village "buddies" to homemade corn-dogs that he made using batter from Da Nang and a Coleman stove. He remarked how the children pranced about with looks of joy and fascination as they held "these hot dogs on sticks." As the CAG's chronology stated, the "village and hamlet people really enjoy watching the games," and for the Americans, the "projects have been a great success in winning the peoples [sic] help and understanding." For Finton and other CAP Marines, moments like those made all of their trials and hardships worth it.128

Marching behind the ball games was the band. Just as the 369th Infantry Regiment's musicians showcased jazz to the French during World War I, several Combined Action Platoons managed to treat the peasants to the official III MAF Drum and Bugle Corps. Playing in villages across 2nd CAG's area of responsibility, this troupe of musical troops proved to be so popular that villagers requested encore performances. Even their elders stood transfixed by the Americans musical spell. One CAP team arranged a series in Phaue Hung and Hou-Phu villages, and after the Drum and Bugle Corps delivered one of their performances, the village chiefs insisted on meeting with the band's leaders and musicians. The CAP Marines immediately

recognized an opening for bettering American-Vietnamese ties and made the necessary
arrangements. The ball bat and bugle appeared to be just as effective in the "other war" as the
M-16, but another ace up the CAPs' sleeve also made an impression upon the local rice farmers
and their families. 129

Civic action remained one of the most delicate tasks carried out during the Vietnam War.
In a war of undefined front lines and free-fire zones, civic action's application seemed almost
impossible. Goodson accurately summarized the peasants' attitude when he said, "'They weren't
concerned about tomorrow or even this afternoon. Survival was their only goal.'" As has
already been mentioned, many of peasants feared that these American teams brought the war and
all of its horrors with them, and for this reason, Colonel Corson, while commander of the CAP
program in 1967-68, warned his men against undertaking "civic-action projects until the
credibility of their military-security efforts has been clearly demonstrated." With American and
PF rifles pushing the Communists out of the hamlets, and the Americans establishing goodwill
among its people, the hammers and shovels began their work. 130

Before taking over as CAP director, Corson commanded a tank battalion from 1966 to
1967, where he employed his Marines in a fashion most unbefitting of armored troops. Using
the Phong Bac village as a lab for his pacification experiment, Corson sprinkled his men
throughout the village, teaching them how to play co thuong, or "elephant chess" so the
Americans could interact with the villagers on a more personal level. Furthermore, he openly
challenged Communist agents to debates on Marxism; debates to which the Viet Cong never
showed up. Another novel idea was the "community chest," where GIs sold "aid items" like
tools and commodities to the villagers and then gathered the proceeds into a large donation pool

129 Ibid., 11.
130 Goodson, CAP Mot, 179; Corson, The Betrayal, 188.
that was used to pay for village development projects. Corson, who had been in and out of Vietnam's hamlets and mountain/jungle countryside since 1950, understood the need to maintain Vietnamese pride when it came to civic action. If the peasant farmers thought they were receiving a hand out, the project was doomed to fail, but if they believed they were taking the lead in building their homes and hamlets, then civic action stood a chance. Thus his later admonishment that "civic action will fail if it is undertaken without the physical support of the people or at a rate faster than the normal pace of the people." In this "other war," patience was the ultimate weapon.131

Despite this slow pace, civic projects remained just as vital as the combat patrols. For example, between July 1 and August 31, 1968, over 41 projects were completed in the 1st CAG area alone. Sometimes two or three were finished by one CAP team, who then had to turn around and provide security for the fragile structures they had just constructed. When one thinks of the combat training that US Marines undergo, one usually does not picture them building pig pens and helping the local farmer start his own pig farm, but that was exactly the mission undertaken by CAP 1-2-2, who also constructed a bunker for the hamlet's families to protect against the virtual certainty of Viet Cong reprisals. CAP 1-1-1 built a 4-T clubhouse, while a sister unit, CAP 1-1-2, built two fences and a dispensary. Not only did the CAPs build bunkers and fences, but they also erected playgrounds and churches, and engaged in road construction. These road building/repair projects allowed Vietnamese farmers to connect to local markets in an attempt to grow the villagers' economic prospects. As expected, some marketplaces suffered from the wrath of Viet Cong reprisals, since the guerrillas specifically targeted the commercial

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centers as part of their general campaign against the combined platoons. When that happened, the Americans worked with the locals to rebuild the shattered market.  

The Americans waged this civic action program in other ways as well. Many times, American CAPs settled damage claims made by the rural citizenry when their property was destroyed by friendly fire in order to preserve goodwill with the villages. When Corporal Barry Goodson's platoon found out that Viet Cong fighters had attacked a nearby farm, the Marines evacuated the farmer's wounded wife to a hospital and scrounged up enough corrugated metal to put a new roof on the man's damaged home. Additionally, Goodson's group, called CAP Mot, the Vietnamese word for the numeral one, distributed axes to replace the machetes the Vietnamese and their ancestors had used for centuries to chop wood. The Marines believed that the Vietnamese peasants had never seen an ax before given their perplexed reactions upon receiving the tool, thus leading directly to a wood-chopping tutorial, which in turn led to a contest in which Goodson emerged the victor. The GIs noted in amazement the speed with which the Vietnamese adapted to their new tools, and Goodson realized that the more he worked alongside the residents, the more they gradually acknowledged him as a friend. Since counterinsurgency tenets preached that education and national pride acted as effective bulwarks against communist propaganda, the CAPs considered the construction of a school complete with desks and a flagpole to be great achievements.

In 1966, Krulak commended a CAP attached to the 1st Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment stationed at Khe Sanh for their efforts in establishing ties with a nearby Montagnard tribe that literally lacked any concept of the war raging around them. The Bru, a particular montagnard


people, resented the refugee flood that had inundated their village, but nonetheless were on solid
terms with the American marines, who assembled "a program of regular medical clinics to care
for the usual cases of yaw and ulcerated teeth." The CAP, designated CAP-Oscar, built upon this
goodwill project by erecting a school, repairing a damaged church, and organizing an orphanage,
and they even tried to lighten the war's terrible burden upon the Bru's children by making
playground equipment out of ammunition cartridges and empty fuel drums. Krulak cited this
CAP as "a proud and serious unit, the only one in all the program utilizing mountain
tribesmen."  

When the general toured the Le My village in 1965 after Clement's battalion began to
apply the CAP concept, he remarked how the district and village chiefs "showed us with much
pride and gratitude" their refurbished village with its new dispensary, schoolhouse, marketplace,
and fortified defenses. Speaking in French, one chief expressed his thanks to Krulak, but added
that all that had been accomplished "has meaning only if you are going to stay." Confidently, he
assured the chief that Clement's "Marines will not stay here, but others will never be far away,
and your own militia will be here all the time." However, only time could judge if the Marines' new
effort in the villages would fulfill this promise.

Before his tour expired in 1967, General Walt hailed the Combined Action Platoons as a
smashing success. The general enthusiastically pointed to several indicators to support his
contention: 1. around 50% of all CAP Marines extended their thirteen-month tours to continue
their missions in the hamlets and; 2. the Viet Cong's intensified attacks against the CAPs and
CAP villages. For Walt, the attention the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army were
placing upon his teams was a clear sign "that the program is beginning to have an effect." Walt

134 Lieutenant-General Victor H. Krulak, USMC (Ret.), First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps
135 Ibid., 185.
later wrote in 1970 that no innovation in the Vietnam War ever matched the effectiveness or the success as that achieved by the Combined Action Program, and in 2002, Major Williamson agreed that when in the bush, the CAPs killed almost as many Communist troops as the line companies, only with much greater efficiency and far fewer men. Historian/counter-insurgency disciples like Andrew Krepinevich echo this same sentiment, claiming that the combined platoons had proven their worth over Westmoreland's attrition strategy, and that CAPs pacified their respective zones "more effectively and with far fewer troops." When employing the wartime Hamlet Evaluation Survey, the counter-insurgency school makes a compelling argument.  

In his 1986 analysis of US strategy in Vietnam, Krepinevich proclaims the CAPs' effectiveness through citations of the 1967 Hamlet Evaluation Survey that, at the time, attempted to quantify pacification's progress in the hamlets by way of a 1-5 point scale, with a score of 5 being the highest mark. The Survey rated the CAP-occupied villages with an average of 2.95 out of 5 points, 1.35 points higher than the I Corps norm, which came in at 1.6. Krepinevich adds that based upon these scores, progress accelerated at a rate two times faster than villages overseen by only Popular Forces militia. Therefore, according to Krepinevich and the counter-insurgency school, the numbers themselves reinforce the idea that the program was in fact a viable alternative to attrition. Nevertheless, numbers, by nature, are neutral, and in cases such as this, they only tell part of a much more complicated story.

Like his men, General Walt attracted large groups of curious children whenever he ventured out into Vietnam's verdant countryside. LIFE reporter Colin Leinster relayed to his

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readers the massive throngs of children following the general around, and how at ease he seemed in their presence. When speaking about the war, Vietnam's children, and its future, Walt mused "of a Vietnam 10 or 15 years from now, when these children are educated and able to fend for themselves," but "Vietnam must wait that long," Walt said to Leinster, "because the current teenagers are a generation lost to another cause." The CAPs bruised that cause, but they had not defeated it. Through this program, the Marines mounted a serious challenge in the fight for Vietnam's backcountry, but while that fight gained in intensity, the program found itself besieged by dark foes lurking from within and without.  

138 Leinster, "The Two Wars of General Lew Walt," 84.
CHAPTER 5
RESISTANCE FROM WITHIN AND WITHOUT

That resistance stretched beyond the jungles to the Pentagon and even 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, where intransigence and disinterest in counter-guerrilla warfare threatened to ossify the Marines' combined action efforts in Vietnam. Even an identity crisis within the Marine Corps itself helped to undermine most attempts to apply the program's methods on a larger scale, and while turf-war turmoil boiled in Washington, the teams themselves contended with perceptions just formidable as the Communist insurgents. It appeared that for every honest chieftain, there was at least one who was corrupt; for every competent PF, there were five scoundrels and at least one of them was really Viet Cong. Most damningly for such fragile work, for every Marine who cared about the mission and the people, there was always at least one who despised the very village he had been assigned to befriend. It was this sort of reality that could not possibly be quantified and/or reflected in a mere five-point evaluation survey.

One will recall how General Krulak's 1965 analysis triggered a lively tug-of-war between traditional strategists and counter-insurgency proponents, with general officers like Marine Corps commandant General Wallace Greene, Jr., and Navy Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp backing Krulak. According to historian Neil Sheehan, Admiral Sharp arrived at the same conclusion that the US needed an immediate strategic course correction around the same time as Krulak launched his research project. Interestingly enough, Greene authored a similar analysis on his own authority that led him to concur with his eventual allies. In fact, Greene presaged both Krulak and Walt not too long after the Marines' March 1965 Da Nang landing, declaring the "real targets in Vietnam are not the Viet Cong or the North Vietnamese but the South
Vietnamese people." Resistance to this idea flared up along every link in the chain of command, and it began almost immediately with General William Westmoreland, America's top soldier in Vietnam.139

According to author and former CAP Marine Michael Peterson's analysis, Westmoreland adhered to the "partisan" doctrine, which dictated that a sovereign country fuels an insurgency in a rival country via material support and the intervention of its conventional military forces. Therefore, disciples like Westmoreland regularly pontificated upon conventional forces' legitimate use in Vietnam. By cutting off the supply flow from North Vietnam and eliminating its army in the South via overwhelming firepower, than the anchorless and defenseless Viet Cong would naturally wither and die, or so the partisan train-of-thought went. Westmoreland staunchly defended the attrition approach in his 1976 memoir A Soldier Reports, explaining that the "operations were aimed at finding the enemy and eliminating his military installations—bunkers, tunnels, rice and ammunition caches, training camps," and he maintained that the "US military strategy employed in Vietnam" was "dictated by political decisions," and those decisions reflected what "was essentially that of a war of attrition." He acknowledged the local populace's importance in stamping out the communist insurgency, but because "so closely entwined were some populated localities with the tentacles of the VC base areas, in some cases actually integrated into the defenses, and so sympathetic were some of the people to the VC that the only way to establish control short of constant combat operations among the people was to remove the people and destroy the village." Since the war's end, historians like Mark Moyar and Dale Andradé continue to support Westmoreland's analysis. In their respective works Triumph Forsaken and "Westmoreland Was Right," the two challenge the war's orthodox interpretation by

139 Sheehan, A Bright Shining Lie, 631-32; Murphy, The Hill Fights, 3-4.
asserting that the war was winnable, and furthermore, they challenge the counter-insurgency school of thought by asserting that Westmoreland had little choice but to face the NVA main force threat. To the "revisionist school" as McAllister calls them, the NVA/VC main forces' presence complicated the war in such a way that Westmoreland could not adhere to a straightforward pacification strategy. Upon further review, it does not appear he was interested in such a strategy, either.\textsuperscript{140}

Westmoreland did not view "winning hearts and minds" as the US military's business, and while he professed an admiration for the Marine Corps and praised the Combined Action Program as "one of the more ingenious innovations developed in South Vietnam," at the same time, he issued orders to "get the marines out of their beachheads." A letter addressed to General Earle Wheeler, then the Army's chief of staff, dated January 22, 1968, paints an all-to-revealing portrait of Westmoreland's true feelings. MACV's top officer called the Leathernecks a brave group, "but their standards, tactics, and lack of command supervision throughout their ranks require improvement." Overall, the Marines "fall short," and to remedy this, he was dispatching an Army lieutenant colonel to Quang Tri Province whose last command "killed 875 of the enemy with only 19 soldiers killed" during "the 4th quarter of CY 1967," to show the Marines there how to fight the NVA. While mirroring Westmoreland's muscle-bound strategy, the letter also reflects the stark contrast between MACV's vision and the CAPs' prosecution of the war in I Corps. Lacking the general's statistics, one of Colonel Corson’s 1967 CAP reports to General Walt confidently announced that "The CAPs had a good night last night-470,000 Vietnamese people got a good night's sleep, and no Marines got killed in the provision of that good night's sleep." Westmoreland also revealed in the letter that the Marines' unconventional methods left

him feeling "somewhat insecure with the situation in Quang Tri Province, in view of my knowledge of their shortcomings." There also exists an earlier incident that provides more insight into the MACV chief's opposition to a CAP-based strategy.141

In late 1964, Westmoreland persuaded South Vietnamese commanders in Binh Dinh Province to divide their forces into smaller units and disperse them throughout the villages "to provide protection" and "patrol extensively in hope of inhibiting VC movement."

Westmoreland's new scheme initially "gave the government [Saigon] a boost in the contest for the population's resources" due to the ARVN's increased presence in the hamlets. However, the "NVA and VC were not about to fight a war determined by a set of U.S. ground rules." The North Vietnamese and the southern insurgents shifted gears from guerrilla to conventional warfare, conducting large scale attacks against the ARVN-occupied villages. Moyar describes how Communist forces engulfed the small ARVN units, attacking them one at a time so as to ensure their numerical superiority. All that was left in their wake was a string of annihilated ARVN outposts. Emboldened by their Binh Dinh success, the Communists launched a general offensive in early 1965, with the GVN district capitals, "deprived of its intelligence sources in the villages," falling prey to heavy attack. Moyar sums up the situation as one where the "provincial capitals and Saigon itself would have been next had the U.S. armed forces not saved the day." Westmoreland deemed Binh Dinh as "a lesson to be long remembered," upon which he drew when "my colleagues" and "the American press agitated for paying less attention to the enemy's big units in order to assign more troops to the process of pacification." In his mind, such tactics had not only been found wanting, but were a proven recipe for defeat.142

142 Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, 99-100; Thomas J. Arminio, Foreign Internal Defense: The Art of Counter-Insurgency and the Combined Action Platoon Concept (Newport: Naval War College, 1996), 6; Mark Moyar, A
Westmoreland emphatically repeated that he simply did not have "enough numbers to put a squad of Americans in every village and hamlet; that would have been fragmenting resources and exposing them to defeat in detail." While pacification proponents saw "beating around the bushes" as fruitless, Westmoreland preached the gospel of "search and destroy" as the way to buy valuable time for the ARVN to extend Saigon's control while immolating communist manpower. The silver-haired warrior held fast to his belief that "only by seeking, fighting, and destroying the enemy could that be done." Pacification, Westmoreland decreed, could only be effected by the South Vietnamese, since they possessed the cultural insight that the Americans lacked. Unfortunately for the counter-insurgents, many top men agreed.143

As far as the US government was concerned, bombing communist supply lines and striking at large troop formations was far easier than convincing an entire people to trust a US-backed government. Michael Hennessy reinforces this when he writes how North Vietnam's vast hordes "captured the attention of most American policy-makers," and that evidently "this threat was the most pressing" because "it was also the easiest to comprehend." Even Marine Corps officers, some of whom were CAP advocates, remained under the spell of the traditional American way of war. According to Williamson, "General Walt, although passionate for the grass-roots appeal of CAP, remained as caught up in the conventional mindset of warfare as Westmoreland." Author and Vietnam veteran Edward Murphy echoes this idea that Walt was still a battle-hardened Marine, despite his ardor for pacification: "But this emphasis on pacification did not mean that Walt possessed an unwillingness to engage the enemy in full combat. Indeed, quite the contrary was true." Southard illustrates this same point by describing Walt's strategy as "multiprunged," with CAP missions being conducted alongside major ground

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143 Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 153, 166, 216; McAllister, "Who Lost Vietnam?," 112.
operations. In August 1965, the Third Battalion, Third Marines launched an enveloping assault with air power, artillery, and amphibious assaults in the hopes of ensnaring a Viet Cong regiment, while a similar operation, *Piranha*, kicked off just a month later. Not even Krulak could escape this aspect of the war's unique nature.  

According to Krulak, pacification was the war effort's primary driver, gradually expanding its control from pacified areas in an "ink-blot" strategy. The next important strategic facet involved shutting off the Communists' supply spigot by mining Haiphong, thus halting vital material "before it ever leaves the North Vietnamese ports of entry." The general also placed an importance upon the NVA's main force presence, pressing for close coordination "with South Vietnamese forces" and moving "out of our protected and sanitized areas when a clear opportunity exists to engage the V.C. Main Force or North Vietnamese units on terms favorable to ourselves." While Krulak maintained that Westmoreland and the Army placed a greater emphasis on the enemy main force units, the point remains that the combined action squads did not have the ability to address the conventional war that was clearly raging in Vietnam. Moyar offers a more pro-Westmoreland alternative, when he postulated in 2008 that both static and guerrilla forces would have been necessary in Vietnam, with the South Vietnamese taking over the pacification programs because "they had personal and ethnic ties to local communities that the Americans lacked." Moyar conceived of an idea similar in some ways to Krulak's.

Intelligence, which CAPs could provide, and precision strikes were the conventional elements to Krulak's war plan. US forces would shield the villages from Communist attack by seeking out and destroying Communist forces that had been identified through accurate intelligence and at a time that was of the greatest advantage to the Americans. In short, Krulak saw pacification

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taking the lead over a greatly truncated version of "search and destroy," for large sweeps as advocated by Westmoreland would "not consume forces needed for protection of cleared areas." Nonetheless, as Krepinevich states, with Arminio agreeing, Westmoreland and MACV "would not accept the fact that getting people to believe you were going to protect them required an effective governmental security force that was going to be there, as well as a lot of time and resources." As if this were not enough, convincing the US political leadership of this proved just as difficult.  

General Krulak believed he had no other choice other than to try to outflank MACV by taking his case before Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. Utilizing the same sort of statistical methodology that McNamara prized, he recounted the recent Ia Drang campaign's mathematical horrors, and how it fit into Hanoi's overall strategy to wear down US forces. Fortifying his argument was his calculation that the destruction of one-fifth of North Vietnam's army would cost 10,000 US and 165,000 South Vietnamese war dead in the year 1965 alone. Krulak's math appeared to be solid, for he later stated that by 1972, the US and South Vietnam lost a combined 220,000 dead while reducing the "enemy manpower pool by perhaps 25 percent." In spite of this report, "McNamara made only a brief comment. He rationalized his own alternative of a slowly intensifying air campaign," which he saw as the best tool to force Hanoi to give up its fight in the south. The secretary also suggested rather anticlimactically that Krulak visit Averill Harriman, the assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern Affairs, to discuss a potential Haiphong Harbor mining and more effective ways to sever NVA supply lines. Fearing Soviet intervention, Harriman rejected the general's recommendations. According to Southard, the general continued to press McNamara in two letters from May 1966 and January 1967 on

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145 Krulak, First to Fight, 197-198; Moyar, A Question of Command, 154; Arminio, Foreign Internal Defense, 16; Sheehan, A Bright Shining Lie, 631; Krepinevich, The Army and Vietnam, 177.
"the necessity of removing the guerrillas from the villages" and "developing village militias and guide the villagers toward a more stabilized life in their hamlets." However, despite agreeing with many of Krulak's points, the Marine suspected the secretary of not pledging "his whole-hearted support." Sheehan describes McNamara, and many other policymakers, as being "too captivated by Westmoreland and the other Army generals to heed logic and simple arithmetic," and therefore it mattered little how persuasive an argument might be against the conventional doctrine.146

Taking full advantage of some administrative string-pulling achieved by his ally General Greene, General Krulak brought his case before President Lyndon Johnson in the summer of 1966. Earlier, a copy of his final analysis had been forwarded for Johnson's review, but "Johnson's opening question indicated that he had not read the paper." He simply asked: "What is it going to take to win?" The FMFPac chief emphasized "the need for improvements in the quality of the South Vietnamese government and for acceleration in the training of South Vietnamese forces," but above all, he stressed that the United States "faced a self-defeating attritional cycle" against a cunning adversary that must not be underestimated. Krulak later recalled the feeling "that everything he was saying was going 'seven leagues' over the president's head." His effort ended after he attempted to discuss the air campaign's shortcomings and his ideas on nullifying Haiphong harbor.147

When the president heard Krulak "speak of mining and unrestrained bombing of the ports," Johnson "looked like he sat on a tack," when he rose from his chair and concluded the meeting. "You're a great general," Johnson reportedly told him as he showed, or as the Marine remembered, "propelled me firmly toward" the door. Despite his best efforts, Krulak realized

146 Sheehan, A Bright Shining Lie, 630-33; Krulak, First to Fight, 199-200; Southard, Defend and Befriend, 136. 147 Sheehan, A Bright Shining Lie, 633; Krulak, First to Fight, 202-203.
that Washington would not accept "that he who will not risk cannot win." So entrenched was "search and destroy" that Krulak actually had to defend on several occasions his Marines' Vietnam performance when McNamara and Paul Nitze accused the branch of not doing enough in the war. Having to protect his Corps’ record of participating "in 35 percent of all major operations" and responsibility "for 28 percent of the total enemy killed in those operations" from January to the summer of 1966 kept the general, and those of like mind, in an atmosphere where innovative ideas could gain little, if any, traction. In short, Washington's and MACV's minds were made up.148

As a result, MACV worried the Marines were a weak point in the US shield around South Vietnam. Bordering the DMZ between the two Vietnams, I Corps witnessed a great deal of combat involving NVA regulars due to its status as a key infiltration zone. With mounting Communist attacks during 1966-1967, General Walt re-deployed his men to the DMZ to confront the enemy, and because of this and MACV's insistence, "Walt simply could not afford to focus on pacification while the NVA wreaked havoc near the DMZ." He therefore ordered Operations Hastings and Prairie. From the spring to late summer of 1966, Marine battalions fought fierce battles against NVA regiments entrenched in hills and ridges along the DMZ; B-52 Stratofortresses even bombed the Communist regulars in support of the Marines on the ground. Even though casualties were high, the Marines' operations succeeded in fixing and driving out the NVA from their positions. At the same time, however, these battles' multiplicative effects began to make an impact just as General Krulak was attempting to engage Johnson's support for pacification, thus fixing ever firmly the US course away from a CAP-centered strategy.149

148 Sheehan, A Bright Shining Lie, 633; Krulak, First to Fight, 202-203.
Hastings' and Prairie's conclusions further convinced Westmoreland to expand "search and destroy" in I Corps, a decision that led to, according to author and Vietnam veteran Edward F. Murphy, the fortification of conventional combat bases like Khe Sanh. With acidic criticism, Colonel Corson blamed Hastings' and Prairie's apparent success for persuading President Johnson of the conventional course's legitimacy as the correct strategy to wipe out South Vietnam's communist foes. These aggressive operations' outcomes even played a major role in the October 25, 1966, Manila Conference in the Philippines. Seemingly confident that Hanoi would recognize the futility in combating US/ARVN firepower, Johnson and the South Vietnamese presented the condition that the North Vietnamese must withdraw from the south in return for an American withdrawal six months later. History has clearly shown that Johnson's conditions were ignored by the Communists, and the US war in Vietnam continued to march to the overwhelming firepower drumbeat, but disbelief/ignorance of CAPs and pacification stretched into other US military institutions, notably the Joint Chiefs who advised the president.150

"'We'll starve you out!'" was the Joint Chiefs of Staff's not-to-subtle response to combined action pacification, as they and other military leaders threatened to see to it that no more money found its way into pacification's coffers. Patrick M. Lange traces the Americans' fundamental misreading of Vietnam to the JCS, particularly its chairman, General Earle Wheeler, who "stated the problem in Vietnam" to be "military, not political," even though French generals who had served in the earlier war claimed with 20/20 hindsight that only a political solution could resolve the country's turmoil. Lange's point ties into Driest's conclusion that the United States government was far too slow in recognizing Vietnam's true nature, and that

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"counter-insurgency was not considered strategically significant and defense department planners paid little attention to it." This further eroded the CAPs' chances of becoming a more significant element of US strategy.\(^{151}\)

This intransigence at nearly every level of command explained in part why CAP Marines were chronically "short of supplies," and resorted to scrounging for anything and everything available. Moreover, US military planners, particularly those from other branches, possessed no incentive for altering this attitude. Lt. Commander Richard McGonigal, a Navy chaplain who assisted in establishing CAP doctrine early in the war, alludes to this when reflecting upon the other branches' ability to deal with the "other war": "I honestly don't think the Army could handle it. I'm quite certain the Navy couldn't, and the Air Force had no need to. They fought their war from thirty thousand feet. They never had to be accountable for blowing a hooch away. [The CAP Marines] and I had to do that." F.J. West's observations back up McGonigal's point. West saw that when friendly/enemy fire devastated locals' lives, most CAP Marines shared the villagers' pain to a certain extent, for they had seen "too much of the villagers, and lived too closely with them, not to be affected by their personal grief." Following McGonigal's assessment, branches like the Navy and the Air Force did not need to observe this reality, as it was not their reality. Additionally, going along with pacification assured a de-escalation of conventional firepower, which would no doubt result in their reduced role in Vietnam's war. Inter-service interests aside, the Marine Corps did not stand alone as CAP's pristine champions. Quite the contrary, in fact, as many Marines wished to see the program pushed aside.\(^{152}\)


Colonel Corso lamented in 1968 that the Marines "were forgetting their own history" when he considered the events of 1966 and the Marines' growing participation in Westmoreland's conventional war. Michael Peterson arrived at the same conclusion in 1989 as he reflected upon US military policy, as well as his own CAP experience. From Peterson's grunt's-eye point of view, the "Marines turned their backs on their own traditions" in favor of a "muscle-bound image" where "the success of counterinsurgency rested upon the proper application of force."

Because of CAPs' ad hoc origins, the program lacked any strategic cohesion, thus making it difficult for the Marine Corps to adequately develop the program, especially when there existed a paucity of battalion commanders who were familiar with CAPs, let alone those who were not irritated by their presence. Those Marines who shared MACV's opinions certainly paid no heed to the 1940 *Small Wars Manual*, which claimed that in these brush-fire wars, there "is probably no military organization of the size of the U.S. Marine Corps in the world which has had as much practical experience in this kind of combat." It dictated that a "Force Commander who gains his objective in a small war without firing a shot has attained far greater success than one who resorted to the use of small arms." To CAP critics, this proclamation might as well have been heresy.\(^{153}\)

Because the original platoons were plucked from the rifle battalions, the "parent units" as Peterson calls them, still assumed overall responsibility for them. That meant when a combined action unit came under heavy attack and was facing the prospect of being overrun, the rifle battalion would have to dispatch a relief force and ride to its rescue. Due to doctrinal non-existence, CAP platoons inserted themselves into an area upon request, either from a military commander or GVN chief, "often beyond supporting range of sister CAP platoons," as

Williamson says. As a consequence, "many CAP villages were literally islands adrift in a Communist sea of insurgency," which became a contentious issue with battalion commanders who resented having to pull a CAP out of danger every time it caught "its tail in a crack." On top of this, many a colonel resented that CAP selection left them short on manpower, blaming the specialized selection criteria for siphoning off "usually the unit's better Marines." This set up remained in place from 1965 to July 1967, when General Robert Cushman replaced Walt as the III MAF commander and removed the CAPs from line unit control, placing them under direct III MAF command. Until then, irritated battalion commanders "were playing the game of ... search and destroy," and neglect, especially logistical, signaled the higher-ranking officers' disgust with being fettered to pacification operations. Their derision also found other outlets for expression that transcended the passive-aggressive behavior mentioned above.\footnote{Peterson, The Combined Action Platoons, 36-37; Williamson, "The U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Program," 3; Driest, Combined Action Platoons, 12; Southard, Defend and Befriend, 24.}

A frequent refrain heard among the CAPs' Marine detractors concerned their place in the war's execution, meaning that it had no place. Peterson relates how many field commanders saw the combined action units as an "insignificant story" in the "overall progress of the war," and many chafed at the program's small expansion in subsequent years. Although Corson and Walt saw their counter-guerrilla warriors as a pivotal weapon whose use must be augmented, officers like Lieutenant-Colonel Max McQuown of the 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, groaned at the very idea. To him, a rapid expansion only increased a poor quality force whose Marines and their Popular Forces cohorts were aloof from the villages and possessed not even an inkling of small unit patrolling or combat experience. He also challenged the program's emphasis on having a working knowledge of Vietnamese language, religion, and customs, claiming that they had none whatsoever, thus the program was merely dead weight. Apparently forgotten by most
Marine officers after the Second World War, the 1940 *Small Wars Manual* spotlighted the natural advantages of ethnic and linguistic commonality, disease immunity and climate adaptation, combined with terrain familiarity, and how these attributes made even the most primitive foe a worthy adversary. As if warning future skeptics, it bluntly prophesizes how all "these natural advantages, combining primitive cunning and modern armament, will weigh heavily in the balance against the advantage of the marine forces in organization, equipment, intelligence, and discipline, if a careless audacity is permitted to warp good judgment." Due to officers like McQuowan, pacification was being disregarded by both political and military officials. Even Saigon looked upon it with disdain.\(^{155}\)

Perhaps the weakest point in the combined pacification plan's armor lay within the Saigon government itself. The CAPs' main thrust was to get the villages to the stage where South Vietnamese government control and services would take root and expand, but as military historian Allan R. Millett writes in his 1980 work *Semper Fidelis*, the "GVN did not match the Marines in money, enthusiasm, and organization; so much of the pacification effort ultimately failed because of lack of continuity and rural security." In short, Saigon hardly cared.\(^{156}\)

The South Vietnamese government paid lip service to pacification, believing instead in the large sweeping attacks favored by Westmoreland and the ARVN hierarchy. Even when conventional operations required a pacification effort to follow in its wake, the "follow-up usually depended on GVN agencies," and the effort was mostly wasted due to Saigon's indifference. That indifference reached into the Popular Force militias that were supposed to be working side-by-side with the Marines in the villages, for it was not unusual that the South


Vietnamese failed to organize and supply PF militias, thus rendering the CAPs a moot point in that area. In a memorandum to President Johnson dated July 1, 1966, Special Assistant Robert Komer relayed his concerns regarding this behavior during a June 23-29, 1966, fact-finding trip to South Vietnam. He clearly spells out that if pacification does not take hold, "we cannot assure victory," and Saigon was hardly doing its part to assure success. Komer reported that "the weak link in the chain is the GVN and the ARVN. We must get a greater return out of them." He complained to Johnson that the "700,000 ARVN forces are not pulling their weight. Nor is the GVN civil side. The US is bearing the brunt of the effort." Komer then made two recommendations to the president, one being that the US steps up its own civil action efforts, and the other to "galvanize the GVN and ARVN into a much greater-and better-effort in this field."

However, upon closer examination, it appeared these recommendations proved next to impossible to implement.  

Komer's report seems vexing at times. He claims that improvements are being made in pacification, and that the South Vietnamese are taking it more seriously, but then points to their lethargy as a cause for concern. There had been a recent increase in pacification programs, but Komer refers to them as a "crazy quilt pattern of ARVN and local forces," and that "confusion exists as to the proper roles and missions of each component of the pacification forces." Within this maze of forces existed the PFs, Revolutionary Development teams, Police Field companies, and Regional Forces, which Komer states "are not enough to do more than hold the present real estate the GVN controls" due to manpower shortages. As for the available manpower, Komer and his staff were hardly impressed. Upon observing three Revolutionary Development teams,

which fell under Saigon's purview, Komer expressed his dissatisfaction with their quality, reporting to Johnson that "26,000 cadre are in the field (not all well-trained)." To at least try to address the issue, Komer suggested turning over pacification to the South Vietnamese army, which he derides as a force that was "not pulling their weight in the battle against the VC main force anyway," an interesting idea given the ARVN's reluctance to engage the Viet Cong in a counter-insurgent war. However, Komer did at see a potential in South Vietnam's RD program.\(^{158}\)

A South Vietnamese Revolutionary Development team, or RD as it was known, consisted of a 59-man unit that acted upon the same principle as the American Combined Action Platoons. Like the CAPs, theirs was a mission to "provide physical security and community development," through education, health, agriculture, and public works projects. They also assisted in the all-important land reform initiatives that were supposed to be taking place in the countryside. In theory, the RDs employed "the Three Th's," Thang, Thuong, Thanh, or "victory, love, sincerity," to combat the Viet Cong's "Three 'Withs,'" eat with the people; live with the people; work with the people. The South Vietnamese utilized the old French pacification installation at Cap Saint-Jacques, changed to Vung Tau, as the RD training ground, where Major Nguyen Be, the base's commandant, inculcated his recruits with a curriculum stressing patriotism and \textit{kiem-thao}, or "nationalist virtues." However, as scholar John C. Donnell pointed out in 1967, it "is obvious that this work requires knowledge, skills, and political understanding, and commitment difficult to impart in a 13-to-15-week period." The time frame of which Donnell spoke was a reference to the Vung Tau training's length, which is also little time to develop an ideological "formula" that provides a pathway to the desired "social revolution" that will counter the Communist threat.

\(^{158}\) Ibid., 2-3.
Donnell later relates how increased Viet Cong attacks coupled with the program's growth threatened its very existence, as it fed into a much deeper problem plaguing South Vietnam.\(^{159}\) With RD expansion, South Vietnam's bureaucratic apparatus grew with it, and as a result, "its various civil and military branches were developing such complicated relationships that a new roles and missions study was made." This also reflected the "political, administrative, and military inconsistencies" that hampered the RDs' development, especially as it became ensnared in the insidious web of Saigon politics. Major Mai, the mentor of Vung Tau's head theoretician, stood at the forefront of a political mess that no doubt helped fuel Saigon's dismissal of pacification operations. Described as a revolutionary zealot, the GVN eventually sacked Major Mai for questionable loyalty. Specifically, Saigon's ruling elite believed that Mai was indoctrinating his trainees into the "Duy Tan faction of the Dai Viet Party," a political faction vying for power against the ruling regime, thus prompting the government to dump Mai out of fear of his instigating a coup that might topple the elite. The fact that one of pacification's fiercest proponents was a political enemy only fueled Saigon's already deep distrust of the "other war" effort. Moreover, some RD teams actually did pledge their allegiances to certain political parties, like the aforementioned Dai Viet or the Quoc Dan Dang, a popular faction in the strategic Central Highlands region. These teams hardly cared about nation-building, as they were too involved in establishing their own influence.\(^{160}\)

Mark Moyar offered his overall assessment of the RDs in 2008, writing that the teams fought poorly and often fled before an attack. He noted that after having sustained a Viet Cong assault, "they often stopped living in a village altogether, operating from a secure base outside the hamlet," thus "leaving the Viet Cong free to prowl after dark." This in turn made the entire

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RD concept to be a useless waste, since one must actually be in the villages in order to make some sort of difference. To Moyar, the RDs' poor performance reflected the poor leadership exhibited by the South Vietnamese government and military, thus making the idea of turning pacification over to the ARVN an unattractive one.\textsuperscript{161}

As stated earlier, the South Vietnamese military possessed no love for pacification, and they held fast to their belief that these activities should be relegated to "lower-level militias and police field forces." The phrase "lower-level" proves significant, since South Vietnamese regulars saw this duty as one that was not befitting real soldiers, preferring instead to engage in the search and destroy missions that Komer insisted they neglected anyway. Disturbingly for US efforts to turn the war over to their ally, Donnell asserted that the South Vietnamese were more than happy to let the Americans take the lead in pacification, as well as becoming addicted to US firepower once South Vietnamese forces gained access to it. A Vietnamization report from the CAPs' 1970 drawdown phase highlights this very issue.\textsuperscript{162}

The First CAG reported to III MAF commander General Herman Nickerson that most PFs and RFs had taken over responsibility for patrolling their respective hamlets yet they still wanted the Marines to remain in the area so they could call in helicopters and artillery strikes. The CAG officer held firm in his belief that it "should not be a CAP mission, however, to remain in the AO to serve primarily as a fire support coordinator" after the Vietnamese have supposedly taken over village security.\textsuperscript{163} After CAP 1-2-7 trained "four PF Platoons and very strong Vietnamese leaders," the Marines decided to withdraw the CAP in accordance with the overall Vietnamization and US withdrawal plans, thus terminating the need for Marines to go out on

\textsuperscript{161} Donnell, "Pacification Reassessed," 571-573, 575.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 573.
\textsuperscript{163} AO is a military acronym for "Area of Operations."
patrol. The Marines soon realized that the Vietnamese were trying to foist a different assignment upon them, as they "were regarded as a reserve force and fire support coordinator." Third MAF removed the CAP anyway; a move which greatly disappointed the district chief. Moreover, the CAG report stated that "these differences of opinion have been the subject of much discussion between Vietnamese and U.S. officers," therefore pointing to South Vietnam's reluctance to take over pacification on its own. In short, South Vietnamese lethargy, indifference, and political scheming took hold, with US muscle keeping the GVN afloat. There also remained corruption's corrosive impact.¹⁶⁴

Another item that Donnell observed during his 1967 re-assessment concerned the correlation between change at the village level and local government administration, notably "if bad administration is traceable to the village or district levels, they [the RDs] are often powerless to effect change." Corruption was a daily fact in Vietnam during the war, and it was a fact with which nearly all the CAPs had to deal. CAP Echo-2's experience in one village reflects this when they found their goodwill being manipulated by a devious village chieftain who submitted requests for building materials, concrete in particular, and explained that the supplies were for village construction projects. The Marines obliged, evading the usual logistical and administrative stinginess by cobbling together the necessary items via scavenging. However, little local development ever materialized, and when Echo-2 investigated, they found the chief had built himself "a grand new concrete house" instead. Still, local leaders building new houses seemed a relatively minor offense compared to others being committed throughout South Vietnam.¹⁶⁵

In Binh Son, 1967, US officials estimated that roughly 50% of USAID food and material shipments fell prey to "rake offs," where South Vietnamese government officials and employees skimmed growing portions of the deliveries and then sold the US goods on the black market. This type of corruption actually affected the CAPs, as the platoons strived to make rice market security a priority so as to prevent not just the Viet Cong, but also crooked GVN representatives from extorting rice from the peasantry. A US Marine general in 1966 claimed that South Vietnamese officials and workmen absconded with nearly 50% of the American cargo landed at Da Nang, and in subsequent investigations, US officials found evidence that showed these supplies were either sold directly to the Viet Cong, or re-exported from outside the country in various black market schemes. These actions reinforced many peasants' leeriness when it came to US-GVN pacification campaigns, and it directly undermined a key objective the CAPs were trying to achieve: winning trust. Provincial and district chiefs, the village policemen, even the Popular Forces blackmailed and bribed people into withholding information on potential Communist plots and suspects, thus lending credibility to Sheehan's statement that corruption "infected the whole of Saigon society," as well as the countryside. Because of the essential role they played in the CAPs' strategy it bears mentioning once more: not even the Popular Forces were immune to this epidemic.166

Due to their meager part-time wages and the subsistence agriculture they practiced, many PFs and their commanders engaged in dubious "business" dealings. One tactic, called "ghosts," became a favorite of PF leaders seeking to make a quick dollar. All PF sergeants maintained a duty roster which the South Vietnamese government used to dole out the militiamen's paltry salary based on the number of men who appeared for duty. The more unscrupulous sergeants

padded their rosters by leaving the names of slain PFs on their lists, and come pay-day, would simply pocket the extra cash. Also, Vietnamese men who attempted to avoid military service in the ARVN resorted to a bribery method that earned them the moniker "potted-tree soldiers," whereby draft dodgers bought fraudulent discharge papers showing they had served time in the South Vietnamese military. These problems metastasized to such an extreme that the United States eventually gagged as many corruption reports as possible. One CAP major named Volentine recalled a meeting he had with a US Army colonel who curtly ordered him, "Don't buck the system," when the Marine complained of the rampant supply pilfering and illicit goods proliferation in his zone. This colonel, echoing other American civil and military officials, dismissed the corruption as being "a normal part of aid distribution" and added that the US was already winning the war in I Corps by driving the NVA from the mountains anyway, so there was little need to give this issue any importance. Volentine's response, "Colonel, that's your war, not mine," not only reflected a wide disconnect within the US command hierarchy, but also another foe that was just as corrosive as corruption, for treachery lurked just as threateningly as the mountain-based NVA.167

During a patrol in the Binh Son region, two combined action Marines noticed a young Vietnamese boy running about, hauling a heavy burlap bag. They eventually stopped the boy and searched the bag, pulling from it a shotgun and carbine rifle ammunition. Their suspicions aroused, the Americans released the boy and his bag, but discreetly followed him to his destination. Believing they would find a Viet Cong safe house, they instead recognized the boy's "employer" to be a local Popular Force sergeant. The Marines instantly arrested him, but because local law enforcement refused to hold him on the grounds that the Marines lacked

jurisdiction, the man walked free. The Binh Son incident revealed that "only a poor man stays in jail more than 3 days," since local police absolutely refused to detain known Viet Cong out of fear of retaliation. Another possibility was blatant betrayal. In 1965, CAP Marines established themselves in an abandoned French fort renamed Fort Page. There an old farmer named Ho Chi told them, "Some PF are VC." It appeared the enemy lurked everywhere: in the jungles, the villages, and possibly the CAP compounds.168

The young Americans upon whose shoulders pacification's burdens rested fought an enemy from without and within. They fought a war not always fully reflected in the statistics-laden situation reports so beloved by the military establishment, but in order to try to gauge the program's effectiveness, one must not restrict oneself to the respective governments and their civil-military bureaucracies. To attempt such a judgment, one must venture into the bush itself. There, one will find the multitude of challenges facing these young Marines, whether it be the language, culture, the Viet Cong, the PFs, the villagers, or even themselves. Only by examining these experiences can one begin to acquire a better understanding of the unique and perilous nature of the "other war."

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CHAPTER 6
THIS IS NO PEACE CORPS

At first glance, the Combined Action Platoons appeared highly effective and actually managed to accomplish a great deal given the hostility that existed among various officers throughout the chain of command, but day-to-day life in the hamlets exacted a heavy toll and was not always up to the program's high standards. Don Moser reported in 1967 that the pacification platoons' "success has varied from nil to considerable," and in the following year, the famed Israeli general Moshe Dayan penned his feelings on the American "other war," writing that "the Americanization of the peace, of daily life, can only serve the Vietcong with terrorist objectives and propagandists' arguments against 'American hegemony in Vietnam.'" This observation stands in sharp contrast from the official Marine Corps command chronologies, which largely point to a steadily expanding and successful operation. When one considers CAP recruiting, training, their experiences with the PFs, as well as life among the villagers and the enemy, one comes away with a different perspective that questions whether or not Krulak’s and Walt's pacification platform would have actually propelled the United States to victory had it been adopted in its entirety.169

Walt, Corson, and counter-insurgency-minded Marines like Major Richard Braun strictly stipulated that any and all Marines involved with the program must be thoroughly vetted through an exacting set of standards. Cultural, historical, and linguistic knowledge stood on a par with combat skills, and as Colonel Corson told Albert Hemingway in his 1994 book Our War Was Different, a CAP Marine must be open to new ideas and not contain an ethnocentric bone in his

body. When digesting these guidelines, a person might envision numerous platoons made up of cultural-linguistic warriors roaming about the country, bringing the fight to the Viet Cong and understanding to remote peoples, and while there were certainly worthy CAP Marines, not all of its members were up to the mark.\textsuperscript{170}

Being a volunteer stood at the top of Walt's requirements, but in reality this was more a guideline than the actual rule. Author Michael Peterson remembered from his own service in Vietnam how the combined action platoons became a misfit depository for recalcitrant Marines. Even though many battalion commanders resented the teams for drawing men away from their companies, it did not prevent the battalions from encouraging their black sheep to volunteer, even after the Marine Corps separated the CAPs from the battalions' command in 1967. This allowed commanding officers to off-load any undesirables in their units and dump them into this extremely sensitive project. Marine Corps veteran Edward F. Palm reminisced years later how, in July 1967, he sat before an evaluation board that only seemed interested in his attitude towards the Vietnamese and ignored the fact that he was a disgruntled enlisted supply clerk with no combat experience at all. Palm commented that the only real qualification "was the enthusiastic recommendation of my commanding officer, who was probably too glad to get a disaffected and unmotivated supply clerk off his rolls." Such recollections certainly reinforced the implacable CAP-hater Major McQuowan's feeling that CAP troops were nothing more than an "admixture of combat support units."\textsuperscript{171}

hardly fit the bill for this assignment, and he was among the first to see it: "I, like the rest of the guys in the 1st CAC, did not volunteer for this duty-we were chosen. What criteria was used in the selection process is a mystery to me, but I think my company commander and platoon commander wanted to get rid of me." Brown went on to describe himself as "not what you call a gung-ho Marine." Other anomalies existed as well, for disaffected privates were not the only ones thrust into the program. Men who lacked battlefield experience, like Palm, did find themselves on pacification detail, but so too did men who had seen so much combat that it proved just as much a detriment as having seen none at all. 172

Eugene H. Ferguson was just an eighteen year-old private who joined the Marines upon dropping out of high school. Upon attaining the coveted eagle, globe, and anchor insignia, Ferguson progressed through a Vietnamese language course, and unlike the vast majority of his comrades, actually possessed a rudimentary knowledge of the Vietnamese language when he arrived in Vietnam in 1968. In a bizarre irony, however, Ferguson received orders putting him into a regular line company. His subsequent reassignment to the CAPs came about as the result of a ferocious NVA ambush that practically annihilated his platoon, with Ferguson and the platoon's radio operator being the only two not wounded or killed. Afterwards, Ferguson developed signs of what psychologists now diagnose as PTSD, and his commanders, as Ferguson recollected, "were anticipating trouble from me," and he soon found himself among the CAPs. He was not the only one. 173

Harvey Baker reported to the program after the NVA mauled his company during the "Hill Fights" around Khe Sanh in 1967, and he carried with him combat's deep scars. Like many uninformed Marines before him, Baker "heard about these CAP units and thought this was my

172 Hemingway, Our War Was Different, 26.
chance to get out of the bush." Nevertheless, Baker realized he had "become kill crazy," and this did not fade after he joined the CAP. He distinctly remembered his state of mind in 1967-68 where "if I wasn't killin', I had to be high," thus showing that drugs' addictive hand had reached into both CAP squads and line units. Even worse, the Marine Corps nearly court-martialed Baker for stabbing his CAP squad leader who employed a racial epithet to Baker's face that ignited Baker's vicious attack. The squad leader did not die, and Baker never stood trial, since the urgency of the Tet Offensive forced the Marine Corps to drop the charges and send him back to combat, but nevertheless, Baker's experience also shows that the CAPs' relative isolation from large US combat formations, did not always exempt them from the racial tensions brewing in the American military and society at that time. This also brings to light the "other war's" schizophrenia, where one pacification Marine struggled to reconcile how "our mission was in a sense [to] kill and help people. A little confusing." A fellow Leatherneck grappled with this duality by complaining that "we've been up in the Mountains where it's been kill, kill, kill; now we come down here and are told we're supposed to love them all. It's too much to ask." These two examples illustrate once more just how much the Marine Corps had forgotten its own small wars study, which declared "tolerance, sympathy, and kindness should be the keynote of our relationship with the mass of the population." However, even though the CAPs were the product of Vietnam's unique war, it was by no means immune to its effects; effects which dictated a shift in how the platoons conducted business.  

From 1965 to early 1968, CAPs embedded themselves in the villages, patrolling along the same routes and headquartered from a centrally located compound with the village itself. In other words, the platoons were static, never venturing too far from their assigned areas, but that

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all changed after the Tet Offensive in late January/February 1968. By Tet, the Viet Cong had memorized CAP routines and patrols, leaving many squads vulnerable to devastating ambushes. In fact, some CAP units were actually overrun during the Offensive, thus leading Marine Corps brass to alter the mission from a static to a mobile concept modeled after the US Army's MATs (Mobile Advisory Teams). Comprised of two US Army officers and three enlisted personnel, MATs roamed from village to village, training PF, RF, and PSDF troops in weapons, small-unit, ambush, and night patrol tactics for roughly one to two months before moving on to another area.175 General Westmoreland approved of the MATs' creation in April 1968 due to the fewer troops involved and the wider area they could cover, and after General Creighton Abrams replaced Westmoreland as COMUSMACV in the summer of 1968, the Army's pseudo-CAP took on an even greater importance.176

Abrams determined that "thrashing about in the deep jungle," and looking for the enemy at a time and place of his own choosing was strategically unfeasible by 1968, therefore he mandated that US combat power enact "fuller area coverage by widely deployed and more agile small units." Historian and pacification advocate Lewis Sorely stressed that the general's course change made the MAT program a top priority, expanding the number of teams in the field from 250 in October 1968 to 350 in January 1969. In the same time frame, PF/RF field strength increased from 86,000 to 91,000, thus mirroring Abrams's opinion that PF/RFs are "kind of home folks," they "just work better" than the US's earlier strategy. Daniel Ellsberg gave a glowing report of Abrams's new approach when he commented how the Army finally had "begun to concentrate on area control than on kills." With Tet's massive scope, static CAPs'

175 Popular Force, Regional Force, and People's Self-Defense Forces: South Vietnamese territorial forces that operated at the village and district levels.
176 Peterson, The Combined Action Platoons, 60; Southard, Defend and Befriend, 42.
vulnerabilities, and the onset of Vietnization, the mobile concept, hardly foreign to Vietnamese battlefields, had come to the combined action platoons.  

MTTs, or mobile training teams, became a new addition to the Marines' strategy following the creation of the Combined Unit Pacification Program by III MAF commander General Robert Cushman. The mission remained the same, but mobility would be the new component, since static, or "compound," CAPs' predictable nature was seen "in retrospect" to "undermine security in the village." After Tet 1968, MTT squads instructed non-CAP Popular Forces for two-week stretches before moving on to another village, a move that General Krulak deemed absolutely pointless, since "the PFs associated with MTTs did not receive the same practical experience as the local forces in CAPs" after a short two-week period. The CUPP's creation and the advent of mobility tactics rubbed off on the actual CAPs as well, with more and more platoons becoming the guerrillas and spending more time in the jungle then they did among the villagers.

Mark Moyar determined the combined action squads, particularly in their mobility phase, did inflict higher casualties on the Communists. In 2014, John Southard asserted that "mobile CAPs suffered fewer casualties and killed more enemy than the compound units," and Major Williamson agreed that "CAPs killed almost as many NVA/VC with greater efficiency and at a lower cost." Corporal Goodson recalled an ambush around Xuan Ngoc Hai village that netted $20,000 in South Vietnamese currency, a detailed map of US positions, and the deaths of several communist officers, one of whom was a NVA colonel. Gone were the days of predictable patrols, as mobile squads changed their routes constantly, oftentimes changing their location several times a day. Moreover, mobile CAPs remained in the jungle for, on average, twenty

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178 Southard, *Defend and Befriend*, 47.
days. Goodson illustrates this shift during a conversation with his CAP sergeant before his first patrol in 1968, when he asked him, "You mean we don't have a compound to hide in case of attack?" After telling Goodson that he would need to re-arrange his thinking, the sergeant, Steve Rogers, explained that "to stay alive we have to be able to hit and run-or simply run." A stunned Goodson soon realized the fundamental truth of mobile CAPs: "the jungle was our home!"

However, while mobile CAPs did venture deeper into the jungle and strike at more Communist forces, their overall effectiveness has come into question.\

Southard asserts that mobile CAPs "did perhaps succeed in improving security," but he postulates that the very event that gave rise to them may be just as responsible for decreased Viet Cong activity. Out of 80,000 NVA/VC assault troops, Southard estimates that the Communists lost roughly 30,000-60,000 during Tet, therefore, the "implementation of the mobile concept may have increased the effectiveness of CAPs statistically," but due to the VC's heavy losses, from which they never fully recovered, it is reasonable to assume that "the near annihilation of the VC during the Tet Offensive definitely played a role as well." Therefore, CAP effectiveness may not have been so much a product of sound pacification tactics, but rather the fact that the NVA and VC main forces quit the shadows to engage the US in a massive set-piece offensive that brought them directly into the maw of US firepower. For this reason, Tet 1968 was a military disaster for the Communists, and security improved as a result because the Communists scaled back their offensive activities in an attempt to lick their wounds and bide their time, especially with the beginnings of Vietnamization and the US withdrawal in 1969.\

Furthermore, Peterson observed that even though mobile CAPs made military sense, only static CAPs could achieve what he called "deep pacification," where many argued the war would

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180 Southard, *Defend and Befriend*, 29, 94.
actually be won. This dovetails into Moyar's conclusion that due to their mobility, "they spent little time on civic action programs of the sort often viewed as essential to successful counterinsurgency." Southard outlines the significance of this assessment to mean fewer schools, wells, and other larger-scale construction projects necessary to enhancing village infrastructure were not undertaken in favor of smaller, more manageable projects, like CAP Mot's ax distribution project. As far as Colonel Corson believed, mobility was a hindrance, not an asset, since the Marines needed to have a constant presence in the villages and "had to be an alternative to the guerrilla, as well as a tactic against the guerrilla" if the program was to work. In fact, it was that alternative that distinguished the program in the eyes of some of its recruits.\textsuperscript{181}

Corporal Goodson recalled wrestling with the irreconcilability of search and destroy's "senseless destruction" against "an enemy we can't see, let alone destroy." Sometimes Goodson wondered if the Americans were any better than the Viet Cong given the destruction wrought by US combat operations, but that changed when a friend charged up to Goodson one day to inform him of an alternative. Initially dismissing the idea, he started to believe after a few minutes of listening "that there truly was a unit in 'Nam dedicated to fighting the war for the people, dedicated to helping the people." The two volunteered. Goodson arrived at CAP training in September 1968, after his own company suffered severe losses assaulting a rice-paddy dike in Operation Mead River. In a diary entry dated May 2, 1967, Navy Corpsman Roger Lansbury of the 2nd Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment noted that "there is a thing here called 'CAC.' This is where a Corpsman lives with the people of a village and becomes, in affect [sic], the village doctor. Training here for this includes 30 days of Vietnamese language school. This interests

\textsuperscript{181} Peterson, \textit{The Combined Action Platoons}, 60; Moyar, \textit{A Question of Command}, 154-155.
me as you have an opportunity to learn the ways of the people." Learning those ways was far easier said than done.\textsuperscript{182}

Upon his arrival at the Phu Bai Combined Action Training School, Corporal Goodson had not the foggiest notion of what to expect. Deeply scarred by his experiences in \textit{Mead River} and driven by an inner desire to make a meaningful difference, he stood before his CAP sergeant who exalted in their good fortune at having acquired Goodson, an experienced machine gunner. In fact, the sergeant continued, the Viet Cong frequently targeted gunners, thus the reason for the squads' desperate need. The sergeant chillingly added that the Viet Cong wiped out a couple CAP teams in their area just prior to his coming aboard. Goodson only thought was: "Total squads wiped out! Machine gunners on the hit list. 'Oh God, what am I in for?'" A general soon provided the official answer.\textsuperscript{183}

Claiming that the CAPs were not only elite, but the equals of the Army's Green Berets, the general called the CAPs "a police force," ... "responsible for training all of the local militia in each village," as well as hunting the villages' Communist nemesis. He summarized their "multi-fold" mission: "Nothing dramatic. Just simple gestures that will assure them that we are totally on their side." After that, Goodson and the other new recruits plunged into a two-week training regimen that the corporal later remembered as a "brief, but thorough" indoctrination of Vietnamese cultural nuances, small unit patrolling, and language. Some of the topics ranged from the identification of Vietnam's venomous snakes, the variety of insects, as well as various weapons' specific uses, and jungle survival. So complete did Goodson believe this training to be that he claimed to feel a deeper empathy and devotion to ordinary Vietnamese, even though he

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\textsuperscript{183} Ibid., 14-15.
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struggled with occasional judgmentalism, like the time he found out that some villages measure their residents' social stature based upon their skill in thievery. However, he did take to heart an important lesson that he later applied in the field: the Vietnamese accepted a person as long as that person could do everything as well as they could or better, especially when it comes to manual labor. Needless to say, Corporal Goodson learned a great deal from the 2-week, 17-hour/day training sessions; sessions that attempted to cram tons of vital information into a short span of time.\textsuperscript{184}

The Combined Action Force School Syllabus from 1970 provides a window into the training schedule. Also possessing a Vietnamese language school, the CAF Syllabus demanded 38 hours' study on Vietnamese subjects and 53 hours on military subjects like weapons safety, patrols and ambushes, land navigation, and first aid. This amounted to devoting roughly 41% of the syllabus to military-specific training, including 10 hours' instruction on calling in air strikes, gunships, and artillery. The men spent another 37 hours on exams, reviews, and inspections. Goodson wrote that he and his group intensely studied the Vietnamese language, and according to the CAF Syllabus, the Marines spent 19 hours total on this essential element, with three hours of language exams. Furthermore, only six hours focused on Viet Cong tactics and infrastructure, and a mere one hour for civic action, no doubt a reflection of the CAPs' mobile transition. Still, while some language training is better than none, one cannot deny that 19 hours of language study, with 9 more hours on Vietnamese history and culture, is hardly enough to give a foreign visitor the ability to live among natives, especially with a language as complex as Vietnamese.

\textsuperscript{184} Ibid., 16-19.
Only 29.6% of the program's training centered on vital topics, as shown by the paltry one hour on the Popular Forces with whom the Americans would be working and fighting beside.  

Historians and observers generally agree that language training was not only critical to the program's success, but also one of its greatest weaknesses. In his 1986 work *The Army and Vietnam*, Krepinevich briefly broke from his CAP-defense to comment that if "the CAPs suffered from problems, they centered on the language barrier between the Americans and their Vietnamese counterparts." In 2002, Major Williamson pointed to "poor language skills" and "cultural ignorance" as among the CAPs' greatest handicaps, as embodied by the Marine Corps' scarcity of Vietnamese translators. He also indicates a failure to address this linguistic deficiency throughout the program's duration, since the Marine Corps recognized language "as critical to developing effective relations with the people," but still, "language skills would plague the program throughout its existence." Driest claimed in 1990 that the CAPs' vulnerabilities could be traced to the "amount of language training received; and the amount of cultural training received." Although the Army bears the brunt of the "search and destroy" strategy, Southard gives the Army credit for their months-long linguistic and culture training it rendered to its Green Berets and MATs squads, writing that by comparison, "Green Beret and MAT advisors completed a much lengthier and detailed training program" than the Marine CAPs. When one reviews the primary-source evidence, it becomes clear why the language theme repeats itself over the years.  

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Jimmy Sparrow spent February 1967 slinking through the bush with the 1st CAG with nary a speck of language training. One particular mission demanded the highest comprehension level when he and his squad eavesdropped on a Viet Cong meeting one night. Creeping up to the hut’s outer wall, the Marines crouched low and strained their ears to intercept any valuable information. Had it not been for the squad's sergeant, who "seemed to be picking up some information," Sparrow himself "couldn't understand a word of Vietnamese." Unlike Goodson, who served over nine months in CAP Mot before receiving a "million dollar wound," Sparrow spent only thirty days among the villagers before proceeding to another assignment upon a replacement's arrival.\textsuperscript{187} Although he thought the CAPs were a good idea that merited further expansion, he insisted the language training made for a weak link that inhibited the teams' effectiveness. Nothing reflects this more than one of the names given the program's units, the Combined Action Company, or CAC. Unbeknownst to the Americans at the time, the acronym was the English equivalent to the Vietnamese word for a certain part of the male anatomy. This prompted an immediate revision from CAC to CACO upon the fact's discovery, but not after having served as a source of amusement for many snickering South Vietnamese.\textsuperscript{188}

Navy Corpsman John K. Nicols, a twenty-one year-old from Lake Parsippany, New Jersey hit the same linguistic barrier that barred most Americans from a complete interaction with the locals. Had it not been for a Vietnamese boy who acted as his interpreter, he would have been at a linguistic loss. Nicols once related how "we get by, 'dau boom' is a stomach ache and 'dau' is a headache and you can ask where the most 'beaucoup dau' is. But we need more language training. For instance, I can't ask which side does it hurt on, is there a sharp pain on the side or about vomiting and diarrhea. I haven't learned the word for chest pain yet." Historian

\textsuperscript{187} “A million dollar wound” was a term for combat injuries that precluded a GI's return to combat.

\textsuperscript{188} Hemingway, \textit{Our War Was Different}, 46-48.
Jack Shulminson observed that lacking the ability "to converse with people or the PFs, it was almost next to impossible for the Marines to have anything but a superficial knowledge of the people they were to protect," something to which Sergeant Mac McGahan can attest, since his CAP spent their tour communicating with the villagers via an etymological cocktail of Vietnamese, English, and pig Latin. Shulminson concludes by saying most pacification Marines only possessed a rudimentary knowledge of the Vietnamese language, if even that, and if that was not enough, other cultural nuances caught the CAPs off-guard as well.  

Phu Bai's or Da Nang's culture seminars did little to prepare Goodson for the time a Vietnamese woman tried to foist her fifteen-year old daughter on him in a marriage proposal. His Western sensibilities shocked, Goodson explained why he must refuse before the Popular Forces sergeant, Taan, took him aside and explained to him the cultural hazards of doing so. He compromised with the mamasan by assuring her that he is her daughter's "man," and that she will be treated honorably, but marriage was not possible due to his own Western sensibilities.

Another incident involved Vietnamese children's social standing.

Major Gary Telfer and Lt. Colonel Lane Rogers, both Marines, discovered in their 1984 study that many times, Vietnamese children would befriend the Americans, despite most villagers' strong disdain for outsiders. One recalls the CAPs' "little brother" program that rested upon engaging young children in games like baseball, so as to build a stronger report with the village, but Telfer and Rogers noted a problem that could arise with this seemingly harmless tactic. Because US society places a heavy "cultural emphasis on youth," the CAPs ran the risk of focusing too much on the young at the expense of the village elders, resulting in "a situation that could create resentment within the village power structure." Furthermore, Peterson adds that

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190 Goodson, CAP Mot, 136-37.
cultural customs, just like Vietnamese culture in general, are not uniform from village to village, and if these customs were violated the villagers became angry. He recalled an incident where CAP Marines entered a peasant family's home and changed their clothing behind a curtain in the middle section of their home, which the Marines did not know housed the family's ancestral shrine, and their action was a desecration of hallowed ground. Incidents like those detailed above illustrate the fine line that pacification's warriors walked, which flows directly into the realities of life among the Popular Force militia and the villagers, and how "for all their hard work nothing in the village ... has necessarily become safe, or easy, or predictable."

General Lewis Walt believed the Popular Forces to be the glue that made his counter-insurgency methods stick, but Leinster's *LIFE* article reveals a more ambiguous situation. Occasionally, the "Popular Forces have fought superbly, but as a rule, the P.F. is poorly paid, poorly trained, poorly motivated and sometimes-often enough to keep the Marines wary- an active agent of the enemy." CAP Echo-2's Marines confronted an insider job that occurred in 1967 when a GI dismantled a bomb wired to a truck during a village movie night in Hiep Hoa. When twenty-year old Corporal Mike Mullins told his staff sergeant the following day, he felt compelled to add that three PFs had not reported for duty, including one who had already drawn suspicion. Mullins recalled that this same PF had been conspicuously absent around Thanksgiving 1966, when the Viet Cong managed to overrun the CAP compound in what many of the CAP men suspected at the time to be an operation with "inside help from one of the Popular Force soldiers." The staff sergeant, Smith, conveyed a similar feeling, remembering how "a couple of months ago, we caught him signaling one night." Initially he dismissed the PF's behavior as goofing off and thought nothing of it until Mullins' story about the grenade. At

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the time of Leinster's article, the suspicious PF in Hiep Hoa had not been seen since the attempted attack. ¹⁹²

CAP Mot encountered an attack more brazen than the furtive efforts tried by Hiep Hoa's communist conspirators. During the Tet lunar New Year celebrations in early 1969, a South Vietnamese dignitary arrived for a quick review of the PFs and their American advisors before shuttling off elsewhere. Prior to this, PF sergeant Shôu ominously declared in rough English, "The VC already in my men and in local villages," thus ratcheting tensions in anticipation of a Viet Cong strike. Strike they did. During the review, a PF militiaman broke ranks and liberally sprayed the compound with bullets until a burst from US rifles felled him. Aside from the VC infiltrator, nobody died, although Sergeant Shôu suffered non-mortal wounds that required his evacuation to a hospital. Such treachery extended into the jungle too. During one patrol in Colonel Edward Danowitz's 4th Combined Action Group, the mixed platoon inserted itself into position for an ambush, only to be ambushed themselves in the process. Viet Cong disguised as PFs actually accompanied the Americans on the patrol, and unbeknownst to anyone at the time, they had tipped the Communists to the ambush site, therefore setting their supposed allies up for disaster. Danowitz called this infiltration "a constant threat to a CAP," and if an insider threat was not enough to put a patrol on edge, the Americans also contended with the equally present threat from the PFs who were not covert VC. As many CAPs discovered, many a PF heart was not in the fight, and many of these militiamen did not need to be communist sympathizers to put the missions in serious jeopardy. ¹⁹³

The Popular Forces oftentimes bungled their own missions, sometimes intentionally, sometimes not. The My Thuy Phuong villagers held their local fighters in low esteem,

¹⁹² Leinster, "The Two Wars of General Lew Walt," 28, 58-60.; Trullinger, Village at War, 123.
¹⁹³ Goodson, CAP Mot, 88; Hemingway, Our War Was Different, 106.
particularly after a daylight house-to-house search in 1967 where the PFs looted the villagers' homes for money and other valuables. As one has already seen, such corruption at the village level made it exceedingly difficult to establish Saigon's goodwill when the very people charged with their protection abused their authority for criminal purposes. Moreover, many American advisors scowled at the PFs' poor behavior. During his 1969-1970 tour to Dai Loc village, Navy Corpsman Wayne Christiansen flatly assessed PFs to be "shitbirds" who were either too old or too young to care about what they were doing in the hamlets, and as the My Thuy Phuong residents could attest, "you really had to watch them all or they'd steal from you." Christiansen recalled a PF corpsman who routinely stole their medical supplies for sale on the black market. Unfortunately for pacification's strategic prospects, it sometimes appeared that the only competent militiamen were the stealthy Viet Cong who had weaseled their way into the local defenses.\textsuperscript{194}

Fear and sloppiness became apparent from the very beginning. In August 1965, Corporal William Beebe described his first patrol with the indigenous troopers as "the most scared I've ever been in my life," after his group caught a glimpse of a shadowy Viet Cong. Although the PF leader spotted the VC, the PFs themselves remained paralyzed with a fear that prevented them from challenging what they viewed to be such a lethal adversary. In fact, Beebe and his men convinced the PFs that the Marines would protect them on the patrol, for without that assurance, the village men refused to even leave the hamlet. "You'd reach out and you could feel them quivering," Beebe said of them. "But they'd go as long as we did. Well not always." The young corporal hardly stood alone in his somber verdict.\textsuperscript{195}

\textsuperscript{194} Trullinger, Village at War, 119; Hemingway, Our War Was Different, 130-32.  
\textsuperscript{195} West, The Village, 18-19.
Lance Corporal Paul Hernandez lived and fought amongst the villages from 1970 to the program's twilight in 1971, and he confirms the aforementioned sentiment through his reminiscences of the Popular Forces poor combat performance. In his experience, the village troops simply "never followed any of the rules," and their caliber remained extraordinarily poor. In addition, they talked and smoked while on patrol, and some fell asleep when they were supposed to be on the night-watch. That last tendency produced damning ramifications for Hernandez when a 1971 ambush that a sleeping PF failed to detect allowed the Viet Cong to get the drop on the waiting CAP, triggering a firefight that rendered Hernandez a paraplegic. Harvey Baker of 3rd CAG echoed Hernandez's evaluation, saying that local forces were mostly useless, and that they made too much racket while on patrol, which some Marines suspected to be an attempt to tip-off lurking Communists so as to avoid making contact. Nevertheless, the Americans forged ahead with their orders, training the seemingly untrainable.196

The inaugural chronology for the 1st CAG in 1968, which was also the first-ever report submitted by a Combined Action Group in the war, provides a run-down of the type of training completed by both Americans and Popular Forces during the six months from January to June. All told, the PFs completed 92,910 training hours centered on Basic Military Terminology, Care and Cleaning of Weapons, Personal Hygiene, and English. During the second half of that year, the part-time troopers amassed 65,378 student hours covering "basic military subjects," while the Americans focused on specific areas to fulfill particular unit needs. One chronology gloats over the improvements in aggressiveness and initiative, citing a PF squad under CAP 1-3-5 that organized a raid on the spot after receiving a tip of a Viet Cong meeting that killed roughly 15 enemy fighters. Curiously, though, in the preceding lines, the text briefly mentions that "some

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196 Hemingway, Our War Was Different, 63, 174.
difficulties were encountered" with the training, including the omnipresent language barrier, and more disturbingly PF "attendance and maintaining interest." A 2nd CAG report from July 1969 adds to this disinterest, when it trumpeted the increase to 65 classes from 58 that oversaw 560 Vietnamese civilians' and PFs' training. It immediately notes that these augmented courses actually saw fewer students, 200 fewer to be exact, than the previous month. To the Marines who knew these men on a more personal level, such reports came as little surprise.  

Around the same time of this report, a CAP Marine identified as Vieira lamented how only a few Popular Forces would fight, and nearly all of them expected the Americans to take the initiative. In fact, the PFs' trademark sneakers became the unofficial symbol of their incompetence. Referred to by the Americans as "PF Flyers," many CAP GIs thought this an appropriate moniker "because when things got tough, they flew the coop," to which Echo-2's Ronald Schaedel can testify. Acting as the point man, Schaedel, called "Pineapple" due to his Hawaiian origins, literally came face-to-face with a Viet Cong in the jungle, triggering a desperate fight that saw every Vietnamese militiaman freeze in terror and refuse to fight. Corpsman Christiansen saw "four of five of the PFs fight with us" in nearly every firefight in which he participated, "while the rest either ran away or hid." While there were PFs who fought the Communists (Goodson credits their indigenous allies with spotting and disarming virtually indiscernible jungle booby traps and teaching them about the nuances of jungle war) the overall performance of these self-defense forces remains mixed at best, and even in units like Goodson's,

198 "Point man"—military term for the one at the very front of a patrol. Usually the first to detect the enemy, or be detected by him.
that did not mean that all was well between the two nationalities. As some found out, sometimes their charges did not need communist influence to turn against them.\textsuperscript{199}

On top of the infiltration and theft threats, CAP Marines needed to be wary of any triggers that might set off their Vietnamese comrades. In the 4th Combined Group's area, village forces stalked one of Colonel Danowitz's men after the Marine mistakenly killed a PF when the local was returning from a patrol. Not only did the Vietnamese intend to kill the American, but they made clear that they would defy an American colonel to do it. When Danowitz spirited the man out of the village, the angry men threateningly blocked the colonel's jeep until Danowitz finally managed to get through to them the consequences of what they were doing, and even then they withdrew grudgingly. Usually on good terms with the resident riflemen, Goodson and his CAP comrades encountered an incident that raised tensions in their neck of the woods to dangerous levels.\textsuperscript{200}

Defying common sense, Goodson's disconnected Combined Action commander regularly dispatched rear-echelon servicemen to the field in order to inflate his unit's medal count, which in turn would reflect well on his personal command record. One man named Thompson ended up in Goodson's patrol with only a couple of weeks left on his tour. Untried, untrained, and unaware of how to communicate in the jungle, the Marine tragically shot and killed a young PF teen he mistook for an enemy when the boy signaled him to re-locate. As Taan told Goodson later, "My men are very sad. They want to kill all marines," and they could do it too. Goodson mentally calculated that the PFs outnumbered the Americans eight-to-one, and if the GIs left, then the Viet Cong would instantly unravel all of their hard-fought gains. For roughly two weeks after the shooting, tensions ran high. Instead of squaring off against the Communists in an

\textsuperscript{199} Hemingway, \textit{Our War Was Different}, 132; Moser, "Their Mission: Defend, Befriend," 60; Goodson, \textit{CAP Mot}, 153.

\textsuperscript{200} Hemingway, \textit{Our War Was Different}, 107.
ambush, the two sides literally set up on opposite sides of each other, and the "true enemy, Charlie, was completely ignored." The Americans privately wondered whether or not the Vietnamese would kill them out of revenge or choose to cash in on the Viet Cong bounty that the Communists placed on the CAP earlier in the year. Fortunately for Goodson's men, nothing sinister actually materialized as their "good deeds of the past" combined with time's healing powers to de-escalate the bitterness. What it did not repair was trust. Every American noticed the cold shift in the Vietnamese villagers' attitudes towards them, and Goodson lamented how the "CO's quest for glory had almost destroyed everything we had spent all our time working and hoping for."

Other CAPs dealt with similar cases. A 3rd CAG trooper once said that a CAP must never strike a villager, unlike the line troops. However, Peterson chronicles an incident where a newly CAP Marine who was fresh from the line companies witnessed two seasoned CAPs argue over who was going to kill a Vietnamese boy they believed was handling money for the Viet Cong. The witness, according to Peterson, watched as one of the men squeezed "the trigger and blew that kid away, in front of his mother and little brother." He continued that the whole scene took him by surprise because no such thing had happened in his regular unit, and all "respect I had for the CAP unit disintegrated" after he saw his CAP sergeant pocket the money the boy had, leading him to wonder "if that kid wasn't killed for his money more than anything else."

Commander McGonigal recollected roughly "'fifty or sixty' anecdotes" of poor CAP behavior, including one team extorting money from the peasants by occupying their bridge, and another squad placing suspected communists and even PFs into barb-wire boxes as a form of

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201 "Charlie" was a GI slang term for the Viet Cong. It is derived from the call sign "Victor Charles," which was used to designate the Viet Cong.
202 Goodson, CAP Mot, 228-230.
punishment. While many teams did not use torture, Peterson sadly concludes that "given the brutalizing nature of the hamlet war, the experience of torture was probably the rule rather than the exception," and he maintains that the fact the VC did worse does nothing to lessen these actions' gravity. Lastly, McGonigal recalled a CAP team leader who actually kidnapped a young woman for his own sexual gratification. On top of this, CAP squads had to patch over offenses committed by the regular forces.\footnote{Ibid., 90.}

CAP Echo-2 flew into damage-control mode when an American, "for no apparent reason other than a hatred for all Vietnamese," launched a tear-gas grenade into a crowd of villagers while his truck roared past. As the men disposed of the weapon, one of them put the damage at about two months' work lost as a result of the stunt. Another Marine, not affiliated with the program, fired his .45 caliber sidearm several times in an ill-conceived attempt to drive away the burgeoning crowd of children gathering around him. One of the rounds struck a middle-aged woman who, had it not been for the CAP corpsman, would have died. Even some of the medical missions fell far short of their stated goal, as is shown by a US nurse who pushed pill after pill upon unsuspecting patients, regardless of their symptoms. Her potions included a witch's brew of mint and charcoal that she once prescribed for poor Vietnamese people suffering from stomach aches. The remedy's result led Corpsman Christiansen to conclude that this "was a good example of what not to do in our own villages." Moreover, these actions provided the Communists with an ample supply of propagandistic ammunition.\footnote{Moser, "Their Mission: Defend, Befriend," 60; Hemingway, Our War Was Different, 92,130.}

When an American flare torched a farmer's house, burning it to the ground, Echo-2 immediately set about re-building it to atone for the US mistake. This act, however, did not prevent the Viet Cong from seizing upon the incident and declaring with self-righteous
indignation that destruction like this is all the CAPs have brought to the villagers. Another
Communist propaganda leaflet recovered by CAP 2-7-2 in Quang Nam Province in 1970 warned
that if the Combined Action Groups continued their activities in the villages, which they insisted
did great harm to the villagers, then "you will be severely punished by the People's Liberation
Armed forces and even by the puppet troops who are working at your side, since they are also
Vietnamese." That last phrase highlights yet again the insider threats the Americans faced every
day. When Nuoc Ngot village blazed from a furious firefight, the Marines battling the Viet Cong
received a barrage of insults as well as bullets. Tom Krusewski, who served there from 1967-
1968, remembered the VC calling out to the Marines in English: "We are going to kill you, Ha-si
[Corporal] Willbite. You die Ha-si Ski." As for the villagers, they "were out there cheering" the
Viet Cong as their world burned around them. Not only did the Communists taunt the
Americans, but they identified them by name, a prospect with chilling implications. The Viet
Cong were not just in the Popular Forces or lurking about the village gates; in some, if not many
cases, they were the villagers.206

The southern insurgency, as has already been discussed, put down its roots in the villages
long before the Americans arrived in South Vietnam, as reflected by Fernand Gignon's
statement: "The Communists benefit from twenty years' experience in the jungle."207 Though the
Americans disrupted Communist control of the rural villages, the Viet Cong still remained a
force to be reckoned with despite the apparent US successes. An unidentified Communist
guerrilla once declared that "every villager has the mission of countering the enemy in every
way, for example, planting spikes along the rows of fruit trees, along the banks of fishponds, and

206 Moser, "Their Mission: Defend, Befriend," 60; Combined Action Force Command Chronology, January 11-
September 21, 1970, 83; Hemingway, Our War Was Different, 92.
207 Gignon, Les Américains Face au Viet-Cong, 70. "Les communistes bénéficient de vingt ans d'expérience de
jungle." Translation by author.
planting grenades in the chicken houses." VCS, or Viet Cong Sympathizers, also added supplying foodstuffs, providing shelter, running weapons and information, and sabotage to their repertoire of subversive activities. Their ages spanned from young to old, and where the Viet Cong were especially strong, nearly everyone was known to serve the National Liberation Front in some way, shape, or form. Wayne Christiansen recalled a small Vietnamese boy who showed up at his MEDCAP one day in 1970 with a bad arm wound that required serious suturing. Three weeks later, the Americans took the same boy into custody after they caught him fixing booby traps for the Viet Cong.\textsuperscript{208}

Marine Staff Sergeant Pat Finton remembered the great feeling he got when he and his men finished building a school house for the local children, only to see it engulfed in a blazing inferno just a few days after its dedication. Retaliating, the Viet Cong paid a ten-year-old village boy to set the school on fire. The boy was apprehended and the school later rebuilt, but such cases reveal the extent of Communist infiltration, even with Marines present in the villages. Many times, villagers used their familiarity with the Americans as a veil for their covert activities. One case involved a CAP that regularly bought Coca-Colas from the same lady, who proceeded to loiter around before leaving the area. Each time, the Communists ambushed the Americans. One evening, the Marines informed their Vietnamese vendor of their position and then set up elsewhere to monitor the location they had given her. When the Viet Cong appeared, the CAP had their proof that the "Coke lady" was really an informant.\textsuperscript{209}

On the night of July 11, 1969, a 2nd CAG combined platoon arrived at a hamlet to order its residents to extinguish their lights, when they zeroed in on a suspicious person entering the


village from a different direction. Upon seeing the Marines, a Vietnamese woman immediately warned the intruder, who fled before the Marines could apprehend him. Later that night, a second American patrol left the CAP's compound only to be ambushed by two waiting Vietnamese toting grenades. So was the reality in Vietnam, where a seemingly innocent-looking farmer could actually be a lethal enemy. Sometimes the villagers informed on more than American activities, as Saigon's endemic corruption and its brutal crackdown on pro-reform protests in 1966 both served to push some villagers into the communist camp. In one instance, a village chief who governed the area like a personal fiefdom received a warning from the Viet Cong to "shape up" or else. When that did not transpire, the chief fell victim to an assassination that was made possible with the help of fed-up villagers who gladly passed on information that allowed the assassins to target the chieftain. When South Vietnamese officials in the Huong Thuy district went on the hunt for "VC cadre leaders," the villagers brazenly provided the names of Saigon officials that the VC-allied villagers wanted gone.  

Interestingly, but not all that surprising given the villages' importance to the insurgents, the Viet Cong conducted a type of CAP-esque mission themselves. General Giap describes the Viet Cong's task in the so-called liberated zones as one of building "these areas in the political, economic, and cultural fields" so that they might "become shining models of a new life, of a new regime" that stood in opposition to the imperialists' dismal world. This task, he goes on, claims a position of paramount importance in the Communists' overall plan to liberate South Vietnam. With its roots dug deep, Viet Cong infiltration threatened the CAPs' goals and fragile achievements in a very real way.  

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\[210\] 2nd Combined Action Group Command Chronology, July 1-September 21, 1969, 35; Trullinger, Village at War, 124-25.

\[211\] Giap, The Military Art of People's War, 218.
When the Viet Cong attacked My Thuy Phuong village in 1967, it stood as the biggest attack ever staged by the Communists in that area until the end of the war, and it produced a nationalist ripple effect through the village's inhabitants. The Viet Cong most certainly played upon such nationalist stirrings in My Thuy Phuong, as can be seen from a one resident's testimony. A young student from that area described the village's feelings of that night's events as "very happy after they saw how brave the Liberation Front guerrillas could be in such an attack against the Americans. Many of us thought to ourselves, secretly, that we must support the Liberation Front." On April 17, 1969, the Viet Cong re-occupied Son Quang village and began "herding people out of the village." When CAP 1-4-2 failed to engage the Communists, who were using the civilians as human shields, it took the Popular Forces to convince the residents to return to the village. However, over 177 peasants were unaccounted for, "presumably back with the VC in their old hamlet across the river," and no longer convinced of the Americans' ability to protect them. Emboldened by nationalism, or other motives, villagers from every level of their society joined the VC, and some of them had connections to the very leadership with whom the Americans were trying to work.212

When Echo-2's Ronald "Pineapple" Schaedel and his fellow Marines found themselves abandoned by their PF counterparts, the VC soldier at the head of the enemy column let fly three bullets at close range that miraculously missed Schaedel, who quickly shot the man. That point man, Schaedel later discovered, turned out to be the Hiep Hoa elder's son, thus prompting Schaedel to ask for the old man's forgiveness. While the father believed his son had chosen the wrong side and forgave Schaedel, the villagers were not in a forgiving mood. When Echo-2 performed another MEDCAP a few days later, "the rest of the people, formerly friendly to the

212 Trullinger, Village at War, 123-24' Peterson, The Combined Action Platoons, 89.
Marines, seemed upset," and "few villagers turned up and those who did seemed frightened and hostile." General Dayan wrote that the US would be better off in Vietnam if local Vietnamese guarded their own villages, that way the villagers would claim a vendetta against the Viet Cong for any deaths that they caused, thus averting that blood vengeance from being directed at the Americans. For some, like the My Thuy Phuong student, to fight the Americans was a matter of patriotism. Still, not all villagers who supported the Americans were alike in their desire to support the Viet Cong.\(^{213}\)

Konrad Kellen observed in his 1969 RAND analysis on Viet Cong cohesion that initially there existed a romanticism in the villagers' view of the communist guerrillas. However, as time and the war dragged on, the Viet Cong maintained pressure via control mechanisms and propaganda to keep villages in line as their relationship became "a workable marriage of convenience," especially after some country dwellers began to see the Communists' promises to be illusory. For some young men, that meant combatting the Americans because they believed the Americans would eventually steal all the Vietnamese women after all the men had been killed. One captured guerrilla claimed that "the majority of the people in the village would prefer the Americans to leave the South" after conveying to his US captors the effects US defoliants were having upon local village life. Other captured fighters stated that US bombs ravaging the countryside fostered animosity among the rural peasantry, thus engendering hatred towards the Americans. Most villagers, it appeared, where caught in a terrible crossfire where "it was a no-win situation for them. They didn't care who won the war: they were caught in the middle. The villagers just wanted peace." In the end, Kellen's statement on the Viet Cong and

the villages cuts to the very heart of the CAPs' difficulties: the communist insurgency was "an ingroup" with "deep roots in the population."\(^{214}\)

Michael Peterson summons the perfect image of both the harsh reality and frustrating nature inherent to CAP service. Despite all the effort poured into the civil action projects; despite all the blood shed to defend the villages, sometimes it all seemed for naught. One CAP Marine captured the lethal conundrum that always threatened the platoons' mission: "'I don't think the VC have ever left this village,'" he said. "'It's like when we play volleyball every night. A former VC officer is captain of the villagers' team, probably still is a VC. But he's a real go-getter. Gives us a heck of a lot of help when it comes to putting in wells.'" In fact, the Viet Cong once walked into that same village and absconded with two pairs of boots, two field packs, two pairs of USMC fatigues, and one USMC helmet. The Marine's next words reveal why this was able to occur with such ease: "Our biggest problem is the village chief. Oh, he smiles a lot, a real yes man, but he's never given us cooperation. The most helpful man in the ville, like I told you, is the VC officer. He gets everything organized." In some instances, the Viet Cong were still very much in control, and accounts such as this show that the American CAPs had not uprooted the Viet Cong's infrastructure to the extent needed to actually pacify South Vietnam.\(^{215}\)

Nevertheless, the Marines pressed on. Some felt they were finally doing some real good by getting into the villages and helping Vietnam's people. Still, one CAP Marine summed up their mission in one brief sentence: "'This is not the Peace Corps.'" Although the fierce set-piece battles that defined previous wars were fewer in Vietnam, the CAPs still fought a war, even if it was differently defined. For them, theirs was "a war of confinement, boredom, frustration, and

\(^{214}\) Kellen, A View of the VC, 14, 18-19, 71; Hemingway, Our War Was Different, 162.

\(^{215}\) Peterson, The Combined Action Platoons, 71, 89.
apprehension," and sometimes sheer terror, a recurring theme that endured for the rest of the war.\textsuperscript{216}

After their highwater mark in 1969, the CAP program gradually shrank, as the Marine Corps and US presence dwindled with the onset of Vietnamization. By 1971, all of the 114 CAP teams in Vietnam ceased to exist. In 1975, the final verdict on the US effort in South Vietnam was rendered when North Vietnamese tanks burst through the Presidential Palace gates and raised the communist banner over Saigon. Like many who served in Vietnam, CAP veterans wrestled with questions over whether or not their struggles and sacrifices had been for nothing. Beyond the private thoughts of these veterans, another question emerged in the war's study, as some historians started to ponder if Vietnam could have been won had the CAP strategy been given more attention. This question has served as the crux of this project, and it is this question that this thesis will now attempt to address.

\textsuperscript{216} Moser, "Their Mission: Defend, Befriend," 58.
CONCLUSION
CAP- WAS IT THE SILVER BULLET?

Although the war ended for the United States in 1973, and for the Vietnamese in 1975, the debate over whether or not the Combined Action Program could have been the war-winning formula rages on among historians, especially with the renewed interest in pacification and counter-insurgency due to the recent Afghan and Iraq Wars following September 11, 2001. Still, the revitalized interest hardly obscures the fact that combined action has oftentimes been banished to history's shadowy corners. According to Southard, most Vietnam War histories either ignore the CAPs or "fail to provide any extensive description of the program." Only when "large-unit war" scholars began to justify America's actions in Vietnam and try to prove that the US cause was just did CAPs start to make their way into the official historical record. Before that, CAPs were at best a footnote. As the United States finds itself fighting insurgents in the Middle East, the US military has reached into its history once more to resurrect long-forgotten tactics that might give it an edge in future wars, but while the military hopes to find a CAP concept that will work in the Middle East, the question still remains: did it work in Vietnam?

When one considers this question, one finds a spectrum of views. Major Curtis Williamson, USMC, whose thesis's sub-title paints the program as an alternative strategy, maintains that the combined platoons and pacification would have defeated the Communists, and furthermore, he advocated an approach similar to Krulak's proposal in the mid-1960s. Like the general, Williamson saw a two-sided war where CAP-like Special Forces fought the insurgents

217 "Large-unit" or "big-unit war" historians are scholars who advocate for Westmoreland's conventional war strategy over pacification as the correct strategic approach in Vietnam. Many also maintain that the Vietnam War was also winnable.

218 Southard, Defend and Befriend, 157-158.
as guerrillas, while large conventional maneuver battalions fixed and destroyed the NVA regulars. Marine Major Charles Driest also signaled his support for the CAPs as the key to a Vietnam victory, and former Army officer and history professor Andrew Krepinevich commended the program for its demonstrated effectiveness, while blaming Westmoreland's attritional mindset for the program's second-place status. Moreover, RAND analyst Austin Long judged the CAPs to be a "road to victory, since it secured the villages, while forcing the VC to attack en masse, thus rendering them vulnerable to American firepower." Even though Lewis Sorely never calls the platoons by name, the anti-guerrilla methodology that he spotlighted in his book *A Better War* strongly mirrored the same tactics practiced by the Marines' polyglot squads. However, McAllister writes that "whether their employment on a larger scale would have led to more or fewer US casualties," or victory, are both "issues of historical debate" with its opposition presenting arguments that merit just as much attention.219

Author Michael Hennessy concluded that both the conventional and pacification plans failed to address the situation in Vietnam, and that the United States failed to send enough troops to prove effective in the war, an argument that noted Vietnam historian John Prados found crippling to the author's own cause due to his "focus on the Marines, whose troop levels were inherently limited to the size of the Corps." Unlike Krulak or Williamson, Hennessy never proposed a hybrid form of the two strategies. However, other noted military historians take a clearer stand.220

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Mark Moyar, a department chair at the Marine Corps University in 2008, credited the platoons with curbing PF desertions and stymying Viet Cong efforts in the villages, but in the end, the CAPs amounted to no more than a stop gap measure. His exact words describing the teams were a "short-term fix" that allowed the South Vietnamese to hold the enemy at bay, but failed in the long-term due to South Vietnamese leadership failures that eventually lost the war for Saigon and the US. Patrick Lange takes a more middle-of-the-road approach, claiming that the program's viability will never be accurately assessed for two reasons: 1. the program was never fully exploited and; 2. the United States lost the war. However, Michael Peterson held the line that the CAPs failed in Vietnam, citing the Marine Corps' "musclebound" conventional mindset, as well as their self-deluding beliefs concerning the platoons' actual results, as major hindrances. In short, "Vietnam was a problem for which there was no American solution." Even the Department of Defense had its doubts during the war.\textsuperscript{221}

In 1968, the DoD determined the teams to be ineffective due to higher casualty rates than the PFs. Furthermore, the department was gravely disappointed that only 1.4 capable PF units were produced for every CAP in the field when the goal was to produce three. Overall, the DoD concluded that after three years in Vietnam, there existed "no evidence that US Marines have been able to withdraw from a CAP solely because their Vietnamese counterparts were able to take over. Even though he supported the CAP concept, Thomas Arminio conceded that no one really knew if the 93 CAPs who turned over village control to the PFs had done so because the area was really secure, or because the villagers or the PFs made a deal with the Communists. Nevertheless, it is to this debate that this thesis wishes to contribute.\textsuperscript{222}

\textsuperscript{221} Moyar, \textit{A Question of Command}, 155; Lange, \textit{A Forgotten Lesson for Contemporary Counterinsurgency Operations}, 9; Peterson, \textit{The Combined Action Platoons}, 125.
As stated in the Introduction, the Combined Action Platoons' goal of pacifying Vietnam, and thereby winning the Vietnam War, could not have been achieved for the following reasons: the cultural reality in Vietnam; indifference to guerrilla war strategy in MACV and the Marine Corps; the Vietnam War's strategic duality and; the relative ease with which pacification's successes could be undone. To be more precise, there simply were too many moving parts that made up an extraordinarily complicated war that the United States did not fully understand. In many ways, this project agrees with Peterson in that there really was no US answer to what was always a Vietnamese question.

First, the United States did not fully understand the complex culture that made up Vietnamese society, relying instead on colonialist assumptions that presented a far too simplistic portrait of Vietnam that misled the Americans into believing that the Vietnamese simply awaited Western enlightenment. Frances Fitzgerald recognized in 1972 the error in the Americans' ways, claiming that the US intervened in the midst of a great political and cultural transformation in Vietnam that began well before the Americans' arrival. Vietnamese scholar Nguyen Quan confirms this in 1994 by describing the period 1858-1945 as a century where Vietnamese society "went through radical changes," as colonial-capitalist economic development, European influence on Vietnamese culture and philosophy, and eventually Marxism's emergence all made indelible marks on Vietnam's character. For the Vietnamese, 1887, 1945, and 1954 might as well have happened yesterday. That upheaval continued into the 1960s and 1970s, as Hunt illustrated when he detailed how some idealistic Viet Cong sought to overhaul completely traditional Vietnamese culture, while other cadres took a gentler approach in their dealings with village elders. This strengthens Hunt's point that these Viet Cong realized they could not very well destroy the very culture that shaped their identity, which in turn reveals the war's deep
cultural complexities. Although the CAP possessed great potential as a counter-insurgency weapon, there was no way they could have attained the understanding needed to address the myriad issues confronting Vietnamese society at the time.223

Vietnam and the United States came from two vastly different backgrounds. Everything about Vietnamese culture, as was seen in Chapter I, points to a society composed of various cultural cross-currents that do not fit into a "one-size-fits-all" doctrine, let alone the practice of Western-style democracy. For example, the 1960s counter-insurgency expert Douglas Pike found the electoral process's introduction to Vietnam to be a source of cultural tension, observing that both northern and southern Vietnamese nursed a deep skepticism of the idea due to its winner-take-all nature. This defied, Pike claimed, the village tradition of "private arrangements" that sought to defuse local political confrontations by striking a compromise that attempted to leave no party too bitter. Pike contends that this distrust of democracy's most fundamental institution connects to the simple fact that nowhere in Vietnam's history is there any evidence of democratic practices, or what Pike calls a "heritage of democracy." However, corruption in South Vietnamese elections point to a different reality where there existed many bitter parties and power often rested in the hands of juntas who cared little for such compromises. Still, a particular part of Pike's observation merits closer scrutiny.224

Vietnam did not have a democratic history, and there existed no precedent for American-style democracy in Vietnamese history. The villages themselves, as demonstrated in Chapter I, were just as varied as Vietnam's regions, and their economic and political systems hardly followed a uniform code, therefore one should not overlook Pike's use of the phrase "private

arrangements." This connects directly to one of the CAPs', and the US's, greatest challenges when it came to nation-building in South Vietnam, a challenge whose essence is captured in an old Vietnamese saying: "'The Emperor's Edict ends at the hamlet gates.'" Villages were unique communities unto themselves with their own traditions, cultural and political, which villagers preferred to attend to themselves. Simply put, the villages fiercely prized their autonomy. Latham's assessment that Vietnamese society did not prove malleable to the modernization theories of the day comes to mind in this case, since village societies were not malleable for the CAP program to mold all the "private arrangements" that made up every village in South Vietnam, let alone understand them. Even more pressingly, most CAP Marines could not even speak the language.\textsuperscript{225}

As many historians have noted, the program severely lacked adequate language training. While the CAPs did accomplish a great deal given this handicap, a program expansion would have been pointless if there were was no corresponding increase in language training and its quality. Moreover, an expansion would have placed an added strain on the program - and possibly the US mission in Vietnam - had the strategy been adopted by MACV. The problem would be the US military developing a language program that could adequately teach the entire US force in that country how to speak Vietnamese, a daunting and frankly impossible proposition. Although some CAP Marines acquired more study after the CAP School added a month-long Vietnamese course to their curriculum, this addition remained inadequate in developing the necessary skills to communicate effectively with the PFs and the villagers. One month is hardly enough time to even begin to grasp the subtleties of a tonal language like Vietnamese, where the difference in pitch determines what word one is saying. The likelihood

\textsuperscript{225} Peterson, \textit{The Combined Action Platoons}, 115.
of error and miscommunication was far too great, and too much was at stake for such errors to not have an effect on the mission at hand. Furthermore, CAP language skills centered upon communicating military terms to the PFs, and as anyone who has ever taken a foreign language course knows, there is far more to any language than a few terms and phrases. In the end, the language barrier proved too formidable for the CAPs to overcome given the time and urgency of the task at hand.

Another hindrance to CAP effectiveness came from within the US military itself. MACV officers beginning with Westmoreland, and including US Marine officials as well, had no faith in the program's ability to pacify South Vietnam. For those like Westmoreland, pacification was a job for the South Vietnamese, not Americans. Firepower from the air and the ground, like World War II, was the American way of war, not a painstakingly slow expansion of pacified areas. As seen in previous chapters, MACV and the US government largely adhered to a conventionally-centered prosecution of the war that resulted from what many historians have judged to be a misdiagnosis of the situation in Vietnam. On the subject of CAPs, McAllister notes that there existed "virtually no evidence that Johnson or his civilian advisors ever debated or seriously considered the CAP question," thus revealing the Johnson Administration's indifference to the program's very existence. In addition, General Krulak's failure to persuade Johnson to pacification's efficacy reinforces even more this argument that pacification would always come secondary to the large-unit war. This indifference segues into the duality that was the Vietnam War.\footnote{McAllister, "Who Lost Vietnam?,'' 106.}

According to some historians, Vietnam was not a standard counter-insurgency nor conventional war. As far as this project is concerned, that assessment is correct, for it was both.
Hanoi's strategy rested upon maximum flexibility, with Communist main forces seeking to prolong the war by spreading US forces across the countryside. One example of this was the 1966-1967 NVA/VC DMZ assaults and how the Marines' re-deployment to that area "played into the hands of the NVA," who hoped to "disperse American forces across I Corps to achieve gains in the guerrilla campaign." Hennessy cites Giap's strategic argument that US forces had to "be drawn to the South's periphery to be engaged in large battles while the local guerrilla forces exploited tactical opportunities within the the population centers," thus providing more substance to the idea of maximum flexibility. Such adaptability appeared elsewhere in Vietnam as well. In the Mekong Delta region, if the Americans focused on conventional tactics, so did the guerrillas, but should the Americans shift to pacification mode, the Viet Cong dispersed into decentralized bands and strove to spread the US forces thin. This way, American troops could not concentrate on a specific area, nor would the communists' infrastructure be in danger of being rolled up should a cadre fall victim to the Americans' hunt. The enemy's highly reactive nature continued to provide validity to the "search and destroy" operations, as General Walt agreed, especially given the fact that the CAPs possessed no antidote to combat the NVA without the aid of US fire support. CAPs, by themselves, were too small and few to stand up to North Vietnamese regiments. It is reasonable to assume that had the United States shifted its plans to a CAP-like focus, the North Vietnamese would have simply altered their own strategy accordingly, just as they did in Binh Dinh Province in 1964.227

The strategic transition described above would have made it extremely difficult for pacification to take root. Not only would more and more troops be needed to operate in the villages, but those same troops would be reliant on American air and artillery power to provide

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227 Southard, Defend and Befriend, 131; Hennessy, Strategy in Vietnam, 128; Denison and Stewart, Pacification and the Viet Cong, 60-61, 64-65.
them with security, as they would become the targets of NVA/VC main forces. This would result in an overall escalation of all US military forces in South Vietnam due to the need to combat the Communist regulars. This scenario stands as a possible contradiction to the assertion made by CAP/pacification champions that these types of operations gained positive results for the US at a much lower cost in men and material, and it does not preclude the possibility that "search and destroy" would have gained precedence anyway. The 1968 Tet Offensive clearly altered the CAP mission, turning the static squads into mobile teams whose main goal was to ambush and disrupt the Viet Cong insurgency. In effect, they became guerrillas who sought out and destroyed communist insurgents. As historians like Peterson, Southard, and Moyar pointed out, the mobile operations left little time for the essential civic action projects required to "win hearts and minds," and had MACV switched back to conventionally-driven war plans, the Communists would again adopt guerrilla-based tactics.

The marriage-of-two-strategies proposed by Krulak and endorsed by Williamson was never tried, and therefore, historians can only speculate upon its possible effects. However, given MACV's and the US government’s attitude towards pacification in general, this idea's adoption seems unlikely, given the fact that a limited, "other war" like Vietnam "is the hardest to fight, especially for a democracy," because "it requires a degree of patience that the voters, especially American voters, do not have." This was the United States's Achilles heel in Vietnam, for they faced a foe "who thought in terms of years, not days, centuries, not decades," a mindset that directly clashed with the American government's desire for a quick and straight-forward solution to the war. Despite its potential, this was something that a CAP-based alternative could not possibly deliver. Also, one must take into account that when General Abrams did adopt a more pacification-focused strategy in 1968, that strategy served the larger goal of Vietnamization.
and US withdrawal, not winning the war over an undefined span of time. Because of the indefinite timespan, there is much that can occur that can unravel months, and even years, of hard work, thus leading one to consider the fragility of the program's successes.228

The last point made in the Introduction concerned success's fragility. One recalls Goodson's CAP and the PFs on the verge of a private war amongst themselves over a fatal miscommunication, or the hostility exhibited toward Colonel Danowitz after a Marine mistakenly killed one of their number. Cultural misunderstandings and outright thefts also harmed the program's prospects, and while many CAP researchers have determined these incidents to be anecdotal, the fact remains that the CAPs were a part of the US military machine in Vietnam, and were therefore the US military's representatives in the villages. This, in effect, made the CAPs responsible, not only for their actions, but the actions of the non-CAP forces as well, thus compounding the difficulty in an already delicate task. While some CAPs achieved solid relations with the villagers, others did not. A quote from Peterson's interview with a CAP veteran helps to illustrate this point. When a peasant asked this man if peace was at hand, the man replied "not yet." A Kit Carson scout "overheard one of these exchanges and laughingly said, 'Trung si, as long as there is one VC left alive, there will never be peace!'"229 This sentiment easily combines with Goodson's fear for Vietnam, where "our influence would be only momentary. The growth of Communist oppression and terror would regain its hold as soon as our troops left." Unlike a conventional war, where an army can be broken, and one man will make little difference, only one is needed to keep an insurgency's flame burning, and the actions of one can quickly destroy a progress that took years to build. Once more, the American people

228 Irwin Unger and Debi Unger, LBJ: A Life (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1999), 341.
229 A "Kit Carson Scout" was a NVA defector who fought alongside the US/ARVN. Trung si is Vietnamese for "sergeant."
would have had no patience for such a war. This connects to the last point that this project hoped to make: only the native population can truly see pacification through to victory.  

Both the French and American high commands enacted similar strategies in their respective Vietnam wars. From technological advantages, reliance on body counts, the similarities between the GCMA and CAP concepts, and their respective Vietnamization processes, a strong parallel exists between their wars' conduct. At some point in their Vietnamese campaigns, both powers realized the essential role played by the local populace. In 1969, Goodson wrote to his mother how the Vietnamese had no concept of or interest in the American way. Around the same time, he recalled PF Sergeant Taan ruefully prophesying: "Someday you go home. No more fight VC. No way for me, my family to be free. We will fight and die forever." These two scenes further illustrate how South Vietnam's existence remained contingent upon the US presence there, for if South Vietnam were to survive, or adopt a communist alternative, it had to do so for itself. The key to victory did lie within the Vietnamese people, but for a long time the United States attempted to win a Vietnamese war for the South Vietnamese. As long as Washington took the lead, Saigon followed, but in the end, only Saigon and the Vietnamese people could achieve the victory that eluded both the French and the Americans. That victory evaded Paris and Washington because it was not their victory to be had.

This extends into pacification as well. If one is to play the numbers game, statistics like the Hamlet Evaluation Survey cited by Krepinevich highlights to a point the CAPs' effectiveness by stating that CAP villages made twice as much progress than non-CAP villages, but this again only shows US effectiveness. What would have been more impressive, and more hopeful for

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230 Peterson, The Combined Action Platoons, 79; Goodson, CAP Mot, 260, 278.
South Vietnam, would be high marks for the PFs in non-CAP villages, which would have been the sorely needed proof that the South Vietnamese were taking the initiative in their own defense. If anything, HES stats like that cited above reflect even more that the United States could not accomplish what only the South Vietnamese could ultimately do. Cosmas's and Murray's assessment of the state of pacification's progress fortify this idea.

They determined that pacification in 1970 largely failed to match 1969's gains because of "South Vietnamese complacency," Saigon focusing on the Cambodian incursion, "and to increased Viet Cong and North Vietnamese anti-pacification activities." While some ARVN units fought well, many did not, and the PFs were not reputed for their sterling combat prowess. Many ARVN commanders disdained pacification as much as the US, therefore refusing to devote much time and effort to it, as Moyar related. Furthermore, as a Command Chronology report cited earlier in this project revealed, some PFs and district chiefs wanted the CAPs to stay put so they would have access to US artillery rather than take the initiative. Still, in spite of this, some continue to believe that CAPs and counter-insurgency held the answer to Vietnam's bloody turmoil, but no matter the what road would have been taken, that road ultimately led back to the South Vietnamese people.

US Army officer John Nagl contended in his book *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife* that had the US military possessed the flexibility that the British Army had during the Malay Emergency, and therefore weened themselves from the prevailing firepower emphasis and adopted a pacification approach, than Vietnam would have been a success. However, Colgate University professor A.J. Rotter counters with several interesting points, notably that the British

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231 According to Peterson, 1969 was the high-water mark for the CAP Program. The program gradually shrank with the Marine Corps’ phased withdrawal from the country, which ended in 1971. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 67.

Army had extensive experience with unconventional warfare throughout its institutional history, and the British successfully managed to establish a viable Malayan government with enough economic and political credibility to sway the people from the communists' message. Moreover, that insurgency, which Rotter claims was never more than 3500, was limited to ethnic Chinese who lacked the scope and power of the Viet Cong. However, it is Rotter's next statement that demands particular attention.233

The United States was unable to establish or support a viable government in Saigon that could rival Ho Chi Minh's nationalist appeal, and Rotter maintains that adopting counter-insurgency tactics would have made little difference either in nation-building or the overall course of the war. The reason was simple: "It was up to the South Vietnamese to show that they cared enough about an alternative to Ho Chi Minh to fight for their independence. If they did not care, or if not enough of them did, no amount of American cleverness, no number of villages pacified or communist cadre 'neutralized,' would have been enough to win the Vietnam War." To paraphrase a later US president expounding upon a later war, the US would stand down in Vietnam as the South Vietnamese stood up. In the end, not enough South Vietnamese stood up, especially in the villages.234

Another conclusion that must be mentioned is Latham's reference to the unmalleability of Vietnamese culture to SHI-type programs. The combined action concept was a part of a pacification effort that was a product of its time, and the dominant pacification theory of that time was modernization theory, a theory now thoroughly debunked by historians, sociologists, and political scientists. This unmalleability stood as the CAPs greatest enemy, since cultures and nations cannot be quickly molded into a desired shape like a piece of clay. Along with the

234 Ibid., 162-163.
aforementioned obstacles, the platoons were driving up against cultural, historical, and sociological customs, traditions, mores, and world views that developed over centuries and defined what it meant to be Vietnamese, a definition the Americans did not comprehend. As long as US pacification strategies rested upon modernization theory's shaky foundations, the likelihood of any success for any of its resulting programs, the CAPs included, would have been marginal at best. Nevertheless, this does not diminish the CAPs' relevance to the present day.

In the 21st century, the United States confronts an all too familiar situation in the Middle East, fighting once more shadowy insurgencies who defy traditional military doctrine's remedies. As a result, the past fifteen years since September 11, 2001 show that the CAPs and their methods prove relevant to today, and therefore warrant a deeper study in order to glean any possible applications to America's current battlefields. As Iraq descended deeper into an insurgent-ridden land laden with sectarian strife, Patrick Lange reflected upon how the US military came to this point in 2006 Iraq after having years of counter-insurgency experience in Vietnam. His observations determined Vietnam to be a blueprint "of what not to do and how not to fight," thereby turning "the US military away from counterinsurgency warfare" and towards "the war it prefers to engage-large scale conventional." As a captain at the Marine Corps Basic School in the 1970s, Mike Wyly noticed that the "instructors were Vietnam vets, but they were ordered not to talk about Vietnam" because the next war would be fought conventionally against the Soviets. This refusal to discuss and retain Vietnam's lessons led directly to what Lange describes as a military system "in crisis action mode," trying to re-visit and re-learn "lessons learned three decades past" so Iraq and Afghanistan did not become synonymous with Vietnam.235

Such "re-learning" has come at a steep price in terms of US lives lost. Because of the gross inattention paid to counter-insurgency in the years after Vietnam, the US Army and Marines lacked the proper protective gear "against the time-honored insurgent tactic of roadside bombs," nor did they possess any of the essential "political, diplomatic, and linguistic skills they needed to accomplish" their mission in Iraq. As has been demonstrated in this project, all of the above were vital aspects of the CAP program that could have been developed further had not the US military blatantly discarded the pertinent successes, mistakes, and lessons that could have been learned. Such a study did not take place in earnest until the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with the publication in 2007 of The US Army-Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual; the first such comprehensive doctrine on the subject in twenty years for the Army, and twenty-five for the Marine Corps.236

General David Petraeus, US Army, re-vamped and re-wrote the military's counter-insurgency playbook, having completed two deployments to Iraq and a command at the US Army's Combined Arms Center. As the US military's top officer overseeing Mosul, Iraq just after the 2003 invasion, Petraeus employed a multi-faceted strategy aimed at developing his northern Iraqi sector's political and economic infrastructures, while also working "to build Iraqi security forces" to provide security within the city's environs. Upon returning to the US in 2005 to assume command of the Combined Arms Center, Petraeus formed a tight bond with fellow counter-insurgency advocate General James Mattis, USMC, thus furthering the development of a comprehensive counter-insurgency doctrine. He also targeted "the Army's extensive education systems, making training officers about counterinsurgency his top priority." However, despite

the acclaim that eventually greeted the new manual's release, the same specter that haunted US efforts in Vietnam threatens US missions in the present day.237

As the Iraq War morphed into a guerrilla campaign, General James Mattis ordered in 2004 that all battalions in his First Marine Division, one of the divisions that employed CAPs during Vietnam, contain a combined action platoon to work with the Iraqis. Distressingly, Mattis's orders went largely unheeded, since "only a few CAPs operated in Iraq," and even more distressing, "Marine CAPs in Iraq did not receive anywhere near the level of support or guidance from the upper echelons of the Marine Corps as did the combined units in Vietnam," a shocking revelation given the CAPs' agonizing litany of struggles during that war. Even after Petraeus's manual's 2007 publication, the Marine Corps failed to follow the lessons of its own history. By the summer of 2009, "the only two CAPs in Iraq had disbanded and the implementation of Marine combined action died with the departure of General Mattis and the First Marine Division." One clearly sees that even today, CAP missions are not taken seriously. When one compares the Vietnam and Iraq Wars' "combat phases," 1965-1973 and 2003-2011 respectively, one notices the glaring difference of a mere two CAPs used in Iraq, to the 114 units that conducted counterinsurgency in Vietnam. Furthermore, the new counter-insurgency manual "devotes several pages to combined action, including a tribute to CAPs in Vietnam as 'a model for countering insurgencies.'" The fact that this model is not being followed at all can only have harsh reprecussions for the US in future wars.238

Just as some French commanders began to realize in the 1950s in Indochina, so must the United States realize in future wars that what worked or did not work in the past may or may not be applicable to the present. Petraeus himself says as much: "You cannot fight former

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237 Ibid., xv-xvi.
238 Southard, Defend and Befriend, 148-149.
Saddamists and Islamic extremists the same way you would have fought the Viet Cong, Moros, or Tupamoros," but nevertheless, the insurgents of the past and present "use variations of standard themes and adhere to elements of a recognizable revolutionary campaign plan."

However, it is only by the retention and constant re-evaluation of the past that historians and military officials can make a more concrete determination as to what kinds of lessons can be adapted and applied. 239

In the interim between Vietnam and Iraq/Afghanistan, the same doctrine-bound outlook prevailed, thus the reckless discarding of Vietnam's counter-insurgency tactics, and the subsequent (and arduous) re-learning process taking place alongside the urgencies of war. If the United States is to confront the challenges presented by future insurgent factions, the US must not ignore the CAPs' operations. Moreover, it most certainly cannot undergo a counter-insurgency crash course in times of war like in Iraq and Afghanistan, for if the historical, cultural, and linguistic elements of a counter-insurgency campaign are not developed before such a campaign begins, they most certainly cannot be developed effectively in the midst of a war. For this reason, the CAPs' legacy must be studied and built upon. With the Obama Administration's "pivot to Asia" to confront China's growing military power in the Far East and the Pacific Rim, the United States is once more walking down the "conventional war" path at the expense of its counter-insurgency experience. Although the CAPs' overall mission to preserve South Vietnam failed, should the study of their past achievements and failures eventually produce a more effective understanding of counter-insurgency, than no matter the outcome of the Vietnam War, the CAPs will not have fought in vain.

The Combined Action Platoons valiantly struggled to achieve a mission against odds stacked heavily against them, both by the enemy and the enemy within, and it is a testament to their courage and dedication that they accomplished what they did. Nonetheless, there existed too many moving parts, among them the history, linguistic complexities, and the culture, that proved too much for such a small program to address. On top of this, its ad hoc origins made it very difficult for a coherent strategy and training program that would address the intricacies of the "other war" to be developed. In short, there was no way the CAPs, no matter how skilled, could win the war alone, even with the combined military might of the United States. That had to come from the Vietnamese.

In the end, the "other war" not only had to be fought differently, but seen differently. Great military commanders achieve their greatest victories, in part, through their ability to see the battlefield through their enemy's eyes and react accordingly. A great counter-insurgency commander must be able to view and interpret the world through the eyes of both the guerrilla and his people in order to be successful. Whether it is Vietnam, Afghanistan, or Iraq, this appears to be the challenge facing America as it continues to march into the 21st century, and for this reason, the debate to which this project humbly attempts to contribute, will continue decades into the future.
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