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**War As They Knew It: Revolutionary
War and Counterinsurgency
in Southeast Asia**

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ABSTRACT

Since the end of the Second World War, Maoist-inspired revolutions based on the People's War model have swept through Southeast Asia like a raging prairie fire. The two most carefully studied of all the Southeast Asian revolutionary struggles are those of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) against the British in Malaya, and that of the Vietminh, Vietcong and Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DVRN) in Vietnam. With good reason, these two case studies have become "meta-models" in the art of revolutionary war and counter-insurgency (COIN). The successful containment of the Malayan Emergency spelt the only victory won by a Western democracy against practitioners of revolutionary warfare, while Vietnam stood out as the first case of the success of the People's War model when it defeated two major Western powers in succession. This paper thus relies on the above two paradigms to explain the COIN approaches of the Americans (dominated by military annihilation) and the British (shaped by decades of imperial policing) in Southeast Asia. By examining the British experience in the Malayan Emergency and that of the Americans in the Vietnam War, this paper explores the two distinctively different trajectories that British and American military cultures took, which ultimately determined their respective response to revolutionary war in Southeast Asia. The focus is on the British and American approaches in the following four key components of COIN strategy—utility of military force, civil-military relations, population security and propaganda—for it is in these four crucial areas that the battle for hearts and minds takes place. The state's performance within this interconnected quadrant ultimately dictates the success or failure in countering revolutionary war, simply because it is through them that the power of the word and deed is most keenly felt by the population and the revolutionary. Many students of COIN have acknowledged the importance of the credibility factor but none have addressed its pertinence within an integrated approach to COIN and counter-revolution. This paper thus demonstrates that insurgencies and revolutionary wars are, by their ontological nature, "credibility wars" and, as such, credibility is the cornerstone—the sine qua non—in any COIN campaign.

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War As They Knew It: Revolutionary War and Counterinsurgency in Southeast Asia

“You fight your way and I fight my way.” – Mao Zedong

In *Carnage and Culture*, Victor Davis Hanson suggests that since the days of classical antiquity, Western culture has evolved a way of war so lethally precise that it now “exercises global political, economic, cultural, and military power far greater than the size its territory or population might otherwise suggest”. He argues that the Western way of war that seeks the annihilation and destruction of the enemy in head-to-head combat is amoral, “shackled rarely by concerns of ritual, tradition, religion, or ethics, by anything other than military necessity”.¹ Hanson’s denomination of a universal Western way of war as one based on amoral military annihilation is perhaps far too sweeping, but there is a kernel of truth in his suggestion that culture is a prime determinant of how civilizations, nation states and non-state actors wage war. The writings of Antoine Jomini and Carl Von Clausewitz have come to fundamentally shape the Western perspective of war. The same can be said of Sun Tze’s impact in the Orient and ultimately on Maoist Revolutionary War. Military commanders in the West, schooled in the Jominian and Clausewitzian tradition are trained to seek decisive military victories while their counterparts in the East eschew combat when possible. John Keegan views Oriental warfare characterized by its peculiar traits of evasion, delay and indirectness, as distinct from the European way of war.² The key difference between the Oriental and Western way of war is, however, the ability of the former to “do a better job of harnessing the perceptions and common sense of the people in contact with the enemy”.³ This emphasis on working among the population to harness the perceptions of the masses, loosely defined as the “Tao” in the very first page of Sun Tze’s *The Art of War*, would reach its apogee with Mao’s development of the People’s War concept.

Although the French Revolution gave rise to “the people in arms” concept, “the first great step toward mass citizen armies”, the French Revolution “unfolded in a way that

¹ Victor Davis Hanson, *Why the West has Won: Carnage and Culture from Salamis to Vietnam*, London: Faber and Faber, 2001.

² John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (p. 397), London: Pimlico, 2004.

³ John Poole, *Phantom Soldier: The Enemy’s Answer to U.S. Firepower* (p. 13), Emerald Isle, NC: Posterity Press, 2001.

never led to Revolutionary War in the full modern sense”.⁴ The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars were fought by patriotic citizen sons of France defending the French state against an external military threat of a conventional nature. The People’s Revolutionary War that we know of today draws its inspiration not from Revolutionary France, but the experiences of Mao as he led the Chinese Red Army in its protracted war against the Japanese in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), and the Nationalist Army of Chiang Kai Shek in the Chinese Civil War (1927–1950). Revolutionary War as Mao knew it, unfolds in three distinct stages. The first stage is defensive, characterized by guerrilla operations and the building up of an underground organization within the population. Preparation for the counter-offensive takes place in the second stage whereby the tempo of guerrilla operations is increased in tandem with the expansion of the underground infrastructure and population control. Upon reaching the point of equilibrium, the third and final stage, the strategic counter-offensive is launched culminating in open warfare until the achievement of complete revolutionary victory.⁵ In the opinion of Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl, a renowned Counterinsurgency (COIN) expert in the U.S. Army, Mao’s theory of Revolutionary War is “an even closer interlinking of the people, the army, and the government than that discovered by Napoleon and analysed by Clausewitz” thus leading to the “greatest revolution in military thought since the ideas of Clausewitz”.⁶ Colonel Thomas Hammes, of the United States Marine Corps (USMC), hails Mao as “the father of a new strategic approach to war”, whose People’s War concept was the “fundamental work upon which the fourth generation of war would be built”.⁷ Indeed, from Algeria to Vietnam, Mao’s vision of People’s War became the preferred weapon of anti-colonial revolutionary movements, communist or otherwise.

Since the end of the Second World War, Maoist inspired revolutions based on the People’s War model have swept through Southeast Asia like a raging prairie fire. The two most carefully studied of all the Southeast Asian revolutionary struggles are those of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) against the British in Malaya, and that of the Vietminh, Vietcong and Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DVRN) in Vietnam. With good reason, these

⁴ John Shy and Thomas W. Collier, “Revolutionary War”, in Peter Paret (Ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy; From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (p. 824), Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986.

⁵ Robert Thompson, *Revolutionary War in World Strategy 1945–1969* (p. 5), London: Secker & Warburg, 1970.

⁶ John, A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (p. 21), Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2002.

⁷ Thomas X. Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century* (pp. 54–55), St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2006.

two case studies have become “meta-models” in the art of Revolutionary War and COIN. The successful containment of the Malayan Emergency spelt the only victory won by a Western democracy against practitioners of Revolutionary Warfare, while Vietnam stood out as the first case of People’s War to have succeeded in defeating two major Western powers in succession. This paper shall thus rely on the above two paradigms to explain the COIN approaches of the Americans (dominated by military annihilation), and the British (shaped by an imperial policing experience that led to the development of an integrated civil-military response that demanded the use of minimal force) in Southeast Asia, as well as the intricacies of Maoist Revolutionary Warfare. By examining the British experience in the Malayan Emergency, and that of the Americans in the Vietnam War, this study will explore the two distinctively different trajectories that British and American military cultures took, which ultimately determined their respective response to Revolutionary War in Southeast Asia.

The focus will be on the British and American approaches in the following four key components of COIN strategy: utility of military force, civil-military relations, population security, and propaganda. It is in these four crucial areas that the battle for hearts and minds takes place. The state’s performance within this interconnected quadrant ultimately dictates the success or failure in countering Revolutionary War, simply because it is through them that the power of the word and deed is most keenly felt by the population and the revolutionary. Many students of COIN/Counterrevolution have acknowledged the importance of the credibility factor but none have addressed its pertinence within an integrated approach to COIN and Counterrevolution. This study will thus demonstrate that insurgencies and revolutionary wars are, by their ontological nature, “credibility wars”, and, as such, credibility is the cornerstone, the *sine qua non* in any COIN/Counterrevolutionary campaign.

Divided by a Common Way of War: Anglo-American War-fighting in Perspective

“Easy. Battalion on the left, battalion on the right, battalion blocking the end, and then a fourth battalion to drive through. Can’t miss, old boy.” – *The Long Long War*, Richard Clutterbuck⁸

⁸ Richard Clutterbuck, *The Long Long War: The Emergency in Malaya 1948–1960* (p. 51), London: Cassell, 1966.

The predilection towards certain methods would give rise, in due course, to a particular military culture—the “beliefs and attitudes within a military organization that shape its collective preferences toward the use of force”.⁹ Military culture dictates a nation’s preference for limited wars or total wars, protracted wars or lightning wars, small wars or big wars. Hew Strachan observes that Empire, and not Europe, has been the more continuous element in British military experience over the past 200 years. Since 1792, Britain has fought continental forces only in the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815), the Crimean War (1853–1856), and the two World Wars (1914–1918 and 1939–1945). Thus, although the theory of war has been Eurocentric, the practice of the British Army was shaped by colonial and imperial “historic practices”.¹⁰ According to Correlli Barnett:

The campaigns of the three Victorian heroes, Roberts, Wolseley and Kitchener, represented essentially all the British people knew of modern war. It was in fact a highly specialized form, which contrasted sharply with war as fought between great industrial powers. There was emphasis on the man rather than the system, on smallness instead of greatness of scale, on great variety of task and terrain instead of a single eventuality ... and easy victories instead of heavy losses and prolonged fighting.¹¹

By the early twentieth century, the British Empire had reached its zenith, spanning across every single continent on the globe, while covering a quarter of the world’s land mass. Since those heady days, the British Army’s focus was on Imperial Policing that made small wars the norm, and large-scale annihilative conventional war the exception. It was partly due to a history of limited resources that the British Army has not viewed technology as a “be-all and end-all solution”.¹² Confronted with a hostile situation, the British have been more likely to opt for a low-profile integrated civil-military response that would eschew large commitments of military resources, with particular emphasis placed on the civil rather than military aspects. The Boer War (1899–1902), the Anglo-Irish War (1919–1921), and the Amritsar Massacre (1919) drove the crucial lesson of minimal force home, and

⁹ Robert M. Cassidy, “The British Army and Counterinsurgency: The Saliency of Military Culture”, *Military Review* (May–June 2005), 53–59, p. 53.

¹⁰ Hew Strachan, “The British Way in Warfare”, in David Chandler & Ian Beckett (Eds.), *The Oxford Illustrated History of the British Army* (p. 422), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

¹¹ Correlli Barnett, *Britain and Her Army 1509–1970: A Military, Political and Social History* (p. 324), London: Allen Lane the Penguin Press, 1970.

¹² Robert M. Cassidy, “The British Army and Counterinsurgency”, p. 59.

the principle that the government cannot act with the same abandon as the insurgents without undermining the very legitimacy of its own rule.¹³ Shaped by its historical role of Imperial Policing, the British Army has largely been an instrument of limited war, built to achieve limited goals at limited cost. Such is modern British military culture and the British way of war—a decentralized approach that avoids excessive use of military force, a preference for small rather than big, and one that draws strength from its past experiences and its inherent flexibility. In short, the bedrock of British COIN success lies in a highly integrated minimal force COIN practice that neither alienates a target population nor undermines its legitimacy and credibility.

The American way of war, on the other hand, is the very antithesis of the British small war tradition. After the success of the American War of Independence (1775–1783), in which irregular action played a crucial role, the U.S. Army turned its back on small wars, and fought its wars under the precept that they were crusades to be won completely. The American Civil War (1861–1865), the Spanish-American War (1898), and both World Wars are all united by this idea. Robert Asprey posits that:

Guerrilla operations in the American Civil War, though striking, were also limited ... military students continued to concentrate on the battles of Shiloh and Gettysburg and Spotsylvania and Fredericksburg in preference to the spectacular raids of Morgan and Forrest and Mosby, which the orthodox officer held as freakish manifestations in a side show of war. Had the North lost the war, its conventional outlook might have altered; but, since it won, its principals regarded the irregular aspects as unseemly if not obscene.¹⁴

Since then, the focus of the U.S. military has been on waging large wars and using its untrammelled might to crush or bleed dry opponents. Russell Weigley's eponymous classic on the American way of war is as relevant today as it was published just at the end of the Vietnam War. Right from the start, Weigley puts that:

¹³ Thomas R. Mockaitis, *British Counterinsurgency, 1919–1960* (p. 20), New York: St Martins Press, 1990.

¹⁴ Robert Brown Asprey, *War in the Shadows: The Guerrilla in History* (pp. 181–182), London: Macdonald & Jane's, 1976.

In the history of American strategy, the direction taken by the American conception of war made most American strategists, through most of the span of American history, strategists of annihilation ... the wealth of the country and its adoption of unlimited aims in war cut development short, until the strategy of annihilation became characteristically the American way in war.¹⁵

With American supremacy in material wealth, technology, and weaponry (both conventional and nuclear), the annihilative/attritional approach of destroying one's opponent via the overwhelming firepower and resources of its military juggernaut often seemed like the surest way to win a war. Indeed, Eliot Cohen defines the two dominant characteristics of American strategic culture as "the preference for massing a large number of men and machines, and the predilection for direct and violent assault".¹⁶ Furthering the debate on the characteristics of American strategic culture, Colin Gray succinctly identifies 12 features unique to the American way of war:

1. Apolitical
2. Astrategic
3. Ahistorical
4. Problem-solving optimistic
5. Culturally ignorant
6. Technologically dependent
7. Firepower focused
8. Large-scale
9. Profoundly regular
10. Impatient
11. Logistically excellent
12. Sensitive to casualties¹⁷

The U.S. military establishment, past and present, has been deeply imbued by the 12 "All-American" features identified by Gray. Jeffery Record admits that; rooted in American

¹⁵ Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of US Military Strategy and Policy* (p. xxii), Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977.

¹⁶ Eliot A. Cohen, "The Strategy of Innocence? The United States, 1920–1945", in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox & Alvin Bernstein (Eds.), *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States and War* (p. 464), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

¹⁷ Colin S. Gray, "The American Way of War", in Anthony D. McIvor (Ed.), *Rethinking the Principles of War*, Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2006.

political and military culture, Americans are frustrated with limited wars, particularly counterinsurgent wars ... And Americans are averse to risking American lives ... Expecting that America's conventional military superiority can deliver quick, cheap, and decisive success.¹⁸ Thus, for most of the twentieth century, U.S. military culture, with the exception of the Marine Corps, generally embraced the conventional big war paradigm at the expense of developing a coherent strategic/tactical approach to small wars and insurgencies. The institutionalized preference for big wars proved to be a serious impediment in developing a successful American COIN approach at all levels: strategic, operational and tactical. The consequence of such a failure was to rear its ugly head in Korea and, later, Vietnam.

Utility of Military Force

The story of America's involvement in Korea from 1950 to 1955 and its initial involvement in Vietnam from 1950 seems to evince the postulate that the American military mind and machine are geared towards fighting conventional wars of annihilation, and thoroughly incapable of comprehending and dealing with low intensity conflict and revolutionary war. In Korea, General MacArthur's Second World War experience in fighting the Japanese assured him that once the United States "flexed its muscles" he would once again transform defeat into victory.¹⁹ Inchon was a textbook perfect reapplication of that experience, but after Inchon, MacArthur's conventional mind was unable to comprehend and deal with the infiltration tactics employed by the massed but lightly armed Chinese Communist forces. Moreover, war was to MacArthur "a substitute for policy, not its continuation", a worldview that very much underpinned the prevalent conventional wisdom of the U.S. Armed Forces.²⁰

Likewise, in Indochina, America's optimism that the French, with the best of American military hardware, could easily overcome a rabble of Asian irregulars was shockingly dispelled. In order to keep the dominoes of Southeast Asia standing, the United States began its direct military involvement in Indochina on 1 August 1950 with the creation of the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG). By 1954, MAAG had

¹⁸ Jeffery Record, "The American Way of War: Cultural Barriers to Successful Counterinsurgency", *Executive Summary*, No. 577 (September 2006), p. 1.

¹⁹ Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War*, p. 385.

²⁰ Jeffery Record, "Why the Strong Lose", *Parameters* (Winter 2005–2006), 16–31, p. 24.

grown from the initial four-man team to 342 advisers. In a visit to MAAG in August 1953, U.S. Army Lieutenant General John O’Daniel declared that “the French would defeat the Viet Minh by 1955” and it was the conventional divisional team, “with its combat proven effectiveness, which is sorely needed in Vietnam”.²¹ O’Daniel was proved wrong on both counts. The French will to resist ultimately collapsed after the devastating defeat at Dien Bien Phu, and victory for the Viet Minh was achieved not through the conventional means as prescribed by O’Daniel but based on the three-phased protracted war model pioneered by Mao.

Both the Korean War and the final dénouement of the first Indochina War between 1950 and 1954 did not alter underlying American Cold War assumptions, but rather vindicated them. The Eisenhower Administration viewed the fall of Vietnam through the prism of the Domino Theory, seeing it as the first wave of the crimson tide that would engulf the whole of Southeast Asia were the United States not to intervene. The provision of military aid to France and the formation of MAAG in 1950 gave an unequivocal signal that the United States saw Vietnam as the next Cold War front—the “Greece of the Far East”. Mark Lawrence argues that the collapse of French colonialism in Indochina immeasurably strengthened American conviction that they could now reshape Vietnam in their own way, and in the quest to create a viable non-communist South Vietnamese state that served Western interests, the Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson Administrations all drew the United States ever deeper into Vietnam.²²

The grand political strategy adopted by the Americans in South Vietnam was to back a pro-Western Vietnamese figure to challenge Ho Chi Minh’s status as Vietnam’s foremost nationalist. As early as January 1951, Donald Heath, the Minister Plenipotentiary at Saigon, reported to the Secretary of State: “Ho Chi Minh is the only Viet who enjoys any measure of national prestige. Far after him would come Ngo Dien Diem.”²³ In the assessment of General J. Lawton Collins, Special Representative in Vietnam:

²¹ John, A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, p. 118.

²² Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (pp. 279–280), Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

²³ Policy of the United States with Respect to Indochina: The Extension of United States Military Assistance to French Union Forces; United States Economic, Military, and Diplomatic Support for the Associated States of Indochina in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1951* Vol. VI (I) (United States Printing Office, Washington, 1977), p. 385.

There is no proper grass roots support of any leader in Vietnam, leaving aside Ho Chi Minh. Diem's virtues as anti-French leader have been tarnished by his dependence on his brothers which has led to quite general feeling that a Ngo family dictatorship is in effect being established. Few nationalists outside his family and immediate entourage would lift a finger in Diem's defense.²⁴

Collins argued for the withdrawal of American support for Diem but in the opinion of John Dulles, the U.S. Secretary of State, "it would seem ... disastrous to destroy the morale and authority of the Diem Government even before we have any idea as to what would come next".²⁵ The hard truth was that it was politically impracticable for the Eisenhower and later the Johnson Administration to accept a Communist regime in Vietnam—even one endorsed through the ballot box.

On grounds that the election process in Communist-dominated areas would not be entirely "free", the Eisenhower Administration backed Diem when he refused to hold nationwide elections as per the 1954 Geneva Accords. The Eisenhower Administration tried to justify its actions by highlighting alleged North Vietnamese violations of the accord while omitting both its own and South Vietnamese transgressions. Such a deliberate distortion of events "is a difficult one to handle even in the best of conditions" whereby a high level of information control can be exercised by totalitarian or authoritarian regimes.²⁶ However, in an environment where the full text of the Geneva Accords was freely available to anyone who chose to look, the message sent by the U.S. government did not stand up to credible scrutiny when compared to actual events. Another major theme of the Eisenhower Administration's strategic propaganda campaign was North Vietnamese "aggression". The Eisenhower Administration likened the advance of Communism in Indochina to that of the Axis powers. "Munich" was evoked and Ho Chi Minh was portrayed as the "New Hitler". The fact that Ho was the foremost indigenous Vietnamese nationalist vis-à-vis Diem or any other South Vietnam alternative was lost on the Eisenhower and Johnson Administrations to the detriment of their credibility.

²⁴ Telegram From the Special Representative in Vietnam (Collins) to the Department of State in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1955–1957* Vol. I (United States Printing Office, Washington, 1977), p. 227.

²⁵ Letter From the Secretary of State to the Special Representative in Vietnam (Collins), State in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1955–1957* Vol. I (United States Printing Office, Washington, 1977), p. 271.

²⁶ Caroline Page, *U.S. Official Propaganda During the Vietnam War, 1965–1973: The Limits of Persuasion* (p. 63), London: Leicester University Press, 1996.

In the opinion of Senator George S. McGovern, by backing a succession of South Vietnamese governments that were perceived largely as ineffective and corrupt puppets of the United States, America committed its second great mistake (the first being to side with the French).²⁷ If the generals misapplied the military lessons of the Second World War, the White House was just as guilty in the misapplication of its political ones. The Eisenhower and Johnson Administrations never quite understood the complexities and dynamics of the Vietnamese Revolution, or realized that Ho's credibility as the paramount Vietnamese nationalist rested not so much on the cause of international communism but his ability to appeal to the needs and desires of ordinary Vietnamese. The credibility gap that existed between Ho and the second best American supported pro-Western alternative was a problem that American policymakers had no effective answer to. By committing themselves to the Diem regime, the Eisenhower and Johnson Administrations had unwittingly placed American national prestige in Southeast Asia at stake, and in the hands of the Ngo family, with serious consequences.²⁸ The ramifications of which will be discussed in the propaganda section of this paper.

Politically, as well as militarily, it is evident that neither the Korean War nor the French defeat in the First Indochina war was sufficient to compel a shift in either the strategic or organizational culture of Washington, particularly the U.S. Army. Highlighting the various small wars that Americans have been involved in since the 1800s (the Second Seminole War, Spanish-American War, Philippine-American War and Mexican Expedition), Sam Sarkesian extrapolates that counter-revolutionary conflicts were not aberrations but have been "placed on the shelves of forgotten history".²⁹ On such "forgotten" lessons of military history, Major General Lewis Walt, Commander, III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) wrote:

I was reminded of my early days as a young officer, learning the fundamentals of my profession from men who had fought Sandino in Nicaragua or Charlemagne in Haiti. The Caribbean campaigns had many lessons applicable to Vietnam forty or fifty years later. I could recall the instruction of veterans of those campaigns

²⁷ George S. McGovern, "America in Vietnam", in Patrick J. Hearden (Ed.), *Vietnam: Four American Perspectives* (p. 18), West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1990.

²⁸ Daniel Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (p. 33), London: The Bodley Head, 1965.

²⁹ Sam C. Sarkesian, *America's Forgotten Wars: The Counterrevolutionary Past and Lessons for the Future* (p. xi), Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1984.

and their lessons on tempering the fight with an understanding of the people, compassion toward them, and the exercise of good works, even in the midst of war ... These seemed new ideas to this generation, with Dachau and Belsen, Hamburg and Coventry, Nagasaki and Hiroshima, Seoul and Pyongyang fresh in the history books.³⁰

Instead of learning and codifying its own and the USMC's small wars experiences in the American War of Independence, the Philippines, the Indian Wars and the Banana Wars, the U.S. Army derided these experiences as "ephemeral anomalies, aberrations and distractions from preparing to win big wars against other big powers".³¹

In contrast, the British Army at the dawn of the Cold War was well familiar with the techniques involved in countering a politico-military insurgency. John Nagl draws attention to the fact that, of the 1,219 hours spent by mid-grade officers at the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College, none was devoted to the study of revolutionary warfare or the impact of Mao while 190 hours were spent on conventional infantry operations. On the other hand, officers at the British Army Staff College had to go through 45 of 1,042 hours of instruction on Small Wars and Policing Duties and another six on the study of Warfare in Developing Countries.³² In the British Army, it was readily accepted that internal security operations were the norm rather than the exception. The accumulated experience from more than a century of imperial policing led to the development of a limited war perspective in the British Army—one that has been highly adaptable to operating in a COIN environment.

On the other hand, U.S. military leaders traditionally regarded irregulars with disdain and believed that "conventional forces that had defeated German armies could readily handle a bunch of rag-tag Asian guerrillas".³³ The U.S. Army chose to adopt what Frank Kitson defines as a "fit soldier with a rifle" theory, while waiting for the day when they can get back to "proper soldiering". Kitson further observed that:

³⁰ Lewis W. Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy: A General's Report on Vietnam* (p. 29), New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1970.

³¹ Robert M. Cassidy, "Back to the Street Without Joy: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam and Other Small Wars", *Parameters* (Summer 2004), 73–83, p. 75.

³² John, A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, p. 50.

³³ Jeffery Record, *The American Way of War*, p. 10.

There are also some sound material reasons for not becoming too well qualified in fighting insurgents, because expertise in this field can result in an officer being channelled away from the main stream of military preferment, a factor which is more apparent in the United States Army than in the British Army.³⁴

Indeed, the historic suspicion of unconventional forces ran deep in the U.S. military establishment. While in office, President Kennedy tried to develop a capable COIN capacity in the U.S. military. However, opposition from the traditional old guard meant that special operations remained small-scale efforts outside the main career stream.³⁵ Thus, when the U.S. Army entered the shooting war in Vietnam, it was fought with a capability and doctrine well-designed for the big conventional wars of Central Europe, but totally inadequate for the People's Revolutionary War that was to lay the American Goliath low.

The performance of the U.S. military as a whole in both the First and the Second Indochina War from 1950 to 1972 depicts the "triumph of the institutional culture of an organization over attempts at doctrinal innovation and the diminution of the effectiveness of the organization at accomplishing national objectives".³⁶ One anonymous U.S. Army general remarked: "I'll be damned if I will permit the U.S. Army, its institutions, its doctrine, and its traditions to be destroyed just to win this lousy war."³⁷ Just as the U.S. Army could never bring itself to forsake its Jominian tradition, likewise, neither the Navy nor the Air Force could repudiate the Mahanian concept of seeking the decisive naval battle, and the Mitchellian notion of the decisiveness of air power.³⁸ To most of the top brass, going against this "trinity of decisiveness" was tantamount to destroying the very fabric of the American military institution. It is small wonder that Weigley lamented on the difficulty of bringing a military with the strategic traditions of the U.S. Army, Navy and Air Force "to conduct campaigns of carefully limited strategic

³⁴ Frank Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion Insurgency and Peacekeeping* (p. 200), London: Faber & Faber, 1971.

³⁵ Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (p. 85), New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

³⁶ John, A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, p. 115.

³⁷ Robert M. Cassidy, "Why Great Powers Fight Small Wars Badly", *Military Review* (September–October 2000), 41–53, p. 41.

³⁸ Antoine Henri de Jomini (1779–1869) and Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914) propagated the ideas that the destruction of the enemy's forces was the main objective of warfare, on land and at sea respectively. On the other hand, Billy Mitchell (1879–1936), believed that air power with its ability to strike deep into the industrial vitals of the enemy was the decisive force that made all other military forces obsolete.

objectives consistent with the presumably carefully limited policy objectives of limited war”.³⁹

Upon entry into military hostilities proper after the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, the USAF sought to obliterate its opponents from the air, while the U.S. Army’s strategy represented by that of General Westmoreland was focused on the destruction of the enemy’s military forces. Last but not least, guided by its past COIN experience, the USMC pursued the diametric approach of political-military pacification rather than military annihilation. In truth, four distinct wars were waged by the U.S. military in Indochina: a conventional ground war waged by its army, a coercive strategic air campaign against North Vietnam, an aerial interdiction campaign against the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and an attempt by the USMC at political-military pacification. As different wars were run by separate command entities divided by service affiliation and irreconcilable differences on how to win the war, the American mission in Vietnam inevitably became “Balkanized”.⁴⁰

Unlike their American cousins, the British successfully avoided the “Balkanization” of the Malayan Emergency through its traditional integrated civil-military approach, in which all armed services and security forces operated under civilian control and the maxim of minimum force. In an attempt to forge closer civil-military cooperation, improve efficiency and prompt coordinated action, Lieutenant General Harold Briggs, Director of Operations, reformed the Malayan administration by introducing the War Executive Committee (WEC) system at federal (FWC), state (SWEC) and district (DWEC) levels. The WEC was, in effect, a network-centric system that eliminated duplicate efforts, and provided a conduit for the rapid and effective exchange of intelligence that ultimately translated into better operational and tactical results on the ground.

Briggs’s tenure also saw the gradual move away from large-scale army sweeps towards a more effective system of small-unit patrols. When the army realized that the conduct of massive sweeps by large units were counterproductive, it developed small patrols that utilized the skills of native trackers, and intelligence provided by surrendered enemy personnel (SEP) or Special Branch infiltrators to target selected

³⁹ Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War*, p. 466.

⁴⁰ Jeffery Record, “How America’s Own Military Performance in Vietnam Aided and Abetted the North’s Victory”, in Marc Jason Gilbert (Ed.) *Why the North Won the Vietnam War* (pp. 121–122), New York: Palgrave, 2002.

terrorists with the minimum force required.⁴¹ The British regimental system facilitated the practice of decentralization as British Army units were accustomed to deploying smaller units for extended periods throughout the empire.⁴² A British general in Malaya quipped: “As far as I can see, the only thing a divisional commander has to do in this sort of war is to go round seeing that the troops have got their beer.”⁴³

In the dense jungles and sprawling plantations of Malaya, battalion commanders performed tactical control of their companies, company commanders yielded control of an action to the platoon leader, who in turn utilized self-sufficient two-to-three day small patrols commanded by sergeants and corporals.⁴⁴ Not only did the flow of intelligence increase from the closer contact between soldiers, police, civil servants and the locals, given the initiative, young officers learned to react quickly and effectively. In short, the British Army realized and acknowledged that the key to operational success in small wars was not the preponderant use of force exemplified by heavy artillery and air bombardment, but rather the willingness to fight like their indigenous opponents on their own terms.

When offensive air bombing was called for, it was aimed at readily identifiable targets and based on good intelligence. Air support was only used against known enemy positions rather than carpet-bombing runs on non-descript jungle. In the words of a serving British officer in Malaya, Lieutenant Colonel Robert Ian Hywel Jones:

We concluded that given accurate information as to a target then there would be merit in considering bombing as a means for attacking it. But to use bombing on a random basis would really be far too costly. And could well perhaps do more harm than good.⁴⁵

In fact, the RAF presence in Malaya never went beyond its peak strength of seven squadrons in 1950, and less than 70 aircraft were available for offensive air support. Aircraft were, however, used extensively for psychological warfare in leaflet and loudspeaker operations.

⁴¹ John, A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, p. 105.

⁴² Robert M. Cassidy, *The British Army and Counterinsurgency*, p. 56.

⁴³ Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (p. 61), London: Chatto & Windus, 1974.

⁴⁴ Robert Brown Asprey, *War in the Shadows*, p. 847.

⁴⁵ John, A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, p. 105.

During the peak year of 1955, 141 million leaflets were dropped. Indeed, by the end of the Malayan Emergency, “there were few insurgents who had not been showered by leaflets or heard a message to surrender broadcast from aircraft”, and interrogations revealed that the CPM guerrillas considered loudspeaker aircraft highly effective in inducing surrenders.⁴⁶ Unlike offensive bombing, which had mixed success, the use of air power in psychological operations was highly effective in eroding the morale of its fighters and crippling the CPM’s physical strength.

This minimal force approach was based on the long-held British assumption that insurgency is not a military problem but a policing task and therefore a civil problem. In a contemporary analysis of the small wars that flared throughout the British Empire in the 1920s and 1930s, Sir Charles Gwynn argues that “the principal police task of the Army is ... to restore [civil control] when it collapses or shows signs of collapse”.⁴⁷ Drawing from his observations of the Moplah Rebellion of 1921 in India, Gwynn concluded that:

Although in the nature of a small war, it may be noted that it opened with a purely police operation in aid of which a small detachment only troops was called in. Similarly, it was left to the police to sweep up last fragments of resistance when the troops had sufficiently restored or to permit the civil power to resume control. The military intervention, although it involved war-like operations, was in essence, therefore, police work on a large scale.⁴⁸

Thirty years later, in 1951, the Colonial Secretary, Oliver Lyttelton would put before Parliament: “The Emergency is in essence a police rather than a military task. More troops would add little to the impact ... In short, I do not recommend any increase in troops.” Rather than commit more troops to the fight, Lyttelton pushed for the creation of the Home Guards to boost the numbers and effectiveness of the police force in Malaya. In his opinion, “once the training and re-training of the police and paramilitary forces have been completed, police action, including the better provision of information, will render military action gradually more effective and, I hope, ultimately

⁴⁶ Simpson, Jay Gordon, “Not by Bombs Alone”, *Joint Force Quarterly*, 22 (Summer 99), 91–98, pp. 94–98.

⁴⁷ Charles Gwynn, *Imperial Policing* (p. 5), London: Macmillan & Company 1939.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 110

unnecessary”.⁴⁹ As will be demonstrated later, the emphasis on policing the population and population control, rather than going for the total military solution, became a vital key in suppressing the Communist insurgency in Malaya.

Britain’s response to the Communist threat in Vietnam came in the form of the dispatch of the British Advisory Mission (BRIAM) to Saigon in September 1961, with the aim of imparting lessons learned from the Malayan Emergency. Sir Robert Thompson, the former Minister of Defence of Malaya and leader of the mission, was unable to convince the Americans that the focus on military solutions to political problems was counterproductive. The explicit endorsement of the strategy of military annihilation and attrition by the American top brass was to govern the entire conduct of the war. The scenario that the Americans encountered and their eventual response to the conditions in Vietnam is aptly described by Thompson:

If [government] forces ... enter the [insurgent] area, they will be harassed by sniping fire and held up by mines and booby traps ... As soon as any opposition is met, artillery and planes are called on, villages are shelled and bombed ... The communists are not slow to make propaganda capital out of all excesses committed by the government, with the result that most search-and-clear operations, by creating more communists than they kill, become in effect communist recruiting drives.⁵⁰

Often at the time and place of their choosing, Vietcong guerrillas would fire at American troops from concealed positions within villages. Eager to engage the elusive enemy, American soldiers would fall for the bait, and assault the hamlets with heavy artillery, naval gunfire, tactical air support and helicopter gunships. In the process of “liberating” the villagers from the Communists, American troops more often wrought extensive devastation on the property and lives of the villagers. The credibility of the American forces as their protectors was thus irretrievably lost with much of the rural population. With a population resentful and disgruntled at the wanton destruction of their lives, livelihoods and property, the Vietcong had no lack of recruits to fill its ranks while American efforts at pacification were critically hampered.

⁴⁹ John, A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, p. 77.

⁵⁰ Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, pp. 34–35.

In 1966–1968 alone, American air munitions expenditure in Indochina (2,865,808 tons) exceeded the total tonnage of bombs dropped during the whole of the Second World War in both the European and Pacific theatres (2,057,244 tons).⁵¹ The prevalent belief among American commanders was that air power could be depended upon to cripple the DVRN's capacity to wage war. The largely agrarian economy of North Vietnam had few targets of economic or military significance and, while North Vietnam did have a military-industrial base, "it was located in the Soviet Union, China, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany".⁵² Short of drawing the Chinese into the conflict, American air power could never provide an effective interdiction of the flow of supplies and war material through Chinese territory. Moreover, the air war in Vietnam epitomized best the David-versus-Goliath struggle between the United States and the DVRN and its propaganda value was not lost on the DVRN. As Edward Lansdale observed:

The very presence of U.S. aircraft over North Vietnam gave visible veracity to the Politburo's claims that it was leading the people Vietnam in a struggle against an invading foreign power and strengthened popular support of the regime by engendering patriotic and nationalistic enthusiasm to resist the attacks and ... Hanoi's political relations with its allies.⁵³

Writing as a contemporary witness of both Indo-China Wars, Bernard Fall observed that technical proficiency is often used by the West (in this case, the United States) to make up for "the woeful lack of popular support and political savvy of most of the regimes that the West has thus far sought to prop up".⁵⁴ Indeed, whatever chance the United States might have had of building a non-communist democracy in South Vietnam was immolated by the destructive proficiency of American firepower.

The overwhelming display of force by the U.S. Armed Forces also had a negative impact on domestic opinion. According to Ivan Arreguin-Toft's "strategic interaction" theory, when actors employ opposite strategic approaches (direct-indirect or indirect-direct), the weaker actor is more likely to win "even when everything we think we know

⁵¹ Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, p. 99.

⁵² Jeffery Record, "How America's Own Military Performance in Vietnam Aided and Abetted the North's Victory", p. 128.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 130.

⁵⁴ Bernard B. Fall, *Street Without Joy* (p. 373), London: Pall Mall Press, 1967.

about power says they shouldn't".⁵⁵ Andrew Mack describes the Vietnam War as a conflict fought on two fronts, "one bloody and indecisive in the forests and mountains of Indochina, the other essentially non-violent but ultimately more decisive within the polity and social institutions of the United States". Mack further argues that the obvious asymmetry in American conventional military power often meant that the morality of the war is more easily questioned.⁵⁶ Highlighting the "distance between the position of the state and that of the liberal forces (that give meaning to the term society) concerning the legitimacy of the demand for sacrifice and for brutal conduct", or "normative difference", Gil Merom concluded that:

Events in Vietnam ... destroyed the credibility of the Vietnam policy ... while Nixon's combined policies bought him time and some freedom of maneuver, they could not eliminate the anti-war sentiment and the protest potential, or change the ultimate outcome of the war ... In the end, in spite of significant battlefield successes, all the Americans achieved was to buy their South Vietnamese allies a few more years of political independence.⁵⁷

America's strictly military approach to counter a People's War in Vietnam saw many a tactical victory in numerous engagements with the NVA and Vietcong on the battlefield. However, the sheer brutality associated with American military action alienated much of domestic polity and public opinion. Drawing on the lessons of Vietnam, David Petraeus drills home the point that public support is the "Essential Domino", and the Vietnam War showed the military that there are finite limits to how long the American public will support a protracted conflict.⁵⁸ By ignoring the public opinion factor and the crucial importance of an integrated civil-military approach to what was essentially a political rather than a conventional military task, what the American military establishment obtained in the end, were pyrrhic tactical victories that led to no strategic solution. On the futility of the big war paradigm, Edward Luttwak mused that "450 American soldiers could have been carrying flutes instead of manning howitzers, and if

⁵⁵ Ivan Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (p. 18), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

⁵⁶ Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict", *World Politics*, 27 (January 1975), 181–82, pp. 177–186.

⁵⁷ Gil Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars, State, Society, and the Failures of France in Algeria, Israel in Lebanon, and the United States in Vietnam* (pp. 232–235), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

⁵⁸ David Petraeus, "The American Military and the Lessons of Vietnam: A Study of Military Influence and the Use of Force in the Post-Vietnam Era", Ph.D. thesis, Princeton, 1987, p. 104.

they had just played their flutes, it would have had exactly the same effect on the outcome of the war”.⁵⁹

Civil-Military Relations

Since the nineteenth century, the British Army developed a history of close cooperation with civil administrators in the maintenance of the *Pax Britannica*. In a COIN environment, the British Army’s role was that of providing the security umbrella under which the crucial tasks of effective civil administration and the winning of hearts and minds could be carried out. As such, the army essentially operated as a police force under civilian control. In Malaya, this principle was readily accepted and practised by all—soldiers and civil servants alike. Although a soldier by profession, Sir Gerald Templer, High Commissioner, Malaya insisted that “the fighting of the war and the civil running of the country were completely utterly interrelated” and refused to allow a “military takeover of what essentially remained a civil problem”.⁶⁰ Another Malayan veteran, Major General Richard Clutterbuck maintained that “military assistance has often been of less importance than their aid in supporting effective civil administration and helping the government to improve the lot of its people rather than to allow it to decline or relapse into chaos”.⁶¹ During his tenure as Director of Operations, Harold Briggs brought in a civilian, Hugh Carleton Greene, to set up the Emergency Information Services (EIS) to coordinate all psyops efforts in Malaya. In the minds of Briggs, Templer, and Clutterbuck, there was no question that the Malayan Emergency demanded an integrated civil-military solution with an emphasis on the “civil” rather than the application of extensive military force. With the military operating in support of civil power rather than in place of it, the Malayan Emergency was never militarized and most importantly never “brutalized”.

Despite the tradition of subordinating military forces to civilian authority in times of civil emergency, early attempts at a coordinated civil-military effort lacked unity of effort. Synergy was injected into the administration with the introduction of the Committee system by Briggs. Civilian members at all levels of the Committee system

⁵⁹ Edward N. Luttwak, “The Impact of Vietnam on Strategic Thinking”, in Patrick J. Hearden (Ed.), *Vietnam: Four American Perspectives* (p. 64), West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1990.

⁶⁰ Robert Brown Asprey, *War in the Shadows*, p. 851.

⁶¹ Richard Clutterbuck, *Guerrillas and Terrorists* (p. 16), London: Faber, 1977.

far outnumbered those of the military except at the federal level. Rather than rely on military intelligence units, the system came to depend on localized insights provided by the indigenous Special Branch. Military liaison officers in the organization would in turn translate such information into operational intelligence. Over time, the Committee system forged a highly integrated civil-military structure that functioned in a synergized manner. In fact, most units had their headquarters set up in Joint Operations Rooms run by the police. A veteran commented that “this close cooperation between the military and the police was the secret of all successful operations”.⁶²

Cooperation was further extended beyond the police-military relationship into the local Malayan community. Karl Hack argues that because of the local ethnic, social and political divisions, the British were able to “screw down” the Communist supporters.⁶³ He further maintains that the integrated civic, military and political measures adopted by the British blunted the resentment caused by coercion.⁶⁴ Indeed, the complex demographic and social intricacies of Malaya were the biggest advantage the British had in the Emergency. With the promise of Malayan independence, the British were able to win the support of the Malay majority and isolate the Malayan Communists who were overwhelmingly Chinese. This “divide and rule” strategy was also applied successfully to the Malayan Chinese community. The British engineered alliance between the Nationalist Malay United Malay National Organization (UMNO) and the Chinese business-orientated Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) provided the political foundation for the successful containment of the Emergency. This, according to John Cross, a British jungle warfare specialist “was crucial to British success because it provided a stronger base of support than that possessed by the embattled MCP”.⁶⁵ Relations with the European planters and miners were close from the start. However, it was the inclusion of Malay and Chinese officials in policy discussion and formulation that developed the much coveted grassroots confidence between the population and the Security Forces. The British experience demonstrated that the high level of civil-

⁶² Joel E. Hamby, “Civil-Military Operations Joint Doctrine and the Malayan Emergency”, *Joint Force Quarterly*, 32, (2002), 54–61, p. 57.

⁶³ Karl Hack, “Iron Claws of Malaya: The Historiography of the Malayan Emergency”, *Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 30 (1), (1999), 99–125, p. 99.

⁶⁴ Karl Hack, *Defence and Decolonisation in South East Asia: Britain, Malaya and Singapore 1941–1968* (p. 129), Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2001.

⁶⁵ John Newsinger, “Counterrevolution The Malayan Example”, *Monthly Review*, 45(9), 19–30, 1994.

military cooperation achieved in Malaya was a decisive factor not only in defeating the MCP militarily, but also in establishing a political solution.⁶⁶

In contrast to the integrated civil-military infrastructure that Briggs and Templer instituted in Malaya, Westmoreland and many of the senior commanders in the U.S. Army saw no need for such an equivalent and conducted the Vietnam War as a “purely military-army-business”. Although political considerations dictated the grand strategy of the war, “they had little connection with the tactical-level management of violence”, and the notion that success in COIN demanded a more civil rather than military approach never took root.⁶⁷ According to Robert Komer, the over-militarization of the war “led to the tail wagging the dog, with everything else required to conform”.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, an aberration from the “search and destroy” strategy of the army was to be found in the “Balkanized” environment of the Vietnam War. Marine Generals such as Krulak and Greene charged that rather than addressing the fundamental needs of the Vietnamese people—security and political stability—MACV strategy was “needlessly bleeding American forces by engaging the enemy in big-unit encounters while the VC infrastructure remained virtually untouched”.⁶⁹ In Greene’s Opinion, unless pacification was given the priority, the Americans “could kill all [the] PAVN and VC [in the south] and still lose the war”.⁷⁰ With Krulak’s firm backing, Major General Lewis Walt was able to conduct an independent campaign of pacification in the I Corps area of operations in the northernmost region of South Vietnam. Walt created a coordinating council of regional civilian agency heads and Combined Action Platoons (CAP), which integrated marine rifle squads with the South Vietnamese Regional Forces platoons. Living in the villages among the rural population, the CAP units were able to focus their efforts on pacification while regular USMC units conducted platoon-sized patrols and civic action programmes. In the planning rooms of Washington, Greene and Krulak fought in vain against the entrenched big war paradigm. Despite the encouraging results of CAP in I Corps, Westmoreland was loathe to introduce the CAP concept to the Army’s area of operations. Westmoreland’s slight regard for an integrated civil-military approach is

⁶⁶ Julian Paget, *Counter-insurgency Campaigning* (p. 78), London: Faber and Faber, 1967.

⁶⁷ John, A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, p. 115

⁶⁸ Robert W. Komer, *Bureaucracy at War: U.S. Performance in the Vietnam Conflict* (p. 82), Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1980.

⁶⁹ Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era* (p. 230), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 250.

aply reflected in a statement that he made on 8 December 1965: “The Marines have become so infatuated with securing real estate and in civic action that their forces have become dispersed and they have been hesitant to conduct offensive operations except along the coastline where amphibious manoeuvres could be used with Naval gunfire support.”⁷¹ The pure military approach as advocated by Westmoreland was to continue in MACV administered sectors until 1968, when a belated effort was made to revitalize and inject some synergy into the pacification programme in South Vietnam.

The last and final shake-up of the pacification programme in 1967 resulted in an acrimonious dispute between the military and civilian bureaucracies in Washington and South Vietnam. The main issue of contention was “whether pacification should be considered primarily a political or a military problem, a matter of social development or of national security”.⁷² Over the years, based on findings that the “division was a purely military instrument and could not adequately control the integrated civilian-military effort that was needed at the province level”, various study groups such as the Roles and Missions Study Group advocated removing the ARVN Divisions from the chain of command on Pacification. Westmoreland, however, did not concur with the recommendations and argued that if carried out, “the Corps span of control would be too large for effective direction”, and the notion, was therefore “illogical”.⁷³ When the dust eventually settled, it was the military view that prevailed. In the final attempt at integrated civil-military pacification, the Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS) programme headed by the ebullient Ambassador Robert Komer was set up, albeit under the jurisdiction of MACV.

Under CORDS, American military forces, as well as those of her allies engaged in an extensive civic action programme, intended to assist the populace in the vicinity of their base areas. Troops were involved in the distribution of food, clothing, building materials and fertilizer, in the construction and repair of bridges, the building of schools and medical clinics, and the provision of medical examinations and immunizations. And yet:

⁷¹ John, A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, p. 157.

⁷² William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (p. 272), Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996.

⁷³ *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decision Making in Vietnam*, The Senator Gravel Edition, Vol. 2 (p. 620), Boston: Beacon Press, 1971.

The expenditure of so much goodwill and massive resources did not translate into the genuinely voluntary involvement of the people ... Aid measures like building roads and schools ... were incremental rather than distributive. While the VC offered to redistribute status, wealth and income, the GVN's efforts were perceived as the preservation of the social status quo, albeit on a higher level.⁷⁴

This failure to win over the confidence of the populace will be discussed in greater detail in the last section of this paper. What must be emphasized here is that just as firepower and technology came to be the substitutes for an effective military strategy, utilizing the financial resources of the world's largest capitalist economy was the dominant approach in the civil affairs arena. The Deputy Ambassador in Saigon William J. Porter admitted that:

The desire for immediately visible statistical results and progress had led to excessive stress on the material and easily measurable aspects of pacification and had failed to emphasize the political, social and psychological aspects of organizing the people and thus eliciting their active cooperation.⁷⁵

Indeed U.S. policy in Vietnam as a whole failed to realize the fundamental importance of the social and psychological factors in pacification, particularly the need for effective population security measures that would separate the insurgent from the population as well as prove to the people that the government was committed to their safety and well-being.

Population Security

The civil-military administration in Malaya regarded its primary mission during the Emergency to be that of providing security to the people, with the subsequent aim of separating the guerrilla from the people. In Clutterbuck's opinion, the most important lesson of the Malayan Emergency was "that the villager is more subject to terror by the *man with a knife* living inside the village at night than by the guerrilla with a gun coming in from the jungle outside".⁷⁶ In order to separate the "man with a knife" from the population,

⁷⁴ Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, p. 93.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Richard Clutterbuck, *Guerrillas and Terrorists*, p. 39.

Briggs implemented “the largest social revolution ever known in Asia; the resettlement of 600,000 squatters into New Villages; a revolution which ... was to prove a brilliant, unorthodox tactic in the war against guerrilla Communism; one which military leaders would study in every future Asian war”.⁷⁷ Anthony Short lauded Briggs’ plan as the “basic analysis and prescription had set the pattern that was to be followed through to a successful conclusion ... and a proper appreciation of what was required in the new villages may be seen as the blueprint for success”.⁷⁸ By March 1953, the attributes necessary for a successful New Village had been defined as:

A modicum of agricultural land and the granting of long-term land titles, an adequate water supply, a reasonably well-functioning village committee, a school which could accommodate at least a majority of the children, a village community centre, roads of passable standards and with side drains, reasonable conditions of sanitation and public health, a place of worship, trees along the main street and *padang*, an effective perimeter fence, a flourishing Home Guard, a reasonably friendly feeling towards the Government and the police.⁷⁹

The fundamental objective of the New Villages was to isolate the insurgent from the population and protect the population from subversion that, according to Thompson, is the prerequisite for uniting the people in community spirit in positive action on the side of the government.⁸⁰ Briggs’ strategy of resettling the Chinese squatters in “New Villages” (continued by Templer) proved to be a highly successful “carrot and stick strategy” that solicited cooperation from the rural Chinese in exchange for a more secured and prosperous way of life.

Briggs and Templer recognized that the decisive tactical element in Malaya was the village police post rather than the army battalion. Both insisted that no New Village should be occupied until the provision of adequate police protection. Briggs oversaw the initial phase of the expansion of the police force that grew from nine thousand to 45,000 within a

⁷⁷ Noel Barber, *The War on the Running Dogs: How Malaya Defeated the Communist Guerrillas 1948–1960* (p. 101), London: Collins, 1971.

⁷⁸ Anthony Short, *In Pursuit of Mountain Rats, the Communist Insurrection in Malaya* (p. 502), Singapore: Cultured Lotus, 2000.

⁷⁹ Richard Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds in Guerrilla Warfare: The Malayan Emergency 1948–1960* (p. 173), Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2004.

⁸⁰ Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, pp. 124–125.

short span of six months.⁸¹ Above all, Briggs knew that a happy ending to the Emergency depended on the active cooperation of the rural Chinese. Briggs sought to convince the Chinese population that their future was in an independent Malaya rather than a Malaya dominated by the Chinese Communists. As part of his efforts to achieve this political end, Briggs gave the Chinese a stake in their own security. In his Directive No. 3 of 25 May 1950, Briggs stated: “The time has come when selected Chinese should be recruited as Auxiliary Police and where necessary armed with shotguns to take their share in anti-bandit operations.”⁸² Realizing the significant role that the local Chinese auxiliary policemen could play in isolating the Communists both physically and mentally from the rural Chinese, Templer continued the policy of arming the Home Guard, and even equipped it with some armoured cars. Not only were few weapons lost, the Home Guard proved to be a valuable link between the security forces and the populace, thus considerably improving the security of the villages.⁸³ In short, the establishment of a permanent police presence in the New Villages and the empowerment of the rural Chinese sent two crucial messages to the Chinese population. First, the government was doing its best to protect them, and second, the government trusted them and was sincere in its efforts to include them in the building of a new independent Malaya.

Initially, the resettled villagers might have felt compelled to cooperate with the authorities out of fear as epitomized in this private letter of a communist insurgent: “The public are so frightened they even refuse to open the door when we visit them ... They ... begged us not to come to the village. So you see we have completely lost the cooperation of the public.”⁸⁴ In time, however, the rural Chinese began to see the government as the provider of physical and socio-economic security. The subsequent transformation of the New Villages into thriving small towns with modern amenities encouraged families to stay put. Kumar Ramakrishna maintains that the British were gradually able to secure the confidence of not only the rural Chinese but also that of the MCP rank and file through the propaganda of its deeds that promoted the physical and socio-economic

⁸¹ Robert Brown Asprey, *War in the Shadows*, p. 845.

⁸² John, A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, p. 74.

⁸³ Julian Paget, *Counter-insurgency Campaigning*, p. 66.

⁸⁴ Hack Karl, *Iron Claws of Malaya*, p. 6.

security of both the rural Chinese and MCP cadres.⁸⁵ To put it bluntly: “with security came loyalty”.⁸⁶ The government’s ability to provide for the security of the people and ensure a stable secure progressive socio-economic environment demonstrated its credibility, and was a key factor in winning the hearts and minds of the rural Chinese.

The establishment of BRIAM under the leadership of Thompson in Saigon was intended to transfer applicable lessons from the Malayan Emergency to South Vietnam, particularly British experience in population control. Drawing ostensibly from the success of the New Villages in Malaya, a massive Strategic Hamlet programme was started but in disregard of Thompson’s advice. According to Clutterbuck, three serious mistakes were made:

1. The initial Strategic Hamlets were set up not in the areas where the Communists were weakest as they had been in Malaya, but in the areas where they were strongest. As a result, they were quickly overrun and the scheme discredited from the start.
2. The resettlement was attempted at an unrealistic pace. No less than 12,000 Strategic Hamlets were established within two years, by contrast with 410 New Villages in Malaya in 18 months.
3. The worst mistake of all was that no police posts, or army posts, were established in the Strategic Hamlets. As a result, the only Popular Forces living inside the Strategic Hamlets were those of the Vietcong.⁸⁷

These three cardinal errors were further elaborated by Thompson in his assessment of the implementation of the Strategic Hamlet programme in South Vietnam. In scathing terms, Thompson affirms that “as a result of impatience for action”, the Strategic Hamlet Programme got off to a bad start. Operation Sunrise with the objective of establishing four defended hamlets was launched north of Ben Cat, in an area extensively controlled by the Vietcong. Furthermore, the resettlement of villagers away from their rice fields gave the impression that all future strategic hamlets were to be of this type, thus providing the Vietcong with excellent propaganda. The hamlets were subsequently lost to the Vietcong

⁸⁵ Kumar Ramakrishna, *Emergency Propaganda; The Winning of Malayan Hearts and Minds 1948–1958* (p. 4), Surrey: Curzon, 2002.

⁸⁶ Robert Jackson, *The Malayan Emergency, the Commonwealth’s Wars 1948–1966* (p. 116), London: Routledge, 1991.

⁸⁷ Richard Clutterbuck, *Guerrillas and Terrorists*, p. 45.

within the year.⁸⁸ The haphazard implementation of the Strategic Hamlet programme coupled with the failure to expand the police and provincial forces meant that it was impossible to provide sufficient security forces to protect the villages.

The conventional outlook of MAAG and later MACV meant that the primary focus was on building up the ARVN rather than the police force upon which successful population security depended. Permanent police presence was to be found only in the larger towns, and “far from being the cutting edge of the anti-guerrilla effort, the police were the weakest of all the South Vietnamese forces”.⁸⁹ A well-known analyst and critic of the U.S. Army’s COIN methods, Andrew Krepinevich maintains that:

Roaming the countryside in search of targets for its unparalleled firepower, the Army ignored the basic requirement of COIN: a secure population committed to the government. In adopting a strategy that measured success by the body count, the Army gave its combat leaders no incentive to stay put and gradually gain control over an area. Thus...the army...never denied the enemy his source of strength; access to the people.⁹⁰

Since the GVN government seemed incapable of safeguarding the villagers, more often than not, the rural population had little choice, but to side with the Vietcong. The ramifications of the failure to secure the rural population from Vietcong infiltration and subversion were plain for all to see in the aftermath of the Tet offensive. Although the general uprising that Hanoi had hoped for did not materialize, many villages were returned to revolutionary control with new revolutionary administrations set up in more than 600 liberated villages between the start of the offensive and the end of March.⁹¹ The American policy of pacification thus lay in tatters, and both the causes of the U.S. and GVN government were irretrievably discredited. In such a situation, winning the confidence of the people became a highly impossible task, since in their minds, the DRVN had proved itself to be the strongest side that would ultimately win the war.

⁸⁸ Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, p. 129.

⁸⁹ Anthony James Joes, *The War for South Vietnam 1954–1973* (p. 68), Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2001.

⁹⁰ Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (p. 197), Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986.

⁹¹ William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, p. 295.

Propaganda

Thompson postulates that in the battle for the hearts and minds of the people, it is the mind that counts: “What the peasant wants to know is does the government mean to win the war? Because, if not, he will have to support the insurgent. The government must ... instil the confidence that it is going to win.”⁹² Briggs appreciated the fact that one of the best methods to instil confidence into the population is effective government propaganda. As noted earlier, Hugh Carleton Greene was brought in by Briggs to set up the EIS, which was to be a civilian institution that handled all of the government’s conduct of public relations and dissemination of public information. Robert Thompson avers that:

In conventional war between two countries there is no question but that psychological warfare directed at enemy units is mainly a military responsibility. In an insurgency, however, it is an internal political matter and should be a civilian responsibility, particularly in respect of its planning and production.⁹³

The British clearly believed that since the Emergency was essentially a civil problem, a supra-civilian Information Services would be the best organization to coordinate and conduct the entire psywar effort. The British further avoided any militarization that would undermine its credibility. If military assets were utilized, it was in the dissemination and distribution role, in the form of leaflet drops and voice aircraft sorties by the RAF in the skies, and on the ground by troops on patrol.

The fundamentals of the government’s psywar efforts were laid out by Greene as follows:

To raise the morale of the civil population and to encourage confidence in government and resistance to the communists with a view to increasing the flow of information reaching the police; to attack morale of members of the MRLA, the *Min Yuen* and their supporters and to drive a wedge between the leaders and the rank and

⁹² Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, p. 146.

⁹³ *Ibid*, p. 95.

file with a view to encouraging defection and undermining the determination of the communists to continue the struggle.⁹⁴

Greene also formulated what was to be the government's long-term surrender policy of "fair treatment" of all Surrendered Enemy Personnel (SEPs). Having realized the "critical psychological vulnerability posed by the powerful materialistic impulse of the average rural Chinese peasant and terrorist", Greene deduced that the "offer of attractive rewards to induce these peasants to betray the terrorists would intensify the anxieties of waverers in the MRLA". Hence, Greene set about rationalizing the existing rewards programme.⁹⁵ Briggs, Thompson and Templer were all convinced that persuading the guerrillas to surrender would be a much more effective method of destroying the MCP than killing them, and staunchly backed efforts of the IES at inducing surrenders.

Under Briggs's aegis, psywar had become "an integral part ... of major operations", and increasingly appreciated by the security forces.⁹⁶ The revitalized psywar deeply vexed the Communists. As contact between guerrillas and government propaganda increased, the MCP was forced to divert its resources into countering government propaganda. The sheer volume of communist counter-propaganda suggested that from 1951 onwards, the government's psywar was starting to make its effects felt.⁹⁷ The main reason for the success of the government's strategic propaganda campaign, and vanguard of its efforts, was the psywar section of the IES. The psywar section led by C. C. Too, a local Chinese, consisted mostly of ex-MCP guerrillas, which never exceeded 30 in number. Too's fundamental rules in psywar were: "don't preach", "don't theorize", "never say I told you so" and "no propaganda based on hatred". Too further believed that "every item of propaganda must be factual and true", to the extent of admitting in a leaflet that a Communist guerrilla whose death he had publicized was alive due to an error in identification.⁹⁸ This emphasis on the truth had the intended effect of boosting the credibility of government propaganda not only in the eyes of the population, but those of its opponents. In his assessment of Too, Clutterbuck wrote:

⁹⁴ Anthony Short, *In Pursuit of Mountain Rats*, p. 417.

⁹⁵ Kumar Ramakrishna, "'Bribing the Reds to Give Up': Rewards Policy in the Malayan Emergency", *War in History*, 9(3), (2002), 332–353, p. 339.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

⁹⁷ Anthony Short, *In Pursuit of Mountain Rats*, p. 421.

⁹⁸ Noel Barber, *The War on the Running Dogs*, p. 118.

The forceful and imaginative Too ... was adept at forecasting CT policies and his psychological warfare approach was based on the understanding gained from constant contact with current Communist thinking. It took us some time to learn the obvious lesson that psychological warfare must be directed by a local man. It is amazing how many Europeans think they understand the Asian mind.⁹⁹

In appreciation of Too's unparalleled knowledge of the MCP and local conditions, Thompson gave Too a free hand as much as main policy would allow and was resolutely behind Too in his "no hate" and "nothing but the truth" approach. The "no hate" policy not only encouraged droves of Communist guerrillas to surrender, but also SEP cooperation with the security services. This in turn greatly increased the flow of invaluable intelligence, something that cannot be gained by simply killing off the insurgents. The British approach to psywar in Malaya can thus be summed up as one that adopted a civil rather than militaristic outlook, avoided hate, strictly adhered to the truth, prevented the guerrilla from seizing the initiative, and based on local conditions rather than an imposed preconceived European perspective.

By contrast, the American approach to psywar was an exact mirror image of its big war orientated "guns and bullets" strategy in Vietnam. Furthermore, the absence of any noteworthy civil-military cohesion meant that the overall planning of the psywar effort, and the production of propaganda in Vietnam was like many other aspects of the war, severely Balkanized. While the Joint United States Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO) oversaw psywar policy in Vietnam, MACV was responsible for its implementation on the ground. Instead of relying on an EIS setup to feed public information to the press, the U.S. military preferred to publish information material themselves. Besides the 4th Psyop Group, based at Saigon, numerous other individual formations ran their own psyops and psyops units. The special operations squadrons had their own psyops units, as did at least three infantry divisions, one airborne division and two Marine divisions. Since psywar was regarded as outside the mainstream of military career development, officers involved in psyops often tried to get out as soon as they were in.¹⁰⁰ The business of winning hearts and minds in Vietnam thus became a militarized as well as Balkanized affair.

⁹⁹ Richard Clutterbuck, *The Long Long War*, p. 106.

¹⁰⁰ Peter Watson, *War on the Mind: The Military Uses and Abuses of Psychology* (p. 385), London: Hutchinson of London, 1978.

The active involvement of American military units meant that psywar in Vietnam was waged in the manner of a conventional military campaign—a military solution for a military problem. The U.S. 1st Cavalry Division conducted pysop strikes to “psychologically exploit contacts with the enemy in battle”. Upon contact with the enemy, a helicopter equipped with broadcast gear would scramble to the area, the “psyop effort then being integrated with artillery fire, tactical air strikes and helicopter gunships”. The confessions of a Vietcong guerrilla captured in the resulting action would be transmitted to the pysop helicopter and re-broadcasted to the fighting zone to be heard by former colleagues within minutes of capture.¹⁰¹ During Operation MALHEUR, which ran from 11 May until 2 August 1967, the First Brigade of Task Force Oregon distributed more than 23 million leaflets to the population with the following message:

The VC claim that they are concerned for the welfare of the Vietnamese people. Why do they use your villages as a base to fight the forces of your government, the Republic of Vietnam ... The VC say they are strong, why must they continue to use defenseless women and children as shields and your villages for their protection? Refuse the VC demands and tell him to do battle in the fields, rice paddies, and woods away from your village and you. The GVN forces have no design to harm innocent civilians but we will destroy the VC and NVA where we find them.¹⁰²

As part of the psywar effort, voice aircraft flew over at night, broadcasting “nostalgic pleas by female voices, and children’s wails for Daddy to come home”.¹⁰³ The primary goal of such efforts is to stir up anti-communist sentiments among the rural population. Positive results were however painfully meagre. Considering the following statement of Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann, it is easy to see why that was so:

In the last decade, I have walked through hundreds of hamlets that have been destroyed in the course of a battle, the majority as the result of the heavier friendly fires. The overwhelming majority of hamlets thus destroyed failed to yield sufficient evidence of damage to the enemy to justify the destruction of the hamlet. Indeed, it has not been unusual to have a hamlet destroyed and find absolutely no evidence of

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p. 411.

¹⁰² Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, p. 67.

¹⁰³ Robert W. Chandler, *War of Ideas: The US Propaganda Campaign in Vietnam* (p. 4), Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1981.

damage to the enemy. I recall in May 1969 the destruction and burning by air strike of 900 houses in a hamlet in Chau Doc Province without evidence of a single enemy being killed ... The destruction of a hamlet by friendly firepower is an event that will always be remembered and practically never forgiven by those members of the population who lost their homes.¹⁰⁴

To encourage Vietcong guerrillas to defect, the Chieu Hoi (open arms) programme was developed by the psychological warfare specialists. Using family contacts, radio and loudspeaker broadcasts, and the dropping of millions of leaflets that focused on prospective grievances and aspirations, the American propagandist sought to convince the guerrilla that the GVN would provide a better life than one under communist rule. Like John Paul Vann, a unit commander of the Chieu Hoi programme wryly notes that the programme “consisted of two 105 mm howitzers, one called Chieu and the other called Hoi”.¹⁰⁵ American practice of psyops in Vietnam like its sweep and clear operations were backed by bombs, rockets and bullets rather than face to face contact. Added to this, the seemingly senseless destruction of their lives, villages, homes, property and livelihoods, it is little wonder that the entire psywar effort held little credibility in the eyes of the Vietnamese people.

American propagandists in Vietnam though technical experts, never quite came to grips with Vietnamese culture and values. They were therefore ill-equipped to deal with the chasm between cultures and often ran programmes that were counterproductive. An example of propaganda gone awry due to lack of cultural understanding was the use of “sex appeal” leaflets. Cheesecake leaflets based on American notions of sex appeal filled with pictures of voluptuous, scantily clad women were produced based on the assumption that the pictures would turn the thoughts of North Vietnamese troops towards home. In the disillusioned words of an American propagandist: “To most Vietnamese there’s nothing captivating about over-endowed women. Pinups just don’t have the same appeal here.”¹⁰⁶ In its failure to bridge the cultural gap, the Americans could in no way win the war for hearts and minds and close the credibility gap.

¹⁰⁴ Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, p. 104.

¹⁰⁵ Peter Watson, *War on the Mind*, 411.

¹⁰⁶ Robert W. Chandler, *War of Ideas*, p. 20.

Moreover, by shoring up the GVN regime, which was perceived by many as corrupt and morally bankrupt, the United States could do little to enhance its credibility. Diem's priority as head of state was the preservation of his power base, and not that of developing South Vietnam into an independent, viable non-Communist state. Advancement in the government and military was based on personal loyalty to Diem rather than on merit. Under Diem, much of the ARVN was reduced to a personal Praetorian Guard used to repressing domestic opposition but incapable of taking on the well disciplined and highly determined Vietcong and NVA. When Diem was murdered on 1 November 1963, General Nguyen Khanh became the GVN's new leader. Instead of reforming the GVN and its credibility, Nguyen's first priority like Diem was securing his own rule.

With its unwavering goal towards the unification of Vietnam by the Vietnamese people, the DRVN was naturally perceived as the more credible nationalist as compared to the corrupt GVN regime. Giap observed astutely that:

The Americans made a big mistake in choosing South Vietnam for a battlefield. The Saigon reactionaries are too weak ... in their weakness ... to take advantage of American aid. Because what was the purpose of the American aggression in Vietnam? To build up a newstyle colony with a puppet government. But to build up such a colony you need a government that's stable, and the Saigon government is unstable in the extreme. It has no influence on the population; people don't believe in it.¹⁰⁷

Although external assistance might alter the power relationship between two opposing sides, the driving force behind any viable nationalist movement must always be a credible indigenous platform that appeals to the population. Washington's inability to shed its label as a foreign invader that was supporting a weak and largely unpopular puppet state proved to be the Achilles' heel of the American propaganda campaign and the American cause in Vietnam.

In an effort to convince its various audiences that South Vietnam was a nation, much American propaganda was devoted to rhetoric emphasizing those very qualities that

¹⁰⁷ Vo Nguyen Giap, *The Military Art of People's War: Selected Writings of General Vo Nguyen Giap* (p. 329), New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970.

American officials privately believed were virtually non-existent.¹⁰⁸ In his landmark memorandum on the issue of pacification dated 15 October 1966, Robert McNamara concluded that:

The U.S. cannot do this pacification security job for the Vietnamese. All we can do is “massage the heart” ... The image of the government cannot improve unless and until the ARVN improves markedly ... Promotions, assignments and awards are often not made on merit, but rather on the basis of having a diploma, friends, or relatives, or because of bribery. The ARVN is weak in dedication, direction and discipline.¹⁰⁹

Indeed, the building of an independent viable non-Communist state in the South was dependent upon the GVN’s credibility as the stronger and better alternative to a communist dominated Vietnam. However, as the Americans begin to assume the greater burden of the war effort in Vietnam, it became difficult to dispel perceptions of the United States being the principal belligerent.

After a tour of South Vietnam in the spring of 1968, Israeli General Moshe Dayan commented that too much was being done for local Vietnamese Administration and that foreign troops could “never win the hearts of the people”.¹¹⁰ Indeed, the dominance of JUSPAO over the Vietnamese Ministry of Information in the production and dissemination of propaganda critically undermined the entire propaganda effort in Vietnam. Barry Zorthian, Director of JUSPAO admitted that “one of our errors in Vietnam was our tendency to substitute ourselves for the Vietnamese in their own communications with their people both because of their shortcomings and our own impatience and confidence in our abilities”.¹¹¹ By purporting its “light-grey” psychological operations to have been produced and disseminated by the South Vietnamese regime, JUSPAO violated one of the key tenet of propaganda: strict adherence to the truth. As the true source of the “light-grey” propaganda became exposed by the Communists, so did the little “white lies”.¹¹² Probably the most damning of all exposes was the deliberate attempt to mislead the public over the

¹⁰⁸ Caroline Page, *U.S. Official Propaganda During the Vietnam War*, p. 75.

¹⁰⁹ *The Pentagon Papers* (p. 596), Boston: Beacon Press, 1971.

¹¹⁰ Douglas Kinnard, *The War Managers: American Generals Reflect on Vietnam* (p. 104), New York: Da Capo Press, 1991.

¹¹¹ Robert W. Chandler, *War of Ideas*, p. 215.

¹¹² *Ibid*, p. 220.

build-up of American forces in the spring of 1965. According to General Douglas Kinnard's 1974 questionnaire to 173 generals who had managed the war in Vietnam, this particular incident "destroyed President Johnson's credibility with the public far more than any action of the media".¹¹³ On the propaganda war in Vietnam, one General admitted: "We placed too much emphasis on the positive ... while engaging in false reporting to cover up setbacks. This, in time, led to our losing credibility."¹¹⁴ American policy inadvertently allowed the Communists a "monopoly on the psychological warfare battlefield".¹¹⁵ In the huge credibility gap that resulted between its messages and its deeds, America's "other war" in Vietnam, the winning of Vietnamese hearts and minds eventually became a lost cause.

Conclusion

The Americans failed to appreciate local conditions and the real issues that were at stake in Vietnam, and adopted a "fit soldier with a rifle" approach rather than attempt to understand local physical and psychological terrain. Not only did they scratch "where it didn't itch at all", but fresh wounds were frequently opened. Where there was previously none, bitterness and hate hardened the hearts of villagers whose homes have been razed to the ground by "friendly" American firepower. Most importantly, the perceived ineptitude and repressiveness of the GVN regime meant that despite the efforts of America's best and brightest minds, many a South Vietnamese peasant remained unconvinced that their future lay in the GVN. The resultant credibility gap was just too wide to be filled in the short space of time that the U.S. government was given to conclude the war. It was a gap that would be filled by the DRVN, whose patient ratcheting up of the people's war since 1945 would ultimately prevail.

It could be argued that the situation faced by the Americans in Vietnam was much more complex and difficult than the one encountered by the British in Malaya, hence the different outcomes. However, it must be said that after the

¹¹³ Douglas Kinnard, *The War Managers*, p. 128.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 133.

¹¹⁵ Mark W. Woodruff, *Unheralded Victory: Who Won the Vietnam War?* (p. 198), London: Harper Collins, 1999.

American War of Independence, victories in successive big wars have inured the U.S. Army to the big war paradigm. This “comfort zone” in the “big” ultimately proved detrimental to the ability of the U.S. Army to respond to “prairie fire” type of conflicts, particularly Revolutionary People’s War. This does not, of course, discount the fact that British success in COIN has been built upon past failures as much as previous success. First published in 1934, Sir Charles Gwynn’s seminal work *Imperial Policing* was to serve as a timely didactic encapsulation of the hard learned lessons in the policing of the British Empire, warts and all. Gwynn’s key tenet that the importance of the Army lay in its role as a “reserve of force” in support of the civil administration has been faithfully adhered to by the British since then, well into more contemporary times. The effort to quell the MCP’s revolution in Malaya was never militarized like it was with the Americans in Vietnam. Another lesson internalized within British COIN practice is that population security (physical and socio-economic), and the credibility that results from its provision, is the *sine qua non* for winning minds if not hearts. Drawing from more than two centuries’ worth of imperial policing experience, the British came to develop a holistic highly integrated civil-military approach to COIN and Counterrevolution. The emphasis on the use of minimum force, the paramount importance of population security, and a credible “hearts and minds” campaign enabled the British to successfully isolate the “man with the knife” from the rural Chinese in Malaya, and in the twilight days of imperial retreat, bequeath a pro-West Malayan state that survived the test of the Cold War in Southeast Asia.

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