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Simon Mai, Whitworth University, undergraduate student, “Pacification Gone Awry: The U.S Failure to Underpin Hearts and Minds in South Vietnam, 1966–1968”

Abstract: Throughout the escalation of American involvement in Vietnam from 1964 – 1968, one key strategy focused on pacification – the winning of the allegiance of South Vietnamese civilians to the Saigon-based Government of Vietnam (GVN). This paper will argue that American/GVN implementation of pacification programs at the provincial and village level revealed three fundamental factors that proved fatal and counterproductive. These factors were the political and social entrenchment of the Viet Cong or National Liberation Front (NLF), the provincial cronyism and corruption of GVN, and the indiscriminate application of American firepower in support of General William Westmoreland’s strategy of attrition. These elements help explain why American led efforts – both military and civilian – at pacification failed to convince the South Vietnamese populace to support the GVN. This paper utilizes secondary sources focusing on the effectiveness of pacification in specific GVN provinces and associated villages as examined in the works of Eric Bergerud, David W.P Elliot and Jeffrey Race. Personal accounts of American/GVN soldiers and administrators engaged in pacification such as Lieutenant Colonel William R. Corson and Lieutenant Duong Van Nguyen will additionally be discussed.

Pacification Gone Awry: The U.S Failure to Underpin Hearts and Minds in South Vietnam, 1966 – 1968

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In 1965, as the United States escalated its Vietnam commitment to what would become the "big unit" war by landing the first combat troops at Da Nang, another parallel war was already being waged in the interior hamlets of South Vietnam. Although bearing various names like the "village war" or simply as the "other war", pacification was the struggle by which the U.S and South Vietnam attempted to win the allegiance of the rural peasantry and propagate the legitimacy and survival of the government of South Vietnam (GVN). Predominately executed (but under strong American auspices) by the GVN, pacification was envisioned as essentially a nation-building exercise utilizing political, social and economic programs intended to protect and uplift the rural citizenry. Particularly from the American perspective, as emphasized by historian Richard Hunt, pacification was not only a nation building tool but also a means of curtailing the insurgency of the National Liberation Front (NLF) or Viet Cong and wresting away their dominance of the countryside.[1] Yet, despite an ever increasing American commitment to pacification programs up to withdrawal in 1973, the pacification campaign was ultimately unsuccessful in achieving its primary goal of securing the loyalty of the peasantry to the GVN. Crucially, the manner in which pacification from the 1966 Honolulu Declaration to the 1968 Tet Offensive was conducted – via the destructive and indiscriminate American "big unit" war and having to work through the corrupt and inept GVN channels – were the main contributors to the GVN failing to win hearts and minds, especially visible within the key strategic provinces of Hau Nghia and Long An and Dinh Tuong as examined by scholars Eric Bergerud, Jeffrey Race and David Eliot respectively.

To begin with, the overshadowing of pacification in favor of the big unit war was not a decision taken lightly by the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) and its first commanding officer, General William Westmoreland. As shown by the historian Gregory

Daddis, Westmoreland and his staff were aware that a holistic strategy – which included pacification – was needed to stem the NLF insurgency and restore GVN control. The problem however, as Daddis identifies, was "identifying an approach, given the resources at hand, which raised the war's costs for North Vietnam within acceptable limits for both the United States and South Vietnam."[2] Grinding the enemy's combatants and manpower – the strategy of attrition that would characterize the big unit war – however seemed attractive expressly for that purpose of convincing the enemy they could not win. In a 1965 directive to his field commanders, Westmoreland greatly emphasized that point: "the ultimate aim is to pacify the Republic of Vietnam by destroying the VC – his forces, organization, terrorists, agents, and propagandists… which ultimately will dominate the bases and render them useless."[3] Battlefield successes through attrition could then also link into the larger holistic strategy and support pacification efforts as Daddis writes.[4] As such, pacification as a non-decisive factor in Westmoreland's mind was merely a goal benefitting from the means of the big unit war instead of the means itself.

With the implementation of the attrition focused, big unit war, the U.S Army and to some extent the Marines became quite integrated with the pacification efforts. As Richard Hunt has examined, the U.S Army had ground operations ranging from search and destroy, clear and hold and pacification support to parallel programs of civil affairs and advisers. Yet all three types according to Hunt were frequently intermixed, causing confusion whether a certain operation was more for reducing enemy presence (per the attrition strategy) or strengthening the GVN position (per one of the main goals of pacification).[5] In the majority of cases however, neither was achieved because of the inherently violent and destructive manner these operations were done. As Lieutenant Colonel William Corson, drawing from his experience as part of a Marine pacification program, would later condemn of the Army's tactics "Each of these [search and

destroy] operations has its own sad story to tell in terms of the almost total disregard for their effect on the Vietnamese people. The terrorism of the enemy has been equally matched by our own."[6]

Such terrorism as described by Corson could readily be found within Army ground operations conducted in Hau Nghia Province close to Saigon. Historian Eric Bergerud contends that given the large and critical role of American forces in Hau Nghia alongside it being heavily populated by peasants and being within the heartland of the NLF insurgency, the province provides a valuable insight into what worked and went against pacification. In effect, it was a province that according to Bergerud "was typical of the type of area in which Saigon had to prevail if it had any hope of long-term survival."[7] However, with the arrival of the U.S Army 25th Infantry Regiment in 1966 pacification efforts intensified to the detriment of the local population. Under the codename "County Fair", U.S and ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) soldiers would carry out raids on hamlets in the early morning, searching houses for NLF, checking ID cards, and carting away suspicious looking or draftable males. These sweeps were often interspersed with destroying bunkers, ambushes and seizure of rice and weapons. The County Fair raids, while including an explicitly peaceful component where the soldiers would provide entertainment, food and medical aid after the raiding, served mostly to alienate the villagers. As reported by two American aid workers in Hau Nghia, a villager they encountered decried the insensitivity showed by the Americans: "'How would you feel…if a bunch of burly foreigners invaded your hamlet, took away your men and played weird foreign music to entertain you?'"[8] The indignation was perhaps more seriously inflamed by what Bergerud describes as an inherent and deep mistrust of the American soldiers towards the Vietnamese. As it was extremely difficult to distinguish between a villager and a NLF cadre, and with mounting

casualties from mines and booby traps, American soldiers took out their anger on the civilians. Cruelty against civilians was commonplace, with villagers' animals being shot and American military vehicles running civilian ones into ditches. One battalion in late 1966 decided that every hamlet they approached was hostile and utilized every ounce of firepower support they possessed when attacked, no matter how large or small the attacking force was. At the core of these actions, as Bergerud explains, was the desire to keep U.S casualties low. Even if it meant deeply alienating the local population, "U.S soldiers were not willing to do anything to jeopardize their lives just to lessen the danger to noncombatants."[9]

The situation was more or less similar in Long An Province as examined by Jeffrey Race. Southernly adjacent to Hau Nghia, Long An had as much, if not more, of a vital and strategic position as Hau Nghia. Cutting almost completely across South Vietnam from the Cambodian border (until 1963) to the South China Sea, Long An was in an area known as the Western Region which contained most of the population and rice growing areas. The province itself produced 260,000 tons of rice annually, making it a vitally important locale for the GVN/U.S. to secure.[10] By 1968, the United States was supporting a two-pincer strategy devised by the GVN to uproot the NLF from the province: the rural construction program and what Race has termed the violence program. The latter program, as articulated by U.S Army Chief of Staff Harold Johnson before the Senate Appropriations Committee in early 1968, envisioned the seeking out and destruction of enemy bases supporting NLF and PAVN forces and elimination of enemy personnel.[11] As the violence program in Long An corresponded well with the big unit strategy of Westmoreland and MACV, it was carried out similarly with extreme prejudice and firepower to the great detriment of local civilian populations. Race writes on one instance in 1967 where an American unit moving on Route 18 close to the village of My Le received small arms fire from

the village. The unit commanding officer responded by ordering airstrikes and artillery fire on the village which caused extensive civilian casualties and physical destruction. Later, senior American adviser in Long An Colonel James Herbert justified the unit commander's action, remarking that he would have been relieved from duty had he not called the strikes. Again, as was seen in Hau Nghia Province, the American rules of engagement effectively put American lives over Vietnamese lives. In a similar vein, another common component of the violence program in the form of harassment and interdiction fires (where artillery and airstrikes were directed at enemy lines of communication or concentrations) was justified by American and South Vietnamese officers as having a significant impact on enemy morale. Reports from deflectors seemingly confirmed this justification, but as Race reports, "they [the deflectors] went on to report what the government did not: that the use of air and artillery attacks had a farm more devastating impact on noncombatants than on combatants."[12]

In addition to Bergerud and Race's respective studies on Hau Nghia and Long An Provinces, David Elliot in his examination of Vietnamese revolutionary warfare conducted in the Mekong Delta from 1930 – 1975 has also paid focus on the province of Dinh Truong and pacification efforts there. Much like Hau Nghia and Long An, Dinh Truong or My Tho (as it was known by the NLF) was considered a vitally important province as the principal water and land routes from the Mekong Delta to Saigon ran through the province.[13] When American forces first arrived in Dinh Truong province in late 1966 and established a base in the Chau Thanh district, the immediate villages surrounding the base started being shelled. Elliot writes that a NLF liaison reported how his village was being shelled regularly day and night since the American base was set up, resulting in numerous casualties. Among most of the dead, the cadre said, were children. Not surprisingly then, much of the villagers turned against the GVN and

accused the Americans of bringing in mortars to kill them.[14] Much like the ground operations described in Hau Nghia and Long An provinces, U.S operations in Dinh Truong also involved heavy firepower utilization and extensive stays in hamlets: in a strategy known as chup non (snaring prey with a conical hat), U.S forces would make rapid probes across a wide area ina checkboard fashion, calling upon massive artillery and air support when contact was made with the enemy. Such operations also had American soldiers constantly occupying hamlets as bases from which small unit patrols were conducted. The constant contact villagers had with American forces then constituted a deep psychological fear that "they would be unable to communicate with U.S troops in circumstances that might be life threatening, or at least lead to arrest and possible imprisonment."[15] While the language barrier as Elliot shows quickly dissipated, residual fear that remained were capitalized by the NLF to sow further discord among the populace.

Whereas the more direct U.S big unit operations harmed pacification's efforts – by virtue of their destructiveness – and further alienating the populace away from the GVN instead of drawing them towards it, the U.S also had to contend that a large majority of pacification efforts were expected to be done by the GVN. Such an arrangement, as it was favorably viewed by American military and political officials, could showcase that South Vietnam was in fact an independent and sovereign state capable of bettering itself instead of an American puppet regime. This was made clear in the first Honolulu conference in 1966 between American and GVN leaders, where the latter committed themselves to economic development and social welfare programs (in what would be termed revolutionary development) as essential elements for pacification and reflecting the beliefs of President Lyndon Johnson that New Deal style programs and populist democratization could win the countryside for South Vietnam. Of course,

as David Elliot writes, the Saigon government were all but keen to accept any American aid but knew such aid was dependent on their nominal adherence to American desires.[16]

Whether the GVN was capable of administering pacification programs with genuine care however trended more towards incompetency and outright corruption, even with the increased American aid funds and personnel. One illustrative example was in the Chieu Hoi pacification program begun in 1963 by the GVN, where NLF fighters were encouraged to deflect to the South Vietnamese. As said by Hunt, before 1965 Chieu Hoi only had one American assigned to it. The following year, however, the United States increased spending for Chieu Hoi to the point where they bore three-quarters of the cost and added additional personnel. Only then did the program, after being augmented to 20,242 personnel, launch off in earnest.[17] Alongside injections of financial funding, American pacification advisers frequently found themselves having to strongly encourage/insist that pacification efforts either be attempted or revised at the local level. These attempts were accordingly stonewalled by lower and upper level GVN officials in pursuit of political agendas, which became an early major headache for CORDS, the American unified civilian-military pacification command established in 1967.[18] Corruption was yet another hindrance to advance pacification efforts, as exemplified in one instance that occurred in the summer of 1965. The United States Operations Mission (USOM) accused the province chief of Binh Tuy of misusing $250,000 in funds from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). After the GVN refused to look into the matter, USOM took matters into their own hands and withheld all further aid to Binh Tuy until the province chief was investigated. Although the GVN eventually fired the province chief, Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge ordered that USOM refrain from such aggressive measures for fear of Saigon losing face.[19] In a similar yet less high-profile case, a CIA case officer inspecting the

locations and strength of GVN revolutionary development cadres in Thua Thien Province in June 1966 discovered that their supervisor, Nguyen Ngoc Ly, had padded the payroll list with 260 nonexistent cadres. By the officer's estimation, the supervisor was probably pocketing a million piasters a month.[20] With incidents like these, the inefficacy of South Vietnamese executed pacification efforts became much like an epidemic.

As demonstrated previously, the seeming reluctance of the GVN to effectively carry out the pacification programs for which they were assigned only encouraged American doubts throughout the pacification campaign about their legitimacy and sway over the South Vietnamese peasantry. One such critic of the GVN, long time U.S Army adviser John Paul Vann, went as far as denouncing the Saigon government for its inherent incapability to ever gain the support of the peasantry. In a scathing 1965 report, Vann proclaimed the GVN as oriented solely towards "the exploitation of the rural and lower-class urban population… [and as] a continuation of the French colonial system of government with upper class Vietnamese replacing the French."[21] According to an analysis from Eric Bergerud, Vann saw that South Vietnamese peasants had little use for political ideology and were in fact politically neutral, but could not support the existing GVN system who had a vested interest in perpetuating their own power. Even well-meaning and genuine GVN officials could do little to affect change, which led Vann to conclude that only the United States could force the GVN to change and save itself. The authors of the Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of Vietnam (PROVN), a 1966 U.S Army study, also came to similar conclusions that the peasantry was fatalistic, war weary and were highly suspicious of the GVN who cared so little for them.[22] Consequently, both Vann and the PROVN noticed that American aid being rendered towards pacification may

be more in fact perpetuating the GVN and its inherent problems, and in doing so, perpetuating as well the dissatisfaction and views of illegitimacy from the peasantry.

To conclude, when considering that American efforts in assisting pacification efforts from 1966 – 1968 were largely subordinate to the big unit war and done through the GVN, the ultimate goals of pacification – gaining the loyalty of the peasantry and upholding the GVN as a legitimate government – were fatally hindered and could not be achieved. As seen in the key provinces of Hau Nghia, Long An, and Dinh Tuong, the overall American ground strategy to seek out and destroy the enemy was meant to provide a shield for pacification efforts to get underway. Yet, the manner in which ground operations were carried out with the rules of engagement allowing for copious amounts of firepower to be delivered on target areas greatly increased civilian casualties and strengthened perceptions that the GVN/U.S. cared little for the preservation of peasant lives and property. The role of the GVN in administering much of the pacification programs with American aid funds and personnel also proved decisive in furthering perceptions that the GVN squandered and exploited pacification resources to such an extent that the Americans could not control despite their attempts. In the end, what few successes pacification programs could claim – like Army's MEDCAP which provided medical treatment for hamlets – could only admiration and support for the Americans in this context instead of the GVN. As aptly concluded by Hunt, "if the South Vietnamese were to believe in their own government, that government had to establish its own credibility. American armed strength…could not be a surrogate for the South Vietnamese government."[23] The Saigon government, despite investing much of its effort in pacification, had little if not less credibility after the tumultuous 1968 Tet Offensive after it pulled much of its forces from the countryside to fight the NLF. Although pacification was further driven post Tet Offensive with the advent of the

accelerated pacification program and measures like Phoenix (which assassinated NLF members), with the GVN implementing long sought-after measures like the 1970 land reform act, these efforts were too late to achieve any lasting effect. Thus, the period from 1966 to 1968 was critical for the goals of pacification to be met, but the emphasis on bombs, attrition and proxy assistance cost the GVN valuable time it needed to build a base of allegiance and security.

Notes

[1] Richard Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995), 1.
[2] Gregory Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 67.
[3] William Westmoreland, "Directive to U.S. Commanders, 17 September 1965" in *A Vietnam War Reader: A Documentary History from American and Vietnamese Perspectives*, ed. Michael Hunt (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 89 – 90.
[4] Daddis, *Westmoreland's War*, 121.
[5] Hunt, *Pacification*, 47.
[6] William Corson, *The Betrayal* (New York: W.W Norton and Company, 1968), 68.
[7] Eric Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1991), 2.
[8] Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, 152 – 153.
[9] Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, 172 – 174.
[10] Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 1 – 2.
[11] Race, *War Comes to Long An*, 225.
[12] Race, *War Comes to Long An*, 233, 236.
[13] David Elliot, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta 1930 – 1975* (New York: M.E Sharpe, 2007), 4.
[14] Elliot, *The Vietnamese War*, 287.
[15] Elliot, *The Vietnamese War*, 289 – 290.
[16] Elliot, *The Vietnamese War*, 250 – 251.
[17] Hunt, *Pacification*, 38.
[18] Hunt, *Pacification*, 128.
[19] Bergerud, *Dynamics of Defeat*, 107.
[20] Thomas Ahern, *Vietnam Declassified: The CIA and Counterinsurgency* (Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 2010), 194.
[21] John Paul Vann, "Harnessing the Revolution in South Vietnam," Small Wars Journal, last modified April 13, 2004, https://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/bobandrews1.pdf
[22] Bergerud, *Dynamics of Defeat*, 108, 110.
[23] Hunt, *Pacification*, 49.

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