

When *Unity of Effort* Is Not Enough

by Terry McNamara

One picture dominates most memories of the Vietnam War and its sad denouement—the line of people climbing a slender ladder to a roof top where a helicopter waited to take them out of their country and away from a collapsing regime. This scene of defeat continues to color our collective attitude toward a war in which so much American blood and treasure were expended to no apparent justifiable affect. Indeed, this trauma has bedeviled any consideration of involvement in other foreign military adventures for some 35 years after the last American's ignominious departure from the roof of the Saigon Embassy.

Understandably, our leadership, both military and civil, has encouraged a degree of amnesia as regards Vietnam and to a lesser extent the war in Korea. Rather, they have refocused on the glories of the more distant past as they rebuild professional armed forces. This understandable reluctance to consider unpleasant memories has come at a cost, for one often learns more from failures than from successes.

More recently, the harsh realities of involvement in “limited wars” in the erstwhile Middle Eastern states of Iraq and Afghanistan have encouraged some inquisitive minds, such as John Nagl in *How to Eat Soup With a Knife*, to reconsider past experiences of unconventional warfare in such places as Malaysia, Algeria, and Vietnam. Sensibly, they sought techniques that might usefully be applied in current conflicts, albeit modified to suit local circumstances. General Petraeus’ field manual on counterinsurgency contains the fullest distillation of these enquiries into both historic and current experience in fighting such wars.

Since discussions of the Vietnam War have re-emerged, military analysts and historians can now consider the forgotten “Pacification Program” that enjoyed considerable success between 1968 and 1972. During that period, the Viet Cong infrastructure was decimated. Contrary to popular perception, the Tet Offensive, mounted in 1968, resulted in devastating losses of both Viet Cong and North

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Vietnamese soldiers and large numbers of their political cadre. The latter, vital to an insurgency, were not easily replaced. The incursion by U.S. and South Vietnamese forces into Cambodia also disrupted the Viet Cong/North Vietnamese's ability to support military action in South Vietnam. U.S. and South Vietnamese forces destroyed vital base camps, logistics, and headquarters facilities that had previously been inviolate sanctuaries.

Finally, the much reviled Phoenix Program further enfeebled the Viet Cong infrastructure by eliminating more of its precious cadre. Thus, by 1971, the populated parts of South Vietnam were firmly under friendly control and significant economic development was underway in the countryside, especially in the fertile, densely populated Mekong Delta of southern Vietnam. However, as in all such wars, no meaningful political or economic development is possible without a protective security envelope.

Security was the enabler in the struggle for the people's hearts and minds. To win the struggle, a majority of the citizenry had to believe it had a stake in perpetuating and defending the political and economic order. Successful economic development that demonstrably benefited the ordinary citizens who worked in the fields, the shops, and the offices would encourage such commitment.

Popular support for governance ideally completes a functioning, secure, nation state and was not fully in place when American forces left Vietnam in 1973. The best that could be said is that a large majority viewed the South Vietnamese government as the best of two poor choices. Clearly, the majority would not willingly have chosen to be governed by a government imposed and dominated by the North. Why else did so many brave the perils of escape on an inhospitable sea in tiny often unseaworthy boats after the collapse in 1975 of the Southern Regime.

The Birth of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS)

Prior to 1967, both the U.S. military and civilian agencies were engaged in facets of pacification. The military's provincial advisory activity was called Revolutionary Development Support. It functioned as an integral part of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). On the civilian side, various agencies initially carried out support and advisory activities in a traditional quasi-independent fashion with coordination effected at the "country team" level in Saigon.

In 1966 an effort was made to bring civilian activities in the provinces under the unified control of the Office of Civil Operations. The Deputy Ambassador, Alexis Johnson, was placed in overall charge with representatives in all regions and provinces. This half-a-loaf attempt at unity of effort was overtaken in less than a year with the formation of a fully unified civil/military organization enshrining the "single manager" concept.

The principal instrument of the pacification program in Vietnam became an innovation born in frustration in the midst of a bloody war. In 1967, some two years after our massive intervention in the war, President Lyndon B. Johnson was convinced that our pacification efforts were hopelessly disunited. Various civilian and military programs lacked coordination and often worked at cross purposes competing with one another in the field. Indeed, too often, they seemed to pursue contradictory goals. None of this was missed by the wily Vietnamese. Both enemy and ally alike were frequently able to exploit the seams that existed between unaware Americans. Among civilian agencies, differences and jealousies resulted in diminished unity of effort. Over time, it became evident that only the military possessed the resources—some 80 percent of the

resources devoted to the pacification program—and organizational structure needed to marshal huge national programs in a war situation. The civilian agencies, however, had the relevant expertise in areas critical to pacification, such as economic development, governance, public relations in a foreign environment, and public administration. When this disconnect was brought to the President's attention, he reportedly concluded that all of the tools and resources available to the U.S. government for pacification must be brought together and integrated into the military command structure. To give form to the President's instruction, Robert Komer, then Special Assistant to the President for Vietnam, proposed in a memo to Johnson that an organization be established following the 'single manager' concept to unite all provincial advisory groups—both military and civilian. This proposed organization, called Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), would be an internally independent part of MACV under the overall command of

President Kennedy had sent General Maxwell Taylor to Saigon as his ambassador. Foreseeable resistance to such an appointment arose from the State Department; Ellsworth Bunker, who was being considered for the ambassador post, and Westmoreland himself. Johnson's purpose, if indeed he was responsible for the rumor, was never clear. The result, however, was to frighten the civilian agencies with the prospect of being taken over by the military. To preclude such an outcome, they quickly acquiesced in pooling their personnel and other resources in a new joint advisory organization that would be part of a military command, albeit under civilian leadership. Bunker is said to have suggested, perhaps at Johnson's prompting, that CORDS would give civilians control of military assets. In any case, whatever the exact scenario, the President got his way, and CORDS was born with little overt resistance from within the U.S. bureaucracy.

To the astonishment of many, Komer proposed that a civilian be named to head the new organization with the title of Deputy Commander of MACV for Pacification. Unified teams were to be constituted at the regional, provincial, and district levels. Civilians, with the title of Deputy Commander for CORDS, would head the four regional teams. At the critical province level, half the provincial senior advisors (PSA) would be civilians with military deputies and the other half would be military with civilian deputies. Following the single manager principle, the PSA, as the American counterpart of the Vietnamese province chief, was the principal American voice in the province and commander of all American members of his advisory team, military and civilian, at both the provincial and the district levels. Resources from all agencies involved in pacification were to be pooled for use by the unified organization. CORDS was authorized and given a presidential *imprimatur* in a 1967 National Security Action Memorandum with the blessing of both General Westmoreland and Ambassador Bunker.

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The political maneuvering that preceded the establishment of CORDS involved a typical Johnsonian shaping operation. First, rumors appeared suggesting that the President was considering naming Westmoreland as ambassador to Vietnam. It was never clear whether this diplomatic appointment might be concurrent with the General's post as Commander MACV. There was a precedent of sorts for such an appointment;

To his initial chagrin, Robert Komer was named the first Deputy Commander MACV for Pacification; he had hoped to become Deputy Ambassador. To ease his disappointment, Komer was accorded the personal title of ambassador with a position of enormous power. Indeed, Komer never let anyone forget that his rank was the equivalent, in military hierarchical terms, of a four-star general. On the MACV organizational chart, he ranked at the same level as General Creighton Abrams who was General Westmoreland's other deputy and his ultimate successor. Komer was probably the first senior civilian official to exercise command authority in an American military organization actively engaged in war time operations. Service secretaries and normal ambassadors may exercise some command authority, but they have not done so in the field during ongoing combat. Komer was never shy in asserting his authority. Indeed, he well deserved his nickname—"Blowtorch". Without this aggressive, assertive personality at its head, CORDS might not have survived and would certainly not have been as successful as it was in driving and orchestrating the Pacification Program.

Unity of command with strong civilian command participation extended throughout CORDS from the center in Saigon, through the regions, to the provinces. In its later days, there were even some civilian senior district advisors. Komer firmly maintained that the CORDS chain of command be respected. For example, when an Army colonel serving as a province senior advisor fell sick and was absent from his post for several weeks, the commanding general of the XXIV Corps, in charge of operations in that region, insisted a senior officer from the 3rd Marine Division take temporary command of the CORDS team. He was forced to back down when informed the deputy province senior advisor had already assumed command with the knowledge and support of CORDS headquarters in Saigon. This was not an unusual incident. Wisely, Komer's view was to keep CORDS

chain of command distinct from the purely military advisory effort assigned to the regular Vietnamese Army (ARVN).

CORDS did, however, retain substantial responsibilities for advising and equipping local security forces. The regional forces (RF) and provincial forces (PF), commanded by the province chiefs, were advised by CORDS personnel as were the police. This arrangement could lead to misunderstandings as these indigenous forces were full time soldiers whose units were often involved in combat alongside

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regular ARVN and U.S. units. Differences were usually settled amicably, but more serious difficulty could result from the ambiguity in command structures.

As finally configured, CORDS included all of the aspects and resources involved in pacification, aside from the regular U.S. and ARVN units and advisors serving with ARVN. Its programs included psychological operations, public safety, amnesty of former Viet Cong, all economic development aid programs, Revolutionary Cadre (a CIA administered program), and the RF/PF advisory and logistics support effort. Most CIA activities were never fully integrated into CORDS, even when elements of CORDS were participating in the Phoenix Program.

CORDS Success

Much of CORDS later success was due to Bob "Blowtorch" Komer's clear foresight and aggressive persistence. He insisted on being a

full member of the MACV command group, as well as having a place at the country team's head table. The integrity of CORDS as a stand-alone operation within the framework of MACV was his constant preoccupation. He insisted on the

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full integration of CORDS chain of command with military officers writing civilian Foreign Service Officer's (FSO) efficiency reports and vice-versa. The single manager concept so dear to Harvard Business School gurus was put into practice with a vengeance by Master of Business Administration alumnus Komer, as a matter of best management practice. Perhaps most telling, Komer used his widely presumed close relationship with the President as a sheathed weapon, but one that he always appeared ready to use. Perceiving strong presidential support for the program, constituent agencies assigned some of their best people to CORDS. The Army made PSA tours especially attractive by equating them with battalion and brigade command tours. The number of Army officers who were assigned to CORDS who later rose to flag rank is a good indication of their quality (one district senior advisor, General John Shalikashvili, became the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff). The State Department was equally generous in assigning some of its best FSOs. From 1969, the Director General of the Foreign Service insisted that all new appointments to the FSO corps must agree to a CORDS first assignment in Vietnam

as a condition of appointment. Many senior officers went to Vietnam voluntarily or were given directed assignments. A special feature of a CORDS assignment for junior and even middle grade officer was that it afforded unusual opportunities for an FSO to gain significant managerial experience at a relatively early stage in his career. Indeed, a good number of CORDS alumni rose to ambassadorial rank in the Foreign Service. This too was a mark of the quality of officers assigned and of the usefulness of the CORDS experience.

A major factor in the success of pacification was General Abram's refocusing U.S. strategy in Vietnam after assuming command of MACV in late 1968. Pacification became the main effort rather than the earlier will-o-the-wisp emphasis on "search and destroy" tactics. This was a tardy recognition that the people were the prize in a counterinsurgency campaign and should be the principal focus. This change in strategy was especially good news to the CORDS side of the MACV house; greater support for pacification by U.S. and ARVN regular units would assure better security for economic development and for villages that were undecided or who had already committed to the government side. Thus the balance in the countryside began to shift noticeably from late 1969. This favorable situation would persist until American forces completed their withdrawal early in 1973.

A New Broom

A change in CORDS leadership in 1969 did not result in any loss of momentum in the Pacification Program. By the time Komer departed for a quieter diplomatic post as ambassador in Turkey, CORDS was well established and secure in its relations with both Vietnamese counterparts and MACV colleagues. Bill Colby, Komer's successor and later Director of the CIA, was an experienced old hand in Vietnam. He had been Komer's deputy for over a year, and his involvement with Vietnam extended back to 1959. He knew all the senior

figures in the Vietnamese political elite and was well acquainted with those in Washington who dealt with Vietnamese issues. Colby was just as dedicated to success in Vietnam and to CORDS as an organization as Komer had been. The men differed in demeanor but not in determination. Colby was the iron fist in the velvet glove. Komer wore his toughness on his sleeve.

As the calendar turned from the turbulent 1960s to a seemingly more tranquil new decade, the densely populated Mekong delta and low lands along the coast were largely free of Viet Cong units. The Viet Cong and their North Vietnamese mentors were recovering and reconstituting in North Vietnam sanctuaries and across the borders in Cambodia and Laos. At the same time, the Viet Cong leadership were being steadily eliminated by an active Phoenix Program, and the complaints that encouraged discontent among the rural population were being satisfied by development initiatives then beginning to come to fruition. These most notably included redistribution of land to those who actually tilled it; introduction of new strains of “miracle rice” developed in the Philippines that yielded three to four times more than traditional varieties; opening of United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funded rural banks in every province aimed at providing affordable finance to farmers who previously were held in thrall by Chinese money lenders; importation of Japanese built “long bore” outboard motors that doubled as motive power for small boats and as irrigation pump during the dry season; and the introduction of additional sources of family income, such as fish farming on the Mekong River. Prosperity was coming to Vietnam’s rural population, especially in the more fertile areas of the south. With it, incentive to lose their sons either to the Viet Cong or to the ARVN was fast fading.

I saw the improvements for myself on a trip in 1970 to the rich Mekong Delta province of Vinh Long, where I had served in CORDS some two years earlier. On a trip to Saigon, Ambassador

Bunker asked me to go to Vinh Long to assess the accuracy of reports he had been receiving of great improvements in security, prosperity, and attitudes towards the Saigon government in the Delta region. During a weeklong visit, I drove without security escort throughout the province, including areas where one would not have dared visit two years earlier without a full battalion of friendly infantry. Farmers peacefully worked in their paddies, markets were full of goods and

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customers, and large numbers of civilian trucks made their way up National Route 4 toward the markets of Saigon heavily laden with the produce of the fertile Delta.

Unfortunately, the same was not true for the provinces north of Saigon especially the area just south of the demilitarized zone, and along the Cambodian and Laotian borders. The Viet Cong may have suffered near mortal damage in the south, but the North Vietnamese had not given up their ambitions. Their calculation now rested on a waiting game for the expected departure of the last Americans. With American formidable firepower gone, they believed it would be easier to deal with the South Vietnamese.

Composition of CORDS Teams

A typical provincial CORDS team consisted of 250 personnel, mostly military, predominately Army. The civilian members were a mixed bag. Many were hired on contract by USAID for service in Vietnam. The largest career contingent

was from the State Department that contributed a significant proportion of its small, elite FSO corps. The bulk of regular USAID employees were not working in CORDS. Rather, they were employed in Saigon dealing with the large national USAID Program. The CIA had a mix of regular employees who provided supervision to a large number of temporary “gun slingers” and others who made up the big battalions the agency needed to service its part of the war. A small part of the CIA personnel in country were assigned to CORDS as cadre advisors. Retired and former military personnel, many of whom had previously served in Vietnam, were well represented on CORDS teams. They were of uneven quality with outstanding examples at both ends of the spectrum. The late John Paul Vann, a former military officer, was an example of the most effective people that served with CORDS.

Late in the war, USAID sensibly hired a group of former Peace Corps Volunteers, some of whom left Vietnam with me on a small boat down the Mekong on the last day of the war. Other agencies contributed smaller numbers of people with special skills. The U.S. Information Service, for instance, sent members of their Foreign Service to run information programs and lead armed propaganda teams. The Department of Agriculture contributed skilled agronomists, who helped introduce new crops and more advanced agricultural techniques. In all, the civilian members of CORDS acquitted themselves well.

Lesson to Be Learned From Cords

Clearly, history never repeats itself in detail. Nonetheless, there are useful lessons that can be drawn from past experiences, albeit with appropriate caveats. There is broad agreement that future conflicts will demand whole-of-government solutions. The U.S. experience with limited conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq confirms the need for engaging all elements of power, both military and civil, in coping with conflict that can best be described as an insurgency. In a different environment, facing a different enemy,

the response might have to be different, tailored to the particular nature of the threat and the character of the enemy. In any case, the need to bring to bear all of the appropriate elements of national power in an orchestrated fashion almost certainly will be as necessary in any likely future conflict as it is in the current ones. Lessons taken from a war that was unsuccessfully concluded could be particularly instructive. In Vietnam, the U.S. government learned some harsh lessons, which were applied late in the day—too late, as it turned out. Nonetheless, CORDS was one of the most interesting and most successful innovations developed during the Vietnam War.

Analysts and historians may draw the following specific conclusions from the CORDS experience in Vietnam:

1. A joint civil-military organization can effectively operate a large program with personnel and resources drawn from several agencies and services.
2. Civilian leaders can successfully function in command positions in an essentially military organization.
3. The single manager principle, so revered by management theorists, is valid as an effective means of organizing interagency action-oriented organizations that include both military and civilian personnel.
4. The best person for the job, whether military or civilian, is the soundest way of providing effective leadership in an insurgency environment.
5. Command support is vital in overcoming reluctance to accept innovative change. Presidential directive and continued support were the essential ingredients in gaining acceptance of the CORDS concept by both civilian and military officials with deep-seated interests and cultural bias.
6. Strong leadership is essential to gaining acceptance of a hybrid organization like CORDS.

Without a “Blowtorch” Komer type in charge, with perceived presidential backing, CORDS would most likely have been suffocated in the cradle.

7. “Unity of effort” is no substitute for “unity of command,” especially in war time. This lesson was learned the hard way in Vietnam. The Office of Civil Operations experiment, described earlier, was a half-a-loaf attempt to bring about cooperation without including the thousand pound bear—the U.S. military. The most effective means of getting things done is to give one individual and/or a single entity responsibility and corresponding authority.

Possible Application of Vietnam Lessons

Despite initial reluctance, provincial reconstruction teams (PRT) were set up in both Iraq and Afghanistan. They have, to a degree, followed the CORDS model in slightly different forms without taking the final step of full integration with unity of command at all levels. Even General Petraeus continues to speak of unity of effort as the ideal interagency *modus-operandi*. Vietnam and the British experience in Malaysia would suggest the contrary. With no one clearly in charge, agencies and individuals, even with good will on all sides, inevitably have different interests and preferred ways of doing things. The best that can be hoped for is compromise and constant negotiation. Regrettably, the weakness of divided responsibility and authority has been displayed in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

Afghanistan appears to be an example of the most dangerous form of divided leadership. The U.S. has a powerful military commander with independent access to the President. At the same time, Ambassador Karl Eikenberry is a retired general and the former military commander in Afghanistan, who has his own well-formed strategic ideas. His disagreements over military strategy with former military commander

General Stanley McChrystal and his unflattering views of the Afghan Chief of State have been well publicized. A further element in the complex American leadership mix in dealing with the Kabul government is a special representative with a notoriously strong personality, decided ideas, and interest of his own. Occasionally, other prominent figures drop in to Kabul for a chat with President Karzai. In these circumstances, one might well ask “how can the Afghans be sure who really speaks with the full authority of the U.S. government and for the President of the United States?”

Some of this confusion is inevitable, but it might be limited by appointing one representative in Kabul who speaks and acts with full authority. In normal circumstance, this figure would be

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the ambassador. In this instance, however, the ambassador already seems a wounded figure whose relations with President Karzai are said to be gravely weakened. In any case, the Afghan Chief of State may feel that he can safely ignore the ambassador as he has multiple other prestigious interlocutors. Press reports suggest that special envoy Holbrooke’s relationship with Kabul may also be troubled. This seems to leave only General Petraeus untarnished among those senior officials now assigned Afghan responsibilities. Providentially, he seems an ideal candidate for the role of American voice in Kabul.

In fact, he may already be the *de facto* principal American interlocutor with the Afghan government. Reportedly, he meets with Karzai about once a day—far more often than the U.S. ambassador.

If General Petraeus were given additional *de jure* status by naming him ambassador he would have undisputed control of all American official personnel and resources in Afghanistan. Alternatively, he could be given the power without the title. Such an arrangement might go down more easily among those who worry about a too powerful military. Certainly, few could challenge General Petraeus on the basis that he is not well qualified. He has demonstrated rare gifts as both a military commander and

as a sure-footed political operator. There are precedents of sorts for giving similar powers to a general. MacArthur in post-war Japan comes readily to mind. Another less well remembered example is Maxwell Taylor who moved from being Kennedy's Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to being ambassador to Saigon. Clearly, they exercised authority over both military and civilian resources. In Taylor's case, his powers in the military realm were a matter of fact rather than a formal designation as military commander.

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Such an arrangement in Kabul could neatly solve the problem of unity of command. Further organizational unification of effort would be easier with a common leader in charge. One possible organizational solution would be for the ambassador/commander to have three deputies: one dealing with the more classic military subjects, such as the direction of the regular International Security Assistance Force units and the training of the Afghan Army; the second in charge of a network of PRTs and for police and judiciary training, much like the role of Komer in Vietnam; and a third running the embassy as Deputy Chief of Mission overseeing the country team. Ideally, the first deputy would be a senior military officer and the second and third deputies would be civilians. Leadership of the PRTs would be based on the best person for the job, whether military or civilian, based on the CORDS model as modified to conform to local needs. Whatever configuration is chosen it should conform to the principles of unity of command and best person for the job.

General Petraeus may not be the only or even the best candidate for the task of bringing together the various elements of American power and speaking with one coherent voice to both allies and enemies. Nonetheless the need for such a unity of command in Afghanistan is clear and urgent. Management theory and historical experience both indicate that a unified command including all relevant elements of national power is likely to enjoy the greatest measure of success in this kind of war as in other complex endeavors. Extraordinary times call for the employment of extraordinary means. **IAJ**