

## A Legacy of Vietnam:

# *Lessons from CORDS*

**by Mandy Honn, Farrah Meisel, Jacleen Mowery,  
and Jennifer Smolin with contributions from Minhye Ha**

### **Introduction**

**D**uring a 1965 speech, President Lyndon Johnson famously called for winning “the other war” of pacification in Vietnam—the war for the Vietnamese hearts and minds. This initiative to build up popular support for the South Vietnamese government while simultaneously breaking down the Viet Cong infrastructure evolved into the largest interagency civil-military program to date. Implemented in 1967, the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support program (CORDS), later changed to the Civil Operations and Rural Development Support program, integrated military operations and development activities under a single chain of command, operating in parallel but separate structures. Multiple agencies including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of Defense (DoD), and the Department of State worked together on infrastructure, economic, and agricultural development; refugee resettlement; psychological operations; and police and public administration training.

To understand how CORDS developed, its overall impact, and how the lessons learned during this period can inform strategy for present-day operations, the authors conducted an extensive review of the CORDS program as part of the Trachtenberg School of Public Policy’s master’s program at George Washington University and compiled a report for the Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation. The review analyzed the role of development in a military-led counterinsurgency operation. Extracted from that report, this article summarizes the successes and limitations of the CORDS program and specifically focuses on development activities as part of the overall CORDS

**Mandy Honn is an Analyst at Logistics Management Institute and previously worked at the Government Accountability Office.**

**Farrah Meisel is providing capacity building support at a Burmese NGO on the Thai-Burma border. Jacleen Mowery is a consultant at the Office for Study Abroad at George Washington University.**

**Jennifer Smolin is a Budget Analyst in the Office of the Global AIDS Coordinator, U.S. Department of State.**

**Minhye Ha is an Administration Manager at Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition International.**

structure. Despite its eventual defeat on the battlefield, it is important to recognize that key components of the U.S. effort were successful in pacifying the South Vietnamese.

## Research Design and Methodology

The underlying research consisted of an extensive literature review of journal articles, books, congressional hearings, government reports, and declassified Vietnam-era documents. The authors also conducted key informant interviews with development personnel who worked in the CORDS program and with program evaluation experts to determine the feasibility and potential effectiveness of similar interagency programs in present-day counterinsurgency operations.

**Before creating a CORDS-like model, decision-makers must recognize that though a CORDS interagency framework may be necessary, it is not sufficient on its own.**

The development personnel interview sample was made up of civilian development workers and Foreign Service officers who were involved in the CORDS program. Because of the focus on the “role of development” from a “development perspective,” military staff members who worked side-by-side with USAID on this effort and could have provided valuable information on CORDS development activities were not included in the sample.

This research effort faced the following limiting factors:

- The final interview sample consisted of only five respondents.

- CORDS participants were not clearly identifiable.
- Time constraints limited the ability for an exhaustive review of available archival and recently declassified material.
- There was an inadequate number of immediate post-evaluations completed by development personnel.

Despite these limitations, sufficient information was available and reviewed to validate the insights and recommendations presented below.

## Recommendations

Based on the research of the CORDS model, eight main recommendations have become apparent for how a similar model could be implemented in present-day and future insurgency conflicts. Each proposed recommendation tackles a different aspect of the program’s cycle and addresses a particular weakness that still exists today.

Before creating a CORDS-like model, decision-makers must recognize that though a CORDS interagency framework may be necessary, it is not sufficient on its own. The model by itself will not be a primary determinant on the outcome of a counterinsurgency operation. More importantly, the host country should have a reasonable level of political legitimacy, and there must be mass support from the host nation population for a U.S.-supported government. These recommendations are more easily implemented if senior-level leaders of both the U.S. and the host country are fully committed to a successful pacification or counterinsurgency effort that includes creating a more integrated structure of host country and U.S. personnel to counterbalance the inadequate access to resources, both human and financial.

## Establish Security Prior to Development Programs

“Whether security is ten percent of the total problem or ninety percent, it is inescapably the *first* percent of the *first* ninety percent.” As stated by senior CORDS administrator John Paul Vann, CORDS workers were very aware that security must be the first priority before any long-term sustainability efforts are pursued. Though CORDS was essentially a non-military program, its main goal of pacification was very much intertwined with the success of military operations.<sup>1</sup>

During CORDS, the most pressing and urgent security issue related to pacification in Vietnam was attacking the Viet Cong infrastructure in the rural areas of the south; however, CORDS participants also worked on aspects of security as it related to development projects. For example, the CORDS workers supported the national police force by helping to create the infrastructure for systems such as telecommunications and helped to update the South Vietnamese correction centers. With this support, the Vietnamese national police force increased from 75,000 in 1967 to 114,000 in January 1972.<sup>2</sup>

The CORDS program made a great effort to enhance security in South Vietnam, but in doing so the program’s staff unintentionally neglected district towns and other areas that were already marked as “secure.” According to Tran Ngoc Chau, the first head of South Vietnam’s Revolutionary Development Cadre Program, in his testimony before the U. S. Senate, there was an “improper selection of areas to be pacified.” He acknowledges that this failure resulted from the push to progress rapidly in order to show a greater degree of progress in pacification.<sup>3</sup> As a result of the need to show great progress, this program was mainly implemented in relatively safe regions instead of problem areas.

The lesson here is that without security,

**...without security, neither the U.S. nor the host country will be able to effectively implement and maintain development programs.**

neither the U.S. nor the host country will be able to effectively implement and maintain development programs. After the establishment of a secure area, coordination between the military and civilians is critical to beginning development activities. Once a secure area is established, civilian development staff can begin to advise and partner with local governments on long-term programs to establish a sustainable capacity within the host country government that provides safety, a stable governance, the rule of law, economic development, and basic needs and services for the population.

## Enhance Training Mechanisms

All CORDS workers in organizational positions in Vietnam came from a military or a civilian agency and received common training at the Vietnam Training Center (VTC) at the Foreign Service Institute in Arlington, VA. The VTC was established to teach a variety of courses to prepare CORDS workers for deployment. Funded by USAID, VTC training received high praise from civilian leaders in Vietnam for providing them with qualified staff. Advisers in the CORDS program received Vietnamese language training; an orientation on Vietnamese history including religion, traditions, and political and economic development; and a course in Vietnamese culture.<sup>4</sup>

While this curriculum existed and was praised overall, there was limited briefing of CORDS volunteers about their colleagues in the field; most importantly, there was little if any training of civilians in either military matters or military culture. This became problematic

as it forced many civilians to learn how to work effectively with their military colleagues only after arriving in Vietnam, which delayed program progress.<sup>5</sup>

The program was also critiqued for the lack of a sufficient cultural component in the pre-deployment training. The result was a cultural collision between the Vietnamese civilians and the U.S. forces. When American advisors were unable to persuade the Vietnamese peasants to give up their traditional practices and “modernize,” they at times succumbed to racist attitudes about the inferiority of Southeast Asians. Upon encountering this Vietnamese “lack of interest” in the modernization practices the Americans were advocating, advisers often stopped advising and did the job themselves.<sup>6</sup> The CORDS experience highlighted the

**...adequate resources must be made available for both civilian and military pre-deployment training.**

importance of understanding indigenous cultures and institutions in the success of development projects in foreign settings. Especially in conflict regions, it is crucial that development workers and researchers make the effort to understand the society in which they are working. This critical weakness prohibited timely responses to the ongoing conflict, as development personnel were not prepared to respond to certain cultural concerns of the Vietnamese population. One potential solution is a continuous assessment of individuals while they are in the field as a tool to evaluate the effectiveness of the pre-deployment training and to determine if the skills and knowledge learned were sufficient. The results of this

assessment could be used to ensure that the gaps are filled and myths are dispelled when training future workers.

Many other pre-deployment training weaknesses found in the CORDS program continue in the present day. Currently, training for civilians and military generally occurs separately and does not focus on ensuring a mutual understanding of each other’s roles in the operation. Clearer identification of expectations for the entire team and introductory courses on how the military and civilians should partner together will enhance their productivity in the field. Civilian training and understanding of the military culture prior to arrival in the host country would drastically improve the civilians’ performance as they could immediately focus on their objectives and not spend the first few months trying to adapt to military culture.

Training must be seen as a priority for effective and successful operations. Therefore, adequate resources must be made available for both civilian and military pre-deployment training. Staffers should be assessed prior to deployment to establish their baseline of understanding and knowledge of the mission. That baseline can then be used for later comparisons.

In addition, the training of host country personnel is a first-step in breaking the U.S. pattern of acting as a patron and creating dependency. Training will encourage the host country to take ownership of activities on the ground. Training could include maintaining a proper budget, managing personnel within the various ministries, conducting refugee operations, and combating corruption.

### **Integrate Civil and Military Structures**

The creation of the CORDS program synchronized the development efforts of the military and civilian agencies by merging

them into one structure, under one leadership chain, and with one mission. Recognizing the expertise of both, a civilian assigned to a key position worked alongside a military deputy and vice versa. Furthermore, at each level within CORDS, this integration assisted in detaching both the military and the civilian staffers from their home agency structures. Each staffer worked under the direction of the senior CORDS adviser (civilian or military) at his/her level, which ultimately allowed the staff to focus on the end goals of the program. As a result, their loyalty was primarily to the CORDS program. This method provided the CORDS senior advisers with operational and technical expertise and logistical support of various home agencies without having to respond to their direction and interference. This integrated effort afforded development personnel with new human and financial resources normally reserved for the military and provided the equipment and tools necessary to complete and improve activities. The fact that funds for CORDS were pooled into one overarching budget was an additional way in which development and military activities worked together seamlessly for pacification efforts.

The integrated civil-military operations were stressed as an integral feature of CORDS, or as an interviewee stated: “[It was the] one thing that made CORDS work.” While the civilians and military had separate roles and performed different activities with various success rates, the whole was greater than the sum of its parts. Another respondent highlighted the importance of unity of command: “The integrated command structure of the program played a major part to insure that personalities do not get in the way [of collaborative success].”

There is a recognized need for a different approach toward a “unity of effort” within the current U.S. government. In his 2006 remarks at the Department of State and Department of Defense Counterinsurgent Conference, former

Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Eric Edelman stated the experiences from Iraq and Afghanistan serve to reinforce the need for a better integration model while developing non-military capabilities. During the key informant interviews, the respondents also discussed the lack of coordination between DoD and USAID that has hindered the progress of current programs. USAID is simply more effective than DoD at certain things and vice-versa. Pooling the resources of the respective agencies is likely to not only enhance efficiency, but also increase success.

**...the experiences from Iraq and Afghanistan serve to reinforce the need for a better integration model while developing non-military capabilities.**

### **Institute Local Ownership**

The relationship between the U.S.-led program and the foreign government are of specific importance to development programs like CORDS. In order for the programs implemented under CORDS to be effective, the South Vietnamese government needed to be as invested in the projects as the U.S. government. Robert Komer explained in his 1970 paper, “Impact of Pacification on Insurgency in South Vietnam,” that with the exception of one or two all operational programs were staffed and managed by Vietnamese. He felt this was necessitated by the U.S. military’s assumption of the primary role in the offensive. An additional factor that speaks to the importance of greater host country ownership and participation in development activities is the difficulty in finding qualified U.S. civilians for these jobs. Civilian commitment was an issue during the CORDS

program and remains a problem in present-day civil-military operations. Longer deployments were more successful, as staffs had more time to build upon what they learned in their training and establish effective working relationships; however, longer deployments were harder to fill with qualified staff.

The large number of civilians on the ground in Vietnam was and still is a unique feature when compared to other counterinsurgency operations. According to State Department records, there were a total of 2,685 civilian personnel in

**Although local ownership is a necessary requisite for a self-sustaining country, the U.S. must be aware of the capacity of the local government before overwhelming it with too much responsibility.**

Vietnam in 1969, including personnel from the State Department, USAID, and the U.S. Information Agency. Of this number, about half were working for CORDS. Comparatively, 384 civilians worked in provincial reconstruction teams (PRT) in Afghanistan, and 907 civilians worked in PRTs in Iraq in 2008. Additionally, many of the civilians today in Afghanistan and Iraq are contractors; whereas, CORDS staff was comprised primarily of government personnel.<sup>7</sup>

The tour duration of civilians is also a major difference between CORDS and PRTs. A year-long tour was not uncommon for CORDS development staff. On the other hand, PRT tours can be as short as three to six months, a policy established to entice volunteers who may not want to spend longer periods in country. Such short tours do not allow team members to establish working relationships and many

times lead to gaps within key PRT positions, since former members may not immediately be replaced by their agencies.<sup>8</sup> These gaps with key PRT positions further complicate the mission when institutional memory is not effectively transferred to relieving units.

While it is clear from the specific success of CORDS programs that the establishment of a parallel structure within the South Vietnamese government was vital to pacification efforts, the U.S. must be cautious of becoming a patron of the host government in this type of parallel establishment and instead focus on acting as a partner. Although local ownership is a necessary requisite for a self-sustaining country, the U.S. must be aware of the capacity of the local government before overwhelming it with too much responsibility. In addition, knowledge of the local language will assist deployment staff in discussing the budget and the personnel capacity of the local government in order to determine if the U.S. and host government are staffed accordingly to manage and deliver planned programs.

### **Create Quantitative and Qualitative Evaluation Metrics**

One of the first full attempts at evaluation of a development program was the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES) started in 1967 by the Military Assistance Command in Vietnam. This evaluation was developed in response to the unsatisfactory reporting system used by the U.S. to evaluate progress in Vietnam in 1966.<sup>9</sup> HES surveys collected more data than ever before. This data provided the ability to show “trends of pacification,” which allowed development workers to see what was working in which areas and to adjust their actions accordingly.<sup>10</sup> As Komer remarked in his paper, it was created out of an “emphasis on generating detailed factual reporting rather than subjective evaluations.”

In addition to the need for evaluation metrics, it is also important to mitigate data

collection bias. Under CORDS, the U.S. transferred the data collection and reporting process over to the Vietnamese, which led to serious concerns about the data's validity. As the Vietnamese government had the most at stake when reporting the data, there was increased potential for inflated and exaggerated results. Having independent collection agencies gather and analyze the data would help to preserve the integrity of the data.

Staff and contributors should also complete an assessment upon their return to the U.S. to determine what improvements can be made to the in-country programs in the future. This assessment can also be compared to the baseline data collected prior to the worker's deployment. This comparative analysis would be helpful in determining future policy considerations.

### **Provide Leadership at the Highest Levels**

The leadership and formation of CORDS came from the highest levels. Senior-level officials in both the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments proved through the dedication of resources and personnel that they were politically committed to achieving success through the CORDS program. Such a large-scale effort and overhaul of the command structure required support from the President as well as from the high-level actors directing the civil and military operations in Vietnam. President Johnson prioritized the non-military pacification activities and emphasized the need to always be informed of the pacification's progress.

Other crucial champions of the pacification program included the senior officials who were orchestrating both the military and civil efforts. General William Westmoreland was very supportive of the interagency approach and worked closely with Ambassador Komer to ensure successful pacification activities. Westmoreland's flexibility was an important

attribute that opened up opportunities for Komer and other civilian senior staff to modify programs that otherwise might have been restricted to military personnel. Generally, Westmoreland supported Komer "on every issue that did not involve taking something away in the way of military forces."<sup>11</sup>

Vietnamese President Ngyuen Van Thieu and Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky were also essential supporters of CORDS. President Thieu stated in 1966 that the Government of the Republic of Vietnam set a similar agenda "balancing military needs and national development, increasing government efficiency, and refocusing the state on social reforms."<sup>12</sup> Although corruption and political instability were constant obstacles, the backing of civil-military pacification operations by high-level Vietnamese government officials was necessary

**Senior-level officials in both the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments proved through the dedication of resources and personnel that they were politically committed to achieving success...**

for CORDS to gain both a large number of committed Vietnamese staff at the local and district levels as well as the corresponding senior officials working on the pacification efforts alongside the U.S.

### **Promote Institution Building**

According to the U.S. National Security Council, "deep-seated" corruption was endemic in the Saigon regime during the entire course of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam and had been identified as a major factor in the ultimate collapse

of South Vietnam.<sup>13</sup> The political corruption and instability in the South Vietnamese government was a fundamental problem that hampered the success of the CORDS program as well as the U.S.'s ultimate goal of pacification. Individual CORDS workers found that many of their Vietnamese counterparts were more interested in their own personal wealth and well-being than in pacification or the implementation of development projects.

Corruption was not only widespread among the ruling elite but at all levels of the civil service, including police officers and bureaucrats alike, due to low morale and low wages. As discussed

**The detrimental effect that corruption and political instability had on counterinsurgency and development programs is a lesson from Vietnam that continues to echo into the 21st century.**

in the interviews, corruption in the central Vietnamese government and among higher-level Vietnamese officials was harmful to the overall operations, but corruption at the local levels was most destructive for development work. As long as corruption in the local governments was controlled, the development efforts were able to move forward.

There was an effort made by CORDS to reduce the often arbitrary and potentially corrupt actions of the central government and of the regional Vietnamese military commands. The civilian members of CORDS were tasked with developing the local governments, which became a successful aspect of the pacification effort. In giving a voice to elected hamlet and village officials, the influence of the central

government was reduced. Prior to this effort, village councils generally had little to do with pacification and development activities. The majority of the local programs were operated by the South Vietnamese government at the hamlet level (a rural area too small to be considered a village) and independent of the village government by teams who were unwilling to share their responsibilities with the village chiefs.<sup>14</sup>

The detrimental effect that corruption and political instability had on counterinsurgency and development programs is a lesson from Vietnam that continues to echo into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One of the few things the governments in Baghdad and Kabul share with the South Vietnamese regimes is a reputation for corruption and an uneasy relationship with their U.S. ally. While the U.S. may have nation-building plans in Iraq and Afghanistan—as they did in Vietnam—it is important those plans support and promote uncorrupt, participatory, and politically legitimate governments, which can only be supplied by the citizens of those governments. Though institution building is an expensive, time consuming, and oftentimes unpopular effort, it is a fundamental aspect of long-term success in counterinsurgency situations.

### **Establish Balance between Program Flexibility and Controls**

According to CORDS participants, part of the success of the program stemmed from its ability to quickly change programs to fit needs on the ground as well as the flexibility to find and try creative solutions. CORDS leaders constantly looked for new and creative ideas to achieve their goals, and it was because of these innovative ideas that CORDS was able to make many of its programs successful. It is generally understood that bureaucratic controls serve as constraints to program modification and implementation. Since these controls always



exist across a spectrum, program managers need to carefully weigh how much control they are willing to risk against the degree of flexibility necessary to achieve the goals sought.

## Conclusion

The CORDS program was an innovative whole-of-government approach to achieving rural pacification through development activities strategically coordinated with military operations. Overall, the program was successful at integrating the civilian and military efforts under one command structure. With the support of the President and senior government officials, the CORDS program was able to break down the bureaucratic process and institute unified activities focusing on the goal of the mission as opposed to each individual agency's objectives. The success of particular development activities in influencing the pacification efforts can be attributed to the effectiveness of the specific activity; however, it is also essential to recognize that the integrated structure of CORDS was a major factor in achieving that success.

It is important to realize that although there are lessons that can enhance current whole-of-government approaches, the environment in which CORDS was deployed is drastically different than today's environment. The U.S. has become one of a multitude of players with a vested interest in the counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, complicating an already complex situation. Furthermore, the U.S. military is not conducting traditional conventional military operations as tactics have adapted to fight advanced insurgencies.

The comparison between CORDS and today's environment is unfair in several ways. First, the U.S. was welcomed as an ally in Vietnam; today, the U.S. government is often viewed as an invader. Second, security was heavily present in Vietnam. Today's civilian components of the PRTs are behind barricades, resulting in an inability to work in the field as freely as CORDS workers.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, there exists a lack of institutional knowledge that inhibits sharing lessons learned or successes among civilian workers.

The lessons that can be taken from the CORDS program to apply to present-day U.S. government counterinsurgency operations include adopting the strengths of the program and learning from its limitations. A clear voice from top officials promoting and leading an interagency program would greatly increase the success of U.S. efforts. For the model to succeed there must be a significant overhaul of the bureaucratic process and agency structure to enable the participants in stabilization and reconstruction activities to focus on overarching goals instead of individual agency objectives. **IAJ**

## Notes

- 1 Richard Weitz, "CORDS and the Whole of Government Approach: Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Beyond," *Small Wars Journal*, Vol.6, No.1, February 4, 2010, p. 2.
- 2 Subcommittee of the Committee on Government Operations, U.S. Assistance Programs in Vietnam, Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Government Operations, House of Representatives, July 15, 16, 19, 21 and August 2, 1971, Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1971, p. 19.
- 3 United States Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations. Vietnam: Policy and Prospects, Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate on Civil Operations and Rural Development Support Program, February 17-20 and March 3,4,17, and 19, 1970, 91st Congress, 2nd Session, Govern-

ment Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1970, p. 383.

4 “The Third Year Begins: FSI’s Viet-Nam Training Center,” State Department Newsletter, Department of State, Washington, DC, 1969, p. 16.

5 William P. Schoux, “The Vietnam CORDS Experience: A Model of Successful Civil-Military Partnership?” contracted by USAID, September 2005, p. 21.

6 Christopher T. Fisher, “The Illusion of Progress: CORDS and the Crisis of Modernization in South Vietnam, 1965-1968,” *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 75, No.1, 2006, p. 46.

7 Neyla Arnas, “Connecting Government Capabilities for Overseas Missions,” in Hans Binnendijk and Patrick M. Connin (eds.), *Civilian Surge: Key to Complex Operations*, National Defense University Press, Washington, DC, p. 240.

8 Carlos Hernandorena, “U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan, 2003-2006: Obstacles to Interagency Cooperation,” in Joseph R. Cerami and Jay W. Boggs (eds.), *The Interagency and Counterinsurgency Warfare: Stability, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction Roles*, Strategic Studies Institute, Carlisle, PA, 2007, pp. 138-140.

9 Erwin R. Brigham, “Pacification Measurement in Vietnam: The Hamlet Evaluation System,” Presentation at the SEATO International Security Seminar, Headquarters Military Assistance Command Vietnam, June 1968, p. 1.

10 “Pacification in Vietnam,” Viet-Nam Information Notes, United States Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs. Office of Media Services, July, 1969, p. 8.

11 Thomas W. Scoville, “Reorganizing for Pacification Support,” Center for Military History, United States Army, Washington, DC, 1982. p. 76.

12 Fisher, p. 35.

13 David Hunt, “Dirty Wars: Counterinsurgency in Vietnam and Today,” *Politics & Society*, Vol. 38, No. 1, March 2010, p. 49.

14 U.S. Agency for International Development, Asia Bureau, Office of Residual Indochina Affairs, Viet Nam Desk. United States Economic Assistance to South Vietnam: 1954-1973, Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, December, [year illegible], p. 296.

15 David Passage, “Speaking Out: Caution: Iraq is Not Vietnam,” *Foreign Service Journal*, 2007, p. 16.