

4-20-2023

## Book Review: Clear, Hold, and Destroy: Pacification in Phú Yên and the American War in Vietnam

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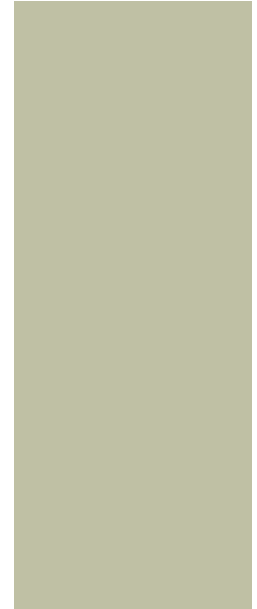
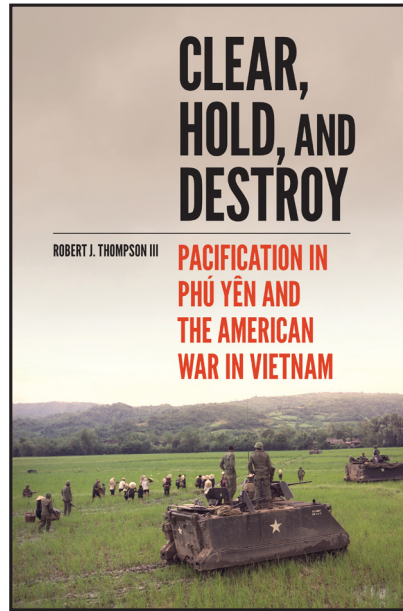
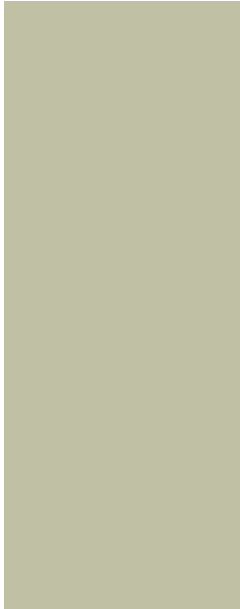
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### Recommended Citation

Samantha A. Taylor, *Book Review: Clear, Hold, and Destroy: Pacification in Phú Yên and the American War in Vietnam* (US Army War College Press, 2023),  
[https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters\\_bookshelf/5](https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters_bookshelf/5)

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## — PARAMETERS BOOKSHELF —



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Many books explore why the Vietnam War ended the way it did and the challenges (such as pacification) faced by the United States during the war, from H. R. McMaster's *Dereliction of Duty* (Harper Perennial, 1997) to Christian G. Appy's *Working-Class War* (University of North Carolina Press, 1993). Robert J. Thompson III adds to this collection with *Clear, Hold, and Destroy*, an examination of middle-level pacification policy in the Phú Yên province. He builds on previous studies in which pacification was the initial and central US strategy in the war in Vietnam. *Clear, Hold, and Destroy* does not explore US policy decisions. As a result, the book includes few discussions of policy, strategy, or events occurring outside the province. Instead, it presents the implementation of pacification policies, US and South Vietnamese efforts on pacification, and the communist strategy to counter pacification. In doing so, Thompson centers pacification in his treatment of US war policy and reveals that "conventional warfare was pacification in Phú Yên. . . .

[T]o understand the war in Phú Yên is to understand pacification" (59).

The book opens with an examination of the first challenge US officials faced with pacification: defining it. Thompson shows how the lack of consensus on pacification's definition, and activities across US agencies and between American and South Vietnamese officials, led to debates about military and civil operations. These debates included questions of whether to focus on winning population support or establishing government control and how to use conventional warfare along with civil affairs to achieve either goal. In debates between US and South Vietnamese officials, the South Vietnamese preference for control became policy, which led US military officials to deploy conventional forces to seek and destroy the People's Army of Vietnam, People's Liberation Armed Forces, and National Liberation Front and to support Saigon control.

After this chapter, the book explores middle-level pacification implementation

in Phú Yên. Thompson shows—going back to the French Indochina War—the People’s Army of Vietnam, People’s Liberation Armed Forces, and National Liberation Front’s strategy involved counter-pacification efforts while maintaining a presence in Phú Yên to conduct irregular and conventional warfare. He also shares how both France and the United States relied on conventional warfare to pacify Phú Yên. These efforts focused on securing the province through seek-and-destroy operations to eliminate enemy forces and bases. During the Vietnam War, the United States designed these operations to create security for civil authorities to develop hamlets and other areas in the province for Saigon to exercise control. Thompson notes that American and South Korean forces conducted most of these operations until 1970, creating challenges after 1970 with the introduction of Vietnamization and the attempts by underprepared South Vietnamese forces to conduct similar operations.

Despite US efforts, conventional warfare could not expunge enemy forces. Thompson shows even as US operations achieved high enemy body counts the enemy would retreat to areas US and South Vietnamese forces did not actively operate in to regroup after conventional battles. As the war progressed, this tactic increasingly allowed communist forces to determine when conventional engagements would occur, while they used irregular warfare to undermine pacification and South Vietnam’s control over the province. Their strategy allowed communist forces to increase their control over the province once Vietnamization began.

Along with these issues, Thompson shows additional interconnected challenges pacification faced after the 1968 Tet Offensive, including a breakdown in US-South Vietnamese government relations, South Vietnamese

officials’ accommodation of the enemy for self-preservation, and the inability of South Vietnamese forces to secure the province without supporting US firepower.

American officials responsible for conducting pacification noted an increased lack of confidence in Saigon’s pacification intelligence due to field inspections contradictory to South Vietnamese reports. United States officials reported an increasing inability or unwillingness of South Vietnamese officials to maintain the security needed to control Phú Yên. This situation grew more apparent in 1971 and 1972, however, US policy on Vietnamization and withdrawal did not change.

Throughout the book, Thompson uses US and Vietnamese sources to highlight US policy and Hanoi’s responses, and he specifies locations, individuals, and organizations to ensure the accuracy of his work. Thompson uses specific group names (such as the People’s Army of Vietnam, People’s Liberation Armed Forces, and National Liberation Front) rather than the term *Viet Cong*—unless used in a quote to provide a more accurate depiction of who did what during the war and how different enemy groups operated in Phú Yên.

This focused study of pacification efforts and how they directed US war efforts in Vietnam also reveals how issues emerged and continued to hinder pacification until South Vietnam’s collapse in 1975. I recommend *Clear, Hold, and Destroy* for a mid-level history of the Vietnam War.

Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2021 • 352 pages • \$39.95

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**Keywords:** Vietnam, Phú Yên, People’s Army of Vietnam, People’s Liberation Armed Forces, National Liberation Front

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