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ON OUR CONDUCT OF THE VIETNAM WAR: A REVIEW ESSAY OF TWO NEW WORKS

by

RICHARD A. HUNT

Bureaucracy at War: U.S. Performance in the Vietnam Conflict. By Robert W. Komer. 174 pages. Westview Press, Boulder, Colo., 1986. \$17.50.

War Without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam. By Thomas Thayer. 276 pages. Westview Special Studies, Westview Press, Boulder, Colo., 1985. \$22.00 (paper).

Within recent years, General Bruce Palmer and Colonel Harry Summers have written widely discussed analyses of the Vietnam debacle that have become the touchstones of most recent debate.¹ Each seeks to understand why America failed to defeat the communist side and raises questions about the nature of the war and the way the United States fought. Although Palmer and Summers offer individual interpretations, both argue that the United States should have focused its military efforts against North Vietnam, whose invading divisions crushed South Vietnam's army in 1975. According to Summers, "Instead of focusing our attention on the external enemy, North Vietnam—the source of the war—we [the United States] turned our attention to the symptom—the guerrilla war in the south—and limited our attacks on the North to air and sea actions only."² Thus, the strategy of counterinsurgency constituted a mistaken response that diverted the United States from taking more effective military action against North Vietnam.³ In General Palmer's book,

he argued for stationing an international military force along the DMZ that would have driven into Laos and cut off the North Vietnamese army's infiltration into South Vietnam.⁴ He does not dismiss pacification, or counterinsurgency, as Summers does, but only treats it in passing.

Into this continuing discussion about the American role in Vietnam comes a "revised and updated" monograph, *Bureaucracy at War*, by Robert W. Komer, who played an important role in the pacification program. This work advances the argument he first made in his 1972 study for the Rand Corporation, "Bureaucracy Does Its Thing." In its new format, his argument deserves as much attention as the books by Palmer and Summers have received. Relying heavily on the so-called *Pentagon Papers*, memoirs of policymakers, the secondary literature of the Kennedy and Johnson years, as well as insights gained as a participant in many of the debates over policy and strategy, Komer compellingly develops a broad and provocative thesis.

Komer's starting point is similar to Summers': why did such a vast expenditure of American military and financial resources yield such meager results? But he soon parts company with the author of *On Strategy*, characterizing American neglect of counterinsurgency, largely called pacification, as one reason for poor performance. Policymakers in Washington seemed to recognize the importance of counterinsurgency but had

difficulty in the 1950s and 1960s getting South Vietnamese or American civilian and military agencies to carry out an integrated counterinsurgency strategy and programs. Institutional constraints, the military and the civilian agencies "playing out their institutional repertoires," to use Komer's phrase, led them to carry out the kinds of activities they were trained to accomplish instead of adapting missions, organizations, and programs to counteract the unusual political and military threat of the Vietnamese communists.

Komer peppers his book with examples of bureaucracies doing what came naturally. The American Army trained the South Vietnamese army as a conventional military force. Consequently, training, equipping, and advising the paramilitary forces were neglected until 1967, relatively late in the war. This neglect was also one cause of President Diem's failure to defeat the insurgency.

After American combat units entered the war, the US Army mounted search-and-destroy operations to engage and kill enemy "main forces." The Army relied on attrition because it had superior mobility, firepower, and resources which would allow it to wear down its foe. As Komer puts it, "Armies like to fight other armies." The American military command in Vietnam "tended to focus all the more on the 'big unit' war to the neglect of other facets of the conflict." It was less comfortable carrying out clear-and-hold operations, which would have helped provide a shield for pacification to get underway and which Komer believes were a more suitable response to the insurgency.

Likewise, "the air forces pressed to do what they knew best: to mount massive bombing campaigns both in the South and against the North," reflecting then current doctrine on how to employ air power.⁶ Although Komer concedes the bombing was not carried out the way its advocates wished, he argues that the results of the air war were limited largely because North Vietnam, with few industries or other militarily lucrative targets, was not as vulnerable to air attack as our previous military experience tended to suggest.⁷ He may be pushing his point too far

when he suggests that we conducted a major bombing campaign of interdiction simply because we had the capability to do so, but it is probably true that the Air Force would have carried out the air war differently in the absence of the B-52 bomber.

Komer is seeking to understand American performance, not looking for scapegoats. He attributes much of the American failure to obtain results in Vietnam to the way large civilian and military bureaucracies constrained the thinking and practices of their leadership and rank and file, making it difficult for them to adapt to a unique challenge. Protecting their individual domains, agencies resisted attempts to have them pool their efforts with other offices and reduce duplicated programs. Government bureaucracies also were reluctant to yield authority over programs in the interest of unity of management. The absence of a single manager in Washington or Saigon, short of the President, to oversee the activities of the armed services and a host of civilian agencies was a critical shortcoming of the US conduct of the war.

One example Komer cites of a moderately successful American adaptation to the peculiar needs of the war is the organization he helped establish and then managed, CORDS (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support). This organization, located in South Vietnam and composed of

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soldiers and civilians from the State Department, AID, and the CIA, provided under Komer's leadership unified management of American support of South Vietnam's pacification program, and it led to a significant expansion of the money, men, and materiel devoted to the "other war."

Komer's message on the advantage of organizational change to meet new challenges is clear, but unfortunately he chooses not to document the case for CORDS' success,⁸ which is presented almost as a given. In outline, his argument is that CORDS solved serious management and organizational problems of pacification support, and thus the South Vietnamese pacification program enjoyed some success. To detail systematically what CORDS accomplished may have exposed Komer to charges of self-promotion and parochialism, but it would have strengthened his argument considerably. The skeptical reader may find it difficult to accept at face value his assertions about CORDS' success.

Komer's thesis raises questions about the other parties to the war. In his view, the Americans lost partly because of the flawed nature of our ally, South Vietnam. Komer is right to criticize South Vietnam's shortcomings, which seriously impeded American military and civilian efforts, and he implies that perhaps the United States was doomed to fail because of our ally's inadequacies.⁹ If that judgment is correct, then solving the organizational and doctrinal problems of American bureaucracies could be interpreted as irrelevant to the outcome of the war.

Although at no time does Komer imply that if we had more effectively tailored our forces and organizations we could have won the war, he does not seem to have taken sufficient cognizance of the enemy's adaptability and dogged retention of the initiative throughout most of the war.

Thayer's book, a unique contribution to Vietnam War studies, makes a convincing case that the US Army did not fight as a counterinsurgent force, and that the enemy was to a great extent able to control

the pace of the fighting as well as his losses and thus hold the initiative.¹⁰ He also presents the kind of evidence that Komer could have used to elaborate his case for pacification's success after 1967.

The author served as Director of the Southeast Asia Division in the Defense Department's Office of Systems Analysis from 1967 to 1972. While in that position he helped compile operational data on many aspects of the war. Much of Thayer's analysis originally appeared monthly in a classified Defense Department publication, the *Southeast Asia Analysis Reports*, and was contemporaneous with the events described. That publication did not please everyone. Articles critical of pacification drew Komer's ire, and critiques of the attrition strategy and the air interdiction campaign at times sorely vexed Army and Air Force brass. The appearance of this material, important in its own right, is also significant for presenting in some detail the informed critique of the air war and of attrition that civilian Pentagon officials made in the midst of the war. The publication of this work in the public domain allows it to reach a wider audience.

To Thayer, the war had two salient characteristics. First, unlike World War II and Korea, the Vietnam War was a war without front lines, which made it difficult to understand. Second, to understand the war it was necessary to discern the patterns underlying the fighting, a task requiring the systematic analysis of statistical data.¹¹

Thayer's carefully accumulated data on the casualty rates suffered by South Vietnamese and American forces and the kind and number of enemy attacks reveal that most enemy actions were small in scale. Battalion-sized attacks, which were a more serious threat than raids and political harassment, constituted a slim percentage (3.7) of all enemy ground assaults.¹² Even in 1972, a year of unusually heavy conventional fighting during the Easter Offensive, enemy ground assaults and indirect attacks by fire amounted to only 21 percent of all enemy-initiated incidents.¹³ The preponderance of the enemy's effort throughout the war, as

measured by Thayer's statistics, was weighted toward political coercion, terrorism, sabotage, and indirect attacks by fire.¹⁴ The purpose of this pattern of activity was to wear down the internal security forces of South Vietnam—its police, militia, and territorial forces providing population security. Casualty figures also support the contention that the communists concentrated on weakening Saigon's security forces. With the exception of 1968, the Regional and Popular Forces protecting the villages and districts of South Vietnam had a higher combat death rate than the South Vietnamese army. The combat death rate for the RF/PF was also higher than for American units.¹⁵ Thayer's figures lead inexorably to the conclusion that the insurgency was no sideshow to the main-force war, but an integral part of the communist strategy to defeat the Saigon government. Rather than a wrong-headed obsession as Summers alleges, the American concern with pacification, as limited as it was, was essential to the defeat of the communists.

That the United States neglected to focus its military effort on the source is another Summers assertion that is not borne out by Thayer's data. Most of the money, according to Thayer, went to fund expensive military activities, the air war and the attrition campaigns, which were largely directed against North Vietnamese military units and installations and which proved ineffective. According to data for Fiscal Year 1969, the preponderance of American expenditures went to finance the air war (47 percent), largely an interdiction effort that failed to stem the infiltration of men and supplies from North Vietnam, and the ground forces' war of attrition (30 percent), which, Thayer argues, failed to prevent the other side from exercising considerable control over its own rate of losses, from replacing its losses, or from retaining the strategic initiative inside South Vietnam.¹⁶

That is not to say that attrition and bombing did not seriously hurt the communists. They certainly did, but these flawed instruments, as used by the United States, were insufficient to defeat North Vietnam's military and were not integral to the key

effort to build a strong South Vietnamese government and military that could compete with the communists. Not enough funds or attention were devoted to the pacification program (less than five percent in 1969), even though its goal was central to American policy.¹⁷ Thayer's conclusion from his data underscores Komer's thesis: large American organizations involved in the war "tended to play out their institutional repertoires instead of making major adaptations to meet the situations they faced."¹⁸

Thayer's statistics should form a logical starting point for discussion of how the war was fought and what was achieved. Although skepticism may be warranted for specific statistics, Thayer's argument rests on the long-term patterns and trends his data disclose, some of which he believes duplicate the experience of the French in their war against the North. Additional research may invalidate or modify some of his conclusions, but to my knowledge no one else has yet even tried to assess systematically our performance in Vietnam. The time has come to understand what really happened in the war and heed the lessons. Thayer's study is a valuable starting place.

NOTES

1. Bruce Palmer, Jr., *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1984); Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: USAWC, 1981).
2. Summers, p. 65.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
4. Palmer, pp. 183-85.
5. Robert W. Komer, *Bureaucracy at War: U.S. Performance in the Vietnam Conflict* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1986), p. 49.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
8. In an article written before the war ended, Komer made the case for the success of the pacification program. See his "Pacification Impact on Insurgency," *Journal of International Affairs*, 25 (No. 1, 1971), 48-68.
9. Komer, *Bureaucracy of War*, p. 22.
10. Thomas Thayer, *War Without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1985), pp. 92-93.
11. *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 45-48.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 119, 163.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 23.