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To Change a War: General Harold K. Johnson and the PROVN Study

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The South Vietnamese government awarded campaign medals to Americans who served in the Vietnam War. Each decoration was adorned with a metal scroll affixed to the ribbon and bearing the date "1960- ." The closing date was not filled in, perhaps prophetically, since in a sense for many Americans that war has never ended.

If, as the medal scroll suggests, American participation is dated from 1960, the early years were those of an advisory effort. Then, in the spring of 1965, the United States began deploying ground forces to take part in the war, with the supporting air and naval campaigns also expanding proportionately. At the peak, in the spring of 1969, some 543,500 Americans were serving in South Vietnam, with many thousands more operating from ships off shore and airfields in adjacent countries.

From June of 1964 American forces in the Republic of Vietnam were commanded by General William C. Westmoreland, while in the Pentagon General Harold K. Johnson became Army Chief of Staff in July of the same year. Both men continued in those posts until July 1968, when Johnson retired and was succeeded by Westmoreland, General Creighton Abrams then assuming command in Vietnam.

American forces in Southeast Asia operated under some stringent restrictions, including being forbidden to invade enemy territory in North Vietnam and, for many years, likewise being barred from ground operations against enemy sanctuaries in bordering Laos and Cambodia. In other respects, however, General Westmoreland enjoyed unusual latitude. As he later confirmed, it was his decision to rely on an attrition strategy, and to emphasize tactics characterized by large search-and-destroy operations designed to locate and engage enemy main force elements.



General Harold K. Johnson
Chief of Staff, US Army,
July 1964 - July 1968

General Johnson was a veteran of the World War II Bataan Death March and long-time captive of the Japanese who had--through talent, courage, and incredible industry--fought his way back to professional prominence. During his service as Chief of Staff he made nine trips to South Vietnam, early on developing severe reservations about how the war was being conducted. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, of which he was a member, were also greatly dissatisfied with how the war was progressing, although their complaints were more concerned with such issues as failure to call reserve forces and restrictions placed on bombing North Vietnam than with in-country tactics. In any event, the reality was that under President Lyndon B. Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara the Joint Chiefs of Staff enjoyed limited influence on either policy or strategy concerning the war.

Under these circumstances General Harold K. Johnson set out to devise, and then to gain acceptance for, an approach to the war in Vietnam that was radically at variance with what he saw taking place there. In effect he sought to re-educate and redirect an institution from within. The results are instructive in terms of such contemporary issues as civil-military relations; appropriate influence at successive levels of command; the culture of the United States Army; and the nature of complex conflicts involving simultaneous struggle on many levels. And, while they are ultimately unanswerable, the analysis suggests fascinating questions about what might have been had the timing of key assignments and implementation of the results of the Johnson-initiated study been other than they were.

Harold K. Johnson set out to do nothing less than change the American conception of the nature of the Vietnam War and then, in accordance with that revised understanding, fundamentally revise the way the war was being fought. This is the story of that brave and lonely effort.

Antecedents of the Study

The Westmoreland approach to fighting the war in Vietnam, as later events demonstrated conclusively, was not going to achieve allied objectives. Harold K. Johnson was one of those most strongly convinced of that fact, and early on. General William E. DePuy, who played a key role in development of that approach as Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations (J-3) in the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), recognized this, acknowledging that Johnson "was a counterinsurgency man 100 percent. He thought, and there were a lot of people in Washington who agreed with him, that Westmoreland and DePuy and his other henchmen out there didn't understand the war, that the war was a counterinsurgency and that . . . we were trying to get prepared for a big bashing of the North Vietnamese Army." [1] That was right on target. Johnson was convinced that Westmoreland's approach was not working, indeed could not work, and he had a sound basis for his views in a study he commissioned soon after returning from Vietnam in the spring of 1965. Entitled "A Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of Vietnam," and known as PROVN for short, that study was complete by March of the following year. Its conclusions would prove to be stark and disturbing, and to have an enormous, although much delayed, effect on the American involvement in Vietnam.

While the directive on the study went out soon after Johnson's return from his March 1965 trip to Vietnam, the initiative had its origins much farther back, reaching at least to Johnson's intellectual inquiries while he was Commandant at Fort Leavenworth during the years 1960-1963.

Two men who were with Johnson at Leavenworth were particularly important in terms of the PROVN Study, Colonel Richard Clutterbuck of the British Army and Colonel Jasper J. Wilson. Clutterbuck had served in Malaya during the insurgency there, and now while assigned as British Liaison Officer at Leavenworth was doing some very insightful thinking, writing, and lecturing on counterinsurgency. He and Johnson became good friends, personally and professionally, maintaining a dialogue on this topic then and later. Much of what they discussed is reflected in a book Clutterbuck wrote, *The Long, Long War: Counterinsurgency in Malaya and Vietnam*.

Not surprisingly, Clutterbuck asked Johnson to contribute the book's foreword. Clutterbuck's central point, one as applicable in Vietnam as to Malaya, was simple and straightforward: "The first reaction to guerrilla warfare must be to protect and control the population." [2] But, he observed wryly, "the predilection of some army officers for major operations seems incurable." [3] That would not do the job, and in fact got in the way of doing it. In Vietnam, observed Clutterbuck, "massive airmobile operations against big Viet Cong units have left few men available for harassment patrols," the real key to success. [4]

While he was Commandant, Johnson had assigned three officers a year-long task of research on the causes and

outcomes of warfare from which he drew some strongly felt conclusions. "I maintain that control is the object beyond the battle and object beyond the war," he wrote in late 1964. "Destruction is applied only to the extent necessary to achieve control and, thus, by its nature, must be discriminating." That outlook, as soon became apparent, would inform every aspect of the PROVN Study.

Jasper Wilson went from Leavenworth to Vietnam, where he wound up as advisor to General Nguyen Khanh, helping plan the coup that brought Khanh--briefly--to the head of South Vietnam's government. During this assignment Wilson kept up an active correspondence with Johnson, who solicited his ideas on every aspect of the war. Johnson also conferred with Wilson during a December 1964 trip to Vietnam, writing some impressions while he was still on the road. "As usual," he told Wilson, "you gave me a good clue as to one of the studies we should undertake with regard to a long range outlook. I intend to do just that when I return, but it will require a good deal of thought and some breakaway from rather stereotyped thinking. I suppose that will be the single most important thought that I picked up on the entire trip." Interestingly, there is nothing on this in Johnson's trip reports. He had apparently decided it was time to strike out on his own in seeking a solution to the problem of Vietnam.

Johnson's own observations during the four trips he had by now taken to Vietnam were also important in shaping his outlook, and even before this most recent foray he was expressing the view that "unfortunately, the heavy armament of the aircraft is largely wasted against the type of target found out there, unless our basic purpose is to flatten the countryside. At this point, that isn't our purpose." From what he had seen, though, that wasn't understood in the field. "General Johnson once observed dryly," said then-Sergeant Major of the Army Wooldridge, "that the attrition war worked against his soldiers more than the enemy. I believe this 'flawed' policy, as he referred to it, was what led to the decision to launch a full study of the war and attempt to turn around a policy that simply was not working."

When Wilson finished his tour in Vietnam, he found himself assigned to the Office of the Chief of Staff as Special Assistant to Harold K. Johnson. "General Johnson gave him an office, a desk, a pad and a pencil. 'Write on Vietnam,' he told him. That was the beginning of PROVN," recalled Colonel Tom Hanifen.

With Wilson close at hand, another precipitating factor of the PROVN Study took place. In late April, Johnson scheduled lunch and a discussion with Bernard Fall, the famous journalist known for his expertise on Southeast Asia. The staff sent in a talking paper for Johnson's use during the conversation, but every time Johnson mentioned something the staff had told him, Fall pointed out how it was erroneous. Afterward Johnson described the experience for Jasper Wilson: "As a result of my discussions with Dr. Fall, I conclude that I am the victim of appreciable misinformation concerning cliques, claques, and the variety of outlooks and objectives of the diverse elements that comprise the population of Vietnam."

Launching the Study

Johnson asked Wilson to talk with Fall and then--drawing on the work he had already done--prepare an expanded outline of a study the staff could be tasked to undertake. "I do not want this to take a dialectical form," Johnson specified. "I want it to address specific problems and specific actions that are designed to alleviate specific problems. If a problem is complex, I want it broken down to proportions which are manageable. I would like a practical time schedule, even if it takes fifty years."

The resultant PROVN Study was conducted by ten carefully chosen and talented officers of diverse backgrounds and experience, two of whom eventually became four-star generals. The specified mix was a historian, a political scientist, an economist, a cultural anthropologist, and specialists in intelligence, military operations, psychological operations, and economic assistance, and the group that was assembled matched up pretty well.

The nominal chairman was the Director of Strategic Plans and Policy in the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations (ODCSOPS), but the de facto chair was Colonel Hanifen, an Armor officer then also working in ODCSOPS.

The study directive was published in late June 1965. A month later the team was assembled and at work. "The time has long since passed when a broader look at this situation [in South Vietnam] should have been taken," Johnson told them, for the directive reproduced exactly his language in the memorandum to Jasper Wilson. "I would like you to

stand away from the problem and examine it from the broadest possible perspective." [5]

While the study was under way, Johnson sometimes dropped in on the team down in their remote spaces, what Don Marshall called their "airy dungeon under the Mall parking lot," really a sort of shelf or balcony located in a big computer room in a sub-basement of the Pentagon. There was constant background noise from the whirring of all the machines, and it was hot in summer and cold in winter, reminiscent of being in the bowels of a big ship. Hanifen set the official duty day at seven in the morning to seven at night, six days a week, but even with those parameters a lot of overtime got logged.

Some members of the study team met with Henry Kissinger once or twice, another time a couple of them had a session with Bernard Fall--meeting with him secretly for some unknown reason--and they had people talk with General Edward Lansdale at Airlie House. Some members of the team made an extended research trip to Vietnam, while others analyzed completed questionnaires from several hundred officers who had served in Vietnam, many as advisors to the South Vietnamese. "Almost none of the respondents," said the final report, "recommended the use of 'large sweeps' against the VC." [6]

There was a lot of cross-fertilization taking place, because in speeches Johnson used things that later showed up in PROVN, and PROVN incorporated things he had espoused before the study began. Harry Jackson put together some maps that proved to be of interest, with one set of overlays showing where the resources--rice, fish, and so on--were located, and another set showing what areas were controlled by the Viet Cong. "Naturally," said Art Brown, "they were the same areas. The VC were in there with the rice and the fish. What we had was the places where nothing was." During work on the study, said Hanifen, "I dropped off pieces to General Johnson that he could use," sometimes pieces like these maps that really drove home the futility of beating around out in the boondocks.

As the study was nearing completion, Johnson went out to Vietnam to spend Christmas 1965 visiting the troops. While there he assembled a group of colonels and sought their views on how the war was progressing. "We just didn't think we could do the job the way we were doing it," recalled General Edward C. Meyer, one of those who met with Johnson and himself a future Chief of Staff. Many others told Johnson it wasn't working, a view reinforced by another commander who said he had pleaded with Westmoreland to "end the big unit war" and told Johnson "we're just not going to win it doing this." [7]

"It was clear [then] that General Johnson was not happy about how the war was being fought. He looked at that huge base camp at An Khe. He said that was not what he had envisioned--a third to a half of the division tied up on base camp security. He had wanted the forces to be dispersed throughout the area of operations. That troubled him," said Meyer. Thus the visit strongly reinforced Johnson's existing misgivings about how things were going in the combat zone.

When the PROVN Study was finished and briefed to General Johnson, he made only one change, directing that a chronological tabulation of statements by various US Presidents, a listing which demonstrated considerable inconsistency over the years, be dropped. "I will not put into print something that would embarrass the President," he told the study team.

Results of the Study

The PROVN Study's results were published on 1 March 1966. [8] Their tone was revealed by the following quotation, prominently displayed at the top of the title page:

Modern wars are not internecine wars in which the killing of the enemy is the object. The destruction of the enemy in modern war, and, indeed modern war itself, are means to obtain that object of the belligerent which lies beyond the war. [War Department, General Order No. 100, 24 April 1863]

That was familiar language, and Johnson had been using it since his Leavenworth days in speeches on the war. The previous year, for example, he had told the National Guard Association that "military force . . . should be committed with the object beyond war in mind." And, he said, "broadly speaking, the object beyond war should be the restoration of stability with the minimum of destruction, so that society and lawful government may proceed in an atmosphere of

justice and order."

That opening also made it pretty clear right at the outset that body count, the centerpiece of Westmoreland's approach to waging war, was not going to be high on the list of the study's priority objectives in Vietnam. What was at the top of the list, indeed the heart of the entire study, was security for the people living in the hamlets and villages of South Vietnam. "PROVN contends," read the foreword, "that people--Vietnamese and American, individually and collectively--constitute both the strategic determinants of today's conflict and `the object . . . which lies beyond' this war." Thus the imperative was clear: "The United States . . . must redirect the Republic of Vietnam-Free World military effort to achieve greater security."

"The critical actions are those that occur at the village, the district and provincial levels," read the study's summary statement. "This is where the war must be fought; this is where the war and the object which lies beyond it must be won." And, recalled Secretary of the Army Ailes, referring to General Johnson, "the guy who said `the object beyond the war' was Johnny." PROVN was very clear on what that object was, "a free and independent non-communist nation." [9]

As early as 1964 Johnson had expressed at a military symposium his view that "the time appears to be at hand to extend our thinking to embrace counterinsurgency operations . . . [as] a normal third principal mission of the Army, going hand in hand with [missions for] nuclear warfare and conventional warfare," comments which the PROVN Study also quoted approvingly.

By contrast, as Johnson subsequently observed, search-and-destroy operations in remote jungle regions produced no lasting effects and were irrelevant to security in the villages. He called the large-unit action "something like the elephant tromping down, and a lot of stuff sprayed away." In this view he was also totally in accord with the PROVN Study, which held that the battle for the villages was the central battle, that "all other military aspects of the war are secondary." "At no time," said PROVN, "should US-FW [Free World] combat operations shift the American focus of support from the true point of decision in Vietnam--the villages." [10]

It seemed clear to Johnson that the same effort expended in the large search-and-destroy operations could have been more effective if it had been spread out over a larger area, and maintained in the areas where it was applied for a longer period of time, for it then "would have achieved more lasting results and been more effective." What being more effective meant to him was "being effective in digging out the infrastructure of the Viet Cong, and being more effective in that with the infrastructure gone the legitimate government could govern effectively in those areas."

Johnson had been appalled in his early visits to Vietnam by the enormous amount of unobserved firepower being splashed around, and things didn't seem to get much better. On a visit in August 1967, Johnson asked how much of the artillery fire was observed, and was told six percent. This, too, was reflected in the PROVN Study, which noted that "aerial attacks and artillery fire, applied indiscriminately, also have exacted a toll on village allegiance." In other words the very operations that were supposed to be protecting the villagers were harming and alienating them. This was clearly no way to "win the hearts and minds" of the people. "Discontinue unobserved artillery fire in populated areas," PROVN flatly recommended.

There were, operationalizing the strategic, tactical, and political insights of PROVN, a total of 140 near-term recommendations, along with others that went to mid-term and longer-range objectives. The study was prepared under the nominal supervision of the DCSOPS, and when it was finished the team took it to the incumbent, Lieutenant General Vernon P. Mock, for approval. The study team perceived Mock to be cautious and self-protective, apparently lacking a sense of how this thing was going to be received. He also seemed to them unaware of the interaction that had been ongoing between Johnson and members of the team, and of how much of Johnson's own views and values permeated the final product. Whatever the reason, Mock refused to sign off. Someone signed for him and the study went to meet its fate.

Lieutenant General Charles Bonesteel, a cerebral and immensely respected officer then serving as Director of Special Studies for General Johnson, provided some thoughts on how PROVN should be presented. "First," he began, "I want to say that I think the study is a highly professional, profound, and useful analysis which really has dug into the real-life problems." As for uses to be made of it, said Bonesteel, "I would personally recommend that it receive selective

distribution outside the [Department of the Army]. . . . It could be distributed on the basis of being a thinkpiece rather than any `Army position.'" Bonesteel added that "timing is vitally important today and I feel that if we try to reconcile all the many divergencies which will arise within the Army family if we try to come up with a fully staffed and approved `position,' we will find that we have missed the boat and failed to influence the Presidential level decisions which are already being made and which will have to be expanded in the near future. Time and tide wait for no man--not even the Army!"[11]

Briefing the Study

In classic Pentagon fashion, PROVN was briefed at one layer of command after another. The Joint Chiefs of Staff were an early audience, with the very able Don Marshall making the presentation. He began by referring to "the current lack of understanding of what the war in Vietnam actually is all about," probably not what the JCS wanted to hear, or what they thought of their own grasp of the situation.[12] "The thing that caused the most interest by far," remembered Marshall, "especially in General Wheeler--they were just fascinated by it--was a display where I had put all the province maps together on a single overall map. My interpretation was that they had had no idea of the smallness of the blue and the largeness of the red and the orange." [13] But fundamentally the Joint Chiefs were more concerned with limitations on the larger war--bombing restrictions, prohibition of attacks on enemy sanctuaries and mining of enemy harbors, restrictive rules of engagement--than they were with the war inside South Vietnam.

General Wheeler was clearly more interested in those matters than he was in pacification, as he had indicated when he took over as Chairman. "It is fashionable in some quarters to say that the problems in Southeast Asia are primarily political and economic rather than military," he said. "I do not agree. The essence of the problem in Vietnam is military." [14]

An officer who was close to him suggested that Wheeler also was reluctant to push PROVN's findings very actively to the Secretary of Defense or within the JCS because, being so critical of how the war was then being conducted, those findings would open up another avenue of attack for the civilians in the Office of the Secretary of Defense to use against the military services.

Beyond that, the JCS were loath to interfere with the field commander's conduct of the war, an outlook with deep roots in military custom and tradition. All this meant that with respect to PROVN the JCS, whose endorsement of the study might have made a difference, laid low. "In any event," said Marshall, "the PROVN Study was not forwarded to the White House by the JCS. Instead, it made its way there by other means. We used to say that instead of going over the river to the White House, PROVN went under the river."

Things didn't go well when the study was briefed to McNamara, either, or so the study team concluded at the time. "It was a miserable briefing," said Volney Warner. "McNamara didn't like what he heard, and didn't want to hear it." Plus the power failed for the overhead projector, and they wound up passing viewgraphs hand to hand, one Chief to the next, down to McNamara at the far end of a long table. Nevertheless, as would soon become apparent, the outcome was not necessarily as unpromising as it first appeared.

PROVN briefers also went to the Far East for presentations in Honolulu and Saigon. The briefing at CINCPAC Headquarters (Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, at that time Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp) in Hawaii was particularly sporty, because PROVN made a point of the need to simplify the chain of command for Vietnam and to that end had recommended that CINCPAC be taken out of that chain. "We wanted a unified command that would control all air, ground, and naval operations in the theater," said Art Brown, "and that guaranteed opposition from CINCPAC when the study went forward."

Westmoreland heard PROVN briefed in Honolulu, where he was on leave at the time it was presented to CINCPAC.[15] "Westmoreland knew all about PROVN," confirmed Warner, "He'd read PROVN." The briefers continued on to Saigon, where they made a presentation at MACV Headquarters, and in due course MACV was called on to provide comments on the finished report. "I wrote Westmoreland's response to PROVN," recalled Colonel Herbert Schandler. "We all thought it was great stuff, but we couldn't say that. We had to write things like `there are some good ideas here for consideration' and so on." Schandler also included comments like "we are implementing

many of these programs already" because, he said, "General Westmoreland wanted to show he was ahead of the game." It was painful to have to draft such a response, said Schandler, because at the working level of the MACV staff the reaction to PROVN was, "We were enthusiastic about it. We thought it was great!"

The PROVN team looked at it this way: "MACV was our second enemy." General Donald V. Bennett, who as a brigadier in DCSOPS had helped oversee the PROVN Study, said, "I think General Johnson was not able to communicate with Westmoreland. Even later Westmoreland didn't understand what he was talking about."

In any event Westmoreland's headquarters was obliged to reject out-of-hand the PROVN findings, because they of course repudiated everything Westmoreland was doing. "The COMUSMACV [Commander, US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] recommended the study be presented to the National Security Council for use in developing concepts, policies, and actions to improve effectiveness of the American effort in Vietnam," Johnson said in the Chief of Staff's *Weekly Summary*. Meanwhile, said Thomas Scoville, Ambassador Lodge heard about PROVN "and demanded of MACV that if they didn't give him a copy, he would go to much higher sources and make them give him one." [16]

Lieutenant General Phillip Davidson, who had served as Westmoreland's Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence (J-2), wrote of MACV's rejection that "the study deserved more mature consideration. Its executioner was General Westmoreland, and while he does not even mention PROVN in his memoirs or in his *Official Report on the War*, his reasons for throttling it are obvious. PROVN forthrightly attacked his search-and-destroy concept. . . . He could not embrace the study's concept . . . without admitting that he and his strategy were wrong." But later, said Davidson, who had an excellent vantage point as he stayed on for a year as J-2 for General Creighton Abrams, the study "would rise again as 'Son of PROVN' in 1969, and then, under different circumstances and a different commander, would gain support and credence." [17]

By July 1966, Johnson told his general officers via the *Weekly Summary*, the study had been briefed to the Joint Chiefs of Staff; the Commander in Chief, Pacific; the Commander, US MACV; the Commander in Chief, US Army, Pacific; the Commander in Chief, US Air Force, Pacific; the Secretary of the Army; and the Secretary of Defense, and was then being staffed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Johnson provided a summary of the study's key findings in the *Weekly Summary*, a publication distributed to every Army general officer worldwide, which meant that even at this early date PROVN's essence was made pretty widely known. [18] Subsequently the JCS authorized distribution of PROVN within the Department of Defense, and in September 1966, six months after the formal PROVN report was issued, Secretary McNamara authorized distribution to government agencies outside Defense.

Once the study had been published, Johnson made its conclusions a staple of his public remarks. At Fort Benning the month after the final report was released he observed that "the Viet Cong political cadre structure throughout the countryside has by no means been put out of action. It is very much intact, and will continue to be a threat to stability in South Vietnam until it is rooted out by the Vietnamese themselves." That was exactly what search-and-destroy, thrashing around in the deep jungle, was missing altogether.

Besides the emphasis on neutralizing the enemy infrastructure, Johnson stressed the importance of local security as opposed to operations of the regular forces. "In the last analysis," he explained, "it is this fellow that's guarding the peasant night after night and keeping his throat from being slit that is going to be the important security factor out there." Jasper Wilson kept hammering on the basic theme as well, stressing to Johnson a year after PROVN had been issued that "the basic objective . . . remains the *people and their security*. We must *offensively take this objective*."

Confirmatory Views

In the summer of 1966, not long after PROVN was published, Secretary McNamara made another of his periodic trips to Vietnam. Afterward, recalled General Donn Starry, who was then a colonel assigned to the MACV staff, "Westmoreland had us do an analysis of the prospects for conclusion of the war" in response to a question McNamara had posed during his visit. "We said that it would take one million Vietnamese, half a million US, and ten years." That wasn't a very palatable forecast, and "Westmoreland wouldn't send our analysis. He said it was politically unacceptable." Meanwhile McNamara's staffers kept demanding that MACV respond to the Secretary's question. "So finally," said Starry, "Westmoreland sent it, but with a disclaimer. He said the war was going to be over in the summer

of 1967."

During 1966 Secretary McNamara's Systems Analysis office, under Alain Enthoven, analyzed combat operations in Vietnam and determined that the strategy of attrition was not working and could not work, not least because of the enemy's ability to control his losses, and also the capacity to replace losses far higher than those the allies were able to inflict. Those findings were conveyed to McNamara.

Systems Analysis also completed work that was severely critical of the effect of huge amounts of unobserved fire delivered by US forces on the Vietnam battlefield, an aspect of the war that had greatly troubled Harold K. Johnson since his earliest visits to Vietnam. These findings were also brought to McNamara's attention by Enthoven.

Yet other work in Systems Analysis documented the far greater effectiveness of small long-range patrols as compared to the multibattalion sweeps favored by Westmoreland, and McNamara was made aware of this work, too. In Vietnam, meanwhile, American forces continued the operations that Systems Analysis found so flawed.[19]

Effect of the Study

In mid-November 1966 the real effect of PROVN, at least within the inner councils of government, became apparent in the pages of a Draft Presidential Memorandum prepared by McNamara. "We now face a choice of two approaches to the threat of the regular VC/NVA forces," he began. One approach would involve further increases in deployed US forces, using them "primarily in large-scale 'seek out and destroy' operations to destroy the main force VC/NVA units." That was what MACV was then busy trying to do. McNamara then laid out the "distinct disadvantages" to that approach, including "very strongly diminishing marginal returns" as more and more US troops were put in the field.[20]

A second approach would involve building US forces only to that level necessary "to neutralize the large enemy units and prevent them from interfering with the pacification program." A portion of the US force, in a departure from the current practice, would "give priority to improving the pacification effort. The enemy regular units would cease to perform what I believe to be their primary function of diverting our effort to give security to the population." And, added McNamara, "I believe it is time to adopt the second approach." [21]

In this key document McNamara also reflected, perhaps for the first time on the record, dissatisfaction with the effectiveness with which Westmoreland was using the troops already provided him. "It may be possible," he wrote, "to reduce enemy strength substantially through improved tactics or other means . . . , but further large increases in US forces do not appear to be the answer." [22]

Then, in words that could have been drawn directly from PROVN, McNamara critiqued the current tactical approach. "The large unit war," he argued, "at which we are succeeding fairly well, is largely irrelevant to pacification as long as we keep the regular VC/NVA units from interfering and do not lose the major battles." Furthermore, search-and-destroy missions by definition enter an area and then move on, failing to provide any lasting security for the people. Thus, said McNamara, "the most enduring problems are reflected in the belief of the rural Vietnamese that the GVN [Government of Vietnam] will not stay long when it comes into an area but the VC will; the VC will punish cooperation with the GVN; the GVN is indifferent to the people's welfare; the low-level GVN officials are tools of the local rich; and the GVN is excessively corrupt from top to bottom." [23]

Search-and-destroy didn't help solve these problems. "Success in changing these beliefs," McNamara stressed, "and in pacification, depends on the interrelated functions of providing physical security, destroying the VC organization and presence, motivating the villager to cooperate, and establishing responsive local government." A new approach was urgently required. "Physical security must come first and is the essential prerequisite to a successful revolutionary development effort. The security must be permanent or it is meaningless to the villager, and it must be a well organized 'clear and hold' operation continued long enough to really clear the area and conducted by competent military forces who have been trained to show respect for the villager and his problems." [24]

The key task was to provide "permanently secure areas" in which to "root out the VC infrastructure and establish the GVN presence," McNamara concluded. "This has been our task all along. It is still our task. The war cannot come to a

successful end until we have found a way to succeed in this task." [25] That was it exactly, and exactly what PROVN had been advocating in the preceding months. Before long, with McNamara's backing, Robert Komer would be deployed to Vietnam as a deputy to the COMUSMACV for pacification support, and the formerly disparate elements of American support for pacification would be pulled together under the COMUSMACV, just as recommended by PROVN. McNamara had been listening after all.

There were others who became PROVN supporters. One was Marine Lieutenant General Victor Krulak. "Brute" Krulak had a personal relationship with Secretary McNamara which he sometimes used to advance a policy viewpoint. In January 1966, just two months before the final PROVN report was issued, Krulak wrote McNamara to urge that a pacification-oriented approach replace Westmoreland's search-and-destroy operations. Attrition, said Krulak, was "the route to defeat." In Vietnam, "the Vietnamese people are the prize." Thus "our self-declared victories in the search-and-destroy operations are not relevant to the total outcome of the war." [26]

Krulak, who commanded Fleet Marine Forces, Pacific, had also recently cabled senior Marine commanders in Vietnam--in a cable marked "Marine Corps Eyes Only"--to say regarding Westmoreland, "I am sure that he has not altered his view that 'find, fix, and destroy the big main force units' is really the answer, and that patrols, ambushes, and civic action are all second-class endeavors more suitable for the ARVN and the paramilitary." "I disagree with this," stressed Krulak, "and know that you do too." [27]

This was an outlook entirely compatible with PROVN's findings, and when Krulak was given a copy of the PROVN briefing in Honolulu he reportedly sat up all night reading it, then the next morning cabled Marine Commandant General Wallace Greene to say it was the best thing he had seen on how the war should be fought.

Another PROVN enthusiast was Robert Komer, who since May 1966 had been working the pacification account in the White House and would a year later be sent out as a deputy to Westmoreland for pacification support. When Komer came on the job he was already familiar with PROVN, published two months earlier, and General Johnson also made sure he had a copy. [28] Early in the new assignment Komer charged out to Vietnam for his first look around, then came back to tell LBJ that "chasing the large units around the boondocks still leaves intact the VC infrastructure, with its local guerrilla capability plus the weapons of terror and intimidation." [29]

One study team member wound up working in Komer's office, and General Johnson seeded others in key places around the Pentagon where they could be advocates for PROVN's recommended approach. Lieutenant Colonel Dave Hughes, just graduating from the Army War College and on orders to Vietnam, wrote Hanifen: "I'm soon off to the jungles. Have been running a mile a morning, practiced on my .45, have black insignia on my fatigues, have memorized PROVN, and am rarin' to go."

"Komer took PROVN and rode it like a horse," said Hanifen, and in July 1967 former PROVN team member Volney Warner wrote to Hanifen from the White House, where he was assigned to Komer's old office, that "PROVN concepts are very much alive and our organizational proposals are now very much in being." But it was not until General Creighton Abrams took command of MACV in the spring of 1968 that PROVN became the touchstone for the entirety of operations there, operations reconfigured for the conduct of "one war" with population security as its goal.

Reflections

In those later years the war was essentially won. [30] But as American ground forces were progressively withdrawn, then air and naval support for the South Vietnamese terminated, and finally even financial assistance slashed, that war was no longer won. Still, following the PROVN blueprint in a race to succeed before those assets were taken away, allied forces in Vietnam came tantalizingly close to achieving the victory that had so long been sought. Had the PROVN precepts been applied earlier, before years of public and congressional support for the American effort in Vietnam were squandered in the ineffectual pursuit of attrition strategy and search-and-destroy tactics, the outcome might have been different. But that was not to be.

Johnson lived to see all that, as Abrams mercifully had not, and in his last years revisited an issue that had long nagged at him, resignation in protest. It is certain that Johnson's personal example of principled leadership constituted one of his most meaningful contributions to the Army he led in troubled times. He characteristically held himself to extremely

demanding standards, and sometimes concluded that he had not measured up. During the course of his stewardship as Chief of Staff he had on a number of occasions contemplated resignation in protest, but each time he drew back, concluding that he could do more good by continuing to serve.

In retirement, a frequent speaker at the Army War College and elsewhere, he was invariably questioned on this matter, and answered as he had rationalized it to himself while in active service, and as he had been counseled by General Omar Bradley. Resignation would be a meaningless act, making at best a brief splash in the newspapers, then quickly forgotten, while others more amenable would be brought in to do the Administration's bidding. Better to serve on, faithful to the Army and the soldier, and do what one could to make things better.

Late in his life, however, Johnson reached a different conclusion, one he confided to a number of people. The most fully articulated version was elicited by Brigadier General Albion Knight, an unusual officer who, while serving in the Signal Corps, was also an ordained priest of the Episcopal Church. He and Johnson had known each other well for a number of years, and there came a point at which Knight asked a searching question. "General," he asked, "if you had to live your life over again, what would you do different?"

General Johnson responded by observing that there are sins of omission and sins of commission. He recalled that the Army had reached down quite a few files to make him Chief of Staff, and said he believed that the Lord had pulled him up to do a job. He spoke of resignation in protest, asking, "Was that the job He wanted me to do?"

Then, very quietly, Johnson spoke of the conclusion he had reached. "I remember the day I was ready to go over to the Oval Office and give my four stars to the President and tell him, 'You have refused to tell the country they cannot fight a war without mobilization; you have required me to send men into battle with little hope of their ultimate victory; and you have forced us in the military to violate almost every one of the principles of war in Vietnam. Therefore, I resign and will hold a press conference after I walk out of your door.'"

Then, added Johnson with a look of anguish, "I made the typical mistake of believing I could do more for the country and the Army if I stayed in than if I got out. I am now going to my grave with that lapse in moral courage on my back."^[31]

Whether anyone else would be so harsh in judging Johnson is questionable, for he was widely admired as an exemplary soldier and a man of inspiring decency and honor. General Bruce Palmer, Jr., reflected the views of many. Johnson, he said, was "one of the noblest men I have ever known. He was my beau ideal."

NOTES

1. As quoted in William Conrad Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships* (Washington: GPO, 1994), III: 170.
2. Richard L. Clutterbuck, *The Long, Long War: Counterinsurgency in Malaya and Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1966), p. 176.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
5. HKJ Memorandum for Colonel J. J. Wilson, 3 May 1965, and CSM 65-283, "Study--A Program for the Pacification and Long Term Development of Vietnam," 21 June 1965, both in Marshall Papers, Indochina Archive, University of California at Berkeley.
6. Department of the Army, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Military Operations, *A Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of Vietnam* (Washington: Department of the Army, 1 March 1966), p. G-8. Hereafter PROVN Study.

7. Quoted in Mark Perry, *Four Stars* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), p. 157.
8. PROVN Study.
9. Here PROVN relied on NSAM (National Security Action Memorandum) 288, which had established that as the objective. In the course of their research the team members found that there were desk officers in the Department of State who were ignorant of that directive, or who ignored it, denying that a noncommunist South Vietnam was a US objective.
10. FW, standing for "Free World" forces, more commonly is rendered as FWMAF for "Free World Military Assistance Forces," meaning those troops contributed by nations other than South Vietnam or the United States, principally those of the Republic of Korea, Australia and New Zealand, and Thailand.
11. Lieutenant General C. H. Bonesteel III Memorandum for Lieutenant General V. P. Mock, 19 April 1966, copy provided the author by Colonel Hanifen.
12. Lieutenant Colonel Donald S. Marshall, PROVN Briefing for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1966, copy provided the author by Colonel Marshall.
13. Blue indicated areas under friendly control, orange contested areas, and red those controlled by the enemy.
14. As quoted in Robert Gallucci, *Neither Peace Nor Honor* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 38-39.
15. PROVN was briefed at CINCPAC 17 May 1966 and at MACV on 21 May. *Pentagon Papers*, Senator Gravel Edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), II: 379.
16. Thomas W. Scoville, citing the MACV Command History, in R. W. Komer, *Organization and Management of the New Model Pacification Program* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 7 May 1970), p. 32.
17. Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1988), p. 411.
18. General Mock subsequently called PROVN "beautifully done" and wrote to Hanifen to report enthusiastically, if not entirely accurately, how it was faring:

Suffice it to say that it has exceeded all expectations and has been received most favorably by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, CINCPAC and the staff in Hawaii, Westmoreland and staff in Saigon, and General Maxwell Taylor. It is scheduled for Mr. McNamara at a staff meeting next week, and I honestly believe that before too long it will be given to State, AID, and other governmental agencies which are concerned with it. In fact, some of the senior people concerned have suggested that the NSC be assembled as a body to hear it, but we don't know yet whether that will eventuate. On balance, it is a masterpiece of understatement to say that the study exceeded everybody's expectations, and you left us a legacy that will not be forgotten.
- Lieutenant General Vernon P. Mock, Letter to Colonel Thomas J. Hanifen, 11 June 1966, copy provided the author by Colonel Hanifen.
19. The Systems Analysis work referred to is described in Alain C. Enthoven and K. Wayne Smith, *How Much Is Enough?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), passim. Dr. Enthoven confirmed that McNamara had been made aware of the results of that research in annotations of a letter to him from the author dated 10 February 1996.
20. *Pentagon Papers*, IV: 369, quoting McNamara 17 November 1966 Draft Presidential Memorandum.
21. *Ibid.*, IV: 369.
22. *Ibid.*, IV: 371.

23. Ibid., IV: 374.

24. Ibid., IV: 376.

25. Ibid.

26. Krulak Paper, "A Strategic Appraisal, Vietnam," quoted in Gibbons, IV: 198.

27. Lieutenant General Krulak, Message to CG FMFPAC/I MAC FWD and CG FIRST MARDIV, 270218 OCT 1965, Greene Papers, Marine Corps Historical Center.

28. Komer, p. 32.

29. *Pentagon Papers*, II: 571. Komer's outlook on all matters having to do with pacification owes much to the insights and experience of Colonel (later Brigadier General) Robert M. Montague, Jr., who had served in the Delta in Vietnam, developed the "oil spot" plan for the 21st ARVN Division, and worked under Ambassador Maxwell Taylor in the Embassy in Saigon, altogether spending five years in Vietnam. Subsequently Montague was assigned to Komer's White House staff where, observed one admirer, "Komer never signed anything that was worth a damn that wasn't written for him by Montague."

30. This thesis is more fully articulated in the author's book, now in preparation, on the neglected later years of American involvement in Vietnam.

31. Brigadier General Albion W. Knight, Jr., interview, 1 February 1997, and telephone interview, 16 June 1995. Also Knight letter to Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., 4 August 1984, copy provided to the author by Colonel Summers. General Johnson made similar statements to or in the presence of several other officers, including Colonel Summers, Colonel Harold Birch, and General Bruce Palmer, Jr.

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Reviewed 25 February 1998. Please send comments or corrections to carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil