

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 35
Number 3 *Parameters Autumn 2005*

Article 10

8-1-2005

Blowtorch: Robert Komer and the Making of Vietnam Pacification Policy

Frank L. Jones

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

Recommended Citation

Jones, Frank L.. "Blowtorch: Robert Komer and the Making of Vietnam Pacification Policy." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 35, 3 (2005). <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol35/iss3/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

Blowtorch: Robert Komer and the Making of Vietnam Pacification Policy

FRANK L. JONES

© 2005 Frank L. Jones

Lyndon Johnson loved an audience, especially a captive one, which is what he had. The White House press corps waited in an uneven arc before him in the Oval Office. Some reporters sat in the cream-fabric settees. Others stood beneath the fixed gaze of Henry Clay's and Andrew Jackson's dark portraits. No one dared intrude beyond the presidential seal woven into the center of the pale green rug that lay before the President's mahogany desk: the proscenium of the stage.

The fragrance of cut flowers and the tension and a ragged silence hung heavy in the air. The time had not yet come for words, but the President sat behind his desk preparing for that moment, looking up occasionally to scrutinize the spectators. "Reporters are puppets," he once remarked. "They simply respond to the pull of the most powerful strings."¹ Then, at precisely 4:15 p.m., on Tuesday, 22 March 1966, with his aides in their places, the White House stenographers with their pencils and notepads at the ready, and all preparations complete, Lyndon Johnson pulled the strings and began the 60th press conference of his presidency: "I am ready if you have any questions."²

Balding and bespectacled with a booming voice, 44-year-old Robert Komer felt the tug of the string as well. Appointed Johnson's interim National Security Adviser when McGeorge Bundy left a few weeks before to head the Ford Foundation, Komer later recalled that period as "the most painful six weeks of my life."³ Now, after responding to several reporters' questions, Johnson announced that Komer would assume a new position on the White House staff.

Johnson had earlier summoned Komer to the Oval Office to discuss his new role. “Bob,” Johnson drawled when they sat together, “I’m going to put you in charge of the other war in Vietnam.” Komer was unfamiliar with the term “the other war.” “Mr. President, what’s the other war in Vietnam? I thought we only had one.” “Well,” the President replied, “that’s part of the problem. I want to have a war to build as well as to destroy. So I want to put you in charge of generating a massive effort to do more for the people of South Vietnam, particularly the farmers in the rural areas, and your mandate will be an extensive one. In fact, I wrote it myself.” Komer declared that he was no expert in Southeast Asia. The President parried his feeble protest. “I’ve got too many people who claim to be long-standing experts. What we need is some fresh blood.”⁴ Komer knew that there was no argument he could muster to dissuade Johnson. Johnson’s leadership style was simple: pick the right man for the job and the rest would take care of itself. Johnson had decided that Bob Komer was the right man; he got things done.

Under this order, Robert Komer set out to implement the President’s goals for the “other war” in Vietnam, goals that were staggeringly different and complex from the large-unit war being conducted there. In essence, to fight the other war, he had to redirect and harness the activities of civilian agencies as well as military efforts to provide security and defeat the Viet Cong guerrillas, as part of a better-coordinated US effort to support the government of South Vietnam through a nation-building program known as pacification. This term had become a substitute for “counterinsurgency” in 1964-1965.⁵ The story is edifying in terms of such significant contemporary issues as the influence of bureaucratic politics, institutional bargaining, the role of presidential staff, the formulation and conduct of foreign policy, and the use of nonmilitary instruments to wage war, especially counterinsurgency, as is occurring in Iraq today. Moreover, it is instructive as to the sway a single person can have on national security policy by understanding and using the levers of power. This is no small point. Richard Falkenrath, President George W. Bush’s Deputy Homeland Security Adviser until May 2004, in speaking about the senior leaders of the Department of Homeland Security, remarked: “Many officials at the department were so inexperienced in grasping the levers of power in Washington, and so bashful about trying, that they failed to make progress on some fronts.”⁶

Frank L. Jones, a member of the Senior Executive Service, is Principal Director for Strategy, Plans, and Resources, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Defense. He has held a number of senior positions in the Defense Department, including Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations Policy and Support, and was formerly Professor of Defense Policy at the US Army War College, 2001-2003.

On the Run

Robert Komer understood the President's determination to strengthen pacification as an element of US policy in Vietnam. Johnson wanted to make Vietnam a showcase of economic, social, and political development in Asia. Pacification was the "Great Society" transplanted thousands of miles away. Komer recounted that Johnson "saw the 'other war' as largely being a sort of building of the TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority] and REA [Rural Electrification Administration]." ⁷ Johnson had made a personal commitment to pacification when he met with Chief of State Thieu and Prime Minister Ky of the Republic of Vietnam in Honolulu two months earlier. ⁸

Johnson was not alone in recognizing the US government's flawed organization to support pacification. Sub-cabinet officials from civilian agencies, the Department of Defense, and the US Mission in Saigon had met in January 1966 in a small Virginia town outside Washington, D.C., to discuss this topic, but could not reach agreement on how to manage pacification more effectively in Washington or in Saigon. ⁹ The idea of a "Vietnam czar" in Washington surfaced soon after, but there was disagreement about where this person should work. State Department wanted the person to be a special assistant to the Secretary of State. ¹⁰ Chester Cooper, a staff member of the National Security Council (NSC), wrote an impassioned memorandum to the President arguing that the person should work for the President in the White House because one bureaucracy cannot manage others at the same level and because it would carry more power if the person worked for Johnson. ¹¹ This view had prevailed, and now it was up to Komer to carry out the President's commitment in the face of bureaucratic resistance from the civilian agencies.

Komer set about with terrier-like determination. He had a reputation among Washington insiders for being prickly, abrasive, brash, impatient, and intolerant of bureaucratic foot-dragging. As a longtime Central Intelligence Agency analyst and NSC staff member, he understood that a conversation between the President and him would be insufficient to move the civilian bureaucracies to achieve the President's objective. Johnson's directive that he was to "manage and supervise," an authority Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara wanted included, would have to be in writing for the bureaucracy to believe. ¹² Even then, the bureaucrats would challenge Komer's authority and cooperation may have to be forced, but a presidential directive was a necessity for him to have any chance of succeeding. He set about writing a document for the President to sign. In essence, Komer was writing his own job description.

Komer understood his mandate as a management problem subject to analysis, an input-output model, concepts he had learned at the Harvard Business School: synchronize existing US civilian agency programs in Vietnam,

identify existing gaps in civilian capabilities, and develop new programs to eliminate those problems as “it was the President’s determination that the program be speeded-up, given priority over military operations, and conducted with wartime urgency.”¹³ He recognized as well that the primary focus of his effort must be in Saigon and not Washington in order to implement the President’s direction. There were two approaches to take. The more direct approach, and Komer always preferred the direct approach, was to work with Ambassador William Porter, deputy to the US Ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. In February, Porter had been designated to improve the management of US support of the pacification effort as Komer’s counterpart in Saigon, and together they could use the authority the President had given them to overcome bureaucratic resistance in Saigon. In this approach, the US Mission would be both friend and foil. The indirect and secondary approach was for Komer to use his mandate to advantage with senior officials in Washington by having these officials instruct their field agencies to comply with Porter’s or his guidance. One aspect was certain: Komer was not going to waste valuable time working through interagency committees in Washington. He believed in “intervening from the top to solve quickly certain specific problems that otherwise would be massaged by the bureaucracy for months on end.”¹⁴

By the end of March, Komer had completed and cleared with the relevant civilian agencies a presidential directive designed to centralize the management of pacification in Washington under his direction. State Department put up a fight, but presidential assistants Joe Califano and Bill Moyers convinced Secretary of State Dean Rusk to yield. President Johnson signed this directive, National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 343, “Special Assistant for Peaceful Construction in Vietnam” on 28 March.¹⁵ Komer’s handiwork ensured him sizable authority not only over seven civilian agencies, but he also had considerable say in the mobilization of military resources to support the President’s pacification commitment.

The directive spelled out clearly Komer’s mandate to carry out the responsibility for “the direction, coordination, and *supervision* in Washington of US non-military programs for peaceful construction relating to Vietnam.”¹⁶ The document also underscored the urgency with which the President wanted his commitment carried out and that Komer and his deputy, Ambassador William Leonhart, would assure that the civilian pacification efforts were coordinated with military operations. Further, he would support the US Mission in Saigon on matters within his purview. Komer administered a White House bureaucratic *coup de grace* as well. He was to have direct access to the President at all times. He had divorced himself from the NSC staff; he would not report through the President’s National Security Adviser.¹⁷

Komer then created an office with a small, select staff to assist him with his duties. Leonhart, as noted, would be his deputy. Porter recommended a young Foreign Service Officer, Richard Holbrooke, who had worked for him in Saigon. Holbrooke in turn recommended that Komer hire Army Lieutenant Colonel Robert Montague. Montague had extensive experience in Vietnam, having served as an adviser to a South Vietnamese Army unit and a member of General William Westmoreland's staff at US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV). Komer added two RAND Corporation employees to assist with economic issues, a Bureau of Budget employee to control agency allocation of funding for pacification activities, and two other staff members.¹⁸

First Impressions

In less than a week, Komer decided he needed to see firsthand how pacification was faring by traveling to South Vietnam. It was the first of more than a half dozen trips he would make over the next year. He sent his official trip report by message to the President at the LBJ Ranch in Texas, which arrived on 13 April. It began with a self-deprecatory statement that his views should "be taken with a grain of salt as coming from a one-week expert." Nonetheless, Komer's views were generally positive. He had established a close working relationship with Lodge, Porter, and General Westmoreland, the senior US military commander in South Vietnam. He was also confident that the US government could build an effective nonmilitary effort to complement the military's actions. Praising Porter for his initial efforts to coordinate the previously loosely aligned civil efforts, he agreed that the civil program was lagging significantly behind the military effort. Komer understood that military requirements had priority but cited a number of problems that were causing economic instability for South Vietnam. These issues needed immediate attention. The first was that civil-military competition for port space and inefficient port operations by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the government of South Vietnam were hindering the distribution of aid to the Vietnamese people; such was representative of the vexations that precluded effective civil programs. Other concerns were pacifying the countryside and reining-in inflation. He asserted that without resolving these issues, "all our other grand enterprises will go for naught."¹⁹

A month later, in a cable to Johnson, Komer apologized to the President for the long period in which he had not provided him with a status report. "If I have not been much in evidence, it is because I have been trying to operate full tilt—as a flood of traffic and resulting anguished screams will attest." Komer had already earned the moniker "Blowtorch" from Ambassador Lodge. Lodge had likened Komer's demands for progress to having a blowtorch aimed at the seat of one's pants, and Komer reveled in the appellation.

Komer continued his message by providing a frank assessment to Johnson. The civil side was a “mess.” Again, he pointed out the military’s dominance in Saigon, the weak and apathetic South Vietnamese government, the inability of the US civilian agencies to operate at the high tempo that war required, and Lodge’s ineffectual leadership of the US pacification effort. Komer argued that a military buildup would prevent a disaster but would not guarantee victory in a “political war.” Further, he saw adverse side effects to the military buildup: “anti-Americanism induced by the visible military presence and pressures of inflation.” Yet he remained determined that Porter and he would “bring order out of chaos on the civil side.”

Komer offered several recommendations that the Pentagon would not find appealing. Lodge needed to insist on better balance between the military and civil efforts and press for military assistance, such as in-country airlift for moving USAID supplies to the rural areas, and helping with the port congestion. Komer believed that eliminating the Viet Cong influence in the countryside and limiting inflation were the highest priorities. He urged the President to press these points on Lodge and to support Komer’s position in the inevitable fights with the Pentagon over them.²⁰ The President acted as Komer requested when Lodge returned to Washington for consultations shortly thereafter, and Komer reiterated his concerns at a National Security Council meeting a few days later, going as far as to say that pacification “has been out-run by our search and destroy capability.”²¹ He had the President’s ear when at a 16 May meeting on Vietnam he outlined for the President his concerns and recommendations to have DOD take steps to reduce the inflationary impact of military outlays and take over port operations from USAID to move materiel. Johnson’s response was simply to get “recommendations and let’s move” on these points.²² Komer subsequently sent a cable to Porter informing him of the President’s direction.²³

Komer understood Johnson’s psychological need for information on the progress being made on pacification. He sent a flurry of memoranda to Johnson in May and June outlining the issues and his intended actions. The President’s response was favorable: “Bob, I applaud you, good. Keep it up & Keep it Hot.”²⁴ Johnson’s words were an unmistakable indication as to why the President had selected him, but Komer recognized the memoranda for what they were, merely a device to keep Johnson informed. Johnson never issued any orders from the memoranda or his trip reports; but then again, he never did so with any of the reports he received from other senior officials either.²⁵ Komer was on his own.

Komer kept pressing Porter for more progress and he kept the pressure on by sending Leonhart or other staff to Vietnam to see if initiation of the “Komer priorities” were occurring quickly enough.²⁶ In weekly reporting ca-

bles to the President, Lodge included information on pacification efforts, but he was merely responding to what he knew to be Johnson's interest. In truth, Porter was devoting most of his energy to being Deputy Chief of Mission, responsible for the US Mission's daily functioning, and not to pacification because of Lodge's demands. Further, Porter, as Deputy Ambassador, had no alternative but to defer to Lodge's authority in all matters, including the pace at which pacification improvement occurred.²⁷

Resistance

By mid-1966, Komer had new ideas about pacification and decried the lack of bold thinking in Saigon. He was increasingly convinced that there was no single key to success on the civil side other than better management and stepped-up activity along political, economic, and social fronts. He underscored the need to generate a major positive effect in the near term because the civil effort was still moving slowly. He knew he was inviting resistance from the Pentagon, but to increase the urgency, pacification demanded that more civil logistics functions needed to be turned over to the military. Second, Porter's mandate required strengthening. He was too involved in the daily administration of the US Mission and could not devote sufficient time to pacification. He also needed clear and unequivocal authority over civilian operations throughout the country. Third, and most important, General Westmoreland needed to devote fewer resources to search and destroy and more to clearing and holding the countryside. Finally, pushing the South Vietnamese government's pacification responsibilities could broaden the civil program. The codicil to this missive was a model of understatement: "My program is not dramatic—but it will help win the war."²⁸

Komer's views had their detractors in the civilian agencies, and his trip reports sent some of them into a rage. At the CIA, George A. Carver, Special Assistant for Vietnam Affairs, sent a memorandum to Director of Central Intelligence Richard Helms after Komer's second visit to Vietnam in late June that was a combination of bureaucratic infighting and perceptive analysis. Carver accused Komer of fundamental misconceptions about the nature of the war in Vietnam. He felt Komer was raising the President's expectations precipitously by giving him the impression that there would be quick and quantifiably measurable results in the pacification area. Further, Carver contended that Komer's recommendations were counterproductive. While agreeing that securing the villages, eliminating Viet Cong influence, and providing the peasants with security were useful steps, Carver disagreed vehemently with the notion that additional resources and better management were the keys to winning the war. Yet Carver's views also underscored an issue with which Komer was contending already, a concern about militarizing the pacification effort,

but they could be interpreted as a concern that the CIA would lose control of its rural pacification programs as well. CIA personnel were particularly upset with Komer's new view that there should be a single manager for pacification running through South Vietnam's three-tier governmental system of regions, provinces, and districts, with USMACV having broad supervisory authority over civilian agencies at the lower levels.²⁹ Carver's memorandum to Helms had the desired effect. Helms sent a reply to Komer outlining the CIA's concerns, but President Johnson made no effort to rein-in Komer or to weaken his recommended approach.³⁰

Meanwhile, Komer expressed privately his concerns about the civil agencies' capabilities. In a letter to Porter, he characterized them as "farcical" when compared to the military's efforts. Ambassador Lodge blamed the government of South Vietnam for not giving pacification priority, arguing that the US Mission had organized the civilian agencies more effectively. Komer conceded that Lodge had a point. Some portion of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) should be redirected toward pacification, supporting the South Vietnamese government's Revolutionary Development Cadre, who acted as agents of social change in the rural areas, while the US Army continued its large-unit strategy against Viet Cong main force and North Vietnamese Army units, but he was still unsatisfied with the Mission's movement on pacification. Nonetheless, by early August, Johnson's patience with Lodge's excuses for slow progress on pacification was almost at an end.³¹

Defining the Way Ahead

In August, Komer directed Holbrooke and Montague to write a paper that would set out a future course of action for pacification. By this time, Komer and his staff were clear on their ideas, and from this point on it was a matter of pushing their position all the way to the President.³²

The paper opened by focusing on what were considered the essentials: security in the countryside and getting the peasantry involved in the struggle against the Viet Cong as the essential element, since only 54.3 percent of the population was regarded as being under South Vietnamese government control. It continued by arguing that success in Vietnam had to include the "village war," that is, pacification, by dismantling the Viet Cong infrastructure to counter local guerrilla capability plus the weapons of intimidation and terror. It then posed the question, "How can pacification be managed more effectively?" The paper provided three options: (1) Give Porter operational control over all US pacification activity, (2) retain the present civil-military dichotomy but strengthen the management structure, or (3) assign the responsibility for pacification, civil and military, to Westmoreland.³³ Thus, Komer suggested for the first time in writing that pacification be put under Westmoreland, thereby rem-

edying the overlap and duplication of programs run by the military and civilian agencies. It was Komer's preferred option, so it was made the strongest.³⁴

Komer was finally satisfied enough with the third draft to share the 21-page paper with two men whose views he trusted, John McNaughton, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, and a conduit to McNamara, and John Paul Vann, a retired Army officer who now worked for USAID in Vietnam.³⁵ Komer had met Vann during his first trip to Vietnam and recognized him as both an original thinker on counterinsurgency and an experienced field operator.³⁶ He also had Leonhart take the paper to Saigon to get the views of Lodge, Porter, and Westmoreland. Lodge and Porter, as expected, wanted the status quo; Westmoreland was willing to assume responsibility if directed. That was all Komer needed to hear, and he discussed the matter with McNamara as he realized that the State Department and the Mission were not going to support his views.³⁷

McNamara's Assistance

In September, Komer and McNaughton talked McNamara into making an official proposal to the President that would place pacification under military leadership. The third option was strengthened and circulated as a McNamara proposal to the other agencies for concurrence.³⁸ It also was discussed with Johnson, who believed that Komer and McNamara were right. CIA, USAID, and State condemned the proposal. Komer sent a memorandum to McNamara as a formal response extolling the concept. The negative civilian reaction led Johnson to hold off implementing the proposal until the right psychological moment. The civilian agencies did not want their personnel in the field under military control.³⁹

Meanwhile, Johnson and Walt Rostow, who had been appointed National Security Adviser on 1 April, were interested in keeping the pressure on the South Vietnamese government to play a larger role in pacification. Rostow recommended a conference in October, this time in Manila, inviting South Vietnam as well as other troop-providing allies. Although the primary thrust of the conference was peace negotiations with the North Vietnamese, Rostow, supporting Komer's view of the military running pacification, also wanted a renewed commitment by Saigon, backed by the allies, on pacification and related issues such as economic development, education, health, and agriculture.⁴⁰

Komer saw the planning for the Manila conference as an opportunity to surface his argument in a memorandum to the President that the US military must assume responsibility for pacification management, since local security was critical and only the ARVN and US military could provide this essential ingredient. Further, because the military had the organization, personnel, engineering resources, and logistical capability, it had to be involved in support of

pacification.⁴¹ The President was swayed by Komer's arguments. He called McNamara and stated, "I feel strongly that it [pacification] ought to go to the military,"⁴² but delayed making a final decision until McNamara's party, which consisted of Komer and Under Secretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach, met with Lodge in Saigon in early October to discuss this new approach.⁴³

Komer already had secured powerful allies. McNamara and Rostow were supportive, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff agreed that transferring pacification management to Westmoreland was likely the best approach; they were not optimistic that the creation of an effective civilian organization could ever occur and certainly not speedily.⁴⁴ The civilian agencies realized that the burden was on them to offer a better alternative and that Komer and McNamara had already gotten to Johnson and sold him on the thesis that pacification was not working and that only the military could do what was needed. Rusk objected strenuously, but his views did not win over the President. The CIA realized that the probability of changing the President's mind was slight, so it opted to attack any recommendations whereby it would lose control of its programs in-country.⁴⁵

Lodge opposed the change in concept, which caused the President to again relent momentarily and consider an alternative that Katzenbach proposed on the party's return from Saigon.⁴⁶ Katzenbach argued that the US Mission had made progress and that the best approach was to have the US military and ARVN improve security while the civilian agencies were consolidated as a new organization known as the Office of Civil Operations (OCO) that Porter would run after being relieved of his day-to-day Deputy Ambassador duties.⁴⁷ Johnson approved the scheme, wanting OCO established "soonest" and to see progress quickly. He set an unworkable deadline of 90 to 120 days for the new organization to demonstrate movement.⁴⁸

Changing Venues

Komer informed Porter immediately that the President's deadline was firm and that he had better "get on the stick," and Johnson personally attested to this view by writing a letter to Lodge urging him to move quickly.⁴⁹ Komer and his staff wrote the directive establishing the organization, and then Komer sent Montague and Holbrooke to Saigon to assist with setting up OCO. The Mission refused to take the short deadline seriously. It would not be until 1 December that the office was established.⁵⁰ Consequently there was little to show during the months running up to another major US-South Vietnam conference in Guam on 20-21 March 1967.⁵¹ By then, Johnson was ready to move forward with the McNamara-Komer option for organizing pacification support, whereby the US military would have the lead with a civilian deputy running the program. He had decided to make civilian leadership changes

in Vietnam as well, since Lodge wanted to leave Saigon. At the Guam conference, Ellsworth Bunker, a distinguished diplomat with a patrician manner, was named the new US Ambassador to South Vietnam, with Ambassador Eugene Locke, one of Johnson's political allies, as his new deputy. Komer was to be the first civilian head of pacification under Westmoreland.⁵² Johnson had asked Komer in February if he would be willing to go to Vietnam. Komer had said yes. "As a professional with 25 years' service, when the President says go and do a job, I'll try to do it," Komer recollected in 1969. He continued, "It's simple professionalism."⁵³

Immediately following the conference, Komer flew to Saigon and met with Westmoreland to negotiate how the new organization, called Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), would be integrated into the existing framework of the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. The structure Komer proposed, and which Westmoreland and Bunker supported, brought US civilian agencies and the military into a combined organization run by a single manager at each echelon from the local to the national—the concept Komer had devised earlier. The two men's acceptance of this organizational construct was a unique achievement, attesting to Komer's management acumen and his powers of persuasion.⁵⁴ Having reached agreement, Komer returned to Washington to write his final report and to draft the formal presidential directive putting him into business.⁵⁵ He had told Johnson earlier that pacification was a problem in field execution, and he would now be responsible for implementing his own proposal.⁵⁶

Concluding Thoughts

Komer held the view until his death in 2000 that the pacification program he had created with Westmoreland's and Bunker's support, and which the South Vietnamese had executed with the help of up to 16,000 US advisers (civilian and military) and resources, was "the best program the US ever devised to meet rural insurgency."⁵⁷ Such a broad and arguably self-serving statement demands scrutiny. Therefore, it is useful to dissect Komer's influence on the pacification program in two respects. First, why was Komer's policy vision of how to enhance cooperation and unity of command of the pacification program the one President Johnson ultimately accepted? Second, after the President approved Komer's policy prescription, was it operationally successful?

Policymaking Success

A number of scholars and officials of the era have judged Robert Komer as an important and successful strategic architect of Johnson's Vietnam pacification policy.⁵⁸ As central as these views and achievements are, the most critical arbiter of Komer's success was Johnson himself. Johnson chose Komer

as his special assistant to implement the President's vision of the "other war." Johnson ultimately decided that Komer would go to Vietnam and serve as Westmoreland's civilian deputy to implement pacification policy on the ground. Why was Komer successful in this role as a policy formulator?

"You can't beat brains," President John Kennedy once said. Kennedy built his national security team around that dictum, and Komer, who joined the Kennedy NSC staff in 1961, had the right intellectual pedigrees: a sterling academic record as an undergraduate at Harvard College (magna cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa) followed by graduation from Harvard Business School. As many of Komer's contemporaries have remarked, Komer had a powerful, incandescent intellect which was melded to his forceful personality, attributes which are sometimes more important than institutional links. The highest compliment Komer could ever pay a subordinate was to call him an "expediter." It is how he thought of himself. He was not a coordinator, a facilitator, or a consensus-builder. He was a man of action who carried out his duties with speed and efficiency. He knew how to charm and manipulate in order to achieve his ends. Yet intellectual capacity and sheer force of personality alone will not bring success in the formulation and implementation of policy. Five other factors pertain to his success.

The first is his loyalty to Johnson, and out of this loyalty grew Johnson's confidence and trust in Komer. As Neil Sheehan noted, Komer was one of the few Kennedy men that Johnson trusted.⁵⁹ They had developed a congenial relationship when Komer accompanied then-Vice President Johnson on a goodwill trip to the Middle East in 1962. Further, Komer was a career professional, dedicated to serving Johnson. His personality was also similar to Johnson's in that he was determined to achieve objectives and did not refrain from browbeating someone if it were necessary to bend their will to his own to achieve success. So there was a personal affinity.

Second, Komer understood the importance of authority and the use of power. His authorship of the National Security Action Memorandum establishing his position as special assistant fitted him with the whip necessary to drive interagency actors. His years of experience in government had taught him the written requisites for success. Johnson ceded to Komer the power that his special assistant needed to overcome the civilian agencies' resistance, and Komer wielded that power effectively.

Third, he had ensured direct access to the President. If Johnson did not select him to replace Bundy as the National Security Adviser, then Komer ensured that he would not have to act through Bundy's replacement, Walt Rostow. This single sentence in NSAM 343 guaranteed that he was an autonomous instrument of the chief executive and Commander-in-Chief. When he spoke or acted, he did so not as an underling of the National Security Adviser,

but as the President's regent. As Porter remarked, Komer was recognized as "Lyndon Johnson's man."⁶⁰

Fourth, over time, Komer created alliances with other senior officials who shared his vision. McNamara, whom Johnson revered during this period, was particularly instrumental in supporting his views, as was Rostow. Komer also divided and conquered when necessary, playing the Defense Department off the State Department. Another tactic he used was the anxiety and distrust between Johnson, who was determined to see his agenda implemented, and the State Department bureaucracy, which Johnson viewed as composed of an intellectual elite who resisted his objective. Komer bided his time, using McNamara to articulate his positions and Johnson's impatience to bring the civilian agencies to heel.

Last, and no less important, he understood the senior policymaker's psyche, his cognitive requirements, especially for information, and fulfilled them by his well-timed memoranda. Komer's reports served to reinforce Johnson's view that Komer was aggressively pursuing his agenda and was the "right man" for creating the Great Society overseas, an objective in which Johnson had a deep emotional investment. Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin recalled that Johnson called the Great Society "the other beautiful woman" and wanted this program to be more highly regarded than the New Deal.⁶¹ Komer understood that this was true for the "other war" in Vietnam as well. He comprehended the significance of the picture of Franklin D. Roosevelt that hung over the fireplace in the Oval Office; FDR was the metric by which Johnson measured his political success and popularity as President.

Operational Achievements

From Komer's arrival in Vietnam in May 1967 through the end of the pacification program in February 1973, two leading authorities on this subject, Richard Hunt and Thomas Scoville, credit Komer, who left Vietnam in November 1968, and his successor, William Colby, later Director of Central Intelligence, with making CORDS largely successful on several levels. First, Komer integrated the organization effectively into the US Mission and Westmoreland's headquarters, thereby promoting healthy working relationships with Bunker and Westmoreland and helping CORDS not only survive later changes in military and political leadership but improving, as was necessary, US military-civilian coordination and programs under a single manager. Although the US military contributed the bulk of the personnel, funding, and resources, civilians held numerous policymaking positions as well as serving as field advisers, thereby improving cooperation between military and civilians. Second, the lines of communication between the CORDS staff and South Vietnamese government officials became particularly reliable, which was of

considerable value in gradually improving South Vietnamese pacification planning and program development. Third, CORDS strengthened South Vietnamese programs which had languished, such as support to local militia and the war against the Viet Cong's politico-military infrastructure. CORDS, especially Komer, convinced the South Vietnamese government leadership to challenge the Viet Cong in contested areas after the Tet offensive. Fifth, the South Vietnamese pacification effort was centralized for better coordination, an initiative that began during Komer's tenure but reached fruition only under Colby. CORDS also pressured the South Vietnamese government to overhaul its top-level pacification management, which produced results. Sixth, CORDS had some influence on the South Vietnamese government to replace corrupt or ineffective officials, which Komer initiated.⁶² Both Hunt and Scoville admit there is difficulty in measuring the effect on military operations. Nonetheless, pacification was emphasized in a number of military operations and gained limited priority among the military objectives specified in US-South Vietnamese campaign plans.⁶³

Despite these positive outcomes, Hunt concludes that Lyndon Johnson's dream for Vietnam remained simply that—a dream. Pacification could not “cause a fundamental transformation of South Vietnam,” and the ultimate goal of pacification was to transform the government structure into a system that could attain popular support.⁶⁴ The US-backed pacification program could not overcome the South Vietnamese government's defective execution of plans and programs, its omnipresent corruption, or its inability to develop a sturdy, self-sustaining political base. Even if fundamental transformation had occurred, it would have taken too long and exhausted the patience of the American public.⁶⁵ As Jeffrey Record and Andrew Terrill note in their recent study of Iraq and Vietnam, these are the two most pertinent lessons that current policymakers must now heed for Iraq: “the challenges of state-building, and the requirements of maintaining sufficient domestic political support.”⁶⁶ The late President Richard Nixon grasped the criticality of the latter point in achieving US political objectives in Vietnam: “When a President sends American troops to war, a hidden timer starts to run. He has a finite period of time to win the war before the people grow weary of it.”⁶⁷

NOTES

1. Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 247. Johnson's remarks were made in an interview with Dr. Kearns Goodwin.

2. For a description of the Johnson Oval Office and a press conference see: Jim Bishop, *A Day in the Life of President Johnson* (New York: Random House, 1967), pp. 71, 103. The 22 March 1966 press conference is in the *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1966* (Washington: GPO, 1967), pp. 343-51.

3. RAND Corporation, “Interview, Robert Komer, Organization and Management of the ‘New Model’ Pacification Program – 1966-1969” (Santa Monica, Calif: RAND, 7 May 1970), p. 27. Hereinafter, “Interview, Komer, Organization and Management.”

4. Excerpt from Robert Komer's Trial Testimony, n.d., folder 14, box 11, Larry Berman Collection (*Westmoreland v. CBS*), The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University. In the trial transcript, Komer provides his version of this conversation between Johnson and himself.

5. Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995), p. 3.

6. John Mintz, "Infighting Cited at Homeland Security," *The Washington Post*, 2 February 2005, sec. A, p. 6.

7. Robert Komer quoted in Merle Miller, *Lyndon: An Oral Biography* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1980), p. 465; Hunt, pp. 2-3.

8. US Department of Defense, *History of United States Decisionmaking in Vietnam*, Senator Gravel edition, Vol. II, chap. 7, "Re-Emphasis on Pacification, 1965-1967" (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), p. 554; Hunt, pp. 3, 70.

9. US Department of Defense, *History of United States Decisionmaking in Vietnam*, p. 539.

10. Memo from the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Johnson, Washington, 16 February 1966, Non-Military Organization for Vietnam—in Saigon and Washington, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, 1964-1968, Lyndon B. Johnson, Vol. IV, *Vietnam, 1966* (hereinafter "*FRUS*, IV"), 77; Notes of Meeting with the President on Vietnam, Saturday, 26 February 1966, 12:45 p.m., *FRUS*, IV, 85; Notes of Meeting, Washington, 26 February 1966, 1:10 p.m., *FRUS*, IV, 86. The documents in this volume are permanently archived at the Department of State's website. The general *FRUS* page can be found at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/>. All of the *FRUS* documents cited in this article are contained in this online volume. The last number in each citation is the document's reference number.

11. Memorandum from the President's Acting Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Komer) to President Johnson, Washington, 8 March 1966, 3:45 p.m., *FRUS*, IV, 90.

12. "Interview, Komer, Organization and Management," p. 27.

13. The Robert Komer-William Leonhart Files, 1966-1968, The Johnson Administration and Pacification in Vietnam, The Guide Introduction, available from http://www.leghist.lexis.com/academic/guides/military_history/vietnam/vietnam-pacification.asp.

14. "Interview, Komer, Organization and Management," p. 239.

15. National Security Action Memorandum No. 343, Washington, 28 March 1966, *FRUS*, IV, 102.

16. *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

17. *Ibid.*

18. "Interview, Komer, Organization and Management," p. 29.

19. Telegram from the President's Special Assistant (Komer) to President Johnson, Washington, 13 April 1966, 1813Z, *FRUS*, IV, 120.

20. Telegram from the President's Special Assistant (Komer) to President Johnson in Texas, Washington, 9 May 1966, 1515Z, *FRUS*, IV, 122.

21. Summary Notes of the 557th Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, 10 May 1966, 5:45 p.m., *FRUS*, IV, 135.

22. Memorandum for the Record, Washington, 16 May 1966, Subject: Meeting with the President on Viet-Nam, 16 May 1966, *FRUS*, IV, 140.

23. Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam, Washington, 19 May 1966, 1:46 p.m., *FRUS*, IV, 141.

24. Memorandum from the President's Special Assistant (Komer) to President Johnson, Washington, 24 May 1966, *FRUS*, IV, 145.

25. "Interview, Komer, Organization and Management," pp. 4-5.

26. Memorandum from William Leonhart of the White House Staff to President Johnson, Washington, 30 May 1966, Subject: Report on Visit to Vietnam: May 17-29, 1966, *FRUS*, IV, 149.

27. "Interview, Komer, Organization and Management," p. 31.

28. Memorandum from the President's Special Assistant (Komer) to President Johnson, Washington, 14 June 1966, *FRUS*, IV, 155.

29. Memorandum from George A. Carver of the Vietnamese Affairs Staff, Central Intelligence Agency to Director of Central Intelligence Helms, Washington, 7 July 1966, Subject: Comments on Mr. Komer's Report to the President on his 28-29 June Trip to Vietnam, *FRUS*, IV, 174.

30. Memorandum from Director of Central Intelligence Helms to the President's Special Assistant (Komer), Washington, 18 July 1966, Subject: Report to the President on Your Recent Trip to Vietnam, 1 July 1966, *FRUS*, IV, 181.

31. Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, Saigon, 27 July 1966, *FRUS*, IV, 193; Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam, Washington, 3 August 1966, 1:21 p.m., *FRUS*, IV, 200; Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, Saigon, 10 August 1966, *FRUS*, IV, 208; and "Interview, Komer, Organization and Management," pp. 36-37; Hunt, pp. 36-37.

32. "Interview, Komer, Organization and Management," pp. 32-33.

33. Memorandum to John Paul Vann, 6 August 1966, with draft 3, 7 August 1966, "Giving a New Thrust to Pacification" attached, John Paul Vann papers, 1966 file, box 1, US Army Military History Institute, Carlisle, Pa.
34. "Interview, Komer, Organization and Management," pp. 33-36; Hunt, pp. 93, 96-97.
35. Memorandum to John Paul Vann; "Interview, Komer, Organization and Management," p. 33.
36. Interview of Robert Komer by Neil Sheehan, 8 April 1975, n.p., Neil Sheehan papers, box 70, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
37. "Interview, Komer, Organization and Management," p. 36.
38. *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39; Hunt, p. 77.
39. "Interview, Komer, Organization and Management," pp. 39-40; and Hunt, pp. 77-78.
40. Memorandum from the President's Special Assistant (Rostow) to President Johnson, Washington, 3 October 1966, 2:35 p.m., *FRUS*, IV, 256; and Memorandum from the Special Assistant for Vietnam Affairs, Central Intelligence Agency (Carver) to Director of Central Intelligence Helms, Washington, 6 October 1966, Subject: McNamara's Pacification Reorganization Proposal Activity, *FRUS*, IV, 263.
41. Memorandum from the President's Special Assistant (Komer) to President Johnson, Washington, 5 October 1966, *FRUS*, IV, 262; Hunt, p. 93.
42. *FRUS*, IV, 262, n. 4.
43. *FRUS*, IV, 263.
44. Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary McNamara, JCSM-672-66, Washington, 14 October 1966, Subject: Actions Recommended for Vietnam, *FRUS*, IV, 269.
45. *FRUS*, IV, 263.
46. Telegram from the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff (Wheeler) to the Commander, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (Westmoreland), Washington, 17 October 1966, 2139Z, *FRUS*, IV, 274.
47. Memorandum from the Under Secretary of State (Katzenbach) to President Johnson, Washington, 15 October 1966, Subject: Administration of Revolutionary Development, *FRUS*, IV, 271.
48. "Interview, Komer, Organization and Management," pp. 40-46; *FRUS*, IV, 274; Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam, Washington, 4 November 1966, 1:20 p.m., *FRUS*, IV, 290.
49. "Interview, Komer, Organization and Management," p. 40; Letter from President Johnson to Vietnam (Lodge), Washington, 16 November 1966, *FRUS*, IV, 310.
50. "Interview, Komer, Organization and Management," pp. 40, 45.
51. Memorandum from Richard Holbrooke of the White House Staff to the President's Special Assistant (Komer), Washington, 1 December 1966, Subject: Vietnam Trip Report, 26 October-18 November 1966, *FRUS*, IV, 321; Memorandum from William Leonhart of the White House Staff to President Johnson, Washington, 30 December 1966, Subject: Visit to Vietnam—December 1966, *FRUS*, IV, 353; Hunt, pp. 82-87.
52. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson*, Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1967 (Washington: GPO, 1968), p. 381.
53. "Interview, Komer, Organization and Management," pp. 52-53.
54. Hunt, pp. 87-88.
55. "Interview, Komer, "Organization and Management," pp. 52-56.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
57. Robert Komer to Anthony James Joes, 5 August 1993, original in the possession of Dr. Joes, Professor of Political Science, St. Joseph's University, Philadelphia, Pa.
58. Hunt, p. 89; Thomas Scoville, *Reorganizing for Pacification Support* (Washington: US Army Center of Military History, 1982), p. 28; General Volney F. Warner, USA Ret., Senior Officer Oral History Program, Project 83-3, interviewed by Colonel Dean M. Owen, 1983, p. 71, Volney Warner papers, US Army Military History Institute, Carlisle, Pa.; (Brigadier General) Robert Montague papers, box 2, Briefing on CORDS, unpublished paper, n.d., US Army Military History Institute, Carlisle, Pa.; William E. Colby with Peter Forbath, *Honorable Men: My Life in the CIA* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), pp. 236-38; George Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1994), pp. 72-73.
59. Interview of Robert Komer by Neil Sheehan, 10 April 1986, n.p., Neil Sheehan papers, box 70, Library of Congress.
60. Hunt, p. 72.
61. Doris Kearns [Goodwin], "Angles of Vision," in *Telling Lives: The Biographer's Art*, ed. Leon Edel et al. (Washington: New Republic Books, 1979), pp. 101-02.
62. Hunt, pp. 275-79; Scoville, pp. 74-83.
63. Scoville, pp. 81-82; Hunt, p. 278.
64. Hunt, p. 279.
65. *Ibid.*
66. Jeffrey Record and W. Andrew Terrill, *Iraq and Vietnam: Differences, Similarities, and Insights* (Carlisle, Pa.: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2004), pp. 55-56.
67. Richard Nixon, *No More Vietnams* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), p. 88.