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Commentary & Reply

Komer, CORDS, and Pacification

To the Editor:

Students of pacification and counterinsurgency should thank Frank L. Jones for a lively examination of the role organizational management plays in such strategies (“Blowtorch: Robert Komer and the Making of Vietnam Pacification Policy,” *Parameters*, Autumn 2005). But his analysis, however interesting, fails to enlighten. As Jones himself concedes at the article’s close, despite the fiery efforts of professionals like Robert Komer, pacification failed in Vietnam. Jones’s gloss on this failure, however, is too brief and too glib to be of much use to the practical decisionmaker. In fact, he misses a golden opportunity to highlight the importance of going beyond issues of organization in crafting a successful pacification policy.

At times, Jones seems to sympathize with his Vietnam-era bureaucratic subjects, who perceived pacification chiefly as an internal problem of management and resource allocation. This view presumed that the United States armed and diplomatic forces could win “hearts and minds” with enough materiel, manpower, fortitude, and unified organizational charts. Perhaps this is why Jones heralds the development of CORDS as an advance, when in fact more perceptive observers—who were responsible for the pacification mission in the field—saw the full militarization of pacification as the beginning of the end in Vietnam.

Colonel William Corson, commander of the Marines’ pacification program, documented the failures of Komer’s “managerial” mindset in his chronicle of Vietnam failure, *The Betrayal*. Corson praised the CORDS director’s efforts but perceived that the new organization was led more by intentions than know-how: “Komer the manager was not Komer the leader Komer made it plain to the CORDS people that they were going to do better and were going to operate as a team, but then he neglected to make clear exactly what they were to do. As a result, CORDS continued to operate inefficient programs in an efficient manner.” Charts and figures could be assembled (or fabricated, as was common practice) to gauge progress in pounds of rice distributed or numbers of hamlets pacified, but these quantitative measures hardly reflected the political and strategic reality on the ground. In fact, despite Jones’s suggestions to the contrary, there is no shortage of documentary and anecdotal evidence that free-flowing CORDS aid lined the pockets of South Vietnamese generals and bureaucrats, deepening the corruption problem, not solving it.

What is worse, in choosing to focus on arbitrary managerial measures of effectiveness, Komer’s bureaucracy paid virtually no attention to the mission, enemy, and terrain that pacification was supposed to deal with. In the best of circumstances, elements such as Colonel Corson’s Marines were permitted to run pacification locally, independently, and somewhat effectively; in the worst, commanders

took their marching orders directly from the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) commander (and, by extension, the CORDS commander), General William Westmoreland, whose lack of zeal for pacification was well-known.

In fact, it never seems to occur to Jones that by inviting all pacification efforts together under the MACV umbrella, Westmoreland and the Army intended to make those programs less effective, not more so. Dr. Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., stops short of arguing this point, but in *The Army and Vietnam* he does note that even after the birth of CORDS, Army brass sought to fight the Vietnam War more conventionally with more regular troops, in line with the Army's traditional doctrine of attrition of enemy forces. Krepinevich details a CIA-led pacification program in 1963 that failed after MACV reassigned the Special Forces soldiers who had been charged with carrying the program out. "The Army," he surmises, "was bent on diverting the Special Forces to more traditional operations than those involved in pacification."

Such evidence reinforces the sense that no matter what resources the military had at its command, its counterinsurgency efforts were halfhearted and misguided: their expertise was in achieving tactical successes, not political ones, and so they attempted to wage what was essentially a political, unconventional war with politically counterproductive, conventional tactics. Military efforts at pacification were the exception that proved this rule.

Frank Jones brings considerable knowledge and personal experience to bear on a discussion of pacification—no idle discussion, given our current counterterrorist and counterinsurgent operations worldwide. Thus he must recognize that the true lesson of Komer's Vietnam odyssey is this: no amount of good intentions or bureaucratic innovations can save a policy that founders on its own doctrinal dogmas.

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The Author Replies:

President Eisenhower once remarked, "Good organization doesn't guarantee success, but bad organization guarantees failure." Robert Komer and his US colleagues were not the only ones who "perceived pacification chiefly as an internal problem of management and resource allocation." Sir Robert Thompson, the noted counterinsurgency authority, underscored the criticality of management in his book *Defeating Communist Insurgency*: "Unless an effective administration is maintained and steadily improved by the recruitment and training of the best young men in the country, national policies become meaningless because, without the functioning of an effective administration, no policies can be carried out."

To call the late William Corson "a more perceptive observer" suggests unfamiliarity with Corson and the context of his book. *The Betrayal* is part personal account, part jeremiad. While it is a fascinating story, Corson's objectivity and reliability as an evaluator of CORDS are questionable. First, Corson had his own agenda. He headed the US Marine Corps' Combined Action Program in Vietnam,

a program that Komer admired but thought was an unrealistic pacification method because of the resources required to run it. Second, Corson's condemnation of CORDS, which he unfairly ties to USAID's shortcomings, focuses primarily on the period when Komer arrives and is trying to establish CORDS, a time of considerable turbulence. Overall, Corson's account lacks emotional and chronological distance to be a solid basis for evaluation. It is for this reason that I relied on the historian Richard Hunt's book, the most comprehensive assessment to date.

It is nonsense to argue that Komer and his colleagues focused on "arbitrary managerial measures of effectiveness" and paid no attention to the "mission, enemy, and terrain." Komer paid considerable attention to local security and attacking the Viet Cong command and control. Further, in reference to rampant corruption, as I noted in my article, this was an issue of considerable concern to Komer. In the first four months of his tenure as deputy for CORDS, he prodded the government of South Vietnam to fire dozens of province and district chiefs for corruption and incompetence. While it is true that Komer and his colleagues made use of metrics, they confronted the very real issue of how to measure success in "a feeling war with no fronts and no rear," as John Steinbeck described the conflict in his dispatches for *Newsday*. Further, CORDS was foremost designed to prompt the Vietnamese to take charge of the pacification, a massive undertaking which remains unappreciated, involving more than 12,000 hamlets.

A closer reading of Andrew Krepinevich's *The Army and Vietnam* and my article is warranted. I never argued that putting the military in charge of pacification would make it more or less effective. Komer made the argument that it would be more effective for the reasons cited in the article. Krepinevich documents the limitations that Westmoreland placed on Komer's plans for pacification. As Krepinevich states, "Although the civilians could not get the Army to modify its approach to the war, they could at least divert some Army resources to pacification and pull some Army officers along in their wake."

Lastly, US pacification efforts cannot be easily dismissed, although Komer admitted that the program was not a resounding success. Others believed it did work. General Bruce Palmer, Jr., in his book *The 25-Year War*, indicated, "By the end of 1970, and certainly by mid-1971, the pacification campaign was well on the way to success." Part of this success is because of the efforts of Robert Komer as policy formulator and deputy for CORDS.

Frank Jones

Commentary & Reply Submissions

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