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THE ARMY'S COUNTERINSURGENCY WAR IN VIETNAM

The American war in Vietnam is one of the most well documented and hotly debated events in the history of the United States. The literature on the war is vast, the historiography strongly contested, the debate never ending. Nancy Tucker argues that Vietnam is "the never-ending war," with the conflict's reverberations being felt long after the end of hostilities.[1]

As John Prados has observed, study of the war has been somewhat atomized, with relatively few grand, overarching works that attempt to tell the story of America's lost war in a single narrative.[2] That atomization diffuses possible "lessons" of the Vietnam War and enables the fashioning of multiple alternative "usable" narratives of the war. In revisionist strands of the literature there is a sense that, if only the particular aspect under discussion had been given more attention, then things might have been different and there might have been a "better war."[3] Indeed, some revisionist scholars argue that there was a better war the United States had in fact won before the vital domino of public opinion gave way.[4] This contention that victory was possible if only something had been done differently has wide repercussions, not only for the historiography of the war but for the lessons that policy makers and strategists draw from it.[5] If the war had been winnable, then arguments about the need to avoid future interventions would lose some of their force, and the Vietnam syndrome would cease to be a key point of concern for policy makers. In short, a "better war" would make military intervention palatable again.

Nowhere is this tendency to offer history as a lesson more prevalent than in the historiography of the US counterinsurgency effort in Vietnam. Gary Hess has divided those who argue that the United States could have prevailed in Vietnam into two groups. There are the "Clausewitzians,"[6] who contend that a less restrained policy, such as increased bombing of North Vietnam or the invasion of Laos, Cambodia, or even North Vietnam, could have led to victory, and there are the "hearts and minders," who believe that better execution of counterinsurgency in South Vietnam could have won the war.[7] The question of whether a better counterinsurgency campaign was possible is at the heart of the tension between those who see Vietnam as "the unwinnable war" and those who perceive a "better war." That tension was a point of conflict throughout the post-Vietnam era, and an improved understanding of the Army's counterinsurgency war in Vietnam can help us better understand the context in which the various factions within the Army constructed their lessons of Vietnam.

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE ARMY'S COUNTERINSURGENCY WAR IN VIETNAM

The "hearts and minds" revisionist critique of the war argues that had the Army embraced counterinsurgency theory more fully, then a different result would have been possible. Proponents of this view, such as Larry Cable, Guenter Lewy, Andrew Krepinevich, and John Nagl, argue that the Army simply didn't understand counterinsurgency and adhered to an "army concept" and doctrine centered on air mobility and massive use of firepower. General William Westmoreland pursued a costly strategy of attrition and ignored the promises of pacification. For these critics, Westmoreland's opposition to the Marine Corps Combined Action Program, which used joint American-Vietnamese platoons to provide long-term security for hamlets, was a glaring missed opportunity. His focus on destroying the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and National Liberation Front (NLF) "main force" units in the unpopulated highlands rather than securing the Vietnamese population betrayed an adherence to an Army strategic culture that was deeply unsuited to the war in Vietnam.

Westmoreland also has his defenders. Dale Andrade, Andrew Birtle, John M. Carland, and Graham Cosmas have all argued that the "hearts and minds" school is both overly sanguine about the chances of success for a strategy that focused on securing the population of South Vietnam and underplays the sophistication of Westmoreland's understanding of the situation in Vietnam. They frequently cite Westmoreland's description in his memoirs of a "two-handed" strategy, where one (American) hand would keep the PAVN main force units at bay while the other (South Vietnamese) hand would pacify the countryside and secure the rural population from the NLF threat. Further, they argue that the number of American troops needed to pacify South Vietnam would have dwarfed even the 536,000 that eventually deployed there. In those circumstances, Westmoreland was correct to use US forces to "stem the tide" and let the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) focus on pacification.

The most comprehensive critique of "hearts and minds" revisionism has not come from those who focus on issues of strategy but rather those who study the *implementation* of pacification at the tactical level. Province-level studies, such as those by David Elliott, Jeffrey Race, James Trullinger, and Eric Bergerud, have been particularly effective in illustrating just how deep the problems with pacification efforts were. These studies all show a resilient NLF, an ineffectual and illegitimate South Vietnamese government, and a US military that was unable to effect change, despite concerted attempts to carry out pacification. Bergerud describes how the 25th Infantry Division in Hau Nghia province employed many of the principles of classic counterinsurgency doctrine yet was unable to make any inroads into the NLF's control of the province. When reading

province-level analyses, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the NLF was far more deeply embedded into rural South Vietnamese society than the South Vietnamese government was and that US efforts at pacification were bound to fail.

A key point of contention between the two schools is the extent to which US pacification efforts improved as the war wore on. Central to this is the status of an internal Army report: Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam (or PROVN). PROVN was a 1966 study commissioned by Army Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson to reappraise the situation in Vietnam. PROVN identified deep, structural problems with the pacification effort and argued that "the critical actions are those that occur at the village, district and provincial levels. This is where the war must be fought; this is where that war and the object which lies beyond it must be won."[8] Some "hearts and minds" scholars, such as John Nagl and Andrew Krepinevich, argue that PROVN represented both a comprehensive critique of Westmoreland's strategy and a viable counterinsurgency strategy that could have won the war.[9] More recent scholarship by Dale Andrade and Andrew Birtle has pointed out that while PROVN was critical of some aspects of the war and argued that the United States should reorganize its pacification efforts and push harder for Government of Vietnam (GVN) reform, it also firmly endorsed Westmoreland's strategy of attrition and the US forces' focus on the main unit war in the highlands.[10] According to Birtle and Andrade, while the document criticized elements of US performance, it was nowhere near the transformative, revolutionary document that "better war" advocates claimed. In fact it endorsed the central points of Westmoreland's approach and supported his conventional campaign.

After PROVN, there was a reorganization of the pacification effort and a new organization, Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (or CORDS), that placed all civilian and military pacification activities under a civilian—Robert W. Komer—and then made the head of CORDS deputy commander of MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam). This new agency would centrally plan all pacification activities and replace the chaos of multiple programs from multiple agencies. Further, in 1967, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), together with Army Special Forces and the South Vietnamese government, launched the Phoenix Program, a controversial operation to target the "Viet Cong infrastructure," the political and support apparatus of the NLF in the villages, and to disrupt it by killing or capturing NLF cadre. These initiatives, together with the replacement of Westmoreland with General Creighton Abrams, were, some revisionists claim, a sign of long-overdue progress in the war. As Lloyd Gardner has noted, the "hearts and minds" revisionists claim that "when General Westmoreland was replaced, a better war was fought and the light at the end of the tunnel [was] relit." It is this alleged rekindling of the

"light at the end of the tunnel" that we must concern ourselves with, for although the orthodox historiography has strongly criticized any contention that the war was winnable, much of that criticism revolves around the strategic choices that Westmoreland faced or the viability of the PROVN report. The contention that General Abrams fought a "better war," one primarily made by Lewis Sorley, garnered very favorable coverage at times in the postwar era, and the claim deserves closer examination.

THE BETTER WAR? ABRAMS'S STRATEGY

Abrams took over as commander, US Military Assistance Command Vietnam, in June 1968. Abrams, with his often-rumpled appearance, ever-present cigar, and abrupt manner, was a stark contrast to his predecessor, General William Westmoreland, the one-time superintendent of West Point. He was also more popular among journalists, so much so that the *New York Times* ran an article declaring that "General Abrams deserves a better war." It is from this article that the "better war" narrative derives its name. Abrams, so the narrative goes, was responsible for a dramatic turnaround in US fortunes by finally implementing a strategy that emphasized securing the population of South Vietnam from attack rather than chasing after the wraithlike North Vietnamese Army in the unpopulated highland jungles near the Cambodian border. This school of thought, which strongly challenges the orthodox view of Vietnam as an unmitigated failure, takes advantage of the fact that the Vietnam historiography has overwhelmingly focused on the pre-1968 era, before Abrams took over.[11] This "better war" narrative was at the core of the version of "Vietnam" advanced by counterinsurgency advocates in the wake of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and is therefore central to postwar contentions over the lessons.

Certainly, Abrams made some significant changes on taking command. Rather than pursue Westmoreland's strategy of attrition, he preferred to emphasize his "One War" concept—that there was not one war against enemy main forces units, one war to pacify the countryside, and one war in the air against North Vietnam, but that all these operations were deeply intertwined and would be treated as such in future. Abrams explained,

> We preach it as "one war," just one war . . . we mean the province chief and the district chief, the RF [Regional Forces] and the PF [Popular Forces] and the Provincial Reconnaissance Units and the Police. Everybody in here has got to work together . . . the Americans shouldn't do anything, really, in the way of operating that the district advisor isn't in on, doesn't know about . . . this is really a complex environment to work in.[12]

The three-month-long Accelerated Pacification Campaign, launched in November 1968, was the epitome of this "one war" concept. Known to the US military as the APC, its objective was to

reestablish the South Vietnamese government's (or GVN) presence in the countryside in the wake of the Tet Offensive through a three-month special effort. Conceptually, there was little new to the APC. It employed the same pacification tools as previous campaigns: emphasis on the use of Regional Forces and Popular Forces (RF/PF) to secure hamlets, the establishment of a part-time militia (the People's Self-Defense Force/PSDF) to provide extra personnel, the *Chieu Hoi* (or Open Arms) program for encouraging NLF desertions, and the nascent *Phuong Hoang*/Phoenix program for targeting the NLF infrastructure (political cadres and supporters) in the hamlets.[13] What was new was the firm support of the US Army in executing it. Abrams was not only instrumental in securing Vietnamese backing of the plan, but he also directed that population security be the primary operational objective for US and Vietnamese forces over the three months of the campaign.

Territorial security was the centerpiece of the APC, and it is worth noting, as some critics do,[14] the emphasis on the coercive elements of counterinsurgency, rather than the "hearts and minds" aspects of doctrine that had been emphasized by counterinsurgency advocates earlier in the 1960s. A briefer made the point explicit when he noted, "There's no question that pacification is either 90 percent or 10 percent security, depending on which expert you talk to. But there isn't any expert in the world that will doubt that it's the first 10 percent or the first 90 percent. You just can't conduct pacification in the face of an NVA [North Vietnamese Army] division."[15] Without security, a necessary but not sufficient condition, development work and good governance programs would be impossible. As Robert Komer explained, the objective was to quickly spread a thin "security blanket" over the countryside, which he argued would "achieve greater results more quickly by seeking to expand a diluted form of government control while destroying enemy forces and infrastructure than by seeking a high degree of security and efficient administration." The focus therefore would not be on improving GVN governance but on gaining as much territory as possible in advance of any possible cease-fire.

On its own terms, the APC was a major success. US and RVNAF forces moved into and secured over a thousand hamlets, the number of *Hoi Chanh* (NLF deserters under the *Chieu Hoi* program) greatly exceeded the plan's goal, and the number of hamlets rated "secure" under the Hamlet Evaluation Survey (HES)[16] jumped from 70 percent to 86 percent between November 1968 and June 1969.[17] The APC set the pattern for future operations: The GVN's Central Pacification and Development Council developed a comprehensive and ambitious Pacification and Development Plan for 1969 while Abrams—although never explicitly disavowing Westmoreland's attrition strategy—placed heavy emphasis on population security in his 1969 Combined Campaign

Plan.[18] Not only did the planning follow the pattern of the APC, but so did the results, at least for a time: The period from 1969 through 1971 marked the high point of GVN control over the countryside, with HES indications showing almost total control over the countryside by mid-1971.[19]

The statistics that measured control were not uncontroversial. Richard Hunt notes the problems that creep in when such data become an end in themselves: "Rather than merely being a means to identify trends and collect uniform data on the countryside, HES became, in the absence of any other clear and universally accepted standard, one of the principal yardsticks of progress and inferentially a measure of individual performance."[20] If this happened, then HES figures were just as liable to be inflated as the notorious "body count" was earlier in the war. William Colby—head of the pacification effort—though generally supportive of HES as an indicator of trends, offered the important qualifier: "Some of the statistics, though, we thought were fairly soft, to put it mildly."[21] As noted in a July 1969 talk by Brian Jenkins at the RAND Corporation, the focus on statistics, accurate or otherwise, was often counterproductive:

> Frequently, increases in the amount of our own military efforts are measured and this is called progress. On this basis, if twice as many bombs per month are dropped in 1969 as were dropped per month in 1967, we are doing better. The same with leaflets, battalion days of operations, and so on. If we ignore the scores and statistics, as the enemy seems to have done, then we are left with a different question: *what is different about Vietnam today from two or three years ago and what is still the same?* I have had to ask myself that question frequently. What impresses me is the remarkable degree to which things remain the same [emphasis in the original].[22]

By June 1969, there were in fact indications that the impressive results of the Accelerated Pacification Campaign were more ephemeral than permanent. Craig Johnstone, chief of CORDS's Pacification Studies Group, reported that "on the balance the efforts at improving territorial security received a great stimulus during the Accelerated Pacification Campaign but have slowed perceptibly as a result of troop shortages and increased enemy terrorist activity." More ominously, Johnstone also argued that "little qualitative improvements in RF/PF forces or in ARVN units in their role of providing a security shield have been noted" and that "practical control of either PF or RD cadre is still mythical."[23] Given that the Accelerated Pacification Campaign was designed to provide breathing space for reform of the GVN and ARVN, such inertia was worrying. Johnstone's concerns were echoed a year later by General Arthur S. Collins, commander of I Field Force Vietnam. In a memorandum written after inspecting his area of operations, Collins observed:

> It is a different war than when I was here in 1966–67, particularly in II Corps. At that time we were constantly running into strong NVA and VC [Vietcong] units, well equipped, well armed, well organized and always from

> regimental to division strength. This no longer pertains, and we do not meet the main enemy units. . . . At the same time, and spotted like measles throughout the country, you consistently find that the VC come right into the village and are not caught or bothered . . . This indicates either very good intelligence from the VCI [Vietcong Infrastructure] structure in the villages or some sort of an accommodation . . . I sometimes get the feeling that the government forces do not have the will to win, and in the long run that may decide the issue.[24]

This lack of main force units does much to explain the ability of Abrams to break his forces into small pieces and to focus so much on population security, but the continued health of the guerrilla pockets "spotted like measles throughout the country" indicates the shallowness of GVN control. The NLF's July 1969 strategy document, COSVN [Central Office for South Vietnam] Resolution no. 9, reflected this change in the nature of the war by calling for a shift from large-scale attacks to protracted guerrilla action in anticipation of US withdrawal.

Even so, the Accelerated Pacification Campaign and the NLF strategy of protracted warfare did not mean that Abrams stopped focusing on those PAVN and NLF main force units that were operating in South Vietnam. As Graham Cosmas notes, as late as 1971 "in all four corps areas, U. S. and South Vietnamese units devoted much effort to what formerly were called search-and-destroy missions." This included the large-scale 1970 incursion into Cambodia and the bloody "main force" battles in the A Shau Valley (most infamously at "Hamburger Hill"). Indeed, analysis by Andrew Birtle has shown that, in quantitative terms, Abrams's approach to the war, even during the Accelerated Pacification Campaign, did not differ significantly from that of Westmoreland.[25] The number of battalion days spent on large-unit operations actually increased, and spending priorities, which emphasized the main force war over security and development, remained the same.

The literature that directly challenges the "better war" thesis makes two pertinent claims: that pacification, even when it was apparently successful, was a shallow, temporary measure; and that any difference between Abrams and Westmoreland was one of emphasis rather than substance. By considering the experiences of two units during and after the Accelerated Pacification Campaign, we can gain further understanding of these key points. The two units, the 9th Infantry Division operating in the Mekong Delta and the 173rd Airborne Brigade in Binh Dinh province, took very different approaches to pacification, but the experiences of both strongly validate the central criticisms of the "better war" thesis.

OPERATION SPEEDY EXPRESS AND FIREPOWER IN ABRAMS'S WAR

In the same speech in which Brian Jenkins worried about things remaining the same in Vietnam, he argued that "[General Abrams] has only partly succeeded in making his own ideas prevail over

the traditional doctrine."[26] Given the practices of some American units, Jenkins's concerns would appear well founded. Perhaps the most egregious example of firepower-oriented pacification tactics under Abrams was Operation Speedy Express, launched by the 9th Infantry Division in the Mekong Delta during the first half of 1969. Based on tactics that entailed the use of helicopters for reconnaissance before rapidly piling available troops and firepower onto enemy targets, the operation seemed as heavily driven by the old "body count" criteria as by population security and drew opprobrium from John Paul Vann, senior pacification advisor in the Delta and key figure in the American war effort.[27] In 1972, Kevin Buckley of *Newsweek* reported that the 9th Division claimed 10,899 "enemy" dead while recovering only 748 weapons in that time. One estimate put the amount of civilian dead during this effort to pacify Kien Hoa province at 5,000, a figure that would be unsurprising given that there were 3,381 tactical air strikes carried out during Speedy Express.[28] Julian J. Ewell, former commander of 9th and later a commander of II Field Force Vietnam, explained his rule:

> Military operations would be given first priority in every case. That doesn't mean you wouldn't do pacification, but this gets at what you might call winning the hearts and minds of the people. I'm all for that. It's a nice concept, but in fighting the Viet Cong and NVA, if you didn't break their military machine you might as well forget winning the hearts and minds of the people.[29]

Ewell was quite proud of his unit's record, recalling, "I think the last month I had the Division—either March or April 1969—we killed something like 2,300 VC and NVA and captured maybe five, ten or fifteen . . . As a result, the skill level just kept going up and up and up. Very successful. In fact, so successful that many people in Vietnam thought we were cheating or something. They didn't believe the results."[30] What the 9th Infantry Division was practicing was the "body count" as applied to pacification. Lt. Gen. Orwin C. Talbott—who had tried Lt. William Calley for the My Lai massacre—complained that "the 9th Division insisted on a body count. They didn't care what body. I heard about Americal and 9th Division all the time. The 9th was worse, all on the body count basis."[31] Similarly, according to Nick Turse, a 1972 inspector general's report on Speedy Express found:

> While there appears to be no means of determining the precise number of civilian casualties incurred by US forces during Operation Speedy Express, it would appear that the extent of these casualties was in fact substantial, and that a fairly solid case can be constructed to show that civilian casualties may have amounted to several thousand (between 5,000 and 7,000).[32]

Ewell, while denying that he was overly focused on the body count, wrote a postwar study on the use of such metrics in combat and concluded that an approach that attempted to maximize the

number of enemy dead "did not lead to a brutalizing of the conflict. In fact, the reverse was true." According to Ewell, "It resulted in fewer friendly casualties in both killed and wounded. More importantly, pacification progressed more rapidly. Thus we see a system which entailed maximum force and higher enemy casualties initially, but, in the long run, wound the war down and facilitated all the developments necessary to defeat the enemy and protect the people."[33]

Such a continuing emphasis on the 'body count' runs completely against the grain of the narrative advanced in the "better war" thesis and illustrated the Army's continuing reluctance to embrace counterinsurgency. On taking command, Abrams had introduced more restrictive rules of engagement; had ordered a drastic reduction of artillery ammunition expenditure, effectively banning speculative "harassment and interdiction fire"; and was quick to praise units that emphasized small unit, intelligence-led operations.[34] Yet Abrams strongly praised Ewell and the 9th Division, telling assembled 9th Division troops at a change of command ceremony in April 1969, "The performance of this Division has been magnificent and I would say that in the last three months, it's an unparalleled and unequaled performance." Abrams singled out Ewell as someone who in "a little more than a year has proven to be a brilliant and sensitive commander. His tactical concepts have been characterized by imagination, sensitivity to the kind of situation that you all are in, and he plays hard."[35]

Abrams's praise of Ewell at the height of Operation Speedy Express indicates a commander who had not ruled out the heavy use of force in the pursuit of pacification. Certainly, he was not averse to massing firepower when he felt it was called for: Abrams considered the B-52 "Arc Light" tactical strikes his strategic reserve and one of his greatest assets[36] and stated, "If he [the American soldier] hasn't got enough stuff there, you've got to give it to him. You've got to bring in air there . . . he expects you to do certain things. And one of them is that when he's getting shot at, by god you'll bring everything to bear."[37] Bringing everything to bear was certainly a skill US force in Vietnam had perfected by 1968–1969. A postwar study on Army tactics noted just how firepower heavy these operations were:

> Attacks were usually conducted by fire rather than by ground assault. Under normal circumstances, an infantry assault was avoided or it was delayed until after the enemy had been virtually destroyed by supporting fires. The high density of automatic weapons among the enemy caused high loss rates in assaulting and exposed allied troops. The function of ground forces (especially the infantry) thus became the "finding" and "fixing" of the enemy, but the "fighting" and "finishing" were most often accomplished by massive artillery and air firepower . . . These "pile on" tactics represented a new high in the US Army's emphasis on firepower and enemy attrition.[38]

This devastating use of firepower led some critics, such as the historian David Elliott, to charge that the increased GVN control of the countryside was not due to any great American acumen at counterinsurgency but could be credited to this massive firepower causing equally massive rural depopulation and a move by refugees into "secure" GVN areas. Certainly, some commanders, such as Ewell, were more impressed by the coercive aspects of counterinsurgency than by any ideas about civic action or good governance.[39] Referring to acts of pilfering from an oil pipeline, he advocated a harsh line:

> You can get a sapper unit mining the road, and you kill two or three and they'll knock it off. It may be that a month later they'll come back. These people can count. And, boy when you line them up [bodies] and they count one, two, three, four, their enthusiasm is highly reduced. That's the way we opened up Highway 4—just killing them. It doesn't take many.[40]

Operation Speedy Express was the American way of war carried out to its logical extreme. What makes its indiscriminate use of firepower and focus on the body count even more surprising was that the operation was not supposed to focus conventional warfare but on pacification and population security.

THE 173RD AIRBORNE BRIGADE AND OPERATION WASHINGTON GREEN, 1969

In contrast to the 9th Infantry Division, some units *were* conducting pacification operations that mirrored classic counterinsurgency doctrine. Some, like the 199th Separate Light Infantry Brigade, were effectively emulating the US Marine Corps Combined Action Program, where units broke down into platoons that mentored and collaborated with local militia forces, living and fighting alongside them in the hamlets. On a larger scale, as part of Vietnamization, advisory efforts became much more central to the mission of US combat forces. A classic example of how these operations could be conducted was Operation Washington Green, carried out by the 173rd Airborne Brigade. Their commander, Brigadier General John W. Barnes, outlined his objectives thus:

> No longer would we be chasing and killing the VC/NVA in the unpopulated jungle and mountainous areas. Even more important, body count would no longer be the criteria for success. Instead, we henceforth would be securing the people and their homes and farms. Our aim would be to deny the VC their support from their hamlets, without which they could not survive.[41]

To this end, his brigade was completely integrated with local RF/PF and became, in the words of its commander "in effect . . . a big mobile advisory team." According to Barnes, the brigade's efforts at securing the population were successful due to "the absence of threat by large, well-

trained, well-equipped NVA forces" and the "integrated US/GVN effort at district, village and hamlet level, in response to a single plan—the District Pacification Plan." Barnes also pointed to the "increased effectiveness of RF/PF through constant daily association with similar US elements" and their success in "convincing the people that security forces are there to stay for as long as the job takes."[42] The CORDS Pacification Studies Group approvingly noted that the "173rd AB has boldly but sensibly deployed their forces in small units (sometimes as small as squads)," and that (in stark contrast to the 9th Infantry Division) the "number of kills and number of operations are not adequate parameters of progress."[43] HES data during their deployment showed marked improvement, with GVN control of hamlets increasing from 67 percent to 86 percent and NLF-controlled hamlets correspondingly decreasing from 18 percent to 0 percent between March and October 1969.[44] So successful did the Nixon administration consider the operation that they adopted Barnes as an unofficial spokesperson for Vietnamization (see the following discussion); at the urging of Secretary of Defense Melvyn Laird he briefed the White House press corps on October 11, 1969, before being sent on the road with his briefing.[45] Therefore, it would seem that Washington Green represented something of a model for both Vietnamization and pacification.

Despite this success, the brigade's tactics did not meet with universal approval. Major General Charles P. Brown, commander of I Field Force Vietnam and Barnes's immediate superior, strongly disapproved of their methods. In his oral history, he recounted:

> When I got there . . . the 173rd Airborne Brigade, which had a good reputation and had done well earlier, had been given the job of holding hands with the regional forces along the coast. Frankly, the unit had become basically ineffective, as a fighting organization . . . Later, I made the 173rd go back to work and put them back into the field operationally. They had gotten used to sitting on their ass holding hands with RF'ers and the PF'ers; it was damn hard to get them aggressive again.[46]

Brown's attitude illustrates the fundamental cultural difficulty in getting a force as technology- and firepower-intensive as the US Army in adapting to the different requirements of a counterinsurgency war. While Barnes and Laird saw Washington Green as a model for the future, Brown—the Army's senior commander in the area—essentially saw the 173rd Airborne as a failed unit. Such disagreements were indicative of the way in which contrasting memories of the war would lead to different factions constructing competing lessons of Vietnam.

While Brown's disapproval of the 173rd Airborne's tactics was a harbinger of the future of counterinsurgency in the US Army in the post-Vietnam era, it would also appear that some of the 173rd Airborne's own troopers had similar (if more serious) difficulties in adapting to the demands

of counterinsurgency. A CORDS field evaluator reported incidences of troopers throwing rocks from their trucks onto Vietnamese Lambrettas, "taxation" by American troops guarding bridges, and, more seriously, allegations that US troops were killing animals and people indiscriminately. The evaluator, John S. Figueira, was unable to find any firm evidence for this but heard from villagers that at least four civilians had been shot and killed by US troops on patrol or in firebases.[47] The field evaluator's description of abuses was not an isolated report; Samuel Popkins, a social scientist and counterinsurgency theorist, visited Binh Dinh province in 1969, and he reported that "he witnessed incidents where soldiers threw sandbags from moving trucks onto passing Lambrettas and other taxi-like vehicles. He reported cases where soldiers tossed candy to children and then followed with a smoke grenade."[48] Such abuses evidently had a negative effect on the 173rd Airborne's operations. Reports from CORDS field evaluators were similarly pessimistic about Vietnamese public opinion:

> Despite generally well-thought-of friendly security forces, enemy cadre were reported regularly entering parts of highly "secured" villages to conduct extended propaganda and supply missions. Except for an instance in which enemy forces deliberately took foodstuffs and livestock from a village, village opinion seemed most frequently to be weighted against friendly forces.[49]

This pessimism was well founded, as the 173rd Airborne's withdrawal coincided with a decline in HES statistics, an increase in terrorist incidents in Binh Dinh, and a decline in the performance of GVN forces. While the 173rd Airborne's partnering with local force increased RVNAF performance in the short run, it also led to dependency and, once American fire support and logistics were withdrawn, the Vietnamese units became increasingly ineffectual. While the APC (and Washington Green) succeeded in seizing and securing vast amounts of the South Vietnamese countryside, the GVN was left with huge new areas to administer, when they had not been doing a particularly good job of administering the areas that were *already* under their control. Kevin Boylan's study of the operation noted that, without a commensurate increase in resources, "there were simply not nearly enough trained and qualified village, hamlet, and higher-echelon officials, health care providers, teachers, and police to keep up with the extremely rapid pace of expansion."[50]

Washington Green is an interesting example of both the potential and limits of counterinsurgency in Vietnam, as it demonstrated that American units *could* be trained to conduct counterinsurgency operations that focused on population security; it was a far more effective operation than the firepower-intensive, body count–focused Operation Speedy Express. And yet, despite being well resourced, well led, and well executed, it ultimately did not succeed, as the old

problem of how to get the GVN to govern effectively and to take over the burden of combat was a limitation that the Army never overcame. Such an outcome demonstrates not only the extraordinarily difficult nature of the task the United States had set for itself in Vietnam but also the limitations of even the best counterinsurgency plans when dealing with a foreign population. The way the Nixon administration—which had taken office in January 1969, after Abrams's launch of the Accelerated Pacification Campaign but before Speedy Express and Washington Green—understood that these limitations would do much to shape the post-Vietnam fortunes of counterinsurgency.

THE NIXON ADMINISTRATION AND COUNTERINSURGENCY

The limitations of Operation Washington Green were apparent not only in Binh Dinh province but also in Washington, D.C. Binh Dinh had been selected for special study as part of a National Security Council effort to take a fresh look at pacification in the Vietnamese countryside. A new ad hoc group formed by National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger—the Vietnam Special Studies Group, or VSSG—carried out the study. The VSSG stemmed from Kissinger's skepticism about the analysis coming out of MACV headquarters in Saigon. In his September 5, 1969, memorandum to President Nixon recommending that the group be formed, he wrote, "Looking back on our experience over the last few years, it is remarkable how frequently officials have let their preconceptions about Vietnam lead them astray even though a careful and objective analysis of readily available facts would have told them differently."[51] The VSSG's study on pacification, "The Situation in the Countryside," bore that skepticism out. While the report highly praised the 173rd Airborne's operations in Binh Dinh, crediting them with "spectacular security and control gains,"[52] it also recognized the fleeting nature of this control and just how reliant it was on US support, arguing that "when the shield is removed and enemy main forces are allowed to operate in populated areas . . . GVN control is erased."[53] Even more ominously, there was little evidence that South Vietnamese forces were ready to take on the challenge of providing security: "From the Allied point of view, progress in achieving security gains is attributable primarily to the presence of U.S. and Korean forces; the role of ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] in improving security is less clear."[54]

Interestingly, the VSSG study attributed much of the pacification progress to *conventional* operations, not sophisticated counterinsurgency techniques, another incidence of the way in which studies of the war—even contemporary ones—could complicate the transmission of counterinsurgency lessons. If the 173rd Airborne received praise, so too did the 9th Infantry

Division and Operation Speedy Express. According to the "Situation in the Countryside" report, security in Dinh Tuong rapidly improved once US forces arrived: "Using fast-paced, sophisticated air-mobile tactics, it [a brigade of the 9th Infantry Division] was able to inflict severe casualties on four of the seven VC main force battalions, particularly in June and July." More broadly, the study also argued that many of the gains in pacification came from progress in the main force war, contending, "It was the vigorous offensive activity of US forces more than ARVN forces which gave the Allies the upper hand in the main force war during 1968."[55] The VSSG study, then, while pessimistic about the prospects of Vietnamization, did not see a redoubled counterinsurgency effort as an adequate solution to the problem.

The study was remarkably clear on the extent of the problem and much more pessimistic than MACV estimates, claiming that the "GVN now controls some six million rural inhabitants; but there are still five million rural inhabitants whom it does not control and who are thus subject to some degree of enemy influence."[56] This finding was an affirmation of Kissinger's skepticism of the figures coming out of Saigon, particularly the HES data. Kissinger had noted that when he had visited Vietnam and questioned those entrusted with gathering HES data and had "asked these people their criteria for judgment of village security, their answers ranged from the highly sophisticated to the appallingly crude."[57] This mistrust of the HES figures was rooted in the Nixon administration's deeper uncertainty in the prospects for success in Vietnam and indeed its ambivalence toward counterinsurgency in general. One of Nixon's first acts in office was the drafting of a National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM 1) on the situation in Vietnam.[58] Opinions were sought from MACV, the American Embassy in Saigon, CINCPAC (the Commander in Chief, Pacific Command), the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the State Department, the CIA, and the Office of the Secretary for Defense (OSD). The replies on pacification showed two divergent views of its success. The military and the American Embassy in Saigon were quite optimistic about the situation, arguing that "at the present time, the security situation is better than any time during period in question, i.e., 1961–1968." The civilians at OSD and the State Department were far less sanguine, arguing that at least 50 percent of the Vietnamese population was subject to some NLF influence or control.[59] This standpoint is perhaps best illustrated by the contents of a Special National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) of January 16, 1969 on the pacification effort:

> Thus far the GVN's principal success has been in expanding its presence into the countryside. Providing permanent security for these gains has been more difficult . . . A large part of the countryside is still contested and subject to the continuing control of neither side. As for gaining the allegiance of the people, this is almost

> impossible to measure . . . Saigon now seems finally to have accepted the need for a vigorous pacification effort. However, progress may still be hampered by the political situation in Saigon, continuing inefficiency, corruption, and the parochial concerns of the GVN.[60]

Even the recommendations of optimists about US prospects in the war served, if unintentionally, to underline just how big a challenge counterinsurgency in Vietnam was. Robert Thompson, one of the classic theorists of counterinsurgency, who had some record of success in Malaya and rather less with the Diem regime in the early 1960s, had been strongly critical of the American conduct of the war up to 1968.[61] However, having been sent by Nixon to examine the situation in Vietnam in 1970, 1971, and 1972, Thompson came back with unfailingly glowing reports of the prospects for pacification, a sign that Abrams was at least conforming to classical counterinsurgency theory in his strategy, even if some of his subordinates were not.[62] However, amid this cheeriness and optimism, Thompson noted that, although the situation was under control, he saw the war continuing for another twenty-five years, albeit at a lower intensity than in 1965 through 1968.[63] According to Thompson, South Vietnam would manage to "win" sometime around the mid-1990s. Such an assessment, though completely at odds with the goals of the Nixon administration and the strategic climate in which the war was being conducted,[64] was probably a relatively accurate best-case scenario, given the history of counterinsurgency campaigns being long, tedious, and indecisive. Given such a perspective from an avowed optimist on the war, it is easy to see why the Nixon administration was less than wholehearted about the concept of counterinsurgency, something that complicated the postwar future of the doctrine.

A persistently pessimistic streak ran through the Nixon administration's prognoses of the condition of pacification in Vietnam, and there was little belief at high levels that South Vietnamese control of the countryside was durable, either under US auspices or following withdrawal. Reporting to President Nixon after a visit to Saigon, Secretary of Defense Melvyn Laird noted that he had informed US military leaders:

> . . . that the American people expect the new Administration to bring the war to a satisfactory conclusion. The people will not be satisfied with less. A satisfactory conclusion, I emphasized, means to most Americans the eventual disengagement of American men from combat . . . The presentation given to me by the MACV staff was based on the premise that no reduction in US personnel would be possible in the absence of total withdrawal of South [sic: North?] Vietnamese troops. I do not believe that our national interests, in the light of our military commitments worldwide, permit us to indulge in this assumption. Nor do I feel that true pacification and GVN control over its own population can ever be achieved while our own forces continue such a pervasive presence in South Vietnam.[65]

Success, then, was not military victory but the disengagement of US troops from combat. Abrams was to conduct pacification as a means to help extract his troops rather than win the war in any conventional sense. Nixon, in a remarkable 1969 memorandum to Kissinger, wrote, "In reading Abrams' analysis of the military situation in South Vietnam I get the rather uneasy impression that the military are still thinking in terms of a long war and eventual military solution. I also have the impression that deep down they realize the war can't be won militarily, even over the long haul."[66] This memorandum is instructive not only in the context of Vietnam but also in the wider context of the Nixon administration's view of counterinsurgency. It seems that Nixon viewed the Army's efforts in Vietnam as doomed to failure. Nixon also worried that the Army lacked imagination and was constrained by conventional thinking; in a note scribbled to himself during a National Security Council (NSC) meeting, he mused on the nature of the war and the inability of senior commanders to adapt to it—"Lincoln appointed Grant and Sherman (in early 40's). We need a man of this war—(Abrams and Westmoreland = WWII)."[67] In an even more remarkable 1972 memorandum to Kissinger and Alexander Haig, Nixon voiced his deep dissatisfaction with how the military had conducted the war:

> I do not pretend to have any knowledge or experience whatever in military matters. But I do know that military men are generally noted for the courage and loyalty of their character and notorious for the plodding mediocrity of their strategy and tactics. Particularly where American military men are concerned, all they seem obsessed with is superior numbers (with even quality a secondary consideration) and with doing things the way they have been taught to do them in the book . . . our military leadership [in Vietnam] has been a sad chapter in the proud military history of this country . . . during the past three and a half years when we have begged them to come up with new initiatives, they have dragged their feet or even openly blocked them.[68]

While this may sound similar to the arguments of counterinsurgency advocates like Andrew Krepinevich and John Nagl, the main thrust of Nixon's memorandum was an inquiry as to whether a massed tank attack could turn the war's fortunes around. The idea that Nixon's dissatisfaction with the military's performance in Vietnam reflected passion on his part for counterinsurgency can be safely discounted.

It is not surprising that it was Nixon who ended presidential interest in counterinsurgency, given the persistent doubt expressed by various reports on pacification, the unrealistically lengthy paths to victory sketched out by counterinsurgency advocates such as Robert Thompson, and his own evident disbelief in the prospects for military victory and dissatisfaction with the way the Army fought the war in Vietnam. If President Kennedy opened what Douglas Blaufarb called the "counterinsurgency era"[69] with his speech about "a new kind of war" to the cadets at West Point

on June 6, 1962, then Nixon surely ended it with his July 25, 1969, remarks at Guam, where he declared that:

> As problems of internal security are concerned, as far as the problem of military defense, except for the threat of a major power involving nuclear weapons, that the United States is going to encourage and has a right to expect that this problem will be increasingly handled by, and the responsibility for it taken by, the Asian nations themselves.[70]

With this statement Nixon effectively foreswore direct US involvement in future counterinsurgency campaigns and enunciated what became known as the Nixon Doctrine. In the context of a failed counterinsurgency campaign in Vietnam, the decision was an understandable one.

CONCLUSION

Much of the debate between the orthodox and revisionist schools on the Vietnam War centers on the question of whether the war could have been won. A subset of that debate is the dispute between orthodox scholars who maintain the counterinsurgency war was unwinnable and revisionists who claim that if the US Army had better understood how to prosecute a counterinsurgency campaign, then victory would have been within reach. This chapter has argued that orthodox scholarship is correct: The war *was* unwinnable, but this chapter also recognizes a key insight of the "hearts and minds" revisionist school—that the Army could have done a much better job at conducting the counterinsurgency war. But even where the Army applied classic counterinsurgency techniques, such as Operation Washington Green, they still lacked success, as the problem of what would happen when American troops left was unresolved.

Given the strategic choices available to Generals Westmoreland and Abrams, it is difficult to see what action they could have taken that would have led to success. The enemy was too well supported, the South Vietnamese government too weak and corrupt, and US forces were too ill adapted for the war they fought. Those who argue that General Abrams turned a failing war around overlook both the similarities between his campaigns and those of Westmoreland and the limitations he faced in prosecuting his "better war." Westmoreland was not as ignorant of counterinsurgency or the importance of pacification as critics have argued, nor was Abrams as strong an advocate of counterinsurgency as some have contended.

The successes and failures of the Accelerated Pacification Campaign showed that many of the fundamental problems of counterinsurgency, apparent since the Kennedy administration, had not

been resolved. Abrams, in a conversation with General Cao Van Vien, chairman of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff, remarked on the problems soldiers had in understanding these difficulties:

> It doesn't get any easier. It just gets kind of different. And here's this—us poor soldiers. You know, we've been to Leavenworth or something, and had all those lessons and books. And I don't remember anybody talking about the stuff you and I are talking about today. They didn't have any lectures on that—anything! And they don't have F.M.s [field manuals] about that. And here we are, we're all mixed up in it, supposed to be helping. I don't think any of us could graduate now. They'd probably have to expose us—too dumb. Can't understand it.[71]

Abrams (and to a lesser extent, Westmoreland) made a strong effort to understand the type of war he confronted, but his failure to find solutions to the challenges he faced meant the post-Vietnam army would not spend time trying to perfect its understanding of counterinsurgency warfare. The failure of counterinsurgency in Vietnam meant that the Army of the 1970s would not seek to build on the innovations that had occurred but would rather turn away from them in an effort to rebuild and redefine an institution that had been shattered by the war in Vietnam.