

THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY AND THE VIETNAM WAR 1962-1972

ADVISORS AND OPTIMISM: THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION AND US MILITARY ASSISTANCE COMMAND VIETNAM Charles Morrissey

From 1950 through 1975, the training of independent South Vietnamese armed forces was consistently identified by the United States as a prerequisite to the establishment of a viable non-communist Vietnamese state. Yet US military and political leaders' unevenness in systematically addressing the South Vietnamese military's deficiencies led to the evolution of armed forces that were unequal to their Communist counterparts. As a result of this and the determination of US policy makers to contain the spread of Communism, American involvement in Vietnam was steadily expanded. The ultimate ineffectiveness of the military training program greatly contributed to the US's inability to foster and maintain an independent non-communist South Vietnam.

During the presidencies of Harry S Truman and Dwight D Eisenhower, the US sought to resolve South Vietnam's internal problems and secure its independent future through increased economic and military aid. It was on 12 February 1955 that the United States Military Assistance and Advisory Group Indochina (MAAG) assumed from France primary responsibility to train, organise and equip the Vietnamese National Army—what would later become part of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF)—into an effective fighting force. From 1954 to 1960 MAAG's focus was on creating a non-communist Vietnamese military in the image of the US Army. While this enabled the South Vietnamese military to improve itself along conventional lines, it did little to allow for the acquisition of counter-insurgency skills that would prove so necessary in the late 1950s and early 1960s. President John F Kennedy inherited from Eisenhower a situation in Vietnam where America figured as the primary external participant. Kennedy quickly grasped the link between South Vietnam's continued existence and US credibility.¹ By the end of his first year in office, he had made Vietnam a primary Cold War battleground.

In late 1961, Kennedy confronted a deteriorating military situation in Vietnam. Although the Army of the Republic of Vietnam's (ARVN) numbers had increased, its performance against the Viet Cong had not measurably improved. Guerrilla activity, since the December 1960 establishment of the Hanoi-backed National Liberation Front (NLF), had risen markedly. Saigon's solution to combating greater insurgent activity was requesting increased US funding for ARVN expansion. While there had been little support in US military circles for providing South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem additional military aid for force expansion, this was the course of action to which Kennedy agreed.² Reviewing the military situation in late December 1961, I Corps Senior MAAG Advisor, Colonel Wilbur Wilson, wrote to MAAG chief Lieutenant General Lionel McGarr stating:

In summary this analysis indicates that we are not currently losing the fight with the Viet Cong, but neither are we winning. As our resources increase and training improves in ARVN and CG, we should win more of the actions with the Viet Cong. In addition, we must influence ARVN units to be more aggressive and take greater tactical risks.³

The conclusions in Wilson's report are not dissimilar to findings of previous MAAG personnel. In sum, the military and security problems facing the US and South Vietnam in December 1961 were little changed from years past. What had changed—with little obvious effect on improving its military or political stability—was the level of American aid flowing into South Vietnam. Frustrated with this minimal progress, Kennedy would re-double US efforts in South Vietnam to end what was essentially a stalemate.

The net result of 1961's Vietnam fact-finding missions, debate within the Kennedy administration and decisions on courses of action for Vietnam, was a sizable increase in the number of US military advisers, the introduction of air mobility to ARVN operations, more military and economic aid for South Vietnam and US military personnel being permitted to participate alongside the South Vietnamese in combat operations against the Viet Cong. What did not change was the Saigon government's ineffective control of the countryside, its low level of domestic popular support, or the South Vietnamese armed forces' numerous deficiencies. The only area that saw any measurable improvement was that of Viet Cong operations and recruitment. Although the events of late 1960 and 1961 clearly illustrated that the ARVN needed to augment its counter-insurgency skills, and also its conventional war fighting abilities, little real progress was seen in these areas. The US senior military leadership suggested that the South Vietnamese should fight their own war but at the same time when asked how the war could be turned around, they proposed the introduction of large numbers of American combat troops.⁴

Seeking to stabilise South Vietnam, in 1962 Kennedy increased the number of US military advisers there to 12,000 and also significantly increased the amount of US military aid bound for South Vietnam.⁵ The heightened US military presence in South Vietnam underscored an increased emphasis and level of optimism with which Kennedy and his advisers approached Vietnam in 1962. In 1962 Kennedy also re-structured the US military command in South Vietnam to allow both for better coordination of US assets in-country and for an increased emphasis on counter insurgency. A key element in these changes was the strategic hamlet program, developed to sever the Viet Cong from their base of support, the South Vietnamese peasants. Together, these Kennedy administration initiatives did enjoy some success in slowing the political and military erosion in South Vietnam. This success, however, proved temporary.

In February 1962 Roger Hilsman, Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, updated Washington policy makers on South Vietnam. Hilsman noted that VC military strength in South Vietnam had reached 25,900 with an additional 100,000 'supporters and sympathizers'.⁶ On the subject of the ARVN, Hilsman argued that it was too 'tied down in static defensive positions'. He added, however, 'no amount of regular troops used offensively would solve the Viet Cong problem unless the villagers themselves are protected and the Viet Cong thus cut off from their source of supplies and recruits'.⁷ To achieve the goal of cutting the VC off from the villagers, Hilsman proposed a three phased plan that included creating 'zones of strategic villages [strategic hamlets]'. His plan also saw the ARVN 'adopt[ing] the strategy and tactics used by the Viet Cong'. Engaging in the three-phased military operation the ARVN would go on the offensive eventually destroying the VC.⁸ Although not everyone embraced Hilsman's program, both Kennedy and Diem agreed to it.⁹ The program was to meet with little success.

To rectify a number of the problems experienced by the Military Assistance Advisory Group, Kennedy ordered the establishment of a new command. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). The new command, officially established on 8 February 1962, would supervise logistic and operational support for the ARVN.¹⁰ The creation of MACV also came about as a result of dissatisfaction with Lieutenant General Lionel C McGarr's performance as MAAG commander; by 1962 he had largely fallen out of favour with his superiors. Voicing his concerns about McGarr's performance. National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy wrote Kennedy stating, 'McGarr has been inadequate'.¹¹ General Edward Lansdale, Secretary of Defense's assistant for special operations, also criticised McGarr's efforts, writing that he was 'fighting the war with memos, with the result that he has lost much of his influence with Diem, Thaun, etc. I urged Thaun to work with him more closely and Thaun pointed to a big stack of papers and said: that's what I got the last time I asked for some help'.¹² Since 1954, MAAG had prepared the South Vietnamese military primarily for conventional warfare, placing little emphasis on counter guerrilla tactics. Kennedy and his advisers recognised that the increased strength of the Communist insurgency and the corresponding increase in the number of guerrilla attacks required a new US military approach—particularly one that placed more emphasis on counter insurgency operations. Military Assistance Command Vietnam would coordinate the expanded US military personnel and aid destined for South Vietnam, allowing MAAG-V to focus solely on training and advising the ARVN, especially in the area of counter-insurgency.

Intentional or otherwise, the establishment of MACV marked the emergence of a shift away from the US military's primary training and advisory role towards a more participatory one. Despite these changes, the ARVN's military proficiency progressed only slightly.¹³ Confronted by a continued lack of progress, the US military leadership might have questioned the logic of increasing the American military commitment there. They did not. The policy of US military expansion in Vietnam suggests a belief among the senior military leadership that the Vietnamese problem had a solution—apparently a military one—even though evidence from their own experience, evaluations and intelligence sources suggested otherwise.

Military Assistance Command Vietnam's headquarters was physically located at Than Son Nhut air base outside of Saigon. General Paul D Harkins was named as the first commander of US Military Assistance Commander, Vietnam (COMUSMACV). He officially assumed command of MACV on 8 February 1962.¹⁴ After being appointed COMUSMACV, Harkins, a self-declared 'optimist', became notorious for refusing to acknowledge any and all evidence of ARVN shortcomings. While COMUSMACV, he tolerated no criticism of the South Vietnamese military and dispensed stiff punishment to anyone who dared to do so.¹⁵ Harkins' optimistic assessments of the situation in South Vietnam was a continuation of a tradition begun by former MAAGs Lieutenant General John W O'Daniel and Lieutenant General Samuel T Williams, both of whom ignored negative reports while steadfastly believing that things would resolve themselves. Commenting on Harkins' view on South Vietnam, United Press International correspondent Neil Sheehan likened it an 'impenetrable fantasy'.¹⁶ Another author labelled Harkins' reporting to Washington as 'Alice-in-Wonderland[esque]'.¹⁷

Harkins' strategy for eliminating the VC was to draw them out in conventional battle and then overwhelm them with superior US firepower.¹⁸ The problem with this was that the VC avoided, whenever possible, set-piece battles. If Kennedy's intention in placing Harkins at the head of the new MACV organisation was to improve the effectiveness of the US military mission in South Vietnam, he had made an unfortunate selection. Harkins' refusal to investigate the reported faults of the ARVN ensured that little was done to correct them. His unwillingness to adopt any strategy other than a conventional one meant that little progress would be made in successfully countering the unconventional tactics of the Viet Cong. Moreover, this meant that most of the problems that had led Kennedy to establish MACV remained largely unresolved.

Compounding these difficulties was the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) structuring of MACV, which created a number of problems that undermined its ability to transform the ARVN into an effective and autonomous military force. Furthermore, allowing MAAG to continue functioning after establishing MACV injected a degree of confusion into the US military's Vietnam command structure. The establishment of MACV did enable a greater focus on counter insurgency, but its complicated and unusual command structure made its functioning problematic. That the JCS did not establish MACV as a theatre command, that they did not immediately replace MAAG with MACV and that they tolerated duplicate chains of command, suggests that a degree of ambivalence existed within the senior US military leadership's overall approach to Vietnam. This ambivalence was to be one of the war's permanent features.

As Harkins was busy establishing himself in his new command. Admiral Harry D Felt, Commander-in-Chief Pacific Fleet (CINCPAC) and Harkins' superior, cabled the JCS laying out the situation in Vietnam as he saw it. He explained that the 'main VC military body has not been defeated; conversely it is numerically stronger than ever before, and militarily/politically the VC is very active'.¹⁹ He further noted that the Viet Cong's method of operation often undercut any advantage the ARVN possessed in firepower. To counter this VC method of operation, the Kennedy administration had encouraged a greater application in training and employing counter insurgency tactics. This desired shift in strategy was undercut by the lack of interest that many US military leaders had for counter insurgency. General Lyman L Lemnitzer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (1960-61), saw Kennedy as 'oversold' on unconventional warfare. General George Decker, Army Chief of Staff (1960-62), argued, 'any good soldier can handle guerrillas'. An anonymous US Army officer's statement on the subject, 'I'm not going to destroy the traditions and doctrine of the United States Army just to win this lousy war', perhaps best sums up the reluctance to embrace the counter-insurgency strategy that Kennedy encouraged.²⁰

Previously the Army had expended little effort on the development or application of a counter-insurgency doctrine. This is borne out by the fact that no mention of it was made in Army Field Manuals until 1962.²¹ The first official Department of Defense study on counter-insurgency concluded that 'the tactical doctrine for the employment' of regular forces against insurgent guerrilla forces has not been adequately developed, and the Army does not have a clear concept of the proper scale and type of equipment necessary for these operations'.²² Major General Victor H Krulak, United States Marine Corps (USMC), commented on problems with the US military's counter-insurgency strategy, noting that 'in the face of speeches to the contrary, the counter-insurgency issue that faces us today is different, is not compatible with existing organizational concepts, it *does* need a fresh look'.²³ On the US counter-insurgency program, Larry Cable writes that it 'arose not from an accurate appreciation of the nature of guerrilla war nor from the process by which guerrillas were suppressed, but rather from the capabilities of the forces developed for the purpose of fighting a mechanized opponent ...'.²⁴ Overall, the Army's response to Kennedy's requests for a greater emphasis on counter-insurgency 'was a negative one'.²⁵ This fact ensured that the ARVN would continue to encounter difficulties in engaging the VC, as they were being trained and structured to fight a conventional war against an unconventional enemy.

Among the problems that the ARVN faced in 1962 was an escalating desertion rate. One memorandum concluded that 'when the battle casualties are added [to the desertion numbers] the total losses are expected to increase to the point where an overall increase in the effectiveness of the South Vietnamese armed forces is doubtful'.²⁶ This situation was made all the worse by many ARVN officers' unwillingness to take the initiative against the Viet Cong for fear that casualties sustained would earn them Diem's disfavour. American military advisers were concerned about the dependency that the ARVN was developing on artillery and air mobility as it lessened their willingness to conduct foot patrols, which were necessary for establishing contact with the enemy. Moreover, the increased firepower that the ARVN had access to was of little use against an enemy that mostly refused to engage in conventional fire fights. Inadequate training also continued to undercut the ARVN's combat effectiveness.²⁷ These inadequacies came to be best catalogued and articulated by US military advisor, Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann, working with the ARVN 7th Division.

After arriving in 1962 as a new member of the military advisory mission, Vann soon discovered that despite the infusion of massive amounts of American aid and a considerable effort on the part of MAAG 'few of the regulars [ARVN] or territorials knew how to adjust the sights of their rifles and carbines well enough to hit a target let alone a guerrilla'.²⁸ As a senior advisor to the ARVN, Vann had the opportunity to learn first-hand of the obstacles that had led to this situation.²⁹

Colonel FP (Ted) Serong, an Australian Army counter-insurgency expert and special advisor to Harkins, echoed Vann's conclusions on ARVN problem areas. Serong wrote:

Morale is patchy. With the possible exception of the Airborne Brigade, there is no infantry element of the ARVN, CG, or SDC with high morale—even the Rangers. A small portion could be rated as fair. Most, low to very low. Witness—no GVN force will attack known VC force unless it has an assured superiority of 10 to 1.³⁰

Had these findings been properly investigated and followed up, a number of the ARVN problem areas might have been resolved. Instead these reports, like countless other unflattering assessments of the ARVN, were ignored in favour of continuing the same basic program that the US advisory mission had been engaged in since 1954. By the end of 1962, therefore, increased efforts of the US military advisory team and augmented material aid to the ARVN had not resolved its underlying problems.

Following a 1962 fact-finding trip to Vietnam, Kennedy's Special Military Representative, General Maxwell D Taylor wrote, 'much progress [had] been accomplished' since my last visit in October 1961, but a 'coordinated national plan establishing priorities for operations against the VC, does not exist'.³¹ Estimates suggested that the ARVN was not achieving 'more than 60 to 70 percent combat effectiveness from the forces presently available to them'.³² The

reasons Taylor gave for this were not new—'lack of intelligence, a defensive outlook, a bad civil-military relationship in the provinces, and Diem's style of over centralised government'.³³ On the US military side, Taylor alluded to a problem that MACV's set-up had created stating 'we seem to be establishing a deeply layered command structure in Southeast Asia'. Summing up his report he noted that one of the 'outstanding questions [was] how to best organize the US military command in Southeast Asia'.³⁴ In May 1964, to address these problems in part, the JCS allowed MACV to assume MAAG's duties and responsibilities. This move was intended to allow the US military to better coordinate its efforts in South Vietnam. Yet by eliminating MAAG, MACV now had even more responsibility and as the scope of the fighting widened, the training and advisory effort suffered accordingly. The neglect of ARVN training would have telling effects in the latter part of the war.

Had Taylor, while he was in Vietnam, been briefed by Vann as he was supposed to have been, the General's report to Kennedy might have been offered a more detailed analysis on the military situation there. This did not happen as Harkins was more inclined to offer Taylor a 'dog and pony show' than allow Vann to educate him on the realities of South Vietnam's military situation.³⁵ Even if Vann had been permitted to explain the seriousness of ARVN failings, it seems unlikely that Taylor would have relayed them to Kennedy in full. While not as overtly optimistic as Harkins, the substance of his reporting back to Washington suggests that Taylor was willing to place the most optimistic spin on events in Vietnam.³⁶ Moreover, as Taylor had personally lobbied for Harkins' appointment as MACV, any findings that contradicted those of Harkins would reflect badly on Taylor.³⁷ It has also been suggested that Harkins' enthusiastic assessment was due to pressure from Taylor. General Donn Starry claimed that Harkins told him 'that what he was reporting from Vietnam was what Taylor was telling him to report'.³⁸ Regardless of who was telling Harkins to do what, it was his reports upon which the Kennedy administration based many of its decisions.

In early 1963 the inability of US initiatives to cure the political and military ills of South Vietnam was visibly demonstrated in the South Vietnamese village of Ap Bac. There an engagement between the ARVN and the VC highlighted all the problems—the ARVN's lack of leadership, its defensive attitude, Diem's interference, and an ineffective chain of command—that continued to undermine the US military advisory mission's efforts to mould the ARVN into an effective fighting force.

The January 1963 battle at Ap Bac between 2000 ARVN and 400 Viet Cong unarguably illustrated ARVN shortcomings. In advising the ARVN commanders on how to conduct the operation, Vann endeavoured to ensure that the South Vietnamese would have everything possible in their favour—numbers, air and ground mobility, and firepower. The execution of Vann's plan first ran into problems when the ARVN commanders delayed the attack for twenty-four hours, which allowed the VC to prepare better defences. Once the attack did get underway, Vann discovered that his ARVN commanders' aggressiveness often evaporated upon the first sign of enemy resistance. Refusing to pursue the retreating VC meant that many escaped, undercutting the operation's effectiveness.³⁹ Poor ARVN fire discipline resulted in a number of friendly fire deaths. Even though the South Vietnamese force was vastly superior in numbers, weapons and mobility, the ARVN offensive succeeded in only killing twelve enemy troops while suffering 61 dead and 100 wounded. The success the VC experienced against the ARVN provided them with a psychological victory. The fact that the American press was there to report on the ARVN's under-performance added to the defeat's psychological impact.

To Vann, who acted as the senior military adviser during the operation, the battle's outcome was proof that the ARVN remained incapable of defeating the Viet Cong and thus of securing South Vietnam. On the engagement Vann stated, 'it was a miserable damn performance. These people won't listen. They make the same goddamn mistakes over and over again in the same way'.⁴⁰ *New York Times* reporter David Halberstam wrote that 'to us [the journalists] and the military advisors involved, Ap Bac epitomized all the deficiencies of the system: lack of aggressiveness, hesitancy about taking casualties, lack of battlefield leadership, a nonexistent chain of command'.⁴¹ Colonel Wilbur Wilson, senior adviser III Corps, wrote, 'the combat effectiveness of ARVN units is directly proportional to the training that we invest in

them.⁴² The ARVN's failure to destroy a VC unit in a conventional engagement should have raised questions on the wisdom and effectiveness of MACV's training priorities to date. It did not.

In an article on the battle for the *New York Times*, Halberstam quoted an unnamed US military advisor as stating that 'time after time I have seen the same Vietnamese officers and troops make the same mistakes in virtually the same rice paddy'.⁴³ Remarking on the shock expressed by many Americans over the South Vietnamese defeat, Halberstam noted, 'apparently the only people not surprised are the American advisors in the field ... who felt that conditions in the field made a defeat like this virtually inevitable'.⁴⁴ Commenting on the battle from the enemy perspective, a North Vietnamese author wrote, 'the victory at Ap Bac opened the way for the bankruptcy of the helicopter mobility and armored vehicle mobility tactics'.⁴⁵ This is not an insignificant fact, as by early 1963 the advantage that the ARVN had been enjoying from air mobility had begun to be lost due to improved Viet Cong anti-air tactics, aptly demonstrated at Ap Bac.

In his after-action report Vann drew attention to the ARVN's inflated enemy body counts and to their commander's skill in avoiding enemy contact.⁴⁶ Although Army Colonel Daniel B Porter, IV Corps, reported to Harkins that the 'conduct of this operation revealed many glaring weaknesses', any concerns that Ap Bac might have raised among senior MACV personnel went unvoiced.⁴⁷ To the shock of many reporters and some military personnel in South Vietnam, Harkins argued that the operation at Ap Bac constituted an ARVN victory. His position on the battle led Neil Sheehan to write that up to that point 'all of us ... had been profoundly underestimating Harkins' capacity for self delusion'.⁴⁸ The VC success at Ap Bac and the US military's disinterest in exploring new approaches to the South Vietnamese prosecution of the war served as a harbinger of what was to come.

A January 1963 CIA report on Vietnam concluded 'on balance, the war remains a slowly escalating stalemate'. This finding offered little comfort for those in the administration seeking a quick victory.⁴⁹ A number of MACV advisors—such as Wilson, Vann, Porter, and Ladd—all continued to report ongoing ARVN failings to Harkins, reports that he chose to ignore. Harkins insisted that all indications suggested that ARVN effectiveness was improving and the war against the communist insurgency was being won. Not all US advisors completely disagreed with Harkins' position on the war. The senior US advisor in II Corps, Army Colonel Hal D McCown reported to Harkins, 'during 1963 the posture of the VC has clearly deteriorated in the II CTZ'.⁵⁰ McCown also wrote that 'the combat effectiveness of ARVN, the CG and the SDC has risen remarkably during this period. Although much progress is needed to reach accepted US standards, ARVN has come a long way and in my estimation has the capability to win the struggle militarily'.⁵¹ Interestingly, McCown's deputy, Army Colonel Rowland H Renwanz, provided a somewhat different analysis from that of his superior. Renwanz wrote of ARVN reluctance to participate in combat operations and of the failure of the strategic hamlet program noting, 'that it would take six years to pacify the area'.⁵² As with all other negative reports, Harkins chose to ignore Renwanz's. He would do this until his replacement in 1964. Harkins' refusal to allow attention to be called to any of the problems in training and employing the ARVN meant that a search for solutions was never fully implemented. This fact contributed greatly to the US's eventual failure to achieve its goal of an independent South Vietnam.

Harkins' most vocal critic, Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann, returned to the US in June 1963 to discover that his reports had been buried by MACV. After lobbying a number of senior officers, including the Vice Chief of the Army, Lieutenant General Barksdale Hamlett, Vann managed to get a briefing to the JCS scheduled for 8 July 1963. Taylor, concerned that Vann's findings would contradict those of Harkins, had the briefing cancelled.⁵³ Mark Perry writes that Taylor's action led to 'an open war within the JCS. The chiefs concluded that Taylor was protecting his good friend Paul Harkins ... whose reputation for competence was widely and openly questioned by Taylor's Army colleagues, one of whom told the JCS chairman that Harkins was "just plain stupid"'.⁵⁴ Taylor was correct to be concerned about Harkins' reputation as Vann's brief contradicted MACV's position on almost every aspect of the war in Vietnam.⁵⁵

Kennedy's military initiatives for Vietnam, therefore, had little success in either modifying the US military approach to the war or in improving the ARVN's effectiveness in prosecuting it. Senior US military leadership in both Saigon and Washington continued to see the war as winnable through conventional means. The injection of a greater array of conventional weapons into the ARVN's arsenal gives evidence that MACV and his superiors in Washington believed that more firepower would tip the war in favour of the South Vietnamese forces. Even though Ap Bac called into question the theory that superior firepower would equal victory, the US advisory effort was slow to change its approach towards combating the Communist insurgency.

Returning to Washington in October, Taylor and McNamara delivered a situation report on Vietnam to the President. It stated that 'the military campaign has made great progress and continues to progress'. They remarked on the continuing slide of Diem's popularity and noted that while there was 'no solid evidence of the possibility of a successful coup' the 'assassination of Diem or Nhu is always a possibility'. McNamara and Taylor acknowledged, 'the political situation in Vietnam remains deeply serious. It has not yet significantly affected the military effort but could do so at some time in the future'. In an effort to influence events in Vietnam the two authors suggested encouraging Diem to institute reforms through US 'expressions of disapproval and withholding of support from GVN activities'.⁵⁶ Throughout the remainder of October South Vietnamese anti-Diem forces planned for his overthrow with increasing determination. On 1 November 1963, a group of South Vietnamese generals launched a successful coup, which overthrew the Diem government and resulted in the assassinations of Diem and his brother Nhu.⁵⁷

In Saigon, the news of Diem's death was greeted with celebrations. In Washington, the news of the South Vietnamese leader's death led to a reassessment of US policy. Having spent almost one billion dollars, increased the number of US advisors to over 16,000 and suffered 108 dead, Kennedy realised that little there had changed for the better. A Kennedy insider wrote that following Diem's death, the President was 'somber and shaken. I had not seen him so depressed since the Bay of Pigs. No doubt he realized that Vietnam was his greatest failure in foreign policy'.⁵⁸ Kennedy would not have long to dwell on Vietnam, as he would be felled by an assassin's bullet on 22 November 1963. As for the North Vietnamese, the death of Diem led to an order for a stepped-up military campaign against the South Vietnamese and American forces. Hanoi also cautioned its people to prepare themselves for a lengthy 'struggle'.⁵⁹ Apparently nothing that the US had done during the Kennedy administration had convinced Hanoi that the war was unwinnable. With the assassinations of Diem and Kennedy, a new approach was brought to the war by both sides with varying degrees of success. The remaining constant was the ARVN's lacklustre performance.

As 1963 drew to a close the political and military situation in South Vietnam was, despite statements by Harkins and McNamara to the contrary, neither stable nor improved. Without question the efforts of the US military advisory mission in South Vietnam had not all been in vain. Since the US take over of the South Vietnamese military training program great improvements had been made in equipment, organisation, infrastructure, education and small unit training. Under American tutelage the South Vietnamese military possessed numbers of excellent and brave soldiers and officers. The ARVN as a whole, however, did not fight at the same level as their adversary. The main point here is that despite the best efforts of the US advisory team and huge amounts of American aid, in late 1963 the South Vietnamese military had not reached a degree of proficiency that enabled them to match their communist enemy. This deficiency would later prove disastrous.

The Kennedy team's actions to counter the reverses in South Vietnam—the establishment of MACV, increasing military aid, economic aid and the number of US military advisors—all failed to halt the erosion of the South Vietnamese military position. The spectacular January 1963 military failure at Ap Bac, despite the ARVN's superior firepower and numbers, best underscored its continued inability to match the Viet Cong in combat. Kennedy's desire to see the US military shift the war fighting in South Vietnam to a more counter-insurgency type approach met with little enthusiasm from most of his military advisors. In short, by late 1963 the US military had failed to modify its approach to war fighting, and by extension that of the South Vietnamese military.

At the time Kennedy was assassinated, Vietnam had become the centerpiece of America's war against Communism. In 1962 and 1963, more so than in 1961, Kennedy had come to fear that an abandonment of South Vietnam would be equated to US weakness and irresolution in combating the spread of Communism. As in 1961, the outcome of the 1962-63 fact finding missions to Vietnam was more US military advisors and more aid for South Vietnam.

Lyndon B Johnson was bequeathed a situation in South Vietnam that was considerably expanded from that which Kennedy had inherited from Eisenhower.⁶⁰ Moreover, Johnson inherited a military situation in South Vietnam where the US had not yet succeeded in training the ARVN to a level where they could effectively reverse Viet Cong gains. Regardless of whether they were being trained for the wrong war, the ARVN after thirteen years of American aid and nine years of direct US training still could not match the enemy on the battlefield. Honouring the US commitment to maintain the independence of South Vietnam would bring renewed and expanded efforts to bring resolution to the situation there.

Without question, the combat effectiveness of Hanoi's military coupled with its leadership's determination to achieve its goal of Vietnamese unification made training the ARVN a considerable challenge. The incremental application of direct American military force, beginning in 1964, also made the formulation of a strategy that would best utilise the ARVN and US military resources problematic. Moreover, the direct application of US military force tied American credibility ever tighter to South Vietnam's continued non-communist status. Direct US military involvement lessened the importance of the ARVN's shortcomings as its role in the war was significantly reduced. The American unwillingness or inability to confront seriously or resolve these problems in training and in strategy, therefore, must be seen as principal reasons why the US was dragged further and further into a war that its own military saw as, at best, problematic from the outset.

From Truman through to Johnson, four presidents stressed, to varying degrees, the importance of training a non-communist indigenous military for the defence of Vietnam. As America's goal was to establish and see maintained a non-communist government in Vietnam, this was a logical course of action. While the inability of successive South Vietnamese governments to rule effectively and the ARVN's inability to defend the country may have been the United States' rationale for its direct military involvement, it erred in not focussing on resolution of these problems after taking over the war. The Vietnamese Communists, not the US's failure in training the ARVN, caused South Vietnam's military collapse on 30 April 1975. Yet the US inability to successfully address problems within the South Vietnamese armed forces, which had been identified time and again by American military and civilian officials, cannot be overlooked in explaining the United States' failure to succeed in its Vietnam policy.

Endnotes

1. This fact was not lost on Kennedy who explained in special assistant for national security affairs Walt Rostow 'that Eisenhower could stand the political consequences of Dien Bien Phu and the expulsion of the West from Vietnam in 1954 because the blame fell on the French: I can't take a 1954 defeat today.' See Arthur Schlesinger, Jr, *A Thousand Days: John F Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 308.
2. Memorandum from the Secretary of Defense's Assistant for Special Operations (Lansdale) to the 'President's Military Representative (Taylor), 21 July 1961, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereinafter *FRUS*), *Vietnam, 1961*, vol 1 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1988), 237-8.
3. Memorandum from Colonel Wilbur Wilson to Lieutenant General McGarr, Chief MAAG, Personnel Intelligence, Training and Operational Matters of Interest to I Corps, 26 December 1961, Wilbur Wilson Papers, Box 1, Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA (hereinafter MHI).
4. See for example, 'Draft Memorandum of the Conversation of the Second Meeting of the Presidential Task Force on Vietnam', 4 May 1961, *FRUS, Vietnam, 1961*, vol 1, 118-19; 'Memorandum on US Forces in South Vietnam, from the Joint Chiefs of Staffs to the Secretary of Defense Robert S McNamara', 10 May 1961, in Neil Sheehan et al, *The Pentagon Papers: As Published by the New York Times* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 130-1; Telegram From the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 18 September 1961, in *FRUS, Vietnam, 1961*, vol 1, 301-04; Lawrence J Korb, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff: The First 25 Years* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 150-1; Memorandum for the President from the Secretary of Defense McNamara, 8 November 1961, in Sheehan, *The Pentagon Papers*, 153-5.
5. George C Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: McGraw-Hill Inc, 1996),. 87-100.
6. Paper Prepared by the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman), 2 February 1962, *FRUS, Vietnam, 1962*, vol 2 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1990), 73.
7. *Ibid*, 75.
- 8 *Ibid*, 83-6.
9. For criticism on Hilsman's program see Memorandum on the Substance of Discussions at a Department of State-Joint Chiefs of Staff Meeting, 9 February 1962, *FRUS, Vietnam, 1962*, vol 2, 113.
10. MAAG remained in charge of advising the ARVN until this function was assumed by MACV in 1964.
11. Memorandum from the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to the President, 15 November 1961, *FRUS, Vietnam, 1961*, vol 1, 606.
12. Letter from the Secretary of Defense's Assistant for Special Operations (Lansdale) to General Samuel T Williams, 28 November 1961, *FRUS, Vietnam, 1961*, vol 1, 688.
13. See John Paul Vann's comments on ARVN progress in Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 91-4.
14. For the MACV terms of reference see Telegram from the Chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff (Lemnitzer) to the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific (Felt), 6 January 1962, *FRUS, Vietnam, 1962*, vol 2, 14-16.
15. General Harkins' unwillingness to heed any criticism of the RVNAF was later made clear at an 11 May 1964 meeting in Saigon. Minutes of the meeting noted that on the issue of 'setting up a reporting system on combat effectiveness and morale of RVNAF' General Harkins 'expressed some concern lest it involve critical reporting by the advisors upon their opposite numbers and that the substance of such reports might get back to the Vietnamese'. See Memorandum of a Meeting, Saigon, 11 May 1964, *FRUS, Vietnam, 1964*, vol 1, 310. On Harkins' cheer-leader type relationship with the South Vietnamese, David Halberstam writes that 'although Harkins was a General, his job was not so much to command fellow soldiers, but to get along with Diem and Nhu, extraordinarily difficult and suspicious allies with most unmilitary minds'. David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 179.
16. Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 542.
17. George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Anchor Books, 1987), 143.
18. Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 124.
19. Telegram from Commander-in-Chief, Pacific (Felt), to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 22 February 1962, *FRUS, Vietnam, 1962*, vol 2, 167.
20. See Michael Lind, *Vietnam the Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 103-04.
21. See Department of the Army, *FM 100-5: Field Service Regulations—Operations* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 1962).
22. Robert A Doughty, *The Evolution of US Army Tactical Doctrine 1946-76* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, US Army Command and General Staff College, 1979), 25. Doughty concludes that although the US Army made an effort in the CI area, 'most tactics for counterinsurgency remained extensions of, or resembled, small unit tactics for a conventional battlefield'. *Ibid*, 26.

23. Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff's Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities (Krulak) to the Deputy Secretary of Defense (Gilpatric), 26 March 1962, *FRUS, Vietnam, 1962*, vol 2, 277. Emphasis in original.
24. Larry E Cable, *Conflict of Myths: The Development of American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 136.
25. Andrew F Krepinevich, Jr, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 37.
26. Memorandum from the Vice President's Military Aide (Burriss) to Vice President Johnson, 30 March 1962, *FRUS, Vietnam, 1962*, vol 2, 284.
27. Brigadier General James Lawton Collins, Jr, *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950-1972* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1975), 35-7.
28. *Ibid*, 55.
29. Larry Cable writes that many US military personnel viewed continued ARVN ineffectiveness as a result of their own failings, rather than anything the US advisory was doing wrong. See Cable, *Conflict of Myths*, 180.
30. Report by Colonel F P Serong, Special Adviser to General Paul D Harkins, COMUSMACV: Current Operations in Vietnam, October 1962, in Paul L Miles Papers, unnumbered box, MACV Studies October 1962 MHI.
31. Paper prepared by the President's Military Representative (Taylor), 20 September 1962, *FRUS, Vietnam, 1962*, vol 2, 660-3.
32. General Maxwell D Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares: A Memoir* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972), 240-2.
33. *Ibid*, 242.
34. Paper prepared by the President's Military Representative (Taylor), 20 September 1962, *FRUS, Vietnam, 1962*, vol 2, 662-3.
35. Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 117. In his memoirs, although Taylor mentions his September 1962 trip to South Vietnam and meeting with Harkins, he makes no mention of Vann illustrating the non-role he played in the meeting. See Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares*, 257.
36. The tone of Taylor's memoir also indicates that he never saw the problems in Vietnam as Vann did. Also important was that Taylor was a close personal friend of Harkins. These facts further suggest that anything that Vann managed to relay to Taylor would be received with a measure of disbelief.
37. On Taylor's protection of Harkins see Lewis Sorley, *Honorable Warrior: General Harold K Johnson and the Ethics of Command* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 153.
38. *Ibid*.
39. Two insightful accounts of the battle at Ap Bac are found in Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*, 154-71 and Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 203-65. Also see Peter Arnett, *Live From the Battlefield: From Vietnam to Baghdad, 35 Years in the World's War Zones* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 88-98.
40. Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 277.
41. Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*, 165.
42. Memorandum for Senior Advisor, 5th Infantry Division, Senior Advisor 23rd Infantry Division, from Wilbur Wilson, 21 March 1963, in Wilbur Wilson Papers, unnumbered box, MHI.
43. For Halberstam's contemporary piece on the battle see 'Vietnam Defeat Shocks US Aides', *The New York Times*, 7 January 1963.
44. Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire*, 166.
45. Anon, *Vietnam: The Anti-US Resistance War for National Salvation 1954-1975: Military Events* (Trans Joint Publication Research Service. JPRS 80968. Washington, DC, 3 June 1982), 54.
46. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 83-4. Two other officers who, along with Porter and Vann, raised concerns to their superiors of ARVN shortcomings were Colonel Wilbur Wilson, III Corps, and Lieutenant Colonel Fred Ladd, 21st Division. Rather than investigating their reports, Harkins chose to ignore and censure their findings. See David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 202-03.
47. See General Bruce Palmer, Jr, *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc, 1984), 22-3; and Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 83-84. For the Porter quote see Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 281.
48. Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 283.
49. Current Intelligence Memorandum Prepared in the Office of Current Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 11 January 1963, *FRUS, Vietnam, 1963*, vol 3, 19-22.
50. McCown cited in Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 82.
51. Colonel Hal D McCown to Deputy COS for Military Operations, Debriefing of Officers Returning from Field Assignment, 16 October 1963, in Paul D Miles Papers, unnumbered box, Pacification January-March 1964, MHI.
52. Renwanz cited in Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 82.
53. For a recounting of Vann's aborted attempt to brief the JCS see, Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 139-42. Also see Korb, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 154.
54. Mark Perry, *Four Stars* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1989), 128-9.
55. For excerpts of this brief, see Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, 83-4.

56. Report of the McNamara-Taylor Mission to South Vietnam, 2 October 1963, in Gareth Porter (ed), *Vietnam: A History in Documents* (New York. Meridian Books, 1979), 247-9.
57. For a full analysis of the events leading up to Diem's death see Kahin, *Intervention*, 146-80. For an insiders view see, for example, Taylor, *Swords & Plowshares*, 288-301.
58. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 848.
59. Resolution of the Ninth Conference of the Lao Dong Party Central Committee, December 1963, in Porter, *Vietnam: A History in Documents*, 255-7.
60. Lawrence Bassett and Stephen Pelz write that 'Kennedy bequeathed to Lyndon B Johnson a failing counter insurgency program and a deepened commitment to a war in Vietnam'. Lawrence J Bassett and Stephen E Pelz, 'The Failed Search for Victory: Vietnam and the Politics of War', in Thomas G Paterson (ed), *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961-1963* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 252.