

**THE VIETNAM CORDS EXPERIENCE:  
A MODEL OF SUCCESSFUL CIVIL-MILITARY PARTNERSHIP?**

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**Introduction**

During its involvement in Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the United States launched a program designed to coordinate the efforts of the South Vietnamese government, the US military and US civilian agencies. The program, “Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support” (CORDS), was essentially a nation building endeavor that sought to promote pacification of the countryside through rural development programs coordinated with military operations. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was heavily engaged in the program, as were the State Department, the US Information Agency (USIA), the Central Intelligence Agency and the U.S. military. Parallel to its involvement in CORDS and the pacification efforts, USAID also continued various traditional economic and social development activities in Vietnam.

The CORDS program in many ways was a forerunner of a current program in Afghanistan, “Provincial Reconstruction Teams” (PRTs), which are teams of international civilian and military personnel working at the province level to extend the authority of the Afghan central government and to facilitate development and reconstruction. Directly and through grantees, USAID is heavily involved in delivering humanitarian assistance, reconstruction, and democratic governance through the PRTs. It is anticipated that this study of the US experience with CORDS will provide useful

lessons for USAID's efforts in the Afghanistan PRTs, as well as for pre-conflict planning efforts in the future.

From June 15 to August 25, 2005, the consultant reviewed documents chronicling and analyzing the CORDS program and interviewed former members of CORDS to assess the program and identify lessons learned from the experience. Funded by USAID, this report aims to provide an overview of the CORDS effort for those working to contribute to ongoing development activities in post-conflict situations. There is extensive literature available on the web on the subject of CORDS, and it is commended to those with further interest in the challenges of counterinsurgency, interagency coordination in general, and CORDS in particular. (See "V. Appendices.")

This report is directed to an audience that is familiar with the political context of Vietnam, Afghanistan, post-conflict situations, and development assistance; therefore, the study does not attempt to be descriptive in nature.

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### **Context – The Vietnam Conflict**

In his article *Remembering Vietnam*, Lewis Sorley writes succinctly and clearly of the contrasts between the early years of the Vietnam conflict (1965 to Tet 1968) and the later years (Tet 1968-1973), which culminated with the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the country. During the earlier years under the command of General William Westmoreland, the American approach was to take over the war from the Government of

Vietnam (GVN) forces and attempt to win it militarily through the conduct of a war of attrition. The objective was to kill as many of the enemy as possible. The theory was this would eventually cause the enemy to lose heart and stop fighting, and the measure of success in this sort of war was body count. During this period pacification and improvement of the GVN's forces were largely ignored and the number of U.S. troops grew dramatically, eventually totaling over half a million.

Stephen Young, in his paper *Defeating Insurgency: CORDS During the Vietnam War 1967-1972*, supports this point, noting that in 1965-66, U.S. military units fought the “war of the big battalions.” using search and destroy tactics. Counter insurgency against the Viet Cong in the hamlets and villages was pushed off onto the GVN and US civilian agencies (State, AID, USIA, CIA). There was no coordination of the war of the big battalions with the “other war” in the villages, with economic development, political reform or penetration of the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI). American leaders, he writes, were divided into warring camps of opinion as to how to win the war. On one side, mostly military, was the belief that aggressive military tactics were sufficient to secure victory. On the other side was the hearts and minds school.

The period following the 1968 Tet offensive, with General Creighton Abrams taking over command of U.S. forces (and William Colby as the Deputy for CORDS), the U.S. employed a “one war” strategy of combat operations, pacification and upgrading of the GVN forces, with the latter two having equal priority with military operations.

Tactically, search and destroy was replaced with clear and hold. Greatly expanded South Vietnamese forces took on the security mission. Territorial Forces (Regional Forces and Popular Forces -- “RF/PF”) under command of province chiefs and

district chiefs respectively, were greatly expanded. The nature of the operations also changed. Large scale operations were replaced by thousands of small unit ambushes and patrols. Pacification was emphasized, particularly the rooting out of the VCI, and became an important component of the war effort.

In his book, *A Better War*, Lewis Sorley explains the critical role of pacification. U.S. commander General Creighton Abrams understood that population security meant not only protecting the people from enemy military forces but also ridding them of the coercion exerted by the VCI (the shadow government). The VCI was critical to the success of the VC military. Roger Hillsman (an Assistant Secretary of State) on a visit in 1967 noted that there had been major military victories but that they had been irrelevant because the VCI were still intact. General Abrams also remarked on this, saying “in the whole picture of the war, the battles don’t really mean much.” Thus, pacification of the civilian population in rural areas became a critical element in securing U.S. military gains.

### **The Rationale for Pacification**

A brief description of the essence of counter insurgency warfare is useful to understanding the how and why of CORDS. In his paper, *The War in Iraq: The Nature of Insurgency Warfare*, Andrew Krepinevich describes the essential rationale for pacification or “winning hearts and minds.” He writes that counterinsurgency warfare is almost always protracted in nature. Those that are not prepared to engage in such warfare over the long haul, perhaps a decade, are unlikely to prevail. The center of gravity in counter insurgency warfare is the target nation’s population, not the insurgent forces. In

the case where an external power, such as the United States, provides a major portion of the counterinsurgent forces, its own population becomes a center of gravity in the conflict as well.

Key to defeating an insurgent movement is winning the “hearts and minds” of the local population. The population must be convinced that their personal goals will be better served if the counterinsurgent forces prevail (winning their hearts). Even more important, they must be convinced that the counterinsurgent forces will prevail (winning their minds). This can only be accomplished if the population is provided with a reasonable level of security against insurgent attempts to proselytize, intimidate, coerce or terrorize them. Providing this level of security takes time – which is one reason why insurgencies tend to be protracted, even though insurgent forces are often quite weak compared to the forces fielded by the government.

Krepinevich maintains that intelligence is crucial to defeating an insurgency. If coalition forces know who the insurgents are and where they are, their ability to bring military force to bear against them – especially in the early phases of an insurgency – is overwhelming. Yet another important benefit of pacification is that a friendly population can be the best source of information. The key to getting access to this information is to provide the people with a sense of enduring security and a political, economic and social stake in the regime.

Intelligence on the insurgents’ infrastructure, Krepinevich argues, is more important than intelligence on their forces. Counterinsurgent forces that focus on engaging and destroying insurgent forces and accord low priority to providing security risk defeat. Counterinsurgency requires a unity of effort and command among the

military, political, economic and social dimensions of the conflict. Reconstruction efforts in the absence of security will almost certainly fail, as will attempts at political reform. Given the culture, doctrine, force structure, and training infrastructure of the U.S. military, it is not well oriented to wage counterinsurgency warfare and thus a more coordinated civil military partnership needs to be employed to meet successfully this objective.

### **The Rationale for CORDS**

U.S. involvement in strengthening ties between the South Vietnamese government and the rural population began in the late 1950s to the early 1960s. Initially, USAID maintained personnel in regional, provincial and district levels under its office of Field Operations. State, USIA and CIA also had personnel stationed in the provinces, and the agencies reported back separately to their respective headquarters in Saigon. In 1966, the Office of Civil Operations (OCO) brought together the programs of USAID, the State Department, and USIA. However, OCO could not address the critical security threat from the insurgency in the countryside that worked to disrupt the pacification efforts. In the article *Pacification in Vietnam*, Krepinevich argues that the problems of OCO could not be overcome unless it was fully integrated with the military effort. The military controlled the bulk of U.S. resources in Vietnam, making it the logical organization to direct any sort of massive pacification effort. In response to this problem, in 1967, the US government created CORDS, which integrated the OCO agencies, the CIA and the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). CORDS pulled together a range of pacification efforts previously managed by USAID, CIA and MACV. This

included refugee resettlement, development of police forces, the Chieu Hoi program (inducing defectors), Phoenix program (VCI neutralization) and Revolutionary Development Cadre (which dealt with restoring local elected government, medical treatment, local development projects, and farmer credit). A State Department Foreign Service Officer interviewed for this paper provided his view of the rationale for the formation of CORDS. He related that in 1965 President Johnson recognized the reality in South Vietnam -- the poor security situation and the need to build up different levels of GVN forces (Army of the Republic of Vietnam, Vietnamese Regional Forces / Popular Forces, and National Police). At the same time, the USG needed to get the country's infrastructure back in working order (roads, electricity, hospitals, et. al.) and strengthen the elements of a civil society. President Johnson believed that this had to be done under a single leader, and he took the advice of his advisor Robert Komer that it should be under military command, not civilian, but with a civilian deputy for CORDS activities. In military terms, MACV was the supported agency and USAID and the others comprising CORDS were the supporting agencies. (State personnel working with CORDS were detailed to USAID.) This structure was established in 1967 at the national level and replicated below at the regional, provincial and district levels.

### **Why CORDS Was Formed**

CORDS was established to address several critical needs, including: 1) the need to enhance coordination among the various agencies -- USAID, State, USIA, CIA and the U.S. military advisory units (as distinct from war fighting units) and 2) the importance of having a single, coordinated US Government entity providing liaison/advisory assistance

to the South Vietnamese government (GVN) from national down to the district level. Prior to the formation of CORDS, the several USG agencies each had representatives at the province level, and each considered its counterpart to be the GVN Province Chief. This clearly was not practical for ensuring appropriate relative priority for the differing support sought from the GVN for USG assisted activities. Thus there was an obvious need to do something to rationalize and prioritize the advice given to the GVN officials and the material support provided to various programs. In addition, the CORDS structure allowed the Saigon USG headquarters to get a better understanding of what was really happening in the provinces.

Robert Komer (previously Special Assistant to President Johnson for non-military aspects of the Vietnam conflict) was the first MACV Deputy for CORDS and is credited with the strategic vision that CORDS was meant to achieve. As Stephen Young explains in *Defeating Insurgency, CORDS During the Vietnam War*, Komer's purpose was to put a political structure in place throughout South Vietnam that would provide "a permanent foundation upholding the combat effort engaged in search and destroy missions. With such a political and administrative foundation in place, combat victories would not prove to be ephemeral with Communists just coming back to where they had been once US forces moved on to another battle. Komer's concept was to fill in behind aggressive mobile military operations with permanent security and government capability." A related point about CORDS is that it allowed President Johnson to show the American people that the USG had a major civilian effort in place as a complement to the military activity.

In November 1968, following North Vietnamese gains from the Tet offensive that year, the new DEPCORDS William Colby presented then U.S. military commander General Abrams with a plan to accelerate pacification efforts. General Abrams recognized the benefits of it and the Accelerated Pacification Campaign was made a top priority, even including for US military operations. The Campaign succeeded beyond expectations due to the coordination of military action and pacification programs. The plan integrated military and civilian approaches to an unprecedented degree. Commanders were encouraged to take forces from areas of light contact and put them where they could do the most good in helping to ensure the success of this offensive or extend it to additional target hamlets.

### **How CORDS Worked**

CORDS reflected an evolution of organizational approach to the pacification efforts. When it was first formed, it was under the command of General William Westmoreland (commander of all military operations in Vietnam) with civilian Robert Komer as his deputy. This integration of military and civilian leadership was essential to the success of CORDS and was implemented at all levels, from national to region to province and district. This design forced civilian and military personnel to integrate their efforts and their thinking toward the common objectives of the US government.

In his paper, *Defeating Insurgency: CORDS During the Vietnam War 1967-1972*, Steven Young explains the organizational structure in great detail. He writes that in the early phases of American support for the GVN, American military personnel had been assigned as advisors to South Vietnamese commanders at the corps, division, battalion,

and sector and sub-sector levels .This advisory structure reported to COMUSMACV. With the creation of CORDS, the sector and sub-sector advisors were transferred to the CORDS organization. Regional / corps advisory commands were given a deputy for CORDS and each sector and sub-sector was given civilian advisors to supervise CORDS activities. Coordination of mobile large-unit warfare with territorial security was achieved at the staff level of region/corps and sector. Mobile troops were assigned either Tactical Areas of Responsibility or given tactical missions in coordination with sector commanders, who brought in sub-sector commands as necessary. In theory, tactical deployments of US and ARVN mobile forces were made in coordination with territorial commanders so that no gaps in security coverage would arise between search and destroy efforts and provision of security for the population.

The CORDS organization was, Young explains, a civilian add-on to an existing military advisory structure. Where a military officer was the senior advisor, a civilian would be appointed deputy advisor and vice versa. The military and the civilians were thus forced to integrate their efforts and their thinking and then contextualize their joint approach in the unique conditions of a specific district or province. At one point a civilian (a former military officer) was appointed Senior Advisor in Military Region IV and thus had command of all US military forces in the Mekong Delta.

The civilians brought with them programs, ideas, funding and responsibility for pacification and rural development. The civilian programs added to the MACV chain of command through CORDS came mostly from AID and USIS's public affairs / psyops / information activities. In addition the support structure for Revolutionary Development Cadre teams assigned to villages was brought over to the CORDS organization. AID

contributed advisors to the police and generalists working with provincial officials. AID kept within its own organizational autonomy advisors at the national level in education public health, public administration, agriculture, credit and economic assistance/budget support. Some CIA programs supporting the police were turned over to CORDS, but the CIA retained its own intelligence gathering capacity and advisory work with the GVN civilian intelligence forces. The MACV structure provided for logistics support of CORDS field operations – housing, supplies, transportation including air assets, and communications.

At the province/sector level, a CORDS team would consist of: a province senior advisor (Colonel or Lt. Colonel or a civilian FSO 2 or 3), a deputy senior province advisor, advisors for the sector S1, S2, S3, and S4 staffs, advisors for the police, agriculture, New Life Development program, Chieu Hoi (amnesty) program, information outreach, and staff support for logistics, communications and transportation. Local Vietnamese were hired for various support functions. The American sector staff consisted of from 25 to 40 personnel, mostly military.

At the district/subsector level, a CORDS team would consist of a District Senior Advisor (Major or FSO 5/6), a Deputy Senior Advisor (Captain or FSO 6/7), an S2 advisor, a heavy weapons instructor, a medic and radio operator. The district American advisory effort had an average of 6-10 personnel, all but one military. Beginning in 1968, Mobile Advisory Teams of a Captain, Lieutenant, two sergeants were assigned for several months each to Popular Forces platoons in villages.

The CORDS organization and functions are well outlined in a November 25, 1970 Staff Memorandum issued by the US Military Command. It provided for an Assistant

Chief of Staff for CORDS under the policy guidance of the Deputy to COMUSMACV and supervised by the Chief of Staff. The Memorandum established and described the functions of the following units:

- Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff, CORDS
- Pacification Studies Group
- Plans, Policy and Programs Directorate
- Management Support Directorate
- Reports and Analysis Directorate
- Territorial Security Directorate (dealing with the Regional Forces, Popular Forces and Peoples Self Defense Forces )
- Phoenix Directorate (managing the program to neutralize the Viet Cong infrastructure)
- Public Safety Directorate (police functions)
- Community Development Directorate (dealing with rural development, ethnic minorities. and civic action)
- Chieu Hoi Directorate (managing the “returnees” or defectors effort)
- War Victims Directorate (dealing with refugees, widows and orphans, and war veterans)
- Saigon Civil Assistance Group (dealing with the full range of municipal functions)

Under the one war strategy, CORDS was established as the organization under MACV to unify and provide single oversight of the pacification effort. Early on,

DEPCORDS Robert Komer stressed eight action programs as central to the CORDS mission. These were: induce defections from Viet Cong forces through the Chieu Hoi program, neutralize the VC infrastructure; improve ARVN support to pacification; expand the RD Cadre effort; increase the capability to handle refugees; revamp police forces; press land reform; develop the territorial security forces (RF/PF).

In 1968, COMUSMACV General Abrams and William Colby, the new DEPCORDS, made CORDS and pacification the main effort in Vietnam and launched an “Accelerated Pacification Program (APC). The reinvigorated civil and rural development program provided increased support, advisors and funding to the police and territorial forces (RF/PF). This rural development emphasis allowed military and civilian (primarily USAID) advisors to work with their Vietnamese counterparts at the province and district level to improve local security and develop infrastructure. Identifying and eliminating the VCI was a critical part of the new focus on pacification, and the APC included the Phoenix program for this purpose. The APC focused on territorial security (not large unit battles,) neutralizing the VCI and supporting programs for self-defense and self-government at the local level. The APC brought some four million people into the People’s Self Defense Force. At the same time, better armed and better trained RF/PF became capable of providing close in security for the rural population. According to the hamlet evaluation reporting system in use at the time, about three million people had been provided security. Also noted were a reduction of taxes collected by the VC, a reduction in recruiting by the VC and a decrease of food taken from villagers.

An important question about CORDS involves the practical daily functioning of the organization. How did personnel from the military and many civilian agencies work

together in CORDS? A former Foreign Service officer assigned to CORDS believes that it was as simple as the fact that the U.S. military in CORDS were instructed to cooperate with the civilian agencies (which they did very well in his opinion). But at least equally important is the fact that the MACV military advisory units at national, regional, province and district level were co-located with the civilian elements of CORDS (usually in the same buildings). It was not difficult to achieve extraordinary breadth and depth of coordination, despite differing organizational cultures. All former Foreign Service Officers interviewed observed that coordination was quite good and usually excellent. Among most of the reports of successful collaboration were those that reflected good use of the talents and resources of the differing personnel and organizations. For example, one district civilian advisor recounted that the senior advisor was military and an engineer, and this officer was always ready to assist the pacification effort with repairing roads, bridges, schools and the like. Other reports from interviews mentioned the receptivity of the military to civilian advisors' suggestions of worthwhile projects on which the military could be helpful. Almost all interviewees reported good working relationships with their military counterparts, no matter which was in the senior role. To many, it was striking how easily the military and civilians moved into this coordinated, joint role with a close, cooperative relationship. The prevailing comment by all interviewees was that each man was there to get a job done, and everyone understood the need to cooperate well in order to achieve that end.

Along with coordination of personnel, CORDS also brought integration of resources and institutional capabilities to province and district level. USAID brought development expertise and technical assistance capability. State contributed political

analysis capability and links with broader diplomatic interests, as well as their field personnel doing whatever else may be assigned. USIA put its information dissemination and motivational skills in the hands of local level managers of the counterinsurgency effort. The military members of CORDS provided their knowledge of war fighting and military intelligence, as well as a great deal of transportation and lift capability, to the CORDS operations at all levels.

Another element to address in CORDS was the coordination of the USG pacification effort with the non-military rural development programs. A former USAID official noted that the pacification program became more politically oriented after the formation of CORDS, with development being more of a means than an end. Such traditional development objectives as improving health and education services were harnessed to contribute to the broader U.S. objective of assisting the GVN to win the war.

All CORDS Foreign Service Officers interviewed agreed that coordination between pacification efforts and rural development programs was not problematic. All programs carried out by the USG related to the pacification effort at province and district level were managed by CORDS. In addition to its participation in CORDS, USAID maintained a separate traditional development assistance program in such areas as education, health, and nutrition. However, all USAID program delivery, either traditional development assistance or pacification was done through the CORDS mechanism in the field. Standard CORDS (USAID-related) pacification work involved building schools and health centers and caring for internally displaced persons. While pacification programs had priority over traditional development activities, in reality it was difficult to differentiate between the two. A traditional USAID project would involve working with

the GVN Ministry of Education to modernize curriculum, but when that curriculum was sent to the province for implementation CORDS personnel would manage this aspect. The building of schools was also handled by CORDS personnel.

USAID personnel played a key role in the organization, particularly with regard to coordination with the host country. The USAID personnel on the CORDS team at province and district levels were usually responsible for managing assistance in several specific functions, among them general economic development, agricultural development, education, health care, refugees (internally displaced people), the Revolutionary Development Cadre teams, the *Chieu Hoi* (“open arms” or returnees) program and others. It is to be noted that State Department personnel working with CORDS were on detail to USAID and performed the same duties.

One person interviewed noted the good technical developmental assets that USAID personnel brought to the national effort, such as improved rice varieties, land reform technology, agricultural production technologies, health care improvements and economic research. The USIA personnel brought to bear valuable skills in public information dissemination and management and media relations.

Another responsibility given to the civilian members of CORDS was local government development. This was a very successful element of the pacification effort. It gave voice to elected hamlet and village officials (who in the past had been appointed) and reduced the arbitrary actions of often incompetent and venal representatives of the central government or of regional military commands.

## **Results – Lessons Learned**

CORDS had significant success in a number of areas of its responsibility. It got off to a good start in 1967; however, the Tet Offensive of January 1968 dealt a setback to the pacification effort. CORDS worked to assist the South Vietnamese government recover from the Tet attacks and to revise the pacification effort given the reduction in territorial security. In the fall of 1968, an Accelerated Pacification Campaign (APC) was put into place and in less than three months significant gains were achieved. The APC surpassed its goal of securing 1,000 contested hamlets and many Viet Cong were persuaded to surrender. CORDS' peak year was 1969, with declines thereafter as the US withdrew resources from Vietnam.

Stephen Young, a CORDS district advisor and later chief of the Village Government division of CORDS, writes in *Defeating Insurgency, During the Vietnam War 1967-1972* that CORDS was a great success. It can claim credit for defeat of the VCI and for the political, economic and military self-reliance of South Vietnam. Unfortunately, it was not designed to defend South Vietnam from a major offensive by North Vietnam without U.S. air support.

As noted by Sorley in his book *A Better War*, the priority given to pacification, even when it came to military operations, was an essential condition of the Accelerated Pacification Campaign. The failure to do so in earlier years largely explained the numerous failed pacification efforts that littered the way. George Jacobson, an old hand in Vietnam, often observed that “there is 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 that will doubt that it is the first 90 percent or the first 10 percent. You just can't conduct

it in the face of an NVA division.” Nor could you conduct it in the face of an entrenched and active Viet Cong infrastructure.

Foreign Service Officers who had worked with CORDS and who were interviewed for this report noted the value of the integrated civilian-military CORDS organization at the various levels (national, regional, provincial and district) as a key to the success of their programs. One respondent put it as “the integration permitted everyone to do their own job and all knew what they were supposed to do.” The civilians were able to have access to military resources (vehicles, aircraft, equipment, et. al.) as well as the military’s knowledge of warfare and counter insurgency. The military welcomed the civilian capabilities in such matters as food programs, refugee relief, agricultural development and health care. One respondent noted that everyone knew his role and was glad to have the expertise and experience of the others.

Provision of military transportation assets in support of the civilian agencies was one key to the success of CORDS and mentioned by all interviewees. Civilians in CORDS were able to utilize US military transport (vehicles, helicopters, and cargo aircraft) to move commodities and personnel out to field sites and to visit remote villages and hamlets that were unsafe to visit by road. This enabled efficient movement of everything from personnel to vehicles to food and other supplies for the pacification program. Ground transportation between a province capital and some district capitals was often insecure. US Army helicopter support was especially useful. (Air America planes, contracted by USAID/Saigon, were limited to transportation between major cities, and their small helicopters were generally only for transport of personnel, not commodities.

The primary contributor to success for one advisor was that large amounts of financial resources were available to the effort. This CORDS advisor stressed the value of the assistance-in-kind program, which was a means to generate local currency for local programming and purchasing of materials. He noted that when the fund was depleted, they could quickly get more. This meant that he could get involved in as many worthy projects as he and his colleagues could find. He described how he would hold meetings with local officials to determine the most needed projects in various communities, such as a school house, a health center, or an irrigation tank. After coordinating with officials of the relevant GVN ministry and getting assurance that staff and materials would be provided once the construction was completed, the CORDS personnel could then quickly procure the building materials (cement, rebar, etc.) locally.

Another Foreign Service officer observed that two elements contributing to the success of CORDS were the willingness of the US military to integrate into the structure and the provision of adequate security in the populated areas where CORDS programs were implemented. (Security in the less populated areas was another thing. The CORDS program did not attempt to carry out pacification and development activities in clearly insecure areas.) He also noted that the command structure contributed to the success of CORDS. By having it under the command of the senior military officer in country, CORDS was able to operate with the highest authority and with good access to resources. The interviewee offered a comparison of CORDS with the structure initially set up for Iraq. There a retired three star general was sent to head up reconstruction efforts, but separate from the military command. This flew in the face of the lesson of Vietnam. By way of explanation, he noted that this was doomed to be ineffective because a retired

three star general, however well qualified, cannot compete for resources and influence with an active duty four star in charge of the overall operation.

Several interviewees mentioned a particular office of CORDS headquarters as a model for civil-military cooperation and for reality checks on what was happening in the field. The Pacification Studies Group (PSG) was composed of equal numbers of military officers and civilians from State and USAID. The function of the office was to conduct field checks of CORDS programs of all types, anywhere in the country, at the direction of the DEPCORDS. The qualifications for working in the PSG were noteworthy. For example, the civilians were required to speak Vietnamese and to have spent at least one year working in South Vietnam at province or district level. (These requirements could not be applied to the military who only served one year tours.) The group conducted studies of a given CORDS program across several provinces or districts for comparison purposes. Or it might do a broad assessment of several programs in a particular province or district. One notable study was a reality check on the controversial Hamlet Evaluation System (HES), a monthly report that purported to rate all the hamlets in the country with regard to their security, pacification and development status. Improving HES scores over time were assumed to mean progress in the pacification effort. The findings of the PSG study that ratings often tended to be overstated or unsubstantiated led to major revisions of the reporting system. The PSG was capable of providing rapid, realistic field checks on the progress of the many CORDS programs by experienced and trusted staff. In all references to this element of CORDS, its rapid response capability to assess accurately progress in the field and to balance overly rosy reporting was invaluable to senior management.

Several of those interviewed for this study noted some issues in working with the military. One believed that much of the military's civic action work was ineffective before CORDS, but it improved significantly after the consolidation as a result of civilian input. Additionally, some felt that before working jointly under CORDS, too much of the military advisory effort was focused on security issues to the detriment of pacification and development.

One person mentioned as a problem the removal of people from their home areas to more secure areas (a stratagem to remove the people from the reach of the Viet Cong). It alienated those being displaced and interfered with their traditional ties to ancestral homes. It was counterproductive and undermined other pacification programs designed to win their allegiance to the GVN.

In fairness to the military, it should be noted that the civilian agency knowledge of military affairs was problematic at best. As one person interviewed observed, there had been little or no training of civilians on either military matters or military culture, resulting in too many civilians having to learn on the job how to work effectively with their colleagues..

Several people interviewed mentioned difficulties in keeping the Vietnamese counterparts focused on the stepping stones to success. Too many counterparts were more interested in their own enrichment than the long and difficult process of pacification and implementation of development projects. This is consistent with comments by several interviewees about the persistent and pervasive corruption of the GVN as a problem that hampered the CORDS program.

## **Conclusions**

The situation in Vietnam was, to say the least, complex due to the country's turbulent history and associated civil and foreign conflicts. The limited nature of this report did not allow for the number of in depth interviews nor the amount of research necessary to judge the multitude of issues, successes, and controversies that are related to the work of CORDS during the war. In addition, there are many articles and books that provide in-depth study of counterinsurgency work in Vietnam. This report is intended to be an overall introduction to the subject with the addition of lessons learned from USAID and State personnel assigned to CORDS.

The most important lesson learned is that the military and civilian counter-insurgency and pacification efforts should be integrated within a single command structure. In this way, all of the USG resources can be brought to bear on the mission. The military and civilian functions are interdependent in a counter-insurgency situation, for all the reasons noted above. Related to this point is the reality that reconstruction/post-conflict development efforts must have strong leadership, with the authority and resources necessary to accomplish the mission.

Another lesson is that it is important to focus on economic and social issues as well as on the insurgency. The CORDS strategy assumed that the populace of Vietnam would be as interested as anyone in seeing tangible economic benefits that could not be provided or obtained if the insurgents were to win. Thus, the introduction of high yielding rice varieties, the availability of fertilizers and pesticides, and other economic and social development programs went hand-in-hand with the counter-insurgency efforts. An emphasis on education with the building of schools and the provision of teachers in

rural hamlets and the building of health centers underscored the interest of the GVN in the wellbeing and development of the rural population.

The CORDS experience also underscored the necessity of ensuring two-way dialogue between field staff and higher headquarters. Successful joint civilian-military cooperation in counterinsurgency efforts requires clear and continual communication, which many interviewees mentioned as a positive element of CORDS. Some interviewees did mention that this communication could have been strengthened by information sharing mechanisms such as in-country conferences, periodic lessons learned bulletins and similar vehicles.

It is to be noted that an underlying factor in the discussions and research was that the security situation in the areas in which most of the CORDS work took place was relatively good. CORDS activities for the most part did not occur in clearly insecure areas. Several of those interviewed stressed that the success of CORDS could not be replicated in an environment in which civilian personnel would be at serious risk.

## **APPENDICES**

- CORDS Vietnam: Major Findings**
- List of Persons Interviewed**
- CORDS Readings**

## **CORDS Vietnam: Major Findings**

On September 20, 2005, the paper “The Vietnam CORDS Experience: A Model of Successful Civil-Military Partnership” was reviewed by a group of USAID personnel, chaired by AA/PPC Dr. Douglas Menarchik. As an aid to the discussion, the author of the paper, William Schoux, prepared a brief document titled “CORDS Vietnam: Major Findings.” The following is the text of that document.

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CORDS was a significant success in civilian-military cooperation in a wartime situation. The major factors or determinants in this success merit examination.

**1. Leadership** – Outstanding leadership was a major factor of the successes of the later CORDS period. This is evidenced by the comparison of the Westmoreland/Komer period with the Abrams/Colby period. Down the chain of command, leadership was a major factor at region, province and district levels.

Flexibility was an important factor in the decision of assigning a military or civilian leader for any given element of the organization. The assignment was determined by the level of security and the experience of the candidates. In the presence of a significant military threat, it was logical to appoint a military officer as the senior CORDS official. In relatively secure areas, a civilian senior official was preferred.

**2. Security** – The pacification program worked best where there was sufficient security to permit continuing access to the population, in cities, towns and hamlets, in order to allow implementation of the full range of CORDS programs. Security is the first consideration in a conflict or post-conflict situation. Where security was adequate, the

pacification program could flourish, with attention to programs of economic development, education, and health services for the rural population. These latter programs were avidly received by the Vietnamese.

As a corollary, in the presence of a serious military threat, the overall USG effort should be managed by the military. After the experience of the pre-CORDS field operations, it was clear that the pacification and development program had to be integrated with the overall military effort. Counterinsurgency requires a unity of effort and command among the military, political, economic and social dimensions of the conflict. This unity is needed at all levels of the effort; in the case of Vietnam, this meant from national down to district level.

**3. The Correct Objectives** – In Vietnam, the situation required a change of strategy, from *search and destroy* to *clear and hold*. The former had the US in an endless war of attrition. The latter allowed for protection of the people and the successful conduct of pacification and development programs. CORDS was instrumental in meeting the objective of holding the support of the civilian population.

In the same vein, it was critical that the US and GVN forces turn their attention to elimination of the Viet Cong Infrastructure, not just focus their attack on the enemy military forces. The obverse of this was the strengthening of the GVN local authorities through a local government development program.

**4. Territorial Forces** - In addition to the Vietnamese national army (ARVN) with its countrywide focus; Regional Forces and Provincial Forces (RF/PF) forces were developed. These territorial forces were the first line of defense in the hamlets and villages and were composed of local people with a stake in their home areas. They were

normally commanded by officers from the area and comprised more than 50 percent of total GVN military forces.

**5. Internal Evaluation to Gain Reliable Information** – South Vietnam was a large, populous country with significant regional differences, and senior CORDS managers needed reliable information on what programs were needed and how well they were working. In addition to conventional reporting methods, CORDS instituted the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES). This system had CORDS district advisory units reporting monthly on every hamlet in every district throughout the country. HES scores provided a barometer of the security status of every hamlet. To guard against bias by the reporters, CORDS managers cross checked data with defector rates, terrorism incidents and intelligence information. In addition, a major study of the HES was conducted by the Pacification Studies Group.

## List of Persons Interviewed

### Name / CORDS Affiliation

Borg, Parker W. / State

Chernenkoff, Sidney / USAID

Foti, John / USAID

Ginnetti, Libby / USAID

Korin, Michael / USAID

Laudato, George A. / USAID

Passage, David / State

Pavich, Frank / USAID

Winn, David / State

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Note: The author, William Schoux, served in various field and headquarters positions with USAID/Vietnam and CORDS, including the provinces of Binh Thuan and Kien Giang, and the Pacification Studies Group in Saigon, from 1966-1970. This paper was prepared under a contract with the U.S. Agency for International Development.

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