

"The guerrilla swims like a fish  
through the sea of men,"  
according to Mao. What is our  
course when the sea is an inviting  
one for the fish?

## Where Do We Go from Here?



**B**y mid-1969, it had become perfectly obvious that in one way or another, sooner rather than later, the United States was going to disengage in Vietnam. Whatever the precise terms of that disengagement, whatever the ultimate resolution, the effort at counterinsurgency in Vietnam was coming to an end and the way was clear for the inevitable next question: What now? Where do we—the United States—go from here?

The first and easiest answer to the question would undoubtedly be a fervent "never again." And the so-called hawks might be just as emphatic in this response as the doves. For the agony, the bitterness, the tensions which our society has suffered at least in part because of Vietnam have constituted a very heavy price indeed. If there is any reasonable way in which another Vietnam can be avoided in the future, all sensible Americans would accept the alternative. Indeed, the present administration in the now famous no-direct-quote briefing on Guam prior to President Nixon's mid-summer visit to a number of Asian nations laid down just such a national policy: "No more Vietnams."

But while national policy may or may not be able to maintain such a heartfelt intention, prudence requires acceptance of the possibility that our best preventive efforts may be insufficient and that once again somewhere, sometime in the foreseeable future, some country will

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again face an insurgency situation which our national leadership will decide involves our essential interests and requires our assistance. Such a prospect hardly seems likely in today's atmosphere but, nevertheless, only the foolhardy would rule out either the possibility or the need for preparing for that possibility.

An estimate of the likelihood of this prospect is measured best by examining the past. We must recognize that the course of events in Vietnam was such that renewed use of the techniques of insurgency, of wars of liberation at other vulnerable points is possible and even likely.

For neither sentiment nor self-delusion should blind us to the merits of a Communist contention

that Vietnam has proved the validity of the Mao-Giap thesis that a determined, skillful "peoples' effort" can bring the world's most powerful industrial and military power to heel in certain situations short of total war. We can reassure ourselves in many ways. If we want to so argue, we can hold that we succeeded in our basic objective of preventing the takeover of South Vietnam by military force, and in this sense, we have seen to it that aggression has not paid and have forced the aggressor to revert to a political track for his goals, but we should be clear that the other side of the coin is a very persuasive one to dissident elements everywhere in the world: application of insurgency tactics as perfected by the Viet Minh and their successors, the Viet Cong, provides a blueprint for success for "Wars of National Liberation." This Communist brief could be argued regardless of further developments in Vietnam. While the Viet Cong and Hanoi have come to the negotiating table, the fact is that we are there too, dealing with them not as defeated parties but as equals. The argument can extend ad infinitum with point and counterpoint. For the purposes of this presentation, let it simply be acknowledged that there is more than a color of a respectable case to be made from the viewpoint of potential insurgents—and the United States as the prime target for the dissidents of the world would do well to recognize that the challenge



may well be mounted once more.

Vietnam, of course, had unique characteristics that made the application of insurgency concepts easier: the largely uninhabited and easily penetrated border areas that permitted infiltration with little hindrance; a tradition of popular opposition to a central government of any kind, let alone one identified with a foreign power; a political, social and historical heritage that facilitated the role of the insurgent; and above all, legitimate political, social and economic grievances on the part of a major portion of the population that needed correction. The specific proverbial ocean was an inviting one for the fish.

But if Vietnam contained characteristics that encouraged the particular type of war which it experienced, it should not be regarded as impossible to reproduce elsewhere. Each potential setting for insurgency will have its special circumstances but resourceful insurgents need only adjust and modify techniques to that particular situation. The effort will not always be effective, but there is no doubt that the basic theories of Mao and Giap can be modified for situations of many types. It will be largely a matter of imagination and skill that will determine whether an insurgency presents a real threat which requires assistance beyond local resources.

Fortunately, there can be a corollary flexibility in the response to insurgency, provided certain essential bedrock principles are observed. It is these principles that this paper will seek to identify and examine. These principles are relatively few in number and simple in concept but extremely difficult to apply consistently in the face of counter pressures. The problems of application have been discussed at great length in the continuing analysis of Vietnam. At this point, we limit ourselves to the exercise of distilling the lessons of Vietnam and pinpointing fundamental requirements for future successful responses to insurgency—no matter how determined and skillful. Furthermore, the requirement for modification in application to particular situations is a demanding one but is not considered here simply because

the basics must be absorbed first—and then the variation can be almost infinite depending on the individual setting.

This act of identification of essentials accompanied by the development of doctrine and capability has an additional prospective virtue of serving as a deterrent to future challenge. For, while the potential insurgents of the world are likely to be encouraged by the course of events in Vietnam, so the counterinsurgents have also had the opportunity to test their methods and should be better prepared in any future contest. If that better preparation is evident, then the likelihood of needing it is reduced. If you will, the United States has to be visibly less of a mark, less of a big, hopeless, sitting duck for every small fry movement that wants to demonstrate its insurgency prowess—and the challenge may be discouraged by the elimination of such a tempting target.

Our creditability in this context of preventive readiness will be better established by a vigorous distillation and acceptance of the lessons of Vietnam—a process that has been relatively neglected under the pressures of the immediate problems facing us in the recent past. The agencies of government—primarily the military—directly involved in Vietnam have been so busy trying to fight the war and our society as a whole has been so absorbed debating it that there has been too little effort devoted to a concerted and systematic evaluation of the Vietnamese experience or to the corollary development of a strategic doctrine for counterinsurgency. We have had much on tactics; too little on strategy. We have in effect had too few qualified specialists writing for us on how to meet the challenge of insurgency.

The emphasis on “we,” the United States, is a deliberate one. For our concept of response to insurgent challenge must necessarily grow out of the nature of our role in a prospective insurgency situation—a role in sharp contrast to the problems facing the existing local social structure and government.

The most likely prospect and the one that will require the greatest

skill is a situation similar to Vietnam: an insurgent challenge to an existing government which we regard and continue to treat as independent and allied rather than subordinate and submissive. We differed in Vietnam—and the likelihood is that we will differ in future situations—from the British in Malaya, perhaps the most relevant of previous counterinsurgency situations. The British were in charge with a direct line of authority in Malaya. When we talk about the United States meeting an insurgency challenge, we are really talking about a situation in which we will be assisting an existing government; in fact, we will be in an allied role, not a position of command. The difference is enormous.

This fundamental characteristic will inevitably color our approach, our policies and our actions. It determines the principles which we seek to apply and provides the basis for our participation and effectiveness. It also limits the pertinence of other experiences and situations. It is why we must develop a doctrine based on the type of situation and relationship with the local government in which we are likely to find ourselves.

It is in this context that we can identify four essentials of counterinsurgency for future American involvement. While these principles seem primer level in formulation, the failure to observe them fully in spirit and concept led to many of our difficulties in Vietnam and similar shortcomings in the future would cast doubt on the potential effectiveness of any response by us to a resourceful insurgent movement.

These principles, of necessity, revolve around the basic ingredients in the type of situation likely to face us: the United States, the host government, the relations between the two and the process of communicating to our respective publics and to the world as a whole. It is useful to examine each of these broad segments and establish some basic considerations which must be observed.

Perhaps one note of caution or limitation is essential if the following presentation of principles is to be placed in proper perspective.



Discussion of insurgency—or counterinsurgency—should not be undertaken in the context of the more conventional war that eventually evolved in Vietnam through the presence of more than one-half million American troops and many tens of thousands of North Vietnamese regulars. Many of the principles enunciated below still have relevance even when the conflict reaches the classical third stage of insurgency that finally emerged in Vietnam but the desired application of these principles is intended to take place long before that phase—indeed, in time for the third phase to need never arrive. For though these principles will still have relevance, it is also true that they are harder to apply and even less effective as the war grows; changes if you will from the relative fluidity, political as well as military, of an insurgency to the rigidity and massive bluntness of a more conventional war. Our remarks are to be read in the framework of a true insurgency; not an insurgency transformed into a battlefield war.

**F**IRST, the involvement of the United States: the principles governing the American part of a counterinsurgency effort break down into two broad categories—basic philosophy and organization. The two are closely interrelated.

In terms of philosophy, we must first and foremost accept fully in deed as well as in word the truism that insurgency movements almost by definition—and the response to them—are essentially political or at most political/military, not exclusively or even predominantly military. Without the acceptance of this principle, we are on a completely false footing and we can save ourselves a great deal of disappointment by not getting involved. In insurgency, it is the political agent backed up by the military capability who provides the cutting edge and the response or “defense” must be based essentially on the same approach. As simple as the point may seem, we have not given much evidence of learning the lesson in the past while the Communists have demonstrated full apprecia-

tion of the basic principle for more than fifty years. Our involvement in terms of assistance to a host government cannot be limited to hardware and/or economic assistance; it must extend into a political area without apology or hesitation. Or, perhaps stated better, we must have assurance that an effective political program will be undertaken by the host government and we in turn must insist and assist in such a program.

Secondly, our approach and the organization for our assistance must be determined by this interrelation of political and military factors. Some of the most astute observers in Vietnam insist that the greatest contribution made by the Viet Cong to the art of insurgency has been organization—and there is much to be said for the theory. Conversely, it might be argued with considerable validity that the greatest American weakness in Vietnam was organization. In effect, we sought to conduct our portion of the effort for many years through the mechanism of a bureaucratic structure designed for normal government operations in Washington. We worked closely with a military that, like the military in all underdeveloped countries, was intensely political—and told our own military to stay out of the political aspects, a restriction our own military accepted much too willingly. Similarly, our civilian agencies—State, AID, and USIA—avoided the military aspects of the effort for too long. Only the CIA tried to bridge the gap but it was too inhibited by its very nature to serve the purpose. It was not until the late stages of the war that some of these artificial barriers began to break down—and in truth, we must recognize that the essential erasing of agency distinctions was never complete, nor was command and responsibility in Vietnam ever truly unified under one chief.

For the future, we need to establish a United States governmental organization that is designed specifically for counterinsurgency rather than conventional war. Such an agency must initially break down the rigid distinction between military and civilian personnel and among Washington agencies just as

our doctrine of operations must break down the artificial distinction between the political and military aspects of the war. Recognizing that an insurgency situation is essentially a political problem or at most political/military need not predetermine the category of personnel who should conduct the effort. Not only is the military not ruled out of such an undertaking but quite to the contrary: the military must participate, provided it recognizes the nature of the effort and becomes qualified to contribute to the political dimension. This is particularly true and particularly difficult for our own military which traditionally has either avoided politics completely or has tended to be identified with the status quo. An insurgency situation requires our military to be political—as distinguished perhaps from engaging in politics in a domestic sense—and to be sensitive and responsive to the need for political change in the host country.

Similarly, civilian—or political—personnel must recognize and accept the military dimension of the insurgency situation with full appreciation for the problems and capabilities of the military forces. Separating the civilian participant from the military aspects of the situation is just as damaging to the effectiveness of the overall effort as separating the military from the political aspects.

It is not until one has served within our government that one appreciates the depth of the heresy involved in the foregoing statements. But, if we do not catch up with the Communists now after fifty years and several major examples of this interrelationship of political and military factors and the need for proper organization and personnel to conduct an effective campaign, then perhaps we should not even try to undertake a counterinsurgency effort again and simply concede that we are not capable of meeting a challenge of this type.

More than anything else, the direction of any future United States effort in counterinsurgency needs the distinguishing characteristic of a coordinated, integrated single channel of political/military authority and organization.





any. In any counterinsurgency effort, we thus need a host government interested in responding to the legitimate needs of its people rather than a simple preservation of the status quo—and that government must be prepared to mount and carry through a necessary program of political, social and economic change. Here again, the concept is deceptively simple, the execution extremely difficult.

**R**ELATIONS between the two governments is the third fundamental aspect that must be considered. Here is an area which raises all kinds of sensitivities and limitations, both for us and for the host government. Our role, presumably, will be one of assistance: the host government will be sovereign and independent. And yet, with due regard for public sensitivities and visible humiliation, we must not permit our surrogate role to inhibit the use of our assistance—military and economic—as leverage to press for the desired goals of political, social and economic responsiveness to the needs of the people. How we apply our pressures is a matter of skill and adaptation to the peculiarities of the nation involved, but applying such pressures when required is essential to success. Once more we find a fundamental principle which is relatively easy to state and enormously complex in application. In Vietnam, we either refrained from applying our leverage sufficiently or, when we attempted to do so, we did it so crudely and visibly that it was almost self-defeating. Perhaps the ultimate test of diplomacy in an insurgency situation is the effective application of leverage based on our assistance. We have a perfectly valid rationale for such pressure. Our lives and resources are involved and our stake in the effectiveness of the host government is a very real one.

**F**INALLY, the fourth principle in the basics of counterinsurgency is the effective communication of the nature, goals and progress of the effort to the public of both the United States and the host country—and indeed to the population of the world at large. Volumes can, have

been and will be written about the communication process in the Vietnam war. For purposes of this particular discussion, it is enough to note that the effort of the United States government fell short of the needs; that the lack of understanding and support at home led inevitably to the presidential speech of March 31, 1968, and the subsequent American determination to disengage almost regardless of consequences. In a very real sense, as seen from Hanoi, history has repeated itself. If the French effort against the Viet Minh was lost in metropolitan France, with the climactic factor being Dien Bien Phu, the American effort might similarly be said to have been lost in the metropolitan United States with the ultimate disillusionment coming in the Tet offensive of 1968.

It is patently clear that popular support is needed for a counterinsurgency effort—both in the country of origin and in the country of assistance. That support must be based primarily on the substance and attractiveness of the political/military program being conducted by the host government and leadership—and thus the relative appeal of the competing sides from the viewpoint of ultimate justice. But communication in today's world has become so immediate and pervasive that, even with a valid program, the failure to communicate effectively can leave an information vacuum which will inevitably lead to an erosion of support. The requirements for successful communication in such circumstances are demanding but failure in this vital area ultimately can undermine the entire program.

For it is no longer valid to assume that US official identification with one side assures an automatic base of support in the US body politic; in fact, given the nature of today's skepticism about official acts, US involvement might almost mean the opposite. A major communication effort is essential right from the start—an effort based on candor, openness and dialogue.

**S**TRIPPED of all elaboration, the bedrock requirements of a successful counterinsurgency doctrine for  
(Continued on page 46)



the United States in the role of assistance to an existing government thus can be stated as follows:

1. Recognition by the United States that a successful effort depends on an integrated and responsive political/military program; and organization of our own considerable resources in accordance with this principle as a means of maximum effectiveness.
2. Recognition of the same basic philosophy by the local leadership which we assist and a readiness on its part to carry out aggressively and energetically an effective program along these lines.
3. A readiness to use American assistance, both military and economic, as leverage on the host government to pursue these goals consistently and vigorously.
4. Effective communication of the program and the effort to

the people of the the assisting and host countries.

As important and critical as these four essentials are, they are still relatively easier to distill and identify than to apply. And in this latter task lies an additional great challenge for future American practitioners of the art of counterinsurgency. To take full advantage of our experience in Vietnam, to insure that the trained manpower we have acquired is not dissipated, to provide an effective ready capability in this highly specialized field of endeavor, some center of coordination and development is necessary. The exact nature of that center can be flexible. One approach would be to have some existing agency of government, such as the Kennedy Center at Fort Bragg, serve as an executive agent for the whole government. Another possibility would be to set up an independent planning office, such as the Office of Emergency Planning for Civil De-

fense, to serve the same function. But in one form or another, the United States needs a center for counterinsurgency to evolve on behalf of the entire government, military as well as civilian, a doctrine for the future based on our experiences in Vietnam and elsewhere and taking into account the refinements in tactics and theory which Communists will undoubtedly develop and disseminate in the years ahead. Such an agency would also draw up contingency plans for possible trouble spots in areas of potential American vital interests.

The creation of an independent center with interagency authority for this purpose would probably require special approval by Congress. The necessary legislation could provide the planning agency with a small budget and modest manpower to undertake training of personnel from all appropriate military and civilian agencies and a charter to evolve national counterinsurgency doctrine. Such an agency could also keep a master list of

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skilled government personnel, regardless of service, who have demonstrated special aptitude for counterinsurgency roles and even train limited cadres of personnel in the language, culture and political situation of countries where insurgency might involve the United States. The integrated civilian/military approach cutting across existing government agencies is essential in this process of preparation. Not only should the development of doctrine and the training process draw on the personnel of many agencies, but these same personnel could play a missionary role in spreading concepts during their service with their parent organization.

Once a situation deteriorates and a national determination is made that American assistance is required in an insurgency situation, the agency could even play an operational role. Initially and at a low level of activity this agency could work perhaps within the existing diplomatic structure in the same

manner that CIA or Special Forces elements have functioned in various situations in recent years. But, when the situation becomes more critical, when and if we approach the scale of assistance to Vietnam of the early sixties, then the President could transfer responsibility for direction of American involvement in the country over to the insurgency agency. Thus, all American elements in that country—State, Defense, CIA, AID, USIA, etc., would come under one direction and one leadership. In effect, the President could apply the joint command concept to the insurgency field, establishing a channel of single authority reporting back through any necessary intermediate levels to one point of authority in the United States—the National Security Council, a specially constituted Civilian/Military Chiefs of Staff or whatever other structure is devised. The principle is the important point: total integration of the civilian/military effort both in the field and in Washington.

There is much to be said for the proposition that only through some such device—whether an agency specially established for this purpose or assignment of the function to an existing organization in the role of executive agent for the government—can the United States properly prepare for and, if necessary, conduct the counterinsurgency effort of the future. Integration of effort, a breaking down of bureaucratic barriers, an acceptance of the interrelation of all aspects of counterinsurgency is absolutely essential for our future readiness. Whatever unorthodoxy is required to apply these principles must be accepted.

At enormous cost in Vietnam, we have gained the experience and foundation necessary to conduct more effective national efforts in counterinsurgency situations. If we build on this base along the lines of the fundamental principles which can be distilled from that experience, then perhaps the price we will have to pay need not be nearly so high if there is a next time. ■

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