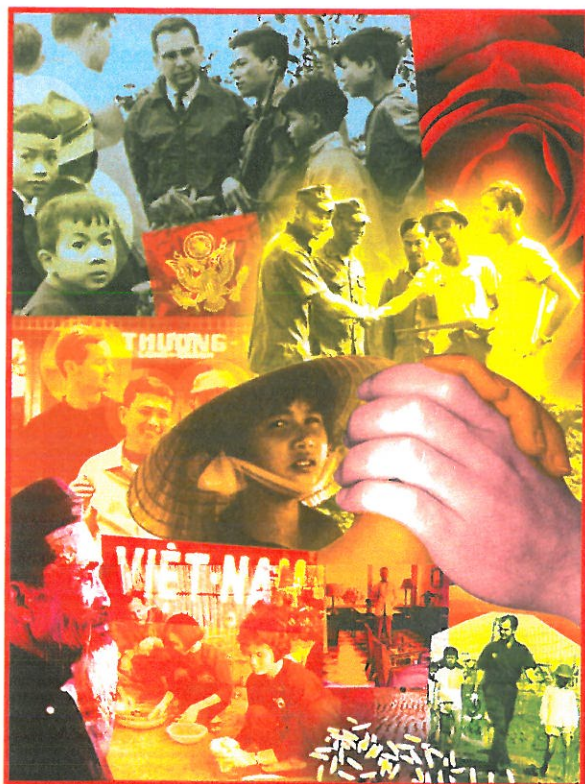


THE HEART AND MIND OF USAID'S VIETNAM MISSION



D MOST USAID PERSONNEL IN VIETNAM, INCLUDING STATE FSOs, LABORED IN OBSCURITY. HERE ARE SOME OF THEIR STORIES.

BY MARC LEEPSON

during the Vietnam War, the U.S. set out not only to win military victory, but also to “win the hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese. This second, equally important campaign to bolster popular support for the South Vietnamese government against the Viet Cong centered on assistance and development programs worth billions of dollars to the war-torn country. The program was directed by a government agency designed to aid underdeveloped countries — the U.S. Agency for International Development — but its soul for the most part was molded in the minds of military men and spymasters like William Colby, who would later serve as director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

From his perch as Saigon CIA station chief and later as the second director of the Civil Operations and Rural

Development Support Program, Colby was highly influential in the war effort. Early on, he was a strong proponent of the "hearts and minds" strategy of which USAID was to be an important component. The CORDS initiative epitomized Colby's conviction that the war would be won or lost not on the battlefield, but in the struggle for the loyalty of the South Vietnamese people.

In hindsight, Colby blamed the loss in Vietnam on failure to implement this strategy. The "major error of the Americans in Vietnam was insisting upon fighting an American-style military war against an enemy who, through the early years of the war, was fighting his style of people's war at the level of the population," he wrote in his 1989 book on Vietnam, *Lost Victory*.

Throughout the war, USAID, which stayed in Vietnam until the fall of Saigon, designed and implemented a wide array of American development and assistance programs in South Vietnam, of which CORDS was perhaps the best known.

Present At The Creation

U.S. assistance to South Vietnam pre-dated the establishment of USAID by some six years, beginning shortly after the nation came into being in May 1954. The International Cooperation Administration and the Development Loan Fund, which had been created to implement the Marshall Plan in post-World War II Europe and then to administer similar economic assistance to other regions, jointly administered the program. The two groups began steering American non-military foreign aid to the fledgling South Vietnamese government of Ngo Dinh Diem in June 1955. Initial funding went for land reform programs and for training South Vietnamese police forces and intelligence services in anti-guerrilla tactics.

President John F. Kennedy signed the Foreign

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Assistance Act into law in 1961, just before the U.S. began to escalate its involvement in Vietnam. At the same time Kennedy also issued an executive order establishing the U.S. Agency for International Development as an independent federal government agency that received its foreign policy guidance from the secretary of State. Whether the timing of USAID's founding was coincidental or not, this reorganization marked the beginning of large increases in

American foreign aid, both to South Vietnam and worldwide.

Previously, the bulk of U.S. overseas aid had gone in lump sums to central government accounts, which left the funds vulnerable to diversion and mismanagement. The new agency provided assistance in the form of smaller loans and grants and targeted long-range plans to build up the economies of less-developed countries. Specifically, it concentrated on the areas of health, agriculture, population planning, education and energy.

The USAID effort in Vietnam, which was but one of many poor countries around the globe, took on something of a showcase quality. Between 1962 and 1975, South Vietnam received by far the largest portion of USAID economic assistance. In 1967 alone the agency's budget allocated more than \$550 million out of its worldwide budget of more than \$2 billion for a nation of some 17 million people.

To demonstrate American commitment to shoring up democracy in South Vietnam, between 1961 and 1972 (when it began winding down its assistance), USAID established countless self-help projects, schools, health clinics, hospitals, highways, hydroelectric facilities, industrial centers and farming cooperatives. The agency also sent thousands of agricultural experts, doctors, nurses, teachers, engineers, intelligence agents, and civilian advisers. For example, more than 700 American physicians served tours in USAID-built South Vietnamese hospitals.

During roughly the same period, the agency also ran the extensive Commercial Import Program, worth billions of dollars. USAID supported Vietnamese importers who ordered foreign goods through the CIP, paying for the purchases in South Vietnamese currency.

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That money then went into a fund at the National Bank of Vietnam, which the South Vietnamese government used to finance development projects and cover operating expenses.

USAID was also instrumental in helping settle hundreds of thousands of refugees, in promoting land reform and in administering the amnesty program (known as Chieu Hoi, or "open arms") that encouraged Viet Cong to desert and join the South Vietnamese cause.

Unlikely Bed Partners?

In 1967, much of USAID's work was melded into the new military- and CIA-dominated Civil Operations and Rural Development Support Program, which became probably the most famous component of its presence in Vietnam. The CORDS program was the brainchild of Robert Komer, President Lyndon Johnson's special assistant for pacification in Vietnam. In that position, Komer was responsible for the government's non-military efforts to "pacify" Viet Cong-controlled areas and return them to South Vietnamese government control.

CORDS brought into one program all of the diverse counterinsurgency programs run by the military, USAID and the CIA. Under CORDS, USAID personnel worked in conjunction with American and South Vietnamese military and CIA personnel throughout the country, setting up programs designed to win Vietnamese peasants over to the South Vietnamese government's cause and to destroy support for the Viet Cong. In particular, CORDS helped the South Vietnamese develop and then support a national police force and local militias known as the Regional and Popular Forces.

Included in CORDS was the controversial Phoenix program, which was designed to eliminate the rural Viet Cong infrastructure. Under Phoenix, which began in July 1968, South Vietnamese and American pacification intelligence operatives gathered information on suspected guerrillas and then worked to capture, convert or kill them. That program ended in 1972.

A few USAID people — most notably John Paul Vann, who was a development officer from 1965 to 1967 and a CORDS adviser from 1968 to 1971 — gained notoriety during their tours of duty in Vietnam for their

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outspoken criticism of U.S. policy. Others, such as current U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Richard Holbrooke, who was a USAID province adviser in Vietnam in 1963-64, achieved prominence well after the war.

Most of those who worked for USAID in Vietnam, however, labored in relative obscurity. Moreover, even after the war, their stories were not widely disseminated. Indeed, USAID's entire mission in the war has been notably underreported in the vast body of Vietnam War literature that has been published since 1975.

The POW

Take, for example, the amazing story of Mike Benge, who first went to Vietnam in 1963 as a volunteer with International Voluntary Services, the forerunner of the Peace Corps. Working under a USAID contract, Benge specialized in education and agriculture.

"USAID had a very big rural school program, building usually one- and two-room schoolhouses out in the rural areas," Benge said in an interview. "I was working on that, going around and checking the construction of them to see if they met up to specs. I also was making sure we had teachers who had gone through a teacher training program, and getting books and other supplies out to them."

Benge was posted in the Central Highlands city of Ban Me Thuot. He worked primarily with the Montagnards, the predominant ethnic minority tribal group in the region, translating and teaching. "We were translating some of the primers into the Rhade language [the language of the Montagnards], using Rhade to ease them into Vietnamese, which was the main language being used in the schools."

From Ban Me Thuot, Benge was transferred to Kontum Province where he set up a demonstration farm and agricultural training center. He then went back to the Central Highlands, where he continued his work with the Montagnards. Among other things, Benge taught at a USAID-built technical-vocational education center.

In 1965 he was hired by USAID and held jobs as provincial representative in Kontum, Phu Yen Province and Ban Me Thuot. At the later post, as the civilian adviser to the South Vietnamese province chief, Benge was in charge of all non-military matters. Benge's team, among other things, dug wells, put in a new telephone system, built a new airport and many miles of roads, and installed electric generating systems. They also rebuilt a hospital and built a new teachers training college for ethnic minorities.

At the mission's height in 1967 Benge was in charge of some 65 Americans, including a 45-member military civic action team. The civilians under his command included education, agricultural and refugee advisers.

The pivotal moment in Mike Benge's Vietnam tour came on Jan. 28, 1968, during the first attack of the Tet Offensive. When Ban Me Thuot came under attack by a battalion of NVA regulars, Benge frantically tried to arrange the evacuation of his USAID team. While doing so, he was captured by a squad of North Vietnamese Army troops.

"The North Vietnamese had a B-40 rocket launcher pointed at me, plus their [rifles], and said, 'Surrender,' which I did," Benge said. "I was held for five years."

Benge became one of a handful of USAID and State Department employees who were POWs in Vietnam. He was taken to a prison camp in South Vietnam, and then was moved to another camp in Cambodia where he was held in a cage for a year. He was moved again to a hospital POW camp in Laos, and finally to North Vietnam, where he eventually was incarcerated in the infamous "Hanoi Hilton."

"In North Vietnam they locked me up in a black box. I was there for a year. It was about six by four feet with the walls painted black, the doors closed," Benge said. "I spent 27 months total in solitary confinement — one year in a cage, one year in a black box."

Benge was released in January 1973 along with the other American POWs held in Hanoi. He was credited with saving the lives of 11 USAID personnel in Ban Me Thuot and received the State Department's highest award

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for heroism and another for valor for his conduct in the prison camp.

The Future U.N. Ambassador

Richard Holbrooke joined the U.S. Foreign Service in 1962 shortly after graduating from Brown University. He studied Vietnamese and went to Vietnam in May 1963 where he served for six years in several posts. After a brief initial stint in Saigon, Holbrooke became a USAID provincial representative in the Mekong Delta. He was 22 years old.

"I was assigned first to USAID's office of Rural Development, headed by a young man named Rufus Phillips

who was a protégé of [legendary CIA man] Ed Lansdale," Holbrooke said in Kim Willenson's *The Bad War: An Oral History of the Vietnam War* (1987). "At 22, I found myself in charge of the Strategic Hamlet Program in Ba Xuyen, a province of 600,000 people, where the Bassac River meets the South China Sea. The capital was Soc Trang. There was an American military advisory group there, and a division advisory group."

About a third of Ba Xuyen province was controlled by the Viet Cong, Holbrooke said, and about a third was controlled by the South Vietnamese government. The rest, he said, "was a gray area." That situation was at odds with what was reported to Saigon and Washington. "There was a profound gap between what Washington had been told about this province, listing 400,000 people under government control, and the real situation, which was far shakier than that," he said.

Holbrooke said he was "outraged" by the misreporting and "raised questions" about it. But he continued to believe in his mission. "I did not draw the conclusion that something was wrong with our effort; I only drew the conclusion that there was something wrong with our reporting and that you have to seek truth from facts," he said. "It never occurred to me in the year 1963 that the United States could lose a war. How could it?"

The Doctor

Beale Rogers was typical of the many American doctors who volunteered to go to Vietnam to work for

USAID. In 1967 the New York physician took a leave of absence from his practice and signed up for a two-month stint in a USAID-run program administered by the American Medical Association.

"They were recruiting physicians to go and work among the civilian population," Rogers said in Harry Maurer's *Strange Ground: Americans in Vietnam, 1945-1975, An Oral History* (1989). Rogers volunteered, he said, because he saw "the prospect of a great adventure, a very useful kind of adventure [and because] I was going to be working with people who were in great need."

He went to work in a hospital in the Mekong Delta town of Phu Vinh. "I was told before I went there that it was a secure area, but I quickly learned that wasn't so," Rogers said. "There wasn't the intensity of the war in the north, but the possibility of injury and death and tension of war was there. [But] I never saw anything happen. I only saw the results of it in the hospital."

Rogers lived in a U.S. military compound with several other USAID personnel, including a U.S. Navy lieutenant commander, a civilian agricultural expert, and a police lieutenant, all of whom worked with Vietnamese counterparts. USAID, he said, "was new to me, and it was impressive. I was so impressed with these people who went out there eager to accomplish something. And with their frustration at [often] being thwarted by the system."

He was put to work immediately in the hospital, working with several American military doctors and medics along with three Vietnamese doctors and a dozen Vietnamese nurses. Rogers worked exclusively with civilian patients. "I let it be known that I wasn't going to treat soldiers," he said. "That was the responsibility of the military. I was there on a people-to-people program. My main ward was for women and children and elderly civilians. On this ward, 25 percent had legs blown off."

Rogers had mixed feelings about the experience. "I came home having done I don't know how many operations, saved a few lives, comforted a few," he said. "But as to doing anything lasting, I'm not ever sure how my presence was received as far as doing my country

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any good. Did they think about it? Did they say, 'That great United States did this for us?' Or did they say, 'Why isn't it doing more?' Did they make any connection to the United States at all? I don't know."

The Agricultural Expert

Mike Korin spent nearly seven years in Vietnam, from 1967 to 1973, working for the U.S. Department of Agriculture on loan to USAID. He

spent two years in the city of Tam Ky in Quang Tin Province, where he shared an office with USAID civilian doctors and construction experts, U.S. military civic affairs specialists and a Vietnamese professional and support staff.

Korin worked there on a wide range of development activities, including rice production, and fisheries, forestry and irrigation systems development. "My work was with Vietnamese government officials," he said in an interview, "representing different agencies and providing USAID resources to help fund those activities."

Korin said the experience was, in most respects, a positive one. "It was exciting. We felt a sense of accomplishment," he said. "But there was also a certain degree of frustration because there was a lot of fighting going on in the province, including attacks on the provincial capital."

The main problem in Korin's area was the large number of refugees. "It made things difficult," he said. "People were constantly being routed out of their villages and their villages were being burned down either by the bad guys or the good guys. People were put into refugee camps. It was very difficult for the people."

Korin was based in Saigon during his last four years in Vietnam. He was among nearly 200 USAID agricultural experts in the country at the time. His Saigon office was made up of about two dozen American USAID agriculture professionals involved in land-reform programs. Korin traveled throughout the country working on the Montagnard land reform and land-to-the-tiller programs, which paid landlords to give land to peasant farmers.

He saw a good deal of the war. "I was shot at a number of times. I was rocketed. I was close enough to see the fins on our allied planes' 500-pound bombs as they

fell through the air to the targets which were a few hundred yards away," he said. "I had a 50-caliber machine gun rake the room I lived in while I was in it in Tam Ky. I drove over roads where there were land mines. I had vehicles that followed me blown up."

Korin, as is the case with most former USAID personnel, has positive things to say about the Vietnamese he worked with. They "were generally effective, appreciative and hard working," he said. Korin praised the "enthusiasm and commitment" of his Vietnamese contacts from the "lower levels all the way up to the senior ministry level officials. They worked very hard. They were committed to it all. There were just other factors that led to the turn of events."

The CORDS Man

Sidney Chernenkoff was part of one of USAID's largest efforts in the Vietnam War, the CORDS program. Chernenkoff quit his job with the Bank of America in San Francisco in 1966 to sign up with USAID. After spending six months in Hawaii taking language training and courses in Vietnamese history, culture, politics and community development, he arrived in Vietnam in March 1967. He spent the next four years there.

Chernenkoff's first posting was as deputy district adviser in the town of Tuy Phuoc in Binh Dinh Province near the city of Qui Nhon. He and other USAID personnel worked with an American army team of 10 men whose job was to advise the local Vietnamese district chief on military matters, including recruitment, training and deployment of the Regional and Popular Forces (the local militia).

"My job on the civilian side was working with refugees," Chernenkoff said in an interview. "We had programs with funds to finance the construction of bridges, schools and roads."

After 18 months in that job, Chernenkoff transferred to the capital, where he worked in the CORDS Evaluation Branch, also known as "Pentagon East." He spent the rest of his tour traveling throughout South

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Vietnam to evaluate different CORDS programs.

"The Evaluation Branch was 50 percent civilian, 50 percent military," Chernenkoff said. "This was the group that reported to [CORDS head] Robert Komer and then later to William Colby, who replaced him. We did studies based on our field experience and our facility with the language."

During his four years in Vietnam, Chernenkoff worked with hundreds of American USAID and CORDS personnel, virtually all of whom were committed to the pacification effort.

"What struck me was that I would meet someone I never knew who was working in a district on the other side of the country and we would come to the same conclusions about things," Chernenkoff said. "Most of us thought that what we were doing was worthwhile and we were having some impact."

On the other hand, he said, many USAID people worried about what would happen in Vietnam after the American troops left. "We had a lot of questions" about South Vietnam "after U.S. troops were pulled out," he said. Most USAID people, Chernenkoff said, believed that the South Vietnamese far too often relied too heavily on American military power as well as on American help in non-military areas.

"The more we did for the Vietnamese, the less they did for themselves," he said. "That wasn't true in all cases [however]. There were a tremendous number of dedicated [Vietnamese] people."

In Retrospect

What impact did the massive USAID effort in Vietnam have on the war's outcome? As is the case with nearly every aspect of the nation's longest war, there are starkly differing opinions about the answer to that question. Some believe that non-military programs had little or no place in the war. Others contend that if the decision-makers who shaped American policy during the nation's longest and most controversial overseas war had paid more attention to the non-military component of our strategy, its outcome might have been more favorable.

F O C U S

Another opinion holds that what USAID did in Vietnam could not overcome the fatally flawed American military strategy of fighting a limited war. "We had some good [USAID] programs and we had some bad programs," Mike Bengé, the former POW, said. "We were there for the right reasons. We just did a lot of wrong things," he said. "The military was fighting the war to lose."

Chernenkoff agreed with that assessment. "My view is that [the U.S. military] and USAID didn't lose the war," he said. "Our policy was flawed."

Others point to the immense problems involved in working on pacification programs in a country that is involved in a shooting war. "USAID programs are not built to dig wells and duck bullets at the same time," said David Reuther, a Foreign Service officer who

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— ***Sidney Chernenkoff,***
***USAID development
officer in Vietnam***

served in Thailand during the Vietnam War.

What can be said with certainty is that USAID played an important role in the war effort. "USAID administrators were a large part of the U.S. mission in the Vietnam War," noted Richard A. Hunt, a U.S. Army Center of Military History historian and the author of *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (1995). "They had a seat at the [policy-making] table in Saigon with the military and the CIA."

USAID personnel, Reuther added, "were highly motivated, believed in what they were doing, thought they doing good things, and by and large worked with South Vietnamese counterparts who were also motivated and good. Of course, the whole thing went to hell. But not because of lack of trying." ■

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