

*United States Marine Corps
Command and Staff College
Marine Corps University
2076 South Street
Marine Corps Combat Development Command
Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068*

MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

***TITLE: The U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Program (CAP): A Proposed
Alternative Strategy for the Vietnam War.***

**SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES**

AUTHOR: Major Curtis L. Williamson III

AY 01-02

Mentor: Dr. Christopher C. Harmon
Approved: _____
Date: _____

Mentor: Col. David J. Barile USMC
Approved: _____
Date: _____

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved OMB No.
0704-0188

Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.

1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 01-05-2002	2. REPORT TYPE Student research paper	3. DATES COVERED (FROM - TO) xx-xx-2001 to xx-xx-2002
---	--	--

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Program (CAP): A Proposed Alternative Strategy for the Vietnam War Unclassified	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
	5b. GRANT NUMBER
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER

6. AUTHOR(S) Williamson III, Curtis L. ;	5d. PROJECT NUMBER
	5e. TASK NUMBER
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER

7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS USMC Command and Staff College 2076 South Street MCCDC Quantico, VA22134-5068	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
---	--

9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME AND ADDRESS USMC Command and Staff College 2076 South Street MCCDC Quantico, VA22134-5068	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
APUBLIC RELEASE

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT
See report.

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:	17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Public Release	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 58	19. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON EM114, (blank) lfenster@dtic.mil
---------------------------------	--	---------------------------	---

a. REPORT Unclassified	b. ABSTRACT Unclassified	c. THIS PAGE Unclassified	19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER International Area Code Area Code Telephone Number 703767-9007 DSN 427-9007
---------------------------	-----------------------------	------------------------------	--

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

FORM APPROVED - - - OMB NO. 0704-0188

public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington headquarters services, directorate for information operations and reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis highway, suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the office of management and budget, paperwork reduction project (0704-0188) Washington, dc 20503

1. AGENCY USE ONLY (<i>LEAVE BLANK</i>)	2. REPORT DATE 1 MAY 2002	3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED STUDENT RESEARCH PAPER
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE THE U.S. MARINE CORPS COMBINED ACTION PROGRAM (CAP): A PROPOSED ALTERNATIVE STRATEGY FOR THE VIETNAM WAR		5. FUNDING NUMBERS N/A
6. AUTHOR MAJOR CURTIS L. WILLIAMSON III, USMC		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) USMC COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE 2076 SOUTH STREET, MCCDC, QUANTICO, VA 22134-5068		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER NONE
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) SAME AS #7.		10. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER: NONE
11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES NONE		
12A. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT NO RESTRICTIONS	12B. DISTRIBUTION CODE N/A	
Abstract: The Vietnam War was a war against an insurgency sustained by the resources drawn from the South Vietnamese peasant. Incapable of viewing Vietnam as anything but a conventional battleground, General William C. Westmoreland applied the unsuccessful strategy of "search and destroy," and ignored the insurgent underpinnings of his enemy and their grip on the populace. Possessing a belief that the war was among the people, the Marines spawned combined action, that of combining a Marine rifle squad with a platoon of South Vietnamese Popular Forces who cohabitated together within a particular village. Never growing beyond 2,500 men and 114 platoons, the program achieved unsurpassed success towards providing security for the populace, threatening the guerrilla infrastructure, empowering the local and regional leaders to govern, and killing the enemy. The strategy proposed contains three elements: separating the guerrillas from the people through combined action, fighting the guerrillas as guerrillas, and limited pursuit of large NVA units with "fix and destroy" forces. Accepting that the war was among the people, this alternative strategy strives to achieve first pacification through combined action, then destruction of enemy forces.		
14. SUBJECT TERMS (KEY WORDS ON WHICH TO PERFORM SEARCH) COMBINED ACTION PROGRAM (CAP); VIETNAM WAR	15. NUMBER OF PAGES: 48	
	16. PRICE CODE: N/A	

17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT UNCLASSIFIED	18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE: UNCLASSIFIED	19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT UNCLASSIFIED	20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UL
--	--	--	--------------------------------------

DISCLAIMER

THE OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS EXPRESSED HEREIN ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF EITHER THE MARINE CORPS COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE OR ANY OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY. REFERENCES TO THIS STUDY SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOREGOING STATEMENT.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title: The U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Program (CAP): A Proposed Alternative Strategy for the Vietnam War.

Author: Major Curtis L. Williamson III, USMC

Thesis: The Vietnam War was a war against an insurgency sustained by the resources drawn from the South Vietnamese peasant. The CAP offered a viable alternative to the strategy taken in Vietnam, challenging the sustaining infrastructure of the guerrilla, while providing security for the largely agrarian populace.

Discussion: Taking a lesson from Mao Tse-tung's insurgent rise to power in an agrarian setting, Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap implemented a guerrilla-based strategy to liberate and unify Vietnam. Placing heavy reliance on the populace of South Vietnam to provide both men and food for the NVA and VC, the village represented a center of gravity for the Communist movement.

Incapable of viewing Vietnam as anything but a conventional battleground, General William C. Westmoreland applied the unsuccessful strategy of "search and destroy," and wholly ignored the insurgent underpinnings of his enemy and their grip on the populace. Possessing a belief that the war was among the people, the Marines spawned combined action, that of combining a Marine rifle squad with a platoon of South Vietnamese Popular Forces who cohabitated together within a particular village. Never growing beyond 2,500 men and 114 platoons, the program achieved unsurpassed success towards providing security for the populace, threatening the guerrilla infrastructure, empowering the local and regional leaders to govern, and killing the enemy. Additionally, all attempts by senior Marine leaders to convince General Westmoreland of the CAP's validity as a fitting strategy for all ground forces failed to overcome his conventional inclination towards the nature of the war.

The strategy proposed contains three elements: separating the guerrillas from the people through combined action, fighting the guerrillas as guerrillas, and limited pursuit of large NVA units with "fix and destroy" forces. Accepting that the war was among the people, this alternative strategy strives to achieve first pacification through combined action, then destruction of enemy forces.

Conclusion: The application of American military power in Vietnam failed to acknowledge the critical vulnerabilities inherent to an indigenous guerrilla force. Through the CAP, the Marines provided a model that if taken throughout South Vietnam would have likely preserved its sovereignty. Given the American inclination to play down the volatility of small scale wars and in particular guerrilla affairs, the Marines' combined action experiences in Vietnam present a viable alternative to unconventional utilization of conventional forces for the future.

Table of Contents

Disclaimer.....	i
Executive Summary.....	ii
Chapter 1. War Among the People.....	1
Chapter 2. The Nature of Vietnam in 1965.....	4
A Maoist Model.....	4
Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap's Strategy.....	5
Sir Robert Thompson's Model.....	9
Chapter 3. The Combined Action Program.....	12
CAP Design and Implementation.....	12
Initial Introduction and Growth.....	15
CAP Strengths.....	18
CAP Weaknesses.....	28
Chapter 4. The Disbelieving MACV.....	33
An American Warrior's Mindset Going into Vietnam.....	33
Development of the Search and Destroy Strategy.....	34
Chapter 5. An Alternative Strategy.....	35
The Strategy Explained.....	36
CAP Improvements.....	37
Implementation and Expectations.....	39
Chapter 6. Conclusion.....	42

I. WAR AMONG THE PEOPLE

"The responsibility of officers engaged in small wars and the training necessary are of a very different order from their responsibilities and training in ordinary military duties. In the later case, they simply strive to attain a method of producing the maximum physical effect with the force at their disposal. In small wars, caution must be exercised, and instead of striving to generate the maximum power with forces available, the goal is to gain decisive results with the least application of force and the consequent minimum loss of life. . . . In major warfare, hatred of the enemy is developed among troops to arouse courage. In small wars, tolerance, sympathy, and kindness should be the keynote of our relationship with the mass of the population."

U.S. Marine Corps Small Wars Manual (1940)¹

Commanding 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, and one of the first Marine units deployed to Vietnam in 1965, Lieutenant Colonel William W. "Woody" Taylor faced a dilemma. He was responsible for ten square miles of terrain and the defense of the Phu Bai airfield, but the geographical scope of his mission greatly exceeded the manpower resources of a single infantry battalion. Captain John J. Mullen Jr., the battalion's adjutant and civil affairs officer, suggested combining Marine squads with indigenous Vietnamese Popular Force (PF) platoons within the villages around Phu Bai. Captain Mullen theorized that by marrying the two forces into one, the battalion could effectively provide security within their area of operations (AO). Lieutenant Colonel Taylor approved the idea and set his executive officer to planning the defense of the Phu Bai area utilizing this combined action approach. None of these men realized their practice of integrating Marine with native forces marked the beginning of a nearly six year endeavor entitled the Combined Action Program or CAP. Embraced by the Marines in the I Corps tactical area of responsibility (TAOR), the CAP represented the fourth recognized utilization of combined action in the Corps' history. By the nature of their closeness with PF forces, the Marines of 3/4 began

the process of pacifying the people and threatening the Communist insurgent infrastructure of the Vietcong (VC).

Senior Marine leaders quickly embraced the successes of combined action in 3/4. Under the leadership of Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (CG, FMFPAC), and Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt, Commanding General, III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF), the Marines saw security of the indigenous population, or "pacification," as the foundation of any effective military strategy in Vietnam and destruction of the Vietcong (VC) North and Vietnamese Army (NVA) as secondary. Their belief that the populace represented the supporting infrastructure of the VC and NVA drew little support outside of Marine ranks. Although the CAP enjoyed quantifiable success in Vietnam, its scope remained minimal. The CAP contradicted military strategy developed by General William C. Westmoreland's Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), that of striking the enemy by "search and destroy" tactics. The implementation of combined action, counter to General Westmoreland's desires, fueled heated debate between that General and the Marine leadership and ultimately pitted Marine against Marine in the fight to retain CAP forces active in I Corps.

Unlike other ground combat forces in South Vietnam CAP platoons lived among the peasants and alongside their PF counterparts. Their cohabitation assured the villagers of their security, allowing relations between these two diverse cultures to thrive. The resulting benefit derived from the relationship meant Marines were empowered with intelligence of their enemy, intelligence that kept them alive. As such, CAP Marines contested the insurgents for rights to the populace. Armed with superior military might, they caused the enemy to commit himself against the strength of prepared defenses and firepower. CAP pulled the guerrilla out of the jungle, wrestled the initiative from him, and forced him to fight for his source of supply, the

people. CAP units successfully provided security for the populace within their purview, enhanced their lifestyle, severed the VC from their source of supply and recruitment, and defeated VC and NVA forces of overwhelming strength, almost without exception.

This is not to say that the CAP was without fault. Differences of language and culture plagued the program throughout its duration. Although the Marines placed priority on its success, combined action implementation followed no set strategy or vision. Platoons were inserted where requested, often well beyond supporting range of sister CAP platoons. Consequently, many CAP villages were literally islands adrift in a Communist sea of insurgency, never gaining full pacification or security without continual presence. Marine leaders failed to integrate the introduction of new platoons in an overarching strategy to push back the mass of guerrilla infestation among the peasants.

Without question, the United States failed to achieve its foreign policy goals in South Vietnam; we lost the war. As the war was fought primarily through military objectives and near absence of political objectives, this has become one of the more frustrating chapters in America's history, and particularly for the members of the uniformed services. It is the purpose of this paper to propose an alternative military strategy for the American war fought in Vietnam based primarily upon the successes of the combined action program. This strategy proposes that pacification should have been the cornerstone of the military strategy with the tenets of the CAP applied on a nationwide scale.

II. THE NATURE OF VIETNAM IN 1965

"It is these simple, provincial people who are the battlefield on which the war must be fought."

Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak

A Maoist Model

Mao Tse Tung achieved Communist rule in China by 1949 following what was by any measure a "protracted" struggle to unify the fractured Chinese countryside under one governmental institution. As Brigadier General Samuel H. Griffith accurately outlined, Mao's plan followed three distinct phases:

Phase 1 is devoted to organization, consolidation, and preservation of regional base areas in isolated and difficult terrain. Here volunteers are trained and indoctrinated, then set forth in the countryside individually or in groups of two or three. About each base is woven a protective belt of sympathizers willing to supply food, recruits, and information. Military operations during this phase are few and sporadic. During Phase 2, direct action takes increasing importance with attacks on vulnerable military and police outposts with the purpose of securing arms, ammunition, medical supplies, and discrediting the government. Phase 3 is focused on destruction of the enemy. At this phase, a significant portion of the guerrilla force has matured to regular conventional army units.²

Mao called for a build-up, guerrilla warfare concurrent with conventional force development, and an offensive phase.

In the build-up phase, military operations remained small scale and limited to preserve precious manpower. Focused clearly on developing rapport with the populace and creation of a necessary infrastructure, Mao developed "three rules" and "eight remarks" to guide the actions of his guerrillas.³ Simplistic in scope, the rules and points framed acceptable behavior for the purpose of cultivating and maintaining trust between the movement and the peasants. Once operating among the people, the guerrillas achieved Mao's dictum of fish swimming in the water.

Accomplishing this, the guerrilla was difficult to discern. The population not only provided him with food and intelligence, they offered cover and concealment. Dressed in peasant clothing, the guerrilla, except when he carried a weapon, was undistinguishable from the peasant populace. In fact, he played the dual role of working in the field by day and as a guerrilla at night.⁴ Mao understood the need to engage the peasant in the muck of his daily life to earn his trust and support for the movement.

Mao also learned that peasants armed merely with ideas are useless in a revolution, and having suffered his first severe setback coined his now famous phrase of political power growing out of the barrel of a gun. Through his three phases, Mao separated clear aims for both the political and military elements. Militarily, the forces served to destroy the government's armed equivalent. Politically, his goals were to throw the government off balance, cause panic, and dislocate the economy in order to gain control of the population. Starting in the rural areas to "use the villages to encircle the towns," Mao united the Chinese countryside behind the cause.⁵ Uncommonly patient and possessing superb instinct, he expertly timed the application of his strategy to a populace receptive to revolution and willing to take action. Mao's conquest spanned two decades of nurturing guerrilla forces for final and decisive action. His drawn-out march to power within a mainly agrarian populace appealed to Ho Chi Minh. The two Communist models of the day were the Russian and Chinese, and as the Russian model drew from an industrialized proletariat, Ho followed the Chinese peasant-based precedent.

Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap's Strategy for Vietnam

The Vietnamese were a simple, yet warring people who knew violence throughout their history. Preceding French and American intrusion, the region saw conflict for nearly two

thousand years, primarily with the Chinese. In 1287, the Vietnamese defeated an invading force of 300,000 Mongols under Kublai Khan using purely guerrilla tactics.⁶ In 1965, Vietnamese south of the 17th parallel were primarily coastal agrarians with 80 percent of the population living within ten miles of the coast and 70 percent growing rice for subsistence.⁷ There existed no more fertile rice producing region than that of the Mekong River delta. Given the violent history of the land coupled with its undeveloped, rice cultured people, Ho Chi Minh's application of guerrilla insurgency to unite the country appeared quite apropos.

Having taken a lead from Mao's successes in China, Ho Chi Minh, aided by his bright and aggressive military counterpart General Vo Nguyen Giap, constructed a similar strategy for liberation of Vietnam. Their model fashioned a military strategy based on the principle of protracted warfare utilizing guerrilla insurgency tactics to support the political end of unifying Vietnam under a Communist regime. Although these two individuals reflected the civil-military structure found in most sovereign entities, their focus and unity of purpose was sublime. Throughout French and American intervention in Vietnam, Ho and Giap's strategy reflected the efforts of two who understood the predominance of political to military objectives.

In 1950, Giap's "The War of Liberation and the People's Army" called for a three phased strategy of liberation:

Phase 1) Strategic Defense – passive resistance while building forces, both guerrilla and regular units.

Phase 2) Active resistance and counter-offensive preparation utilizing extensive guerrilla attacks with continued propaganda and subversion.

Phase 3) General counter-offensive designed to defeat the French Army.⁸

The similarities between Giap's strategy and Mao's were unmistakable. Each called for a build-up, open guerrilla warfare, and a finale of offensive operations to crush the government's army. Each saw a degree of guerrilla fighting as continuity through all three phases. Each saw his

revolution ending in a military general counter-offensive to smash the opposition's armed forces. Again, this stems from Mao's earlier reservations about peasants armed only with ideas against government forces. Taken one step further, each realized the eventual need for conventional forces in the final phase of operations. As Mao once stated, "Irregular warfare alone will not succeed, but is simply the means of converting popular support into an army sufficient for the climactic military encounters."⁹ Giap organized his forces to meet the needs of his phased strategy as well as to prepare and enhance the military power of each region; there was a three-tiered structure of regular army units, regional forces, and militia or self-defense forces.¹⁰

Doc Lap. Ho and Giap realized the army might never achieve the third phase of their strategy without popular support. Specifically, they needed control of the villages and hamlets for sustainment. To accomplish this Ho organized propaganda teams with the message of "*doc lap*," or "independence," telling the people plainly that *doc lap* would be achieved by the people, as the Vietminh was the people's party, fighting the people's war. Ho was the son of middle-class peasants, and easily related to the man in the rice paddy. With the Vietminh burrowing into the villages, they brought a greater message of sacrifice and hardship along with their promise of *doc lap*. Ho asked the people for everything in the name of *doc lap*: food, information, shelter for wounded, money, messengers, supply carriers for the army, spying, lying, fighting, and in some cases dying. Where the people responded to these demands, the Vietminh moved in and flourished. Additionally, political officers were integrated into the villages to marry ideology and military operations with political objectives. Often the soldier's political training took greater priority than the learning of military tactics.¹¹

The Vietminh were told to be as courteous in their dealings with the people as were Mao's followers. Early in the VC movement they developed three basic principles: eat together, live together, and work together.¹² Later, Ho adopted Mao rules to Vietnamese culture, publishing the "six forbiddances" and "six permissibles" in his 1948 book *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution*.¹³ Within the context of achieving *doc lap*, Ho realized that subjugating his forces to the populace would win their favor. Catering to their needs, showing genuine sensitivity to the minor variations in culture and customs between regions, these twelve rules provided a baseline of personal conduct. Simple points, yet, they acutely related to the needs of the peasants, even suggesting that where affordable, the guerrillas provide minor necessities out of pocket. Cunningly woven within the forbiddances and permissibles was the ever-present ideological message of the "Resistance."

Writing after the war, Giap commented on the effectiveness of he and Ho's strategy to marry the people to the movement:

...Since popular bases were indispensable to the development of the guerrilla war, we dispersed the companies of each battalion and we permitted them the necessary liberty of action so that they could infiltrate different regions and cement their friendly relations with the local populace. Since the companies were relatively weak, they had no difficulty in understanding the necessity for firm popular bases. Thanks to their intimate acquaintance with the different regions, they easily won the support of the local population. Their close connection with popular bases gave a strong impetus to the armed conflict. When the guerrilla units acquired enough experience, when the local militia became powerful enough, the dispersed elements of the companies in the different localities gradually regrouped themselves.¹⁴

Giap grew his force from pure guerrilla roots. Young men recruited from the villages initially served in the local guerrilla militia and self-defense forces, the Vietminh, and later Vietcong. From these ranks, and as their training progressed, guerrillas were pulled-up and reassigned to the regional forces, still utilizing primarily guerrilla tactics. With further training, these same men were often assigned into regular NVA units. Just as every Marine is a rifleman,

every soldier among Giap's forces was a guerrilla. Unquestionably, this frustrated U.S. forces in Vietnam and in particular MACV, who assumed the Communist applied tactics in accordance with the phase of their revolution, i.e., in Phase III, all forces would fight conventionally. Contrary to this notion, Giap fought his forces utilizing both conventional and guerrilla tactics wherever each served him best.

Ho Chi Minh and General Giap took unmatched measures to secure the favor of the population. The foundation of any strategy to eradicate this detailed subversion supposes the need to first separate the guerrillas from the people. Only by matching Ho's cultural sensitivity and courteousness with the common man in a wholesale manner could U.S. efforts have achieved this. Interestingly, as a Senator, a prescient John F. Kennedy theorized that "...what we must offer them [the Vietnamese] is a revolution—a political, economic and social revolution far superior to anything the Communists can offer."¹⁵ Hindsight being what it is, any offer of something grander than Communism inferred that salesmanship take place at the grassroots level, among the people.

Sir Robert Thompson's Model

Sir Robert Thompson, a veteran of Burma in World War II, a veteran of the British Malayan "Emergency," and a leading scholar on guerrilla warfare, published two books on Vietnam. Knighted in 1965 upon his return from four years in Vietnam, Thompson later released *No Exit from Vietnam*, effectively articulating the nature of the U.S. predicament there. He portrayed the maturity of the Mao design taken in Vietnam, in what is likely Phase II, or equilibrium, and arguably this state dominated the years of America's tenure, with limited exception. On occasion Ho and Giap's strategy entered Phase III, counter-offensive, as with

undertakings such as Tet in 1968. He attributed the Vietcong success in South Vietnam to their politically subversive underground organization, established over many years and "firmly rooted within the country during the earlier French Indo-China War."¹⁶ His model for guerrilla organization forms the basis for discussion throughout this paper and presented concrete evidence of the nature of the guerrilla organization encountered by U.S. forces on the ground in Vietnam from first hand observation (Figure 2).

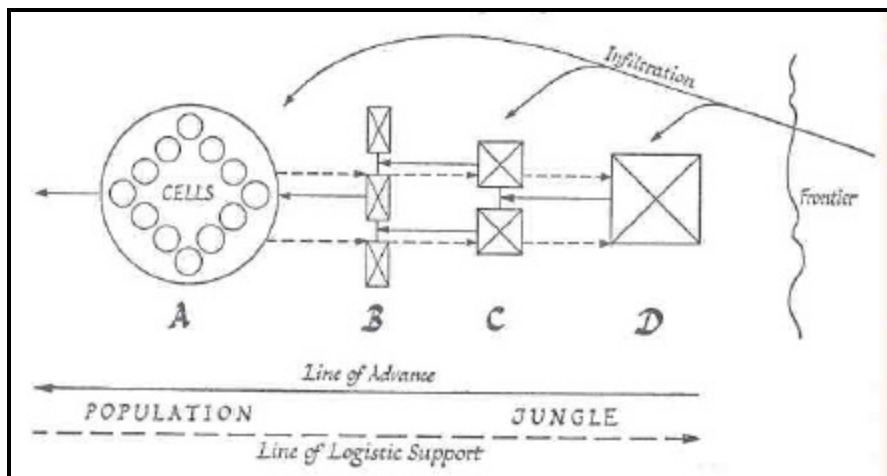


Figure 2. Guerrilla Infrastructure in Vietnam

Source: Robert Thompson, *No Exit from Vietnam* (New York: David McKay Company Inc., 1969), 32.¹⁷

'A' represents the underground organization within the population in the villages and towns of the country. The cells are responsible for subversion, penetration, intimidation, terror, propaganda and sabotage, and for providing the guerrilla units at 'B,' 'C,' and 'D' with recruits, supplies and intelligence

'B' represents village guerrilla units, initially of squad size, operating round their own villages and giving armed support to 'A.'

'C' represents regional guerrilla units, initially of platoon strength, which are normally confined to their own districts. It is their task to support 'A' offensively, by attacks on small police or military posts, by ambushing and by harassing government forces. It is also their task, defensively, to prevent government forces from regaining control over the population in their areas.

'D' represents regular guerrilla units which may start at company size and be built up to battalion and regimental strength. These are deployed initially in remoter areas where they can be safely trained and expanded, until a situation has been developed where they can accelerate the

advance of the whole insurgent movement into the more populated areas of the country by carrying out attacks and ambushes against regular government forces.¹⁸

The above model presented several key insights into Vietnam. The village represented at 'A' stood out as a clear center of gravity. Recalling the phases of growth in Ho's plan, development from Phase 1 (strategic defensive) to Phase 3 (offensive operations) paralleled, with perhaps slight lagging, the development from 'A' to 'D.' The ability to execute those phases depended entirely upon the successful development from 'A' to 'D.' Phase 3 depended upon a regular army (manned by North Vietnamese and young men recruited from South Vietnamese villages or 'A') trained to perform at 'D.' Note how closely tied the tasks of 'A' were to achieving political objectives, whereas 'B' through 'D' appeared purely military in nature and focused on Mao's task of defeating the government's armed forces. Success of the entire movement depended upon 'A'. U.S. operations directed at 'B' through 'D' would have tactical and even operational military effect, but would not break down the supporting infrastructure of 'A' and the all important flow of manpower. Conversely, reduction of guerrilla forces at 'A' denied the remaining elements of recruits, supplies, and intelligence; the fish were out of the water. Additionally, Thompson pointed out the nature of the line of advance running opposite from the line of logistics support. Unlike conventional armies, where logistics flow from a base at home to the threatened country, the logistics support for the guerrillas existed within the population of the country at war, flowing from the villages vice what was the "frontier" in his depiction.¹⁹ If the cells providing the logistic support at 'A' were captured, the ability of 'B' through 'D' to sustain themselves became severely degraded, requiring the force to think of its very survival vice operations.

Unfortunately, Thompson published *No Exit from Vietnam* in 1969; the U.S. had most likely lost the war by 1968. Regardless, it would have had little impact on the mindset of most

Americans charged with developing military objectives for the U.S. This illustration depicted the nature of South Vietnam in 1965 as President Johnson decided to place troops on the ground in an effort to thwart a formidable challenge to a fragile South Vietnamese government. In late 1964, General Giap made the decision, against Mao's recommendation for protracted war, to accelerate into conventional war and hope to achieve victory in 1965. As U.S. Marines came ashore at Danang, General Giap had been funneling NVA units down the Ho Chi Minh trail for nearly six months.²⁰

III. THE COMBINED ACTION PROGRAM

“Of all the United States forces the Marine Corps alone made a serious attempt to achieve permanent and lasting results in their TAOR by seeking to protect the rural population. Realizing that the maintenance and protection of the villagers in their own villages (not evacuated as refugees) and the support of the Vietnamese Popular Forces in those villages were essential to the control over an area, the Marines devised the concept of ‘Combined Action Companies’.”

Sir Robert Thompson

CAP Design and Implementation

Combined action in Vietnam, as stated in the introduction, came from need to accomplish the assigned mission of 3d Battalion, 4th Marines. But this was not the first utilization of the concept. Three specific citings from Marine operations in Haiti (1915-1934), Santo Domingo (1916-1922), and Nicaragua (1926-1933) point to successful incorporation of Marines with indigenous forces to defeat insurgency.²¹ Whether the Marines of 3/4 were cognizant of their heritage was unknown, but the general development of CAP came from a handful of officers. Captain Mullens forwarded the idea; Major Cullen B. Zimmerman, the battalion executive

officer developed the plan with the approval of Lieutenant Colonel Taylor; and First Lieutenant Paul Ek commanded the first "Combined Action Platoon" in August 1965.²²

In his book entitled *The Combined Action Platoons*, Michael Peterson brought out three characteristics of combined action: the USMC/PF mix, specialized training, and the volunteer nature of the CAP.²³ CAP platoons integrated a Marine squad, 13 Marines and a U.S. Navy corpsman, with a PF platoon of approximately 35 soldiers. As in these previous uses of combined action, the success of the program in Vietnam centered on the popular forces (PF). The PF's interests were simple, yet quite compelling: the defense of his family and their ancestral home. General Walt captured the value of the PF soldier in that the PF "knew every person, paddyfield, trail, bush, bamboo clump, shelter, tunnel, and buried rice urn in the vicinity and in many cases the local VC guerrillas if not related to them."²⁴ The Marines survival depended upon building a trustworthy rapport with the PFs and Marine leaders were quick to realize this. CAP platoons were only implemented where the village or district chief could generate the PF platoon to serve alongside the Marines. This marriage of Americans to the indigenous village militia force illustrated a true center of gravity for combined action.

Concerning training, the necessity to make an effort to bridge the eastern-western cultural divide was apparent. The Marines appropriately developed a "CAP School" initially directed by First Lieutenant Ek and located in Danang. A two week school, the curriculum sought to give the Marines skills and education in Vietnamese customs, intelligence procedures and reporting, counter-intelligence measures, small unit tactics, and very basic language skills. Not surprisingly, the Marine Corps possessed no wealth of Vietnamese translators and although recognized as critical to developing effective relations with the people, language skills would plague the program throughout its existence.²⁵ The need to teach small unit tactics appeared odd,

as these were Marines and "every Marine a rifleman." The reality was that a substantial portion of the American CAP force came from support units as well as line infantry battalions. Marines from support type backgrounds required remedial training in basic infantry skills as well as instruction in calling in artillery and air fires.

A point of pride still evident among CAP veterans was the volunteer nature of the program. Nominated by his battalion commander, the individual Marine became subject to a board, which the Assistant Chief of Staff, Combined Action Program, III Marine Amphibious Force (A C/S, CAP, III MAF) chaired at the height of the program. Prerequisites for the CAP included two to four months time in country with at least six months remaining on a man's tour, no disciplinary actions, a recommendation by the Marine's battalion commander, and the absence of any xenophobic or racist qualities towards the Vietnamese people. In essence, the program was decentralized, relying primarily on the trustworthiness of the squad leader and the volunteer make up of the squad itself.

The typical introduction of a platoon into a village followed a pattern. Either a battalion commander identified the need for a CAP platoon in a particular village or the request came from the village or district chief. In the latter case, a battalion commander would approve and agree to detach a squad to a village, but only if a PF platoon resided within the village.²⁶ A point for additional discussion, this highlights the sporadic and unplanned nature of introducing CAP platoons across the I Corps AO without an overarching integrated strategy.

The CAP was decentralized and quite uncharacteristic in its organization and chain of command. While the CAP platoons drew from infantry battalions primarily, their ties to them remained administrative and informal in practice. The battalion effectively relinquished the squad to the combined action chain of command for operational control. A Combined Action

Platoon (also known as CAP) reported to Combined Action Companies (CACOs), normally commanded by a Captain within the parent infantry battalion. The CACO reported to one of four geographically designated Combined Action Groups (CAGs), commanded by a Lieutenant Colonel. The CAG reported to the A C/S, CAP III MAF and, ultimately to the CG, III MAF. Figure 3 graphically depicted this basic structure for CAP forces and the relationship of each to their Vietnamese counterpart. Additionally, infantry battalions did not integrate CAP platoons into their everyday operations, and should the platoon require reinforcements they possessed a radio to request emergency reaction forces identified from surrounding infantry units.²⁷

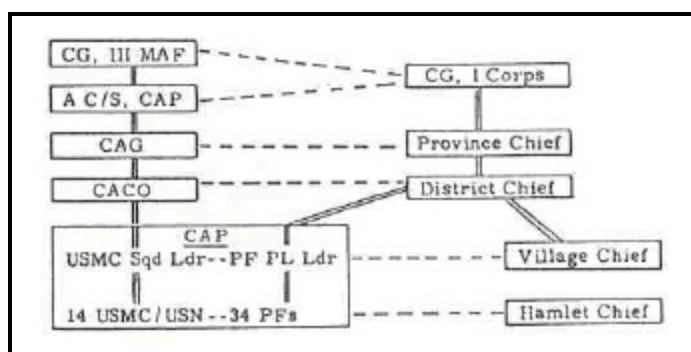


Figure 3. CAP Organization

Source: Michael P. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1989), 137.²⁸

Initial Introduction and Growth

When Captain Mullen suggested the integration of PF forces with Marine squads, six PF platoons resided in the Phu Bai TAOR. General Chuan, Commanding General of the 1st ARVN Division granted a Marine request for limited operational control of the PFs. Colonel Edwin B. Wheeler, recognizing the necessity of language skills, pulled from his staff First Lieutenant Ek, a fluent Vietnamese speaker, to form the first "Joint Action Company." Each of the initial CAP Marines were handpicked by Ek and he personally schooled them with a week of training to

ensure as he said, they knew "whom to call 'sir' and whom to call 'you'."²⁹ The early objectives focused on security, counter-intelligence, and obtaining the good will of the people. First Lieutenant Ek envisioned employing the platoons in a manner effectively building relations between the PFs and Marines while destroying VC infrastructure; unknowingly, Ek's strategy paralleled Ho's.³⁰ August 1965, the first four-combined action platoons of "Joint Action Company" went operational in the Phu Bai TAOR.

Initial impressions of the PF forces were disappointing at best. Poorly trained and equipped, their unwillingness to engage the VC revealed an understandable fear harbored among the PFs. The introduction of American Marines changed their outlook and as General Walt surmised, "Here in each of their villages, was a team of highly trained regulars, and all the resources of the Americans to come to their aid in the event of trouble."³¹ Understandably, the PFs gained with confidence. The Marines taught tactics and instilled discipline. The PFs provided the Marines with language training, recognition of local customs, and valuable information regarding VC operations. Beginning with daytime local security patrols and defensive measures, the Marines gradually instilled the PFs with the confidence to perform day and night patrols with almost daily frequency.

Phased integration into the villages took the Marines from limited daytime observation to cohabitation within the village. Daylight introduction began with the primary purpose to observe life without interfering; they watched the villagers in their daily life to acculturate themselves. As they learned the local routine, the Marines began day and night presence, further observation, and integration with the people. The platoon soon began spending several nights per week in the village, leading to the final step of living within the village.³² Relating back to Sir Robert Thompson's model and the "base" of guerrilla support, First Lieutenant Ek's CAP employment

plan, coupled with the resources of the Marine rifle squad, began the process of putting at risk the guerrilla's base in the Phu Bai area.

By the close of 1965, Marines concluded combined action showed promise, and resolved to expand the program throughout the I Corps TAOR beyond its initial six platoons. Also, a new name was introduced—the "Combined Action Company." The succeeding four years saw relatively extensive growth: 1966 - 58 platoons, 1967 - 79 platoons, 1968 - 102 platoons, and 1969 - 114 platoons.³³ Implementation of the CAP program throughout the war reflected a balancing act of sorts on the Marines part between satisfying MACV's "search and destroy" mantra and the Marine Corps' belief in combined action.

Growth in the CAP encouraged development of the program's objectives, and resulted in a formalized mission adopted from the PF's six rules:

- 1) Destroy the Vietcong infrastructure within the village or hamlet area of responsibility.
- 2) Protect public security and help maintain law and order.
- 3) Protect the friendly infrastructure.
- 4) Protect the bases and lines of communication within the villages and hamlets.
- 5) Organize the people's intelligence nets.
- 6) Participate in civic action and conduct propaganda against the Vietcong.³⁴

In comparison to Ho's Six Forbiddances and Permissibles, the Marines were lacking in cultural depth and sophistication, but the essence of the objectives hit directly at separating the people from the Vietcong and pacification. Pursuit of these principles started with destroying the Communist grip on the populace and providing adequate security for the people. From this, the development of civic action programs began the process of winning the "hearts and minds" by bettering their expectations in life. Aimed directly at the village, if Ho Chi Minh or General Giap had knowledge of an American strategy based on these criteria, at a minimum, it would at

least have been a source of concern and may have necessitated a review of their entire plan for liberation of South Vietnam.

CAP Strengths

Village Impact. The successes of combined action ranged from the civic actions for the villagers to the strategic impact of supplementing the nationwide pacification efforts. Beginning at the lowest level, that of benefiting the peasant, the CAP achieved noteworthy impact for three reasons, according to Colonel William R. Corson, a retired Marine and author of *The Betrayal*:

- 1) Small numbers of Marines do not agitate hamlet life or create xenophobic reactions to military forces
- 2) The Marine squad had adequate tactical firepower to convince peasants of their military competence,
- 3) The rank, age, attitudes made it easy for peasants and the Popular Forces to identify with the Marines as individuals.³⁵

These three factors portrayed a uniqueness of the CAP to strike the balance of adequate combat power without causing the Vietnamese to feel themselves under occupation. The Marines retained the capability to call for artillery, air support, or reaction forces as the situation dictated, but their primary tactic against the VC and NVA, patrolling, relied on small arms weapons empowered by invaluable intelligence drawn from the villagers themselves. Use of artillery and air were infrequent, which limited collateral damage to the farmer and his crops, and villagers valued this sensitivity.³⁶ Marines provided security at little cost to the peasant and his way of life.

Sir Robert Thompson pointed out: "Once security is provided, the villager is then put in a decision point of staying with the Vietcong or coming over to the government side. When security was not enough, some form of influence was required to gain the favor of the peasant."³⁷ In the war of gaining the local's favor, civic action became the primary tool Marines wielded to

influence the populace. From medical and dental support to building schools, Marines employed the organic capabilities of their organization to the advancement of Vietnamese livelihood. In a typical two-month period, 2d CAG built the following in their TAOR: 9 bridges, 9 churches, temples, or pagodas, 13 culverts, 4 dispensaries, 113 family dwellings, 8 fences, 3 market places, 3 playgrounds, 1.45 miles of roads, 6 schools with 9 classrooms, 1 public shower, 4 public restrooms, 95 wells, 8 dams/dikes, and 1 village office.³⁸ Bringing engineering assets to bear, 2d CAG achieved influence through rudimentary enhancements of villagers' physical well being. They provided protection to the village and empowerment to its leaders. The amenities listed above represent the unmatched ability Americans possess in the war to win the "hearts and minds" of the South Vietnamese, compared with that of the Vietcong, whose contributions to the people were inconsequential. This element of American power remained lost on Westmoreland and MACV and thusly underutilized.

A key Vietcong objective called for discrediting the government administration at all levels. While the ability to directly affect the national government remained beyond reach, the impact of combined action on hamlet government proved significant. In those areas lacking CAP platoon presence, less than one of five hamlet chiefs remained in his home overnight and only 29 percent of the hamlets had functioning hamlet councils.³⁹ Of those hamlets possessing CAP platoons, four of five hamlet chiefs slept in his own home and 93 percent had functioning hamlet councils.⁴⁰ As the evidence portrays, by 1967 CAP platoons were clearly providing security in their areas to the degree of allowing local administration of government to resume. Government figures were routinely targets of terrorism and assassination. Combined action provided a buffer the people and their leaders came to trust between themselves and the feared Vietcong.

Source of Intelligence. Regarding the peasant population as a source of intelligence for his revolution, Mao once stated "the enemy stands on a lighted stage from the darkness around them," or perhaps more appropriately put, "all eyes are upon you."⁴¹ With security provided and civic actions improving the village standard of living, a discernable trust and fondness, if not a bond of near kinship, commonly sprang up between the populace and the cohabitating Marines. As this bond developed, the Marines often achieved a cherished status among the people with intelligence on the Vietcong as a primary byproduct. The villages saw the impact Marines had on their security, livelihood, and children's futures and realized a need to protect their American partners from the Vietcong. William Corson noted that the village children were quick to open up to the Americans, and enjoyed the notoriety of delivering VC equipment, or leading a Marine to a hidden weapons cache within a village. Corson also held the belief that within most CAP platoons over six months old, the amount of intelligence coming from the populace overwhelmed the Marines ability to act on it.⁴²

These points on intelligence highlight a key distinction between the strategies taken with combined action verses search and destroy. CAP represented as positive and lasting an enterprise as the elder villagers had witnessed in their lifetimes. Whether it was Chinese, Japanese, VC, or the French, the invading hordes of his life were only in his locale long enough to deny him of his few, but valued resources. It was no wonder that at the six-month mark of CAP involvement, the villages became sympathetic and protective of their American counterparts. Enduring commitment within the village, with Marines an integral entity among the people day and night, counted for something and the villagers came to place value on the security of their Marines. The intelligence they provided kept those Marines alive, which

furthered peace and harmony, a resource of fleeting existence in agrarian Vietnam. The Marines represented a better way of life for the peasant, greater opportunities for his children, and relative prosperity. Further, the intelligence provided the Marines handed them the initiative over the VC, and forced the guerrilla to contest for rights to the people, a fight they could not win.

The intelligence obtained by the CAP platoons from the villages they supported directly attributed to their own survival. The enemy in Vietnam constructed mines of anything from raw explosives to dud ordnance left behind from artillery fires and aerial bombardment. VC and NVA soldiers' ingenuity in mine warfare accounted for 30 percent of the U.S. casualties in the Vietnam War, yet among CAP Marines losses to mine warfare were too insignificant to record.⁴³ VC and NVA sappers depended upon intelligence gained from the population, coupled with detailed planning, to execute successful mine operations against American soldiers and Marines and here CAP negated their intelligence attempts.⁴⁴ Among CAP platoon villagers, they simply refused to jeopardize the safety of the Marines by corroboration with the Communist. Instead, they provided the Marines with the location of mines and booby traps, realizing their security depended upon the Marines' security.

Strategic & Operational Impact. What was taking place down in the village rippled upwards. Col. William Corson credited the Marines' combined action with three distinct impacts on the Vietcong, which achieved operational and arguably strategic significance within the context of military operations: recruitment denial, subsistence denial, and combat losses.

Corson's rationale appeared justified:

- 1) As of September 1967, a census of the fifty most senior CAP platoons in operation following the first six and twelve month period of operation revealed that the average unexplained loss of residents was less than one-tenth of one percent, or approximately 170 persons of 170,000 persons.

- 2) CAP denied access to 75 percent of the rice crop in I Corps' TAOR over four harvests, and built central market places to centralize distribution and provided observation of rice purchases.
- 3) Combat operations encompassed the entire range of combat with increasing emphasis on defensive combat as the CAPs become an effective symbol of a hamlet's willingness to turn its back on the Vietcong.⁴⁵

The young male farmhands of the South Vietnamese countryside represented the single most sought after commodity of the Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army, but drawing only "one-tenth of one percent" throughout South Vietnam would have killed their indigenous guerrilla force. Corson estimated the NVA and guerrilla forces in I Corps' TAOR at roughly 35,000 to 40,000 before the Tet offensive.⁴⁶ With a population of just less than three million Vietnamese in I Corps TAOR and supposing a CAP hold on the entire population, the VC and NVA would be hard pressed to keep up their strength drawing less than 3,000 men a year from the region. Unfortunately, recruitment estimates before the CAP in I Corps were nonexistent for comparison sake. Regardless, the impact on recruitment remains valid. The Marines' presence spared the young Vietnamese men from impressments into service for Ho Chi Minh. The operational impact on General Giap's force sustainment was apparent; rather than recruiting new, young fish from the water, fishing seasoned ended.

With recruitment at a standstill, attrition of the existing North Vietnamese force, i.e., starvation by denied access to the rice crop furthered the impact of the CAP on Giap. Combined action effectively replaced the guerrilla presence in the village and took up the Vietminh model of eating, living, and working among the people. Marines took to perimeter security of the rice fields when the annual rice harvest came around in "Operation Golden Fleece." III MAF staff officers estimated that Golden Fleece netted over 500,000 pounds of rice in 1965 and while an estimate of total rice procured for 1966 was not kept, a single battalion operation in the village of

Van Ha netted a VC granary holding over 720 tons of rice, nearly one and one half million pounds.⁴⁷

Central markets under Marine observation yielded two significant benefactors for the Marines. First, it enabled the farmer to compete in an open economic market and earn a profit on the entire crop he labored over without losing a portion to the VC. Secondly, the Marines were able to observe purchases of rice in the open market place. A South Vietnamese government regulation prohibited the purchase of more than five pounds of rice per person per day, which often uncovered VC sympathizers in the market place as they attempted to make unit size rice purchases within plain view of Marines.⁴⁸ An accurate depiction of rice denied the NVA and VC by Marine efforts remains unknown; undoubtedly the effort of the CAP and Operation Golden Fleece put revenue back into the pockets of the South Vietnamese farmers and created hunger pangs for the VC and NVA.

Corson pointed out the phenomena of the increasingly defensive nature of combat for the CAP platoons. Initial CAP combat operations focused on aggressive patrolling of the village and its surrounding areas. Initial patrolling paralleled efforts to integrate their lives with that of the villagers to achieve control over the resources normally claimed by the guerrillas. In the early days of combined action, guerrillas left the platoons alone and moved down the road to unprotected villages for their needs.⁴⁹ Surprising to the Marines, by 1967 combat frequency seemed to be growing at a pace equitable with CAP platoon growth. As CAP platoons sprouted in the four CAGs, VC self-preservation arose as an issue within their ranks. By 1967, attacks on CAP platoons were frequent and often company or larger size undertakings by the North Vietnamese.

This ratcheting up of combat action in a defensive arena reflected frustration on the part of the VC. As the CAP platoons moved into a more defensive mode of operations they effectively stole a march on the VC within the village, and dictated the VC's need to attack the village in an attempt to open up supply lines. As Sir Robert Thompson professed in his model, guerrilla sustainment came not from North Vietnam, but from within the South Vietnamese populace. Combined action effectiveness caused the VC to attack the village, which represented the base of the Marines, but more importantly the home of the peasants. The NVA, denied their source of supply, attacked the people. Ho's "Six Forbiddances" never accounted for combat against noncombatants, but rather implied harmony between the two entities.

For the villager with his life and the lives of his love ones at stake the decision cycle was brief and favored the Marines to his front, fighting for his ancestral home and family. Dr. Andrew Krepinevich, commenting on Westmoreland's "search and destroy" strategy argued "the guerrilla could avoid battle among the people, draw U.S. forces into the hills, and freely engage the population."⁵⁰ Combined action platoons refused to leave the village and dictated the terms of combat to the guerrilla. The VC attacked the Marines, which in turn caused collateral damage to the village and villagers themselves. This ensured control of the village stayed with the Marines. Further, the Marines, with reinforcements, artillery, air support, and aerial resupply at their disposal, held the initiative and decisive combat power. Testament to their fighting capabilities and the combat power of American forces in general resided in the fact that throughout their existence only one CAP platoon was overrun.⁵¹

Statistical Analysis. Being a statistician as well as Secretary of Defense during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, Robert McNamara thrust numerical quantification and

analysis into the Vietnam War as its sole yardstick. As Robert Asprey put it, "the only measure of success was the kill rate."⁵² Yet even under this lens, combined action fared nearly as well as any other force. Specifically, only battalion or larger size operations produced more enemy casualties than the CAP (Figures 4 & 5).

CAP COMBAT RESULTS: 1966-1968				
Force	1966 ^a	1967 ^a (1st 9 mos)	1968 ^b (1st 5 mos)	Total (21 mos)
CAP KIA				
U.S.	6	64	124	194
PF	5	51	83	187
Total	11	118	207	336
Enemy KIA	129	464	1061	1654
Enemy captured	137	383	249	769
Total	266	847	1310	2423
Ratio of enemy losses to CAP losses ^c	24/1	7.2/1	6.5/1	7.2/1

^aData for 1966 and 1967 from Combined Action Headquarters, III MAF, Da Nang, November 1967.

^bData from Civic Action Office, G-3, Hq. Marine Corps, June 1968.

^cLosses = killed and captured.

Figure 4. CAP Combat Results

Source: Francis J. West, *An Area Security System for Vietnam Incorporating Combined Action*, RM-5895-ARPA (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corp., 1969), 4.⁵³

GENERAL COMBAT RESULTS: 1966-1968	
Force	Ratio of enemy losses to friendly losses ^a
CAP (PF or U.S.) in I Corps	7.2/1
U.S. large unit (800 or more men) in I Corps	7.6/1
U.S. small unit (2 cos or less) in I Corps	6/1
Allied forces countrywide average	3.8/1 ^b
PF countrywide average	1.5/1 ^c

^aLosses = killed and captured.

^bSoutheast Asia Analysis Report, May 1968.

^cSoutheast Asia Statistical Tables, through December 1967.

Figure 5. General Combat Results

Source: Francis J. West, *An Area Security System for Vietnam Incorporating Combined Action*, RM-5895-ARPA (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corp., 1969), 4.⁵⁴

Figure 5 in particular compared the effectiveness of the CAP in killing North Vietnamese soldiers against other combat elements. Although large units outperformed CAP during this period, the separation was a negligible five percent. Given the capabilities of a Marine squad coupled with a PF platoon versus that of a battalion or regiment, CAP produced nearly equivalent North Vietnamese killed and captured at considerably less cost and greater efficiency. CAP strength never surpassed 2,500 or the equivalency of a single slightly undermanned regiment. CAP existed among the people perpetually whereas large units only struck out for short periods, then returned to a base camp.

These figures also pointed out the alarming casualty rate of the PF soldier in Vietnam, nearly a one to one ratio. Casualties among PF soldiers serving with CAP platoons were worse, twice as many PFs died with CAP platoons as compared to PFs serving in non-CAP villages.⁵⁵ At first glance, one might quickly deduce that for all its benefits the CAP ultimately led to the greater demise of the people it presumably professed to protect. Secondly, PFs must have

suffered alarming desertion rates among the CAP platoons. The reality was just the opposite. CAP PF soldiers suffered only one quarter of the desertions from their ranks as non-CAP PFs, or put differently, non-CAP PFs deserted four times as fast as CAP PFs. CAP Marines inspired the PFs to a greater degree of commitment to stand up and fight the VC. The Marines trained the PFs to unprecedented levels of tactical proficiency, and reversed the early observations of PFs dissenting the Marines at the sound of gunfire. In turn, this strengthened the PFs confidence in themselves, and with their American platoon mates fighting along side them, they willingly took responsibility for the defense of their own village. “Vietnamization” – the admission that to end this war the South Vietnamese would have to take charge of their own affairs – did not take hold as U.S. policy until 1969, yet Marines were achieving it years earlier. Sooner or later, the PF soldier would have to take responsibility for the war; combined action gave the PF first the training to fight, then the confidence to challenge his adversary.

One out of every eight CAP Marines died in Vietnam, and while this may not represent a strength, the overwhelming evidence supports the proposition that the Marines who served within the CAP believed it had relevance, possessed personal confidence in the program, and felt a sincere responsibility to the peasant.⁵⁶ This assumption is support by the fact that 68 percent of CAP Marines volunteered to extend in country for six months or more beyond their initial thirteen-month tour compared to the 15 percent who extended from all the remaining forces serving in Vietnam.⁵⁷ Proud to serve in the village, which in no way represented a sanctuary from the war, CAP Marines developed a relationship with the people of Vietnam and from this came loyalty, devotion, and a selflessness unparalleled throughout the military establishment with regards to the South Vietnamese people.

CAP Weaknesses

Bipolar Cultures. Along the spectrum of cultural diversity, one could argue that American or Western culture lies at one end, and the Vietnam or Asian culture lies at the furthest point from it. At the very heart of this difference was the fact that we spoke two different languages. It is one thing to attempt to traverse this linguistic no man's land at the Starbucks counter with a grande latte in the balance, but quite another to hinge one's survival in combat on it. Among both Americans and Vietnamese alike, the greatest challenge of the CAP throughout the war was overcoming the lack of language skills on the part of the Marines. They received basic instruction in the two-week CAP School, but this never amounted to more than rudimentary training. Additionally, the Marines did not attempt to standardize language training or procure language specialists from the Defense Language School in Monterey, California.⁵⁸ The majority of the Marines serving in the program extended, giving them the better part of a year or more to learn needed language skills from the villagers, but initially they floundered. The challenges of not being able to communicate are readily apparent to anyone having spent time overseas. Misunderstandings, frustration, and outright rage were evident between the PFs and Marines in the early days of CAP, and effectively undermined the Marines' best efforts to integrate themselves into the villages.

Cultural differences were apparent. Sensitizing the Marines to general Asian culture was enough of a challenge, but South Vietnamese culture fractured at the hamlet level. Variations between hamlets existed, and regional rites and customs often depended upon weather, crops, and occupations.⁵⁹ Recall Ho's guidance to respect the variations in customs between regions. First Lieutenant Ha Sau Hoa, a translator and language instructor for the program, lamented the

three main shortfalls of the CAP program as poor language skills, cultural ignorance, and theft.⁶⁰ This last observation reflected the Marines preference of hot chow over the C-ration. In their acculturation into Vietnamese peasant life, Marines developed a taste for their host's cuisine and often stole food from the PFs. In particular, the theft of “hatching hens,” a precious source of income, was a common complaint among the farmers.⁶¹ The theft of a hatching hen by hungry Marines appeared harmless enough, but it reflected cultural ignorance and a lack of ethics.

As an extreme example, albeit humorous, one of the most bizarre and diverging facets of Vietnamese culture concerned the sanctity of marriage, where the Vietnamese deplored premarital sex between couples. While Vietnamese men abstained from premarital sex, they openly practiced mutual masturbation.⁶² In western culture, a man’s business was a man’s business, but in Vietnam it was not uncommon to find a couple of off duty PFs relieving each other’s tension back at the hut. Undoubtedly, 19 year-old American boys fighting a war half way around the world took issue with what in their culture was an act of unparalleled discretion.

A Squad Lacking Adult Supervision. Assigning a CAP to a village effectively severed the operational string between the squad and the parent battalion. CAP platoons reported to a combined action chain of command lacking the manpower to effectively scrutinize the actions of 114 platoons. Decentralize execution and unquestioning trust and confidence in the individual squad leader defined the program. On rare occasions, Marines grossly violated this trust. Isolated incidents of extortion, rape, and at least one murder were documented, but these actions did not characterize the CAP as a whole. As Michael E. Peterson expressed in his book *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines Other War in Vietnam*, “The CAP Marines were not supermen; they came from the same culture as the other U.S. service people in Vietnam.”⁶³

Yet, incidents such as theft of hatching hens might not have been perpetrated under the daily supervision of staff noncommissioned officers and commissioned officers resident in a line battalion. Perhaps the program would have benefited from the Marine Corps employing whole battalions to a specific CAG, thereby maintaining the imbedded relationships and command structure of staff noncommissioned officers and commissioned officers. This would have provided continuous oversight. Instead, CAP relied upon the lone sergeant or corporal to fulfill the shoes of a career officer and seasoned diplomat simultaneously.

Lack of an Overarching Strategy. Although Marine leaders in Krulak and Walt recognized the dynamic nature of the insurgent situation in South Vietnam and the applicability of combined action to thwart it, they lacked an integrated strategy of implementation. The absence of an operational strategy for combined action represented the greatest downfall of the program, a clear lack of vision on the part of staff officers and commanders within III MAF and FMFPAC. Creation of a CAP platoon rested with battalion commanders and village chiefs, as they identified a need. As Francis J. West Jr., author of *The Village* so clearly pointed out, “CAPs [combined action platoons] sprang up all over the four CAGs, but with no clear strategy” and further forwarded that because platoons did not exist in an “intermeshed defensive net” or a “saturation deployment scheme” each hamlet was essentially “an island in a sea of VC control.”⁶⁴ Further evidence of this isolation surfaced in 1969, when after four years of employment, only two CAP platoons of 114 had achieved a level of pacification sufficient to allow the squad to move into new villages.⁶⁵ West’s theory appears quantified. Without an overarching “ink blot” type strategy, the CAP platoons lacked mutual support and many were isolated. III MAF envisioned the potential of the program to counter insurgency, yet failed to

institute it with any remnant of meaningful forethought. Although a tactically defensive application of power, CAP platoon growth in an interlocking fashion would have achieved the "clear and hold" strategy proposed by many. An integrated and ever expanding CAP strategy would have achieved pacification and an effective operational offensive through tactical defense.

The Enemy Within. In January 1969, total United States Marine Corps ground forces in South Vietnam reached a wartime high of 98,418 Marines and sailors, of which combined action represented less than 2,500 men, or 2.5 percent of the total ground force.⁶⁶ At best, combined action depicted a token effort by the Marine Corps. Why, if the Marines knew they had a key to military success in the program, did they not expand combined action throughout the I Corps TAOR? The simple answer is that General Westmoreland would not let them, and he demanded the Marines pursue his strategy of "search and destroy" along the DMZ.⁶⁷ Even so, Westmoreland gave Lieutenant General Walt, ample latitude to accomplish the mission in I Corps and given the ground forces in country, he could have expanded the program while dedicating the bulk of his force to search and destroy.

Lieutenant General Walt developed a three-pronged strategy of search and destroy, counterinsurgency, and pacification to answer both MACV and Lieutenant General Krulak's strategic desires. General Krulak, an avid believer that the "battlefield" in Vietnam lay among the people, was furious, calling Walt's plan a "mutation strategy."⁶⁸ General Walt, although passionate for the grassroots appeal of CAP, remained as caught up in the conventional mindset of warfare as Westmoreland. Writing in his book, *Strange War, Strange Strategy*, General Walt professed, "Now we were caught in a situation similar to that in Korea in 1950—an army coming down from the north to seize and hold ground." Although disheartened to see the impact on

pacification, i.e., combined action, General Walt did little to suppress his heartfelt desire to pursue conventional avenues at the first opportunity in 1966. "Quickly the battle was joined. I was able to free seven Marine infantry battalions...they (the NVA) attacked in mass formations and died by the hundreds...But they had accomplished two of their objectives...they had slowed the progress of pacification of the I Corps area by forcing me to commit men into the largely barren north..."⁶⁹ As if placing the blame squarely on the shoulder of Vo Nguyen Giap, Walt felt compelled to rush into the "barren north" with marginal regard for the peasant. Robert Asprey considered the Marine pacification effort "never more than a drop in the bucket, blaming Giap's quasi-conventional warfare as draining the pacification effort."⁷⁰ Perhaps his blame was misplaced.

Replacing Walt in June 1967, Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman gave General Krulak the cold shoulder regarding combined action as well, stating in a 1982 interview, "I soon figured out how Westy [General Westmoreland] liked to operate and tried to operate the same way, and get on with the war and not cause a lot of friction for no good reason."⁷¹ General Krulak energetically supported the CAP program, some would argue to a fault, to both General Westmoreland, and Marine commanders. General Cushman, given to appeasing General Westmoreland, would go on to become the 25th Commandant of the Marine Corps. Among Marines, the CAP found no greater supporter than that of Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, who alone saw the guerrilla insurgency as clearly placing the battlefield among the people. Conversely, Walt and Cushman set an enduring example of tokenism, limiting the scope and impact of combined action to near obscurity in I Corps.

IV. THE DISBELIEVING MACV

"I simply had not enough numbers to put a squad of Americans in every village and hamlet; that would have been fragmenting resources and exposing them to defeat in detail."

General William C. Westmoreland

An American Warrior's Mindset Going Into Vietnam

Conventional wars dominated the military operations of the 20th century preceding Vietnam. Perhaps those valiant and noble victories blinded the military planners of Vietnam who crafted their strategy to fit a type of warfare they were best suited for vice the actual enemy and his organization. In his book, *The Army and Vietnam*, Dr. Andrew Krepinevich, a veteran of Vietnam and a career U.S. Army officer, stated "conventional operations held sway over the Army, deeply embedded in the service's psyche."⁷² In his two volume work on guerrilla warfare, Robert Asprey stated that, "Westmoreland and other military leaders, and civilians, could not see the war for anything more than in conventional terms despite its guerrilla/unconventional flavor. Westmoreland saw the enemy as unimaginable and inflexible."⁷³ Ironically, Westmoreland's lack of imagination and inflexibility were the leading contributors in the failed strategy of "search and destroy" applied during his reign as Commanding General, MACV. The conventional Army Westmoreland and others grew up within, an Army achieving unprecedented fame throughout the Second World War and Korea, misunderstood the nature of Vietnam, and created a conventional strategy to counter a guerrilla insurgency threat. While General Westmoreland admitted the unique nature of the CAP and its function in pacification, he refused to address such a strategy on a nationwide basis, viewing it tactically unsound, defensive in nature, and simply too risky. Reflecting on the Robert Thompson model, a conventional

approach seeking conventional confrontation failed to address the sustaining infrastructure of the Communists.

Development of the Search & Destroy Strategy

Long before combat operations commenced, arguments over the nature of the war and "pacification" made their way to Westmoreland himself from senior Marines such as Lieutenant Generals Krulak and Walt. Their argument pitted pacification against chasing the enemy all over the jungle. In November 1964, a small ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) force conducting pacification operations suffered a significant defeat at the hands of the Vietcong, and as Westmoreland stated, "it was a lesson long to be remembered." This lesson soured Westmoreland's view of pacification operations as placing small units in vulnerable situations to defend themselves against massed Vietcong or NVA units. "MACV took the lesson they wanted from this to support big-unit operations" vice the reality that ARVN lacked sufficient quick reaction forces. Secondly, MACV's findings completely brushed over the air mobile capability of U.S. forces potentially employed in a pacification scenario. MACV developed "search and destroy" to suit the Army's modus operandi, force structure, and doctrine. Westmoreland and MACV appeared determined to make the war suit their construct.⁷⁴

In November 1965, Lieutenant Colonel Harold G. Moore's 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry exacted victory against a Vietcong regiment in the Ia Drang valley. This victory cemented the strategy of "search and destroy" in the minds of Westmoreland and MACV, as Moore's battalion killed 1,200 North Vietnamese to their 200 losses. While these two episodes highlighted two isolated incidents open to interpretation, Dr. Krepinevich proposed they represented ample justification for General Westmoreland and his staff to warrant a search and destroy strategy over

pacification. In their minds, Moore's successes against a NVA regiment proved the enemy awaited us in the jungle to directly confront U.S. forces in conventional battle.⁷⁵ The coming years would prove this level of confrontation infrequent and entirely dependent upon the desires of the VC and NVA vice our own.

V. AN ALTERNATIVE STRATEGY

"If you'll give me 700 Combined Action Platoons I'll win the war in six months and the taxpayers cost will be about \$45 million."

Lieutenant Colonel William Corson, USMC

Among military historians, veterans, and the average American, Vietnam stands out poignantly as a loss. As a military endeavor, the strategy of "search and destroy" failed to secure our policy objectives. Essentially, a conventional mindset against a guerrilla insurgency of native origin failed. The leaders of the day, although well intentioned, discounted the war among the people and belittled pacification to the "other war." As the war was among the people, a strategy clearing enemy presence and holding that ground, or "clear and hold" at a minimum, would have likely ensured a draw.

Having established that combined action represented a viable approach to ridding South Vietnam of Communist insurgency, we now propose an alternative strategy with three distinct elements: separating the guerrillas from the people through combined action, fighting the guerrillas as guerrillas, and limited pursuit of large regular units through "fix and destroy" forces.⁷⁶ Further, there is no suggestion that these elements exist in equity: as in the Thompson model, the necessity of securing the populace, "pacification," exceeds all others.

The Strategy Explained

As Thompson stated, the Combined Action Program made the only real effort to protect the people of Vietnam. The touchstone of this underutilized strategy was in rooting out the VC forces imbedded in the villages of South Vietnam. Utilizing the Marines' combined action approach in an intermeshed strategy, CAP pacification starts within a single village and expands from there, never allowing a village to become isolated by the guerrillas. What size force would it take to occupy every village in South Vietnam? First, each village would not require a CAP platoon, but the majority of villages necessitate it. Additionally, only those outlying villages whose geographical distance from surrounding villages negates ready reinforcement by neighboring CAP platoons would require relocation of the inhabitants. 10 million villagers lived in rural South Vietnam and on average one CAP platoon controlled a village of 5,000 people. Taking this as a model, pacification requires 2000 CAP platoons, or 32,000 American servicemen.⁷⁷ This is a reasonable sum considering MACV directed over 550,000 servicemen in country at the height of the war. A comparable figure of PFs assumes the South Vietnamese could produce a reasonable 70,000 PFs, well less than one percent of the rural population.

The second tenet involves taking the guerrilla fight to the guerrilla with the added benefit of American military strengths. This element of the strategy presumes the need for a robust Special Forces capability. To fight the guerrillas in their element requires highly trained and conditioned reconnaissance patrols capable of extended operations in the dense jungle. Adequately outfitted with superior firepower and sustained by aerial means, this specially trained counter-guerrilla force attrites the VC with ambush tactics, neutralizes guerrilla supply lines, and provides higher headquarters advance warning of large troop concentrations and movements.

Westmoreland did not have it all wrong, any more than the Marines had it all right, and although limited in frequency, VC and NVA forces challenged Americans in battalion strength or better. As a counter, this strategy supposes the need for large "fix and destroy" forces, used on occasion to destroy large concentrations of Vietnam forces.⁷⁸ This third aspect counters those occasions when the enemy presents an opportunity for open engagement. U.S. forces strike with devastating speed and maneuver maximizing their aerial assault capability in concert with close air support and strategic bombing. Ultimately, this capability neutralizes enemy staging and training areas within South Vietnam. For this purpose, regular units, able to reinforce up to a division size force are required within each TAOR. Again, this element of the strategy has limited usage, but its significance and utility represent the killing blow of the strategy.

CAP Improvements

Marine CAP platoons in Vietnam suffered from a disjunction in command and control: they were on an administrative chain to the squad's parent battalion, while operationally they answered to the Combined Action Headquarters within III MAF. However common in the present day of jointness, componentcy, and unified commands, this mixed relationship proved stressful at the grassroots level in Vietnam. Distanced from the preponderance of Marine forces, many within its ranks believed the CAP was misunderstood and undervalued beyond the NCO ranks of the Marine Corps. Battalion Commanders signed off on a CAP platoon in a particular village and often only heard from the squad leader when he required reinforcements. Undoubtedly, battalion commanders held the belief that CAP platoons were not viable combat entities. Combined action was more than winning the hearts and minds, and the CAP casualties

attested to the fact that it was real, discernable combat there in the village. The split devotion to two separate reporting chains created misperceptions and animosity among I Corps Marines.

An alternative approach using the battalion command structure takes the inherent responsibility from the Corporal or Sergeant to that of a career officer, the battalion commander. Some would argue that it took a special Marine for CAP and this perhaps drove the volunteer nature of the program. These same Marines argued that dedicating whole units to combined action would not work due to racial prejudice, xenophobia, and cultural insensitivity of the average Westerner. The individual volunteer and subsequent scrutiny by the III MAF selection board served primarily to weed out unsuitable Marines who would be operating independently of the Marine Corps in what was unquestionably a diplomatically sensitive mission. Screening becomes immaterial with a battalion employment. Marines properly led and objectively explained the mission by their commanders will invariably produce results beyond all expectations. This method of employment effectively brings together all administrative support and operational control of the CAP platoons under one command in the traditional architecture and provides superb oversight.

Imbedded in the CAP concept would be the ability to mass forces quickly in support of platoons under attack. Given the heloborne assets of American forces in Vietnam, and the mutually supportive strategy, reaction forces would have to be able to respond to any crisis within a reasonable time, optimally less than an hour. Envisioning CAP platoons down in the village and regional reaction forces dispersed, combat efficiency would best be served by maintaining service integrity throughout the TAORs. To fill all the CAP platoons with Marines who would then call on the Army for reinforcement begs inefficiency and interservice bickering. This strategy intends to maintain the four corps area makeup as it existed, that of the Marines in I

Corps and the U.S. Army within the remaining three. The initial endstate of pacification would be the tying in of the four TAORs into a nationwide combined action security network.

Implementation and Expectations

Phasing, just as with the Communist plan, is assumed in this strategy, as the foundation of all subsequent actions depends entirely upon first wresting control of the villages away from the Communists. As the CAP platoons begin their work the guerrillas will fall back to alternate positions, those surrounding villages. Stung but not down, their requirements for supply remain, but their ability to secure it begins to degrade. As CAP platoons further fan out, the guerrillas begin to feel the real sting of the strategy as resources dwindle, particularly food and recruits.

Concurrent with phase one, long range, and extended duration patrolling begins. These highly trained patrols, primarily Special Forces teams, fight a counter-guerrilla war, but also impact regular NVA units and their ability to move from staging areas into the lowlands. Patrolling for up to weeks on end, sustained through aerial delivery, these patrols fight guerrillas as guerrillas, ambushing supply lines in the dense jungle terrain at will. External supply lines extending from the Ho Chi Minh trail suffer as well. With their in-country supply source, the village, threatened, they fall back on what assets they can procure from North Vietnam. The reaction here may be twofold, that of requiring more from the north and open conflict for control of the villages.

As Sir Robert Thompson predicted when the popular base of the guerrilla is threatened, "Sooner or later, the VC, denied access to the primary source of supply, the population, would have to come out in the open and contest the government's control of the people."⁷⁹ When the VC, their supply base in the hands of the CAP platoons, contest control of the village, they no

longer possess the initiative. The VC and NVA, sensing the threat to their sustainment, mass company and battalion level assaults on villages. The initial counterstroke to these attacks comes from the villagers themselves, who having embraced the security and lifestyle enhancement of combined action act to preserve the arrangement. The villagers become an unmatched human intelligence activity, forewarning their American counterparts of VC and NVA unrest and movements in the surrounding areas. No doubt, the Marines and soldiers would cultivate their relationship with the villagers, placing great emphasis on VC movement.

As intelligence on enemy activity confirms the likelihood of attack on a village, reaction forces are placed on higher states of alert and begin to augment the CAP platoons in the villages. With the platoons an integral part of the command structure, situational awareness throughout the chain ensures operations support the repulse of Communist attacks. At the instance of attack, Americans, profiting from unmatched maneuver in the form of aerial assault helicopters quickly mass combat power in the form of ground troops, artillery, and close air support to deny the enemy control of the village. Mao said, "Guerrillas should not allow themselves to be put in a position where they are robbed of the initiative and the decision to attack forced upon them."⁸⁰ With CAP platoons spreading across the countryside, their lifeblood threatened within the village, the guerrillas are left with no recourse but to attack the village. Unfortunate for him, this pits his weakness against the strength of the Americans unmatched conventional might. Neither the guerrilla nor the regular NVA army can win this fight. Throughout South Vietnam this same scenario would potentially play itself out hundreds of times, always with massive casualties inflicted upon the Communist.

The third element, fix and destroy forces, come into the scenario as large NVA forces stage themselves in preparation for assaults on the pacification effort. Those dispersed and

numerous forces, ready to mass in support of the CAP or to fix and destroy large enemy units afield remain vital. The Vietnam War proved that Giap, in command of a conventional army of some size, felt the need to test it against the Americans from time to time. In these instances a tactic of fix and destroy, throwing the might of American air power well outside of the village areas, would have devastating effect on the enemy without threatening agrarian Vietnam.

Within an undeterminable period, this strategy would have decisive impact on Communist insurgency in South Vietnam. An ever-widening expanse of pacified populace, coupled with American tactical combat dominance equating to significant force attrition, would put Ho and Giap well off of their own strategy. From their frustration and desperation guerrilla operations would degenerate to terrorist attacks on military forces and government institutions. While impossible to eradicate terrorist, attacks would have little impact on the strategy beyond harassment, and would strengthen resolve against the Communist north among South Vietnamese.

Having presented this strategy, the obvious and inherently Western question remains, "how long?" Time was perhaps the greatest tool Ho Chi Minh wielded against the Americans and to think that the U.S. populace allowed the conflict to draw out over the course of a decade is mind-boggling. It is difficult to predict with any accuracy the duration required for this proposed strategy. At a minimum, it suffices to say that in well less than the time America spent at war in South Vietnam this strategy would have achieved at least a stalemate preserving the 17th parallel. Beyond that, the outcome depended upon factors beyond the military realm of influence.

VI. CONCLUSION

"I was convinced that the side that finally receives the support and trust of the people would be the side in control in the end"

Edward P. Metzner

With the evidence presented in support of the Marines' combined action approach to the Vietnam dilemma, the reasonable conclusion is that it worked. CAP had overwhelming local successes towards achieving what "search and destroy" never could. Combined action hit upon the true nature of the war and put in jeopardy the supporting infrastructure of Ho Chi Minh's guerrilla based organization in South Vietnam. Recognizing the battlefield as the people, not the VC or NVA, Marine leaders sought to separate the guerrilla from the peasant to effectively cut the umbilical cord sustaining the enemy. The results speak for themselves, as do the programs shortcomings.

Taken one step further, if General Westmoreland would have embarked upon a strategy hinged upon combined action, and successfully shut down armed subversion within South Vietnam, this was only one element in the equation for success there. Assuming military dominance, the battle to produce a viable, respected, and trustworthy administration stymied the best American statecraft. Arguably, in any similar endeavor, the military effort, regardless of its complexity, is relatively simple when compared with creating and maintaining a credible government. The problem was further exacerbated in South Vietnam where American expectations of government clashed with Mandarin realities. In short, a successful military undertaking in Vietnam would have assured little more than a stalemate with an open-ended occupation much like that of South Korea.

So, what are the implications for the future? Has the United States learned its lessons with indigenous insurgency in foreign lands? That answer is yet to be seen, but ongoing operations in the wake of September 11th may provide numerous opportunities to right the wrongs of Vietnam. Already the situation in Afghanistan shows potential to develop into full-blown guerrilla warfare as warlords, now sprung from Taliban bondage, compete to acquire their share of forthcoming international aid and booty. The Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) in the southern Philippines, an Islamic separatist group based on the island of Basilan and currently under the surveillance of U.S. Special Forces, offers one limited guerrilla conflict. Also, proposed operations in Yemen, Somalia, and Georgia present potentially insurgent challenges to conventionally minded American strategists. Finally, the current situation in Columbia, arguably overshadowed by operation Enduring Freedom, presents as similar and dynamically complex a scenario as we encountered in Vietnam. In summary, for the fan of the Marines' CAP platoons, the future, replete with opportunities, may vindicate its usefulness.

To those strategists and planners, the creed of combined action is powerfully simple. The key to an effective strategy involving an indigenous insurgency is to separate the people from the combatants. To this end a review of the lessons of CAP, both strengths and weaknesses, begs that the force be first applied with sufficient vision. Secondly, tomorrow's guerrilla fighters must be culturally attuned, linguistically adept, and capably armed. In a conventional sense, U.S. forces are the most capably armed in the history of mankind. Arming with respect to cultural sensitivity and language skills, particularly with respect to Islam, presents the greatest obstacle to willing application of the tenets of combined action in future scenarios. Just as in Vietnam, the merit of getting among the people, learning the language, taking the time to detect and appreciate the minute, yet numerous cultural deviations present, is less than appealing and may fall well

outside of the operational and tactical paradigms of most in uniform today, less those forces belonging to the Special Operations Command. The hope is that at a minimum this paper will serve to spark debate by those tasked with developing military strategies in like conflicts of the future.

General Charles Cornwallis' defeat at Yorktown on October 19th, 1781 was in great measure due to an American indigenous insurgency led by Nathaniel Greene and Daniel Morgan about and throughout the Southern colonies. In Vietnam, America played the role of Great Britain in the American Revolution, that of attempting to prevail in a guerrilla conflict by deploying a large, albeit highly trained, conventional force. Ironically, by the 200th anniversary, the lessons of that auspicious chapter in the founding of this glorious union were forgotten. The parallels between these two conflicts are so many that they sadly add credence to the mantra that those who fail to study history are doomed to repeat it.

¹This quote, taken from the "Psychology" section of the introductory chapter of the Small Wars Manual, touches on several basic distinctions of small wars and highlights the widely held belief that small wars, and in particular insurgency scenarios, are wars among the people. General Lewis W. Walt, USMC (Ret.) paraphrased from this same text with noted adaptation in his book *Strange War, Strange Strategy: A General's Report on Vietnam*, stating, "In regular warfare, the responsible officers simply strive to attain a method of producing the maximum physical effect with the force at their disposal. In small wars, the goal is to gain decisive results with the least application of force and the consequent minimum loss of life. The end aim is the social, economic, and political development of the people subsequent to the military defeat of the enemy insurgent forces. In small wars, tolerance, sympathy, and kindness should be the keynote of our relationship with the mass of the population." General Walt's paraphrase accurately identifies military operations as the enabler to social, economic, and political enhancements.

²Mao Tse-tung, *Mao Tse-tung on Guerrilla Warfare*, trans. Brigadier General Samuel B. Griffith, USMC (Ret.) (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1989), 20-22.

³Tse-tung, 112.

Rules:

- 1) All actions are subject to command.
- 2) Do not steal from the people.
- 3) Be neither selfish nor unjust

Remarks:

1) Replace the door when you leave the house. (In summer, doors were frequently lifted off and used as beds)

- 2) Roll up the bedding on which you have slept.
- 3) Be courteous.
- 4) Be honest in your transactions
- 5) Return what you borrow.
- 6) Replace what you break.
- 7) Do not bathe in the presence of women.
- 8) Do not without authority search the pocket-books of those you arrest.

⁴Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1966), 34. This and the preceding two sentences each represent thoughts taken from this text.

⁵Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 28-30. This and the preceding two sentences each represent thoughts taken from this text.

⁶Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 101.

⁷Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak Lt. USMC (Ret), *First to Fight* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 196.

⁸Robert B. Asprey, *War in the Shadows: The Guerrilla in History* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1975), 698. This model served Ho well through the French-Indochina War and prosecuted into the conflict in South Vietnam. Before the end of 1964, Giap began movement of entire NVA units into South Vietnam. See also, Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War, People's Army* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1962), 46-47, 101. Giap states that "the long-term revolutionary war must include several different stages: stage of contention, stage of equilibrium and stage of counter-offensive." Giap later states that "the general law of revolutionary war is usually to go through three stages: defensive, equilibrium and offensive," and it is this interpretation that Roger Hillsman reiterates in his introduction (p. xix-xx).

⁹Peter Paret and John W. Shy, *Guerrillas in the 1960's* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1962), 35.

¹⁰Vo Nguyen Giap, *How We Won the War* (Philadelphia: RECON Publishers, 1976), 34.

¹¹Asprey, 701-703. This entire paragraph was derived from this text.

¹²Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years of the U.S. Army in Vietnam 1941-1960* (New York: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1985), 337.

¹³Asprey, 704.

Six Forbiddances

- 1) Not to do what is likely to damage the land and crops or spoil the houses and belongings of the people.
- 2) Not to insist on buying or borrowing what the people are not willing to sell or lend.
- 3) Not to bring living hens into the mountain people's houses.
- 4) Never to break your word.
- 5) Not to give offense to people's faith and customs (such as to lie down before the altar, to raise the feet over the hearth, to play music in the house, etc.).

6) Not to do or speak what is likely to make people believe that we hold them in contempt.

Six Permissibles

1) To help the people in their daily work (harvesting, fetching firewood, carrying water, sewing, etc.)

2) Whenever possible, to buy commodities for those who live far from markets (knives, salt needles, thread, pen, paper, etc.).

3) In spare time, to tell amusing, simple, and short stories useful to the Resistance, but not betraying secrets.

4) To teach the population the national script and elementary hygiene.

5) To study the customs of each region so as to be acquainted with them in order to create an atmosphere of sympathy first, then gradually to explain to the people to abate their superstitions.

6) To show to the people that you are correct, diligent, and disciplined

¹⁴Asprey, 702-703.

¹⁵Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 648.

¹⁶Robert Thompson, *No Exit from Vietnam* (New York: David McKay Company Inc., 1969), 32.

¹⁷Thompson, *No Exit*, 32.

¹⁸Thompson, *No Exit*, 33.

¹⁹Thompson, *No Exit*, 34.

²⁰Karnow, 334 & 452. This and the preceding sentence were taken from this text.

²¹Krulak, 190.

²²General Lewis W. Walt, USMC (Ret.), *Strange War, Strange Strategy: A General's Report on Vietnam* (New York: Funk & Wagnals, 1970), 105.

²³Michael P. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1989), 24.

²⁴Walt, 105.

²⁵Peterson, 49.

²⁶Peterson, 33.

²⁷Peterson, 36.

²⁸Peterson, 137.

²⁹Major Charles M. Johnson, USMC and Jack Shimlimson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and Buildup 1965* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1978), 135.

³⁰Johnson and Shimlimson, 135.

³¹Walt, 107.

³²Peterson, 24-25. This process of integration described was taken from this text.

³³Francis J. West, *An Area Security System for Vietnam Incorporating Combined Action*, RM-5895-ARPA (Santa Monica, CA: The Rand Corp., 1969), 64; Jack Shumlimson and others, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year 1968* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1997), 624; and Charles R. Smith, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: High Mobility and Standown 1969* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1988), 356.

³⁴William R. Corson, *The Betrayal* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1968), 184.

³⁵Corson, 190.

³⁶West, 10.

³⁷Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 145.

³⁸Peterson, 104.

³⁹Corson, 186. Taken from data collected in 1967.

⁴⁰Corson, 186. Taken from data collected in 1967.

⁴¹Tse-tung, 23.

⁴²Corson, 187. This and the preceding statement were taken from this text.

⁴³West, 11.

⁴⁴West, 11.

⁴⁵Corson, 185-186. The thoughts presented within this paragraph were taken from this text.

⁴⁶Corson, 185.

⁴⁷Jack Shumlimson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1982), 234-237.

⁴⁸Corson, 185.

⁴⁹Peterson, 25.

⁵⁰ Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., *The Army in Vietnam* (Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 167.

⁵¹ Krepinevich, 175.

⁵² Asprey, 1140.

⁵³ West, 4.

⁵⁴ West, 4.

⁵⁵ West, 9.

⁵⁶ Corson, 184.

⁵⁷ West, 9.

⁵⁸ Peterson, 24.

⁵⁹ Peterson, 93.

⁶⁰ Peterson, 93.

⁶¹ Peterson, 93.

⁶² Peterson, 44. This and the preceding sentence taken from this text.

⁶³ Peterson, 91.

⁶⁴ West, 33.

⁶⁵ Peterson, 59.

⁶⁶ Smith, 380. These totals were taken from FMFPAC personnel distribution report.

⁶⁷ General William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1976), 165-166.

The general admits to passing the CAP platoons' success to other commanders with the guidance to incorporate such a concept "as local conditions might dictate." Westmoreland mistook the Marines' involvement in the villages as unwillingness to push beyond the doctrinal "shallow beachhead" long associated with amphibious assaults. He saw the Marines as locked in doctrine rather than adapting to the insurgent nature of Vietnam, viewing their stalled approach along the DMZ as rigidity, whereas reality was that of innovation. He further states, "I believed the marines should have been trying to find the enemy's main forces and bring them to battle...although there was no question that since I was commander of all American military forces in Vietnam, the marines were under my over-all command, I had no wish to deal so abruptly with General Walt that I might precipitate an interservice imbroglio...I chose to issue orders for specific projects that as time passed would gradually get the marines out of their beachheads."

⁶⁸ Peterson, 123. This and the preceding sentence taken from this text.

⁶⁹ Walt, 140-141.

⁷⁰ Asprey, 1160. Walt felt significant pressure from General Westmoreland. While Westmoreland avoided direct confrontation with the Marines, as Dr. Andrew Krepinevich (176) points out, he was "disgusted with the Marines' approach to the war." Westmoreland wrote Walt in an attempt to persuade him to move his forces into the highlands along the demilitarized zone, stating that he was "impressed with the professional competence of all echelons and with the grasp which your officers and men display regarding the problems of long term security and pacification...about the situation throughout the part of I Corps which lies beyond the three Marines enclaves. Outside of your enclaves the VC are largely able to move at will and they are rapidly consolidating very large areas...The longer the VC have a free hand in the rest of the Corps, the more the area they will consolidate, and the more difficult it will be for us in the long run...Therefore, I believe very strongly that we must...seek out and destroy large VC forces." See also, General William C. Westmoreland TOP SECRET message to General Earle Wheeler, subject: "Visit to Washington by Richard E. Cabazos, LTC Inf, US," 22 January 1968. Regraded unclassified order Sec Army by Tag Per #830024. In this message Westmoreland's earlier flattery of Marine professionalism to Walt was proved disingenuous. If discovered by the Marines, the message sent from Westmoreland to then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Earle Wheeler could have significantly damaged relations between the two services. Praising a Lieutenant Colonel Richard E. Cabazos, whom he had just sent to visit the Marines in I Corps to advise on building battalion defensive positions, Westmoreland wholly condemns the Marines to Wheeler: "As you perhaps appreciate, the military professionalism of the Marines falls far short of the standards that should be demanded by our armed forces. Indeed, they are brave and proud, but their standards, tactics, and lack of command supervision throughout their ranks requires improvement in the national interest." That Westmoreland would so willingly blaspheme the Marine Corps to Wheeler suggests that the later shared this view and leaves one wondering on the breadth of this perception within the United States Army during the period.

⁷¹ Shumlimson and others, 13. It is likely that this statement was intended for Krulak. Arguably, it may well have been that Krulak's passion for pacification, and his candid disagreement with General Westmoreland cost him the Commandancy.

⁷² Krepinevich, 164.

⁷³Asprey, 1277. This and the preceding sentence taken from this text.

⁷⁴Krepinevich, 166-167. The thoughts expressed in this paragraph were taken directly from this text.

⁷⁵Krepinevich, 166-167.

⁷⁶Thompson, *No Exit*, 137,198. Thompson proposed a three-pronged approach of protecting or controlling the villages, small unit deep penetration operations, and utilizing the remainder of the force in a dispersed, occupied manner. The strategy proposed would appear to be that of General Walt's presented on page 31. This proposed strategy is drawn primarily from Thompson's work, but differs in two ways from Walt's applied strategy. General Walt's implemented strategy stressed 'search and destroy' tactics, while assigning little emphasis to pacification and counterinsurgency. Secondly, 'fix and destroy' implies engagement of a known enemy location, whereas 'search and destroy' equated to blindly scouring the jungle in hopes of a meeting engagement.

⁷⁷West, 34. This figure accounts for some two thousand personnel assigned for support outside of the villages. Dr Andrew Krepinevich, (176) in his book, *The Army in Vietnam* cites a 1967 Department of Defense report claiming to require 167,000 troops to encamp every village in Vietnam. This number appears extreme given the estimates of William Corson of 700 CAP platoons and that of West of 2000. Each served in Vietnam, Corson extensively with the CAP at all levels. As such, the author has chosen the more liberal of the two. Regardless, with a force of over 550,000 in Vietnam, any of these estimates were supportable.

⁷⁸Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 119.

⁷⁹Krepinevich, 171.

⁸⁰Tse-tung, 104-105.

Bibliography

a. Books

- Asprey, Robert B. *War in the Shadows: The Guerrilla in History*. Vol. 2. New York: Doubleday & Company, 1975.
- Corson, William R. *The Betrayal*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1968.
- Cosmas, Graham A. and Murray, Terrence P. Lieutenant Colonel USMC. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Vietnamization and Redeployment 1970-1971*. Washington D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1986.
- Cross, James E. *Conflict in the Shadows: The Nature and Politics of Guerrilla War*. New York: Doubleday & Company, 1962.
- Davidson, Philip B. Lt. General USA (Ret). *Secrets of the Vietnam War*. Novato CA: Presidio Press, 1990.
- Duiker, William J. *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*. Colorado: Westview Press, 1981.
- Dung, Van Tien and Giap, Vo Nguyen. *How We Won the War*. Pennsylvania: RECON Publications, 1976.
- Giap, Vo Nguyen. *How We Won the War*. Philadelphia: RECON Publishers, 1976.
- _____. *People's War, People's Army: The Viet Cong Insurrection Manual for Underdeveloped Countries*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1962.
- Greene, T. N. (ed.). *The Guerrilla and How to Fight Him*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1962.
- Howard, Michael and Paret, Peter. *Carl Von Clausewitz: On War*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984.
- Hunt, Richard A. *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds*. Boulder CO: Westview Press Inc., 1995.
- Johnson, Charles M. Major USMC and Shulimson, Jack. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and Buildup 1965*. Washington D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1978.
- Karnow, Stanley. *Vietnam: A History*. 2nd ed. New York: Penguin Books, 1991.

- Krepinevich, Andrew F., Jr. *The Army and Vietnam*. Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.
- Krulak, Victor H. Lt. General USMC (Ret). *First to Fight*. New York: Pocket Books, Simon and Schuster Inc., 1984.
- Metzner, Edward P. *More Than a Soldier's War: Pacification in Vietnam*. Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 1995.
- Nickerson, Herman Jr. Lt. General USMC (Ret). *Leadership Lessons and Remembrances from Vietnam*. Washington D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1988.
- Palmer, Bruce General USA (Ret). *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam*. Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1984.
- Paret, Peter and Shy, John W. *Guerrillas in the 1960's*. New York: Praeger Inc., 1962.
- Peterson, Michael P. *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1989.
- Scoville, Thomas. *Reorganizing for Pacification Support*. Center of Military History, U.S. Army, Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1991.
- Shumlimson, Jack. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War 1966*. Washington D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1982.
- Shulimson, Jack, and others. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year 1968*. Washington D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1997.
- Smith, Charles R. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: High Mobility and Standown 1969*. Washington D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1988.
- Spector Ronald H. *Advice and Support: The Early Years of the U.S. Army in Vietnam 1941-1960*. New York: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1985.
- Summers, Harry G. Colonel USA (Ret). *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*. California: Presidio Press, 1982.
- Tanham, George K. *Communist Revolutionary Warfare: The Vietminh in Indochina*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1961.
- Telfer, Gary L. Major USMC, Rogers, Lane Lieutenant Colonel USMC and Fleming, V. K. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese 1967*. Washington D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1984.

Tse-tung, Mao. *Mao Tse-tung on Guerrilla Warfare*. Trans. Brigadier General Samuel B. Griffith, USMC (Ret.), Headquarters Marine Corps, 1989.

Thompson, Robert. *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1966.

_____. *No Exit from Vietnam*. New York: David McKay Company Inc., 1969.

Walt, Lewis W. General USMC (Ret). *Strange War, Strange Strategy: A General's Report on Vietnam*. New York: Funk and Wagnals, 1970.

West Francis J. *An Area Security System For Vietnam Incorporating Combined Action*. RM-5895-ARPA. Santa Monica, CA: The Rand Corp., March 1969.

_____. *The Pragmatist: A Combined Action Platoon in I Corps*. D-17093-ARPA. Santa Monica, CA: The Rand Corp., May 1968.

_____. *The Village*. Wisconsin: Wisconsin Press Ltd., 1972.

Westmoreland, William C. General USA (Ret). *A Soldier Reports*. New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1976.

Whitlow, Robert H. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Advisory & Combat Assistance Era 1954-1964*. Washington D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, 1977.

b. Articles.

Childs, Jack Gunnery Sergeant USMC, MacKenzie, Norman Staff Sergeant USMC, Sweeney, Michael Corporal USMC, and Wilson, George Master Sergeant USMC. "Combined Action." *Marine Corps Gazette*, October 1966, 28-31.

Damm, Raymond C. "The Combined Action Program: A Tool for the Future." *Marine Corps Gazette*, October 1998, 49-53.

Dunn, Jerry F. Colonel USA. "A New Look at Pacification." *Military Review*, January 1970 84-87.

Editorial (Author unknown). "'Combined Action' - It Works." *Navy: The Magazine of Sea Power*, September 1967, 7.

Kriegel, Richard C. Lieutenant Colonel USMC. "Revolutionary Development." *Marine Corps Gazette*, March 1967, 36-43.

Krulak, Victor H. Lieutenant General USMC. "The Guerrilla and Reality." *Marine Corps Gazette*, July 1966, 41-42.

Krulak, Victor H. Lieutenant General USMC. "Krulak on Vietnam: He Tells It Like It Is." *Navy: The Magazine of Sea Power*, June 1968, 24-29.

Larsen, Finn J. "The Peregrinations of Mr. McNamara." *Army*, January 1966, 10-13.

Mack, Richard E. Lieutenant Colonel USA. "Hold and Pacify." *Military Review*, November 1967, 91-95.

McWilliams, J.P. "Pacify and Hold." *Marine Corps Gazette*, February 1965, 56.

Smithers, Samuel W. Lieutenant Colonel USA. "Combat Units in Revolutionary Development." *Military Review*, October 1967, 37-41.

Westmoreland, William C. "The Fight for Freedom in Vietnam." *Army Information Digest*, February 1965, 6-15.

c. Papers.

Komer, R. W. *Impact of Pacification on Insurgency in South Vietnam*. Rand Corporation/Working Paper, Prepared for the Sixty-sixth Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, August 1970.

Report of a Seminar. *Lessons from the Vietnam War*, 12 February 1969. London: Royal United Service Institution, 1969.

Wynn, Kenneth E., Major, USMC. *Did the Marines Better Understand the Nature of the Vietnam Conflict and was the Combined Action Program More Suitable than Civil Operations Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) in Dealing with Insurgents?* M.M.S. Paper. Quantico, VA: United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College, May 2000.

d. Messages.

General William C. Westmoreland TOP SECRET message to General Earle Wheeler. Subject: "Visit to Washington by Richard E. Cabazos, LTC Inf, US," 22 January 1968. Regraded unclassified order Sec Army by Tag Per #830024.