

# Managing Revolution: Cold War Counterinsurgency and Liberal Governance

Author: Peter Berard

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# Managing Revolution: Cold War Counterinsurgency and Liberal Governance

Peter John Berard

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# **MANAGING REVOLUTION: COLD WAR COUNTERINSURGENCY AND LIBERAL GOVERNANCE**

Peter Berard

Advisor: Seth Jacobs, PhD

Counterinsurgency doctrine, as an intellectual project, began as a response on the part of liberal world powers to the dual crises of decolonization and the Cold War.

Unlike earlier means of suppressing rebellions, counterinsurgency sought not to quash, but to channel the revolutionary energies of decolonization into a liberal, developmentalist direction. Counterinsurgency would simultaneously defeat communists and build a new and better society. As early efforts at developmentalist counterinsurgency failed in Vietnam in the early 1960s, the counterinsurgent's methods and goals changed. The CORDS Project, starting in 1967, replaced the emphasis on building a new society with altering present societies in such a way as to prioritize surveillance and the removal of subversive elements. From its inception, the political visions that counterinsurgency seeks to implement have shifted alongside – and at times prefigured – changes in liberal governance more broadly.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Table of Contents .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Dedication .....</b>	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
<b>Acknowledgments .....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Introduction: Counterinsurgency as a Project .....</b>	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
<b>1. Threads of "Classical" Counterinsurgency: Late Imperial France and Britain Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. Creating a Counterinsurgent Culture .....</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>3. Vietnam and the Emergence of the American Counterinsurgency Project...100</b>	
<b>4. The Politics of Surveillance and Assassination: CORDS and the Pivot to a New Foundation for Counterinsurgent Governance .....</b>	<b>145</b>
<b>Conclusion: Liberalism and the Governance of Turbulence .....</b>	<b>190</b>
<b>Works Cited.....</b>	<b>227</b>

*For my parents*

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## COUNTERINSURGENCY AS A PROJECT

When I conceived of the idea of making counterinsurgency my dissertation topic, as a mere stripling first-year Master's student in 2008, I seldom needed any extra definitional follow-up when I answered "I research counterinsurgency" when asked the inevitable question of what sort of history I study. Many people – particularly the kind of people a young grad student was likely to meet – knew the term. They heard it enough on the news recently. They could connect it to a face- the intellectual but reassuringly confident and steely-eyed general on their televisions or their *New York Times* feeds, David Petraeus. You could pick up the US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Manual, published a few years earlier, at any bookstore, if you were so inclined- and according to sales figures, many were. Another, subtly different indicator: it was not uncommon, in the summer or fall of 2008, to find copies of that same counterinsurgency manual on the tables of the sidewalk used booksellers, the best sources for books in New York and one of the primary good things about the city. Their presence there indicated that the booksellers, canny marketers all, thought they would sell- and, moreover, that copies of the manual were frequently sold off, donated, or simply thrown away by enough New Yorkers to wind up a frequently scavenged object.

Since then, the proportion of the people to whom I give the canned spiel every humanities grad student has to have at the ready who do not require further explication of

the term “counterinsurgency” has steadily declined. These are generally educated people with some interest in politics and the world around them: students and teachers at various levels of higher education, activists and organizers. By the end of the Obama era, I had concluded that my attempts to scry for understanding in the eyes of new acquaintances when I uttered the word “counterinsurgency” was too unreliable, and I would just go ahead and cram a brief definition of the term – “means for fighting insurgents, you know, guerrillas, like Vietnam or Iraq” – into my pre-canned spiel. Previously I had avoided doing so for fear of over-explaining and seeming patronizing- what if someone got annoyed by my presumption that they needed the word “counterinsurgency” defined for them? This fear has not realized itself, in part because people are generally more generous and forgiving of graduate students than graduate students generally are to themselves, and in part because the term is not the touchstone it was for a brief moment at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Both in my definitions of it to people that I meet and in most of the literature surrounding it, counterinsurgency is defined negatively, on two different axes. It is the negative of “conventional war,” that is, wars defined by open battles between uniformed opponents. It is also the counter to insurgency, that is, uprisings against some established state of affairs, be it a long-standing governing arrangement or a recently-established military occupation. This is how the US military chooses to understand counterinsurgency, as a generic term for fighting guerrillas and insurgents. A substantial number of scholars and analysts, both supporters and critics of the US military, use it in much the same way, a means of describing a given task and the ways of accomplishing it.

Thus defined, counterinsurgency has been around as long as there has been war, and indeed, arguably longer than “conventional” war defined as set-piece battles between uniformed armies. Counterinsurgency as a term only begins to appear in the late 1940s, and became a common phrase in American defense discourse about a decade later. Military writers often view other terms for the same range of tasks – counter-guerrilla, small wars, “Indian fighting,” etc. – as more or less meaning the same thing as “counterinsurgency,” broadly-defined. Some recommend perusing the US Marine Corps manual on “Small Wars” from 1935 or British Army colonel C.E. Callwell’s 1896 volume *Small Wars: Their Principles and Purpose* to gain counterinsurgency insight.

However, counterinsurgency as a term also means something more specific than any means of fighting guerrillas. The word has a history, and that is the history of a doctrine, a living intellectual tradition. A google ngram with the terms “small wars” and “counterinsurgency” show that references to counterinsurgency in English-language books published in a given year began to outpace references to “small wars” in 1962, and skyrocket ahead after, with a number of dramatic dips and soars. This was more than a shift in terminology. Counterinsurgency congealed as a doctrine in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and entailed a reimagining of the political basis of military problems that are as old as the first empires.

Historians are right to point to the similarities between “small wars” and colonial interventions more generally and counterinsurgency. At their most basic, the scenarios – stronger powers occupying significantly poorer and less militarily powerful countries (or else local hegemony occupying poorer and restive portions of their own states or empires) – tend to be the same. So, too, tend to be the problems facing the occupiers: attacks by

forces arising from the occupied population, employing guerrilla tactics to strike where the occupier is weak, and relying upon the occupier's ignorance of local geography, culture, and politics to evade the occupier's power. The solutions proposed by colonial or pseudo-colonial military officers tend to resemble those of counterinsurgents, as well. Such measures include controlling populations through confinement (and, generally, terror); increased emphasis on intelligence and gaining understanding of the occupied culture; efforts to woo populations through various means; and, on the simpler tactical level, a re-emphasis on mobility over firepower. Both critics and supporters of counterinsurgency and the projects in which counterinsurgency has been deployed point out these similarities, going back at least to the colonial wars of the mid-nineteenth century as historian Douglas Porch points out, and arguably much further.<sup>1</sup>

What changed in the transition from colonial war or “small war” to counterinsurgency were several key pieces of the context in which powers engaged in occupations. The first, and most important, were changes in the politics and strategy of insurgents. The techniques of occupation – and of governance more generally, of which occupation and counterinsurgency are a subset – are always defined not just by the values, goals, and understandings of the governors, but the resistance of the governed. When modes of self-assertion by the governed change, so too do governance techniques. If the tactics deployed by mid-twentieth century insurgents in China, Algeria, Vietnam, Cuba, Kenya, and numerous other parts of the globe weren't new (were quite old, in

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Porch Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press 2013); Laleh Khalili Time in the Shadows: Confinement in Counterinsurgency (Palo Alto; Stanford University Press 2012); Anthony James Joes Resisting Rebellion: the History and Politics of Counterinsurgency (Lexington; University of Kentucky Press, 2014)

fact), the strategies and politics behind them were new to the governments they fought and the governments that backed those governments.

A number of factors combined to make insurgents more capable of mobilizing the masses of their respective populations against the colonial, neo-colonial, or otherwise unsatisfactory regimes that ruled over them. Counterinsurgents tend to give a great deal of credit to individual strategists for making this possible, lead among them Mao Tse Tung, the great theorist of protracted people's war, and occasionally to other figures: Irish Republican guerrilla leader Michael Collins, leaders of the Cuban Revolution such as Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, Vietnamese National Liberation Front commander Vo Nguyen Giap, and sometimes even figures from the counterinsurgents' own pantheon, such as T.E. Lawrence. Doubtless there is much credit to be given to many of these figures, especially Mao, whose writings on war (and the myths surrounding them, and him) spread far and wide across the mid-twentieth century developing world and beyond. The spread of anti-colonial ideologies, from nationalists to communists to various shades in between, were undoubtedly pivotal to the development of people's war as a viable insurgent strategy.

There were also numerous material factors in play, such as the delicate balance between the ability of colonizers to consolidate colonized populations into discrete, self-conscious national (and sometimes tribal or sectarian) groupings which proved increasingly capable of self-assertion in the face of imperialism, on a long arc from the late nineteenth century onward. Looming in the background was the decreasing capability of colonizers to control their colonies, certainly in such a way as to make them profitable to the hegemon. While several colonial powers held on to a more traditional understanding of their

colonies, as simple possessions of a rightful empire (Portugal, most prominently), by the end of the Second World War, most colonial powers, lead among them Britain and France, realized that at the very least, their war-weakened condition would necessitate some renegotiation of the arrangement with their colonies- hardly the first, historically. As it happened, these powers were largely incapable of stage-managing the collapse of their respective empires in the ways they had hoped, though were successful in fending off some of the worse outcomes, and strategies developed managing these exits would be important strains of the counterinsurgency governmentality.

The realities of the colonial project lead us to the second key contextual condition for the shift to counterinsurgency: the Cold War. The rise of the United States to superpower status (and patron of the colonial powers), and the beginning – and extended duration of – the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, complicated further the late colonial dynamic. As decolonization accelerated in the mid-1950s and the United States foreign policy establishment defined its Cold War aim as containing Communism throughout the world, the number of states which the US and its allies needed to prevent from “falling” to communism – in many cases in the form of genuinely popular local leftist movements – multiplied. Long-independent developing countries, primarily in Latin America but including states like Thailand, Ethiopia, and Iran, also appeared vulnerable to waves of leftist agitation, inspired by decolonization, resentment of US power, and the myriad frustrations of underdevelopment. The risks for American power were many, diffuse, and any one of them could be understood as materially critical to the overarching struggle, understood as a matter of societal life and death, between the

US and the Soviet Union and between liberal democratic capitalism and communism. They often were understood as precisely that.

These problems – the rise of new and frightening forms of mass movements in much of the developing world, and the Cold War making the developing world into an array of battlegrounds between the US and a communist bloc perceived (wrongly) as monolithic – were understood through the framework of the third important contextual element of the formation of counterinsurgency: the primacy of Cold War liberalism in the American foreign policy establishment in the mid-twentieth century. Cold War liberalism and the US responses to the crises of decolonization, Cold War, and guerrilla insurgency are so closely linked – and so nearly contemporaneous – it is difficult to separate the two. Many of the lineaments of this ideology existed in liberalism well before the Cold War broke out, but liberal thinkers and policymakers substantially revised many liberal ideas and practices due to the pressures of the struggle.

While many of the background assumptions were shared between this and earlier iterations of liberalism – particularly the commitment to constitutional governance and the primacy of individuals (conceived variously) – what makes Cold War liberalism a formation worth studying in its own right are its adaptations to challenges and threats from its left and, to a lesser extent, its right. The presence of a viable competitor to liberalism, in the form of Communism and other leftist movements, for the mantle of global upholder of freedom, progress, and other Enlightenment values, forced liberalism to the left – towards distributing power downwards – both before and during the Cold War. Fears of worker's revolt and the intractability of economic crises such as the Great Depression encouraged liberals to redefine the relationship between government and

society, expanding the role of government in regulating the economy. Both the negative example of racialized power structures in Nazi Germany and agitation on the part of marginalized communities in liberal countries, most notably black people in the United States, led to the discarding of formal racial classifications as a way of regulating the rights and duties of citizens and communities, and to an effort to find schema to replace it, most importantly those based on educationally-attained merit. A long-standing distaste for formal colonialism in liberal and progressive circles, particularly in the United States, came to the fore as efforts to maintain formal empire embarrassingly floundered after the Second World War, leading the US foreign policy establishment to disengage – though never fully – from support for formal European colonization in Africa and Asia.

What distinguished Cold War liberalism from its left competitors – what led the liberal American Cold War state to be able to co-opt left-liberals, social democrats, the occasional Trotskyite, into a project which was meant to contain and eventually destroy a flawed but extant state notionally dedicated to humanity's leftward march – was its incorporation of left-leaning dynamics of progress into older, liberal structures of power and governance. Liberals could radically alter their idea of "limited government" in terms of intervention in the economy or even deeply-held cultural practices such as those pertaining to race. But standing firm – more central to liberalism than ever – were two ideas: that individual (and associational) action was the main actor in history and politics and not class struggle; and the idea of change as gradual, accumulative, and structured by both norms and laws- not sudden, violent, or entailing a clean break with older structures. In practice, these two commitments – the abjuring of classes (or other masses, such as races or religions) as actors, and belief in non-revolutionary progress – brought forth a



conception of government as the management of social change and the forces that could bring it about, namely, people en masse. It also brought forth a type of governor, the meritocratic manager of the large institutions – governmental, business, educational or other nonprofit, etc. – that would accomplish this management, responsive within strictly-defined limits to democratic control, and more generally to norms defined largely by proscription of behaviors associated with the left (demagoguery, class struggle) or the right (open racism, hooliganism).

These three elements -- the decay of colonialism, the Cold War, and the stringencies of Cold War liberalism -- all limited options available to a superpower faced with substantial challenges from insurgents, and in some instances offered new opportunities. Violent, massive retaliation and repression as a declared, open general policy – of the kind pursued by the Nazis in occupied Eastern Europe or by the British Raj in Afghanistan – was off the table, due to all three elements structuring the situation. If the liberalism of the cold warriors wasn't enough to prevent that sort of mass, openly arbitrary bloodshed (and it was a thin reed in that regard, as the bombing campaign over North Vietnam shows), then the danger of alienating other decolonizing countries, with a rival power bloc willing to greet it with open arms, could and did. Installing a friendly dictator and allowing them to repress your enemies (and theirs), as was standard great power practice throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was very much on the table and broadly describes much of what the US did to counter insurgencies in Vietnam and elsewhere, but in much of the world the political energies unleashed by decolonization could not be contained that easily, especially with outside powers encouraging insurgency.

No matter how often cold warriors might have grumbled about liberalism tying their hands, all was not lost for those tasked with managing the part of the great machine of the managerial state dedicated to foreign interventions in the mid-twentieth century. Global trends of the mid-twentieth century worked for them, too, primarily the overweening might and material abundance of the United States during the height of its power and prosperity. Beyond allowing national security managers a massive budget to play with, this abundance also hinted at a social model Cold War liberals could advance abroad to combat the appeal of Communism, something more traditional colonizers typically lacked. American Cold War liberals could lay claim to the contested mantle of progress in a way that earlier generations of those tasked with managing fractious developing countries – previous liberals included – could not, in large part due to the real increases in standard of living that America’s post-1945 economy produced, and the media technologies that could propagate images of that lifestyle across the globe.

Where this concatenation of influences ultimately led was to a reconceptualization of the relationship between occupiers and popular politics. That is to say, it led to the conception of counterinsurgency doctrine. Counterinsurgency, understood as a historically-occurring phenomenon roughly contemporaneous with the coining of the term, is animated by idea that to combat insurgencies, rather than oppose or dissipate the energies of popular upheaval that generate guerrilla movements, the US or a power backed by them can and should manage and channel this energy along the lines understood as productive by Cold War liberalism. Practitioners of “small wars” and other colonial conflicts had long understood themselves as providing governance, often more than fighting wars, as Rudyard Kipling’s imperialist self-pity showed often enough. But

counterinsurgents radically altered this form of governmentality in response to the challenges of decolonization and the Cold War, and in line with their own liberal commitments, by attempting to create a way to suppress popular uprisings by tapping into the same energy that generates them.

This management effort strained the intellectual resources of liberal governance to its breaking point- and, arguably, beyond. This work will examine how a new form of liberal governance, with its lineages in familiar liberal soils but its growth in the distinctly illiberal terrain of internecine war, grew around counterinsurgency. The single greatest application both of counterinsurgency and of liberal efforts to manage a turbulent, fractious political situation far from the borders of the liberal great powers in the mid-twentieth century sits at the center of our story: the war in Vietnam. While counterinsurgency's story begins before the United States intervened with troops in Vietnam and has not yet ended, the Vietnam War provided the parameters and the testing ground for the most important developments in the counterinsurgency governance mode. The conflagration of the Vietnam War was such that none of the elements that went into it came out the same way. Not only was this true for counterinsurgency, but it was true for the liberal governing structures more generally that were implicated in the failure of Vietnam. Between its own adaptations for strategic purposes and the changes in liberalism that accompanied failures in Vietnam and elsewhere, counterinsurgency's governing practices and ideas changed over times. In some cases, these changes tracked changes in liberalism, and in other cases, impelled by tactical challenges or the generativity of relatively small groups of thinkers with budgets and little oversight,

counterinsurgency blazed trails which liberalism more broadly would come to track themselves.

Counterinsurgents and liberals by and large believed that what they were doing was allowing the natural course of human affairs to go forward, in the face of assorted artificial, ideological impediments: the legacy of colonialism, Communist (or, later, other kinds of) bad actors attempting to channel the people's energy elsewhere, the curse of underdevelopment. The changes we see in liberalism and counterinsurgency over time largely concern revisions in how these supposedly-natural processes go forward, what end state it would result in, and how counterinsurgents could find and remove impediments to them. Cold War liberalism generally understood the end state as a thoroughly organized, managerial, liberal capitalist democracy, heavily regulated both legally and normatively. The counterinsurgents who subscribed to it saw their task as finding ways to channel popular upheaval to ends that would advance that vision, eventually creating a self-sustaining state. Things changed after Vietnam, both in counterinsurgency doctrine and in liberalism tout court. Instead of channeling potentially dangerous social energies into society-wide projects of development, the forming modality of neoliberalism (and counterinsurgency in the neoliberal era) came to understand development and the political actors involved in it as essentially diffuse, individualized, as generating institutions as needed autonomously. The role of the state – especially a counterinsurgent state – was in removing impediments to the individualist market order, eventually creating self-sustaining states in their own image. These changes would prove fateful both for the shape of US interventions abroad and for the states these

interventions would shape, and moreover, for the shape of liberalism as an ideology going forward.

This work is a history of counterinsurgency as a concept, a vision of social change, as bounded but changeable set of practices of power, and most of all as a self-conscious project. As such, this project is bounded by the emergence of counterinsurgency as a term and a concept in the 1950s, and on the other end, by the limits of the contemporary upon which historians are wise not to tread. The primary focus of the project is the American intervention in Vietnam, and the ways in which the counterinsurgency mode both shaped the war and was shaped by it. A focus on counterinsurgency as a self-conscious mode of power explains why this work does not extend to related projects going back to the height of European and American formal imperialism and beyond. The project focuses tightly on Vietnam, somewhat to the elision (though not the eclipse) of earlier counterinsurgency interventions in Malaya and Algeria. This is because Vietnam was counterinsurgency applied on a massive scale by the liberal superpower. The lineaments of governing modalities change in response to the degree of power channeled through them, and the difference in scale between the American war in Vietnam, and the British wars in Malaya and Kenya or the French wars in Algeria and Indochina, is so massive as to definitively reorder the lineaments of the counterinsurgency modality during its course. So, too, were the political differences between an effort to prop up a friendly independent regime sincerely (if erroneously and tendentiously) believed to represent a given country, and the efforts of former colonizers to stage-manage their exits gracefully (or, in the case of French Algeria, efforts to desperately hold on to an occupied territory).

The scale of the American intervention in Vietnam did more than change the shape of the counterinsurgency modality. It changed the shape of liberalism, and of global politics, which naturally ensured further changes in how defense thinkers conceived and applied counterinsurgency. Gabriel Kolko called the cycle of conflicts the Vietnamese revolutionaries faced from the founding of the Indochina Communist Party in 1930 to the final unification of the country under communist rule in 1975 “the longest, most sustained revolutionary effort in modern history.”<sup>2</sup> The liberal response to this effort – as directed by a state at the height of its power and of its confidence in a certain kind of liberalism – sought not just to defeat this revolution, but to rechannel its energies into a liberal direction (if not a democratic one). This response, if successful, would prove definitively that the energies of decolonization could be effectively channeled by Cold War liberalism, thereby solving one of the most intractable problems facing the liberal superpower and its allies. That the response failed – strenuously, spectacularly, protractedly – did not portend the doom of the American side in the Cold War, despite the prognostications that helped launch the American war in Vietnam in the first place. But along with a number of other crises, the failed American war in Vietnam helped doom Cold War liberalism, or at any rate shape global liberalism into something new. For a work understanding counterinsurgency as a self-conscious governing mode in the liberal tradition (if not, always, self-consciously liberal), the Vietnam War is the pivot of the story, certainly as far as history, as opposed to current events, goes.

Arno Mayer describes modern history as an interaction between the forces of revolution and counterrevolution, a systole and diastole pumping the blood – delivering the energy

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<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Kolko Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience (New York: The New Press 1985) 3

and potential for action – throughout the whole system of global politics from the French Revolution onward. In an objective sense, the US effort in Vietnam was counter-revolutionary. The American government and its Vietnamese allies sought to counter a revolution, an effort to refound Vietnamese society on the basis of a redistribution of power downward and more broadly. But the closest Mayer’s typologies of counterrevolution come to accounting for the architects of the counterinsurgency project or of the American war in Vietnam more broadly is in his definition of “conservative” – pragmatic, pessimistic, committed to preserving systems as they are, and basically ineffectual unless in combination with “anti-revolution,” that is, popular sentiment directed against revolutionaries and in favor of the *ancien regime*.<sup>3</sup>

While some aspects of this picture suit the likes of John Kennedy, Walt Rostow, Robert Komer, or for that matter David Petraeus, it does not do justice to the realities of Cold War liberalism. Cold War liberals – and many adherents of other strains of liberalism, both before and after the Cold War – did not see themselves as enabling the old regime in the revolutionary situations in which they intervened. This very much included the American intervention in Vietnam, which after Dien Bien Phu forswore French or other formally colonialist involvements, attempted to find Vietnamese partners with anti-colonial credentials such as Ngo Dinh Diem, and in general made strenuous efforts to coopt or otherwise channel the energies of revolution and decolonization. They attempted – and generally failed – to find a way between, above, beneath, or otherwise orthogonal to the revolution-counterrevolution dynamic. When the moment of decision came – either embrace counterrevolution, and the reactionary violence it entails, or allow the

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<sup>3</sup> Arno Mayer *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton; Princeton University Press 2000) 51-53

Vietnamese revolution to go forward – America chose counterrevolution, reliably, in many ways, large, small, tactical, and strategic, and not just in Vietnam. Indeed, the main thrust of official American military memory on the subject of Vietnam is essentially that American strategy was insufficiently reactionary- it failed either to unleash sufficient violence on the Vietnamese people (particularly North Vietnam) or else to engage a supposed groundswell of anti-revolutionary sentiment amongst the Vietnamese people.<sup>4</sup>

But at crucial moments – mostly when American policymakers were both concerned about the fortunes of the Saigon regime but otherwise feeling relatively powerful and confident, most notably in the immediate lead-ups to the assassination of Diem and of the Tet Offensive – US strategy and politics in Vietnam reflected a genuine, if unconscious, effort to succeed in a revolutionary situation while evading the dynamics of revolution and counterrevolution. Cold War liberals delved into their governmental toolkit – and created new tools – to attempt to steer the energies generated by revolution into forms amenable to their beliefs and interests. This was not the first time liberals had done this, though it was arguably the largest such expenditure of effort, with the highest stakes, since liberals attempted to steer the course of the long cycle of revolutions entailing the Spanish American revolutions in the 1820s, the 1848 revolutions in Europe, and the overthrow of American slavery in the 1860s. It would not be the last, though the end of the Vietnam War coincided with – and undoubtedly helped shape – a historical conjuncture in the late twentieth century which disaggregated and reshaped many of the familiar lineaments of both revolutionary and counterrevolutionary politics.

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<sup>4</sup> Harry Summers *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (San Francisco; Presidio Press 1982); Mark Moyer *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War 1945-1965* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press 2006)



Many of those committed to any of the broad, amorphous ideological coalitions involved here – revolutionaries, counterrevolutionaries, or liberals – might object to the insertion of liberalism as a third force between the dynamics of revolution and counterrevolution. Revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries would likely reject out of hand the idea that liberalism is anything other than their opponents in disguise at their most relevant, a frivolous distraction at their least, as would their historians (“liberalism” has zero index entries in Mayer’s *The Furies*, a book six-hundred and ninety-five pages long). Liberals are likely to reject, wholeheartedly, the premise that modern history really marches to the drumbeat of revolution and counterrevolution, preferring more congenial stories of measured progress (something similar might be said for conservatives who fall short of the sort of counterrevolutionary fury Mayer writes about, but that’s a separate issue).

Nevertheless, there exists an established pattern of liberal powers attempting to find ways between the revolutionary distribution of power down the social hierarchy and counterrevolutionary or reactionary efforts to distribute power upwards. This is a long, complex, multifaceted history, as contradictory as the histories of revolution or counterrevolution, and no less bloody, as the experience of Vietnam attests. Elision of a dynamic requires a deftness that acceptance does not- witness how often liberals fail and accept a degree of capitulation either to the revolutionary or the counterrevolutionary project. Whatever liberalism may lack in stark necessity compared to the other ends of the historical dynamic, it makes up for in furious generativity of forms of politics, governmental arrangements, ideas, cultural formations, that in one way or another could be enlisted to sooth, dissipate, channel, redirect, or otherwise modify the energies of revolution and counterrevolution. One such formation of significant importance, both for

its effects and as an example of liberal governmentality as a response to the strains of revolution, is counterinsurgency.

The first chapter of this work examines the strains of European – primarily French and British – strategic thought that played an important role in the formation of the counterinsurgency mode. The degree of European influence on American counterinsurgency doctrine has been overstated at times, but officers who fought in late colonial conflicts in Algeria, Indochina, Malaya, and Kenya provided concepts and frameworks that would prove enduring parts of counterinsurgency’s repertoire of governing techniques. In some instances, as in that of Robert G.K. Thompson, they would go on to work with the US forces in Vietnam. French sources often provided strategic or tactical concepts, such as *quadrillage* (dividing the population into small, surveillable groups). British sources helped frame the counterinsurgency project as the provision of a certain kind of governance.

Chapter two discusses early American adaptations of the counterinsurgency framework. Concentrating on the career – and, more importantly, the (largely self-built) myth – of CIA agent and counterinsurgency guru Edward Lansdale allows the work to examine two important parts of the story. The first is the example of the suppression of the Hukbalahap Rebellion in the Philippines, through which Lansdale made his reputation. This was a late-colonial war of the United States’s own, which would prove influential to how the American defense establishment understood its intervention in Vietnam, especially early on. The second, arguably more important, is the way in which Lansdale, an advertising man before he was ever a spy, initiated the process, still ongoing, of selling counterinsurgency to the second problematic public it was meant to manage- the

populations of home countries potentially wary of lengthy foreign interventions. By tying counterinsurgency in with a number of cultural dynamics – the desire to reclaim masculinity, liberal paternalist myths of “uplift” of downtrodden racial others, and a widespread yearning for a way to undertake Cold War action without triggering a nuclear war – prevalent in the United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Lansdale helped make extended counterinsurgency war safe for liberals.

The third chapter concerns the first large-scale application of counterinsurgency doctrine (understood, by that time, as discrete project) by the United States, in Vietnam under the Kennedy administration. Modernization theory as understood by American social scientists, including figures like Walt Rostow who held high positions in the defense establishment, put a definitive stamp onto official American counterinsurgency doctrine as it was first forming under the dual pressures of John Kennedy’s personal urging and the accelerating conflict in Vietnam. In the first flush of enthusiasm both for modernization as a framework for understanding developing societies and of civic action as a tool for counterinsurgency, the United States sponsored the Strategic Hamlet Program, a resettlement initiative meant to create model democratic villages across South Vietnam, to safeguard its people and provide a seed for economic and social development. This project failed dramatically for a comprehensive range of reasons. Both the promise of the Strategic Hamlets, and responses to its failures, would prove fateful for the counterinsurgency project going forward.

The fourth chapter illustrates the second try for a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy in Vietnam, under the auspices of the Civic Operations and Revolutionary Development Support – better known as CORDS – project, the brainchild of CIA agent

and defense establishment fixer Robert Komer. Reconceptualizing counterinsurgency away from being a builder of a new society and towards being a surveiller, shaper, and regulator – generally through internment and assassination, as in the notorious Phoenix program – CORDS prefigured some of the changes in liberal governmentality writ large over the course of the late twentieth century. In my conclusion, I will attempt to tease out some of the lineaments of neoliberal counterinsurgency as practiced in Central America and the Middle East (insofar as the source base and the contemporaneity of events will allow), as well as trying to extract insights about the history of liberalism from the story of counterinsurgency as a whole.

## Chapter 1: Threads of “Classical” Counterinsurgency: Late-Imperial France and Britain

*Genealogies are a tricky business, almost as tricky as life itself, frequently threatening to succumb to entropic degradation.* – Philip Mirowski, *Machine Dreams*

Both proponents and critics of American counterinsurgency doctrine embed it in an intellectual genealogy which prominently features French and British military officers of the mid-twentieth century. Some trace the forebears of the doctrine considerably further back, but the strategists of the twilight of empire invariably appear prominently on the family tree. Sometimes, these officers dominate the picture to the point where counterinsurgency is treated as though it was directly transposed from late-imperial colonial wars to the context of the Cold War (and beyond). The works of writers from this late-imperial milieu are oftentimes packaged together as “classical counterinsurgency,” sometimes with input from counterinsurgents from other military establishments.<sup>5</sup>

Deploying a canon of “classical” counterinsurgent text rooted in imperialism as an

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<sup>5</sup> Douglas Porch *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press 2013) Pages 72-77; David Kilcullen *Two Schools of Classical Counterinsurgency* (Small Wars Journal blog, 01/27/2007 <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/two-schools-of-classical-counterinsurgency>); Hannah Gurman “Introduction” in Hannah Gurman, ed. *Hearts and Minds: A People’s History of Counterinsurgency* (New York, The New Press, 2013) pages 10-12

explanatory tool suits a number of purposes, many of which are directly opposed to each other. The polemical utility for critics of counterinsurgency doctrine in linking counterinsurgency to sinister, anachronistic roots should be obvious. The counterinsurgency critic thereby also becomes the critic of colonial oppression. The semantics of imperial origins are more complicated for counterinsurgency supporters, and more nebulous: the association of counterinsurgency technique with exotic, morally questionable situations seems to imbue it with a certain mystique, of a type of knowledge inaccessible to contemporary decision-makers except through communion with wisdom from a semi-forbidden past. The counterinsurgency proponent thereby becomes the excavator of a usable past and the adjudicator of thorny moral and historical quandaries.

As with any origin story, there is truth in this picture of the roots of counterinsurgency. British and French late-imperial officers played important roles in the formation of counterinsurgency doctrine. The campaigns in which they fought – Indochina, Algeria, Kenya, Malaya – deserve the attention they receive from both historical and strategic students of counterinsurgency war. At least one of the major counterinsurgency writers, Malaya Emergency veteran General Robert G.K. Thompson, worked directly on shaping American counterinsurgency strategy in the Vietnam War.

But as in any origin story, the truth coexists with a generous admixture of myth. The American policymakers who first committed their defense establishment to a counterinsurgency strategy read the “classical” counterinsurgents in the way policymakers generally read things: with the distracted quality of men with a lot on their plates and the breezy confidence that they can grasp even complicated and subtle matters through briefings, memoranda, and executive digests. Moreover, when American

policymakers began to consider counterinsurgency seriously in the late 1950s and early 1960s, they did not view the British and French counterinsurgency campaigns solely as examples to be followed. They saw the French campaigns in Indochina and Algeria, in particular, as bloody failures. No matter how often their policies may have replicated the practical effects of imperialism, the American defense establishment understood itself to be in the business of bolstering the sovereignty of allied states such as the Republic of Vietnam, not preventing it. Classical counterinsurgency was not – could not have been – transliterated directly into the American strategic imagination, not in the early 1960s or in the mid-2000s.

More than providing answers to the Americans constructing the counterinsurgency project, the classical counterinsurgents helped shape the questions of managing popular political energy in the context of war and international ideological struggle. They contributed a menu of ideas and practices from which other counterinsurgents selectively borrowed. It is worth noting that the “classical” counterinsurgents were writing, at most, only a few years before the American counterinsurgents began formulating their take on the doctrine, and many wrote contemporaneously with the American deployment of the strategy in Vietnam.

As such, the nature of the relationship between American counterinsurgency doctrine and the “classical” counterinsurgency writers does not map neatly onto the parent-child model some analysts have used. We can see the classical counterinsurgency writers as mitochondria in the cell of counterinsurgency doctrine: bearers of old, important information (and liabilities), more easily flagged and traced in the chaos of the body than cellular DNA, an essential component of the larger organism of the cell, a store of

generative energy, but not constitutive of the whole. Like the body, counterinsurgency continually generates itself, in part by material inherited from its progenitors but in part by energy and matter taken in from outside of itself.

### **Elements of the Counterinsurgency “Canon”**

The counterinsurgency canon benefits from curation efforts undertaken by a comparatively small, tightly-knit body of professionals who display great filial piety towards those they choose to see as forebears. The lists of classical counterinsurgency texts assembled by figures such as David Nagl, Carter Malkasian, David Kilcullen, and the editors at Praeger Security International – a publisher that prints a well-regarded line of “classics of the counterinsurgency era” – are remarkably similar. While counterinsurgent scholars often seek out fresh perspectives and new test cases, almost all of them return to roughly similar sets of core canonical texts. These inevitably include the work of two French officers who fought in the Algerian Revolution, David Galula and Roger Trinquier, and their journalistic counterpart Bernard Fall. Equally often one finds British General and Malaya veteran Robert G.K. Thompson on these lists, and somewhat less frequently fellow British veterans of the late imperial wars Richard Clutterbuck and Frank Kitson (one indicator: Thompson has a volume rereleased by Praeger Security International; Kitson and Clutterbuck do not).

But like genealogy, canon formation is a tricky business. Canonizing lessons of the Hukbalahap Rebellion poses a number of conceptual issues for counterinsurgents. The Huk War is an irresistible case study for counterinsurgency boosters. Roughly



contemporaneously with the Malayan Emergency and the French war in Indochina, the Filipino government, with help from the United States, defeated the Hukbalahap and retained power, providing a powerful example for American counterinsurgency planners going in to the Vietnam War, as will be discussed in the next chapter. Canonization becomes tricky because the canonical counterinsurgent of the Huk War was Edward Lansdale. Lansdale was a clandestine CIA officer and his memoirs are hampered by official secrecy and his own tendency towards spin and obfuscation. This means those who would systematically extract lessons from the war he fought need to get creative. Some, including Praeger Security International, include *Counter-Guerrilla Operations*, a manual coauthored by Lansdale's comrades in the Huk War, Filipino Army colonel Napoleon Valeriano and Australian lieutenant colonel Charles Bohannon.<sup>6</sup> This compromise is unsatisfying: Bohannon and Valeriano emphasize the tactical, not the political, propaganda approach with which the Huk War victory came to be associated. Others resort to novels, referring either Graham Greene's *Quiet American* or Eugene Lederer and Richard Burdick's *The Ugly American*, both of which are widely believed to contain Lansdale-analogues.<sup>7</sup> The desire to include a full range of successful counterinsurgency lessons – crucial for an often officially unpopular military doctrine – clashes with the nature of the available texts: their formal heterogeneity and uneven presence across the field of examples from which a counterinsurgent might draw.

The grab-bag of Lansdale's uneven written legacy contrasts sharply with the legible, neatly categorizable productions of the RAND Corporation, which prefigured the interest

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<sup>6</sup> Napoleon Valeriano and Charles Bohannon, Counter-Guerrilla Operations: The Philippine Experience (Westport CT; Praeger Security International 1962)

<sup>7</sup> Gregory Fontenot *The Quiet American, The Ugly American: Counterinsurgency From The Fifties* (Military Review Vol. 88 No. 1) 2008

of official Washington in counterinsurgency by several years. A symposium held at RAND's Santa Monica headquarters in April 1962 featured a tantalizing selection of figures. The invited participants were almost all military men, including David Galula, Frank Kitson, Charles Bohannon, and Edward Lansdale. They presented ideas drawn from their experience, interspersed with questions and prompts from RAND-employed social scientists. They covered a wide variety of topics over several days, ranging from the broad scope of counterinsurgency to what sort of backpacks work best for jungle warfare, and from tactical formations for infantry squads to how to create village political committees favorable to friendly regimes. The symposium is sometimes included in lists of the counterinsurgency canon, and RAND-connected figures – George Tanham (who was present at the symposium), Robert Komer, Francis “Bing” West – make up the bulk of the “classical” American counterinsurgency writers, though most of them worked and wrote their major counterinsurgent works during and after the failure of American counterinsurgency strategy in Vietnam.<sup>8</sup>

The April 1962 RAND counterinsurgency symposium is both a gold mine of information about the state of the field of counterinsurgency doctrine at that time, and something of a historiographical mirage. The symposium no more provides the key to counterinsurgency than the texts of Trinquier, Galula, or Thompson, and for the same reasons. As with any canon, the body of inherited counterinsurgency thought is only “classic” well after the fact. The men who defined the American counterinsurgency project during the Kennedy administration were aware of many of the figures that would later become classical counterinsurgents, but naturally did not think of them that way – classical, canonical -- at

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<sup>8</sup> Stephen T. Hosmer and Sybill Crane *Counterinsurgency: A Symposium* (Santa Monica, RAND Corporation 1962)

the time. Canonization of any of these figures is more of a product of the late 1970s and after – Douglas Blaufarb coined the term “the counterinsurgency era,” to define roughly the decade between 1956 and 1966 as the time when classical counterinsurgency was produced, in 1977 – than of the time when the texts were written.<sup>9</sup> The canon is as much shaped by the project of counterinsurgency – the messy, inconsistent, multi-directional bureaucratic effort of the United States military and foreign policy establishment to develop a consistent means of coping with turbulence in the developing world – as the project was shaped the canon, at least in the early stages of both. Trinquier and Thompson influenced David Petraeus and Michelle Flournoy more than they did Creighton Abrams or even Walt Rostow.

“Classical” counterinsurgency played a role in the formation of the counterinsurgency project that is both less straightforward than the inheritance model of influence and more familiar to those who have studied how ideas and practice function together. The policymakers who constructed counterinsurgency borrowed liberally from a wide array of sources, including many of the classical counterinsurgents, without taking any given source as authoritative and bringing in many ideas generated elsewhere. More than operational advice, “classical” British and French counterinsurgency contributed to framing the problem of counterinsurgency. They pioneered the lineaments of the relationships of force that the counterinsurgency project sought to comprehend and rearrange to the benefit of American Cold War strategy.

Later chapters will focus on the American contributions to the counterinsurgency canon, most of which were produced after their French and British counterparts. Britain and

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<sup>9</sup> Douglas Blaufarb The Counterinsurgency Era (Glencoe IL; The Free Press 1977)

France confronted the surge of popular energy that was decolonization in a much more immediately pressing way than did the United States in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, and they had considerably smaller, weaker forces with which to meet it. While British and French officers drew liberally from earlier imperialist methods of dealing with dissent, the realities of the postwar world – lead among them European weakness and the restraints imposed by the Cold War and alliance with the United States – forced adaptations to their methods. The (incomplete, strategically-edited, and tendentiously-read) record of these adaptations provided a rough map to the new conceptual territory – the politics of the turbulent decolonizing world -- that American counterinsurgents sought to govern.

### **Late Imperialism and the Problem of the Population**

The classical counterinsurgents we will encounter in this chapter – Roger Trinquier, David Galula, Frank Kitson, and Robert G.K. Thompson – differed widely in their strategic ideas, but they shared critical commonalities, most of which concerned politics in one sense or another. All of them shared – and played key roles in shaping and promulgating – the basic counterinsurgency conceit that controlling population is the point of counterinsurgency war, more than killing enemies or holding territory (though the three activities are not mutually exclusive and imply each other to a certain extent). This is the seed of “population-centric” counterinsurgency, the aspect of the doctrine that sets it apart from “enemy-centric” ways of making war. The simple, vague precept – the importance of control of the population -- raised two profound, interrelated questions: what are the relevant attributes of a population, and what actions allow for the

establishment and maintenance of control? These are questions of politics in the broadest (and oldest) sense: questions of the *polis*.

The answers that the various counterinsurgents gave differed in their particulars, but between them they laid out remarkably consistent and lasting lineaments for the conceptualization of populations and their control. In the counterinsurgent conception as defined largely by late-imperial strategists, populations are essentially static and passive. Populations have few values of their own, and still less agency unless stirred by a minority with a plan. They have cultural attributes – adherence to religion, folkways, family structures – that impinge on the operational details of working amongst them, and these vary in importance from culture to culture (and on which counterinsurgent one asks). Any evidence that the people en masse desire a given political outcome – decolonization, socialism, or anything else – is, from the viewpoint of classical late-imperial counterinsurgency, evidence of the action of an active minority of agitators. Left to their own devices – or to the counterinsurgent's – the people would mostly look after (in rough descending order of importance) safety and security, prosperity, and respect for their cultural customs.

In order to root out enemies who imbricate themselves deeply into an only partially-legible social order, the classical counterinsurgents had to create tools for comprehending societies and excavating within them, both to gain information and in order to act on that information. They sought to find ways – on a budget and in a hurry, given the exigencies of recently war-ravaged, declining empires fighting faraway wars – to use their power to arrange the social order in occupied societies to make these tasks easier. In short, these men – intelligent, educated, but in their own self-image military men, fighters, not

philosophers – engaged with difficult, fundamental questions of political theory. What is more, they insisted that their readers – at least those who claimed to engage in the task of countering Communism or other radical ideologies in the developing world – do the same, though at least with some of the heavy lifting provided by their guidelines.

These men also typically did not identify as liberals, nor would most of their contemporaries call them such, but their vision of politics fit remarkably snugly with the liberalism of the Cold War. Conflict was not an essential aspect of this vision of politics, even if it defined the political work these men wrote. Agitators produced conflict, exploiting grievances and misunderstandings to advance an ulterior agenda. The natural harmony of interest, the *sine qua non* of the liberal concept of social relations, runs throughout the counterinsurgent vision. Counterinsurgency doctrine seeks to repair and maintain these harmonious relations, and in that respect it deserves to be considered alongside discourses of social welfare, civil rights, liberal jurisprudence, and other efforts on the part of liberals to provide robust bulwarks for harmonious, productive social relations in the face of the turbulent twentieth century. The classical counterinsurgents provided a set of first drafts for the problem of managing the explosion of popular political energy in the developing world in the fraught context of the Cold War.

The counterinsurgency project which emerged out of the American defense establishment in the 1960s incorporated a number of influences from European late-imperial models, but not all colonial wars were created equal as far as they were concerned. American policymakers of the time adhered to a clear hierarchy in terms of perceived applicability of various foreign models of dealing with insurgencies. They trusted British sources the most. The successful suppression of the revolution in Malaya struck American

policymakers as an auspicious example for their own efforts in Southeast Asia, and British counterinsurgency writing was more amenable than any other foreign source for reasons that will be discussed later in this chapter. A step down in the hierarchy of trustworthiness were the French. American defense thought has had an ambivalent relationship with French counterinsurgency writing. French counterinsurgents such as David Galula and Roger Trinquier were probably the most systematic, elegant writers among the “classical” counterinsurgents. Their ideas – especially Galula’s – influenced American counterinsurgency policy in Vietnam (and later, Iraq), but failure and atrocity lingered in the American image of the French wars in Indochina and Algeria. Other colonial counterinsurgency efforts – the ongoing struggle between the Portuguese regime and the inhabitants of its African empire, for instance, or the Dutch effort to contain the insurgency in Indonesia – merited little in the way of discussion among the founders of the American counterinsurgency project, and less emulation.

Put schematically, French counterinsurgency writing provided more means than ends to the counterinsurgency project, where British counterinsurgency writing tied means and ends together in patterns that would define counterinsurgency doctrine going forward. French counterinsurgents were admirably clear and straightforward – if not always telling the whole truth – about what they thought counterinsurgents must do. Ironically, given the way British counterinsurgents participated much more directly in the American counterinsurgency project than their French counterparts, French counterinsurgency writings from the 1960s made much better manuals than British works of the same era. British counterinsurgency doctrine was more circumspect about what exactly the strategies they called for entailed, but provided more of the sociopolitical

vision of counterinsurgency that American strategists would inherit, adapt, and implement.

### **French Lessons: Roger Trinquier and David Galula**

The French engagement with the problems of developing-world insurgency in the Cold War was thoroughgoing enough that they developed their own schools of thought on the question, with their own names: *guerre revolutionnaire* or, in Roger Trinquier's provocative phrasing, *guerre moderne*, the modern way of war. French military involvements in the postwar era were almost exclusively dedicated to fighting guerrilla opponents, primarily in Indochina and Algeria, and French defense intellectuals devoted a great deal of time and effort to the counterinsurgency problem significantly earlier than did their American counterparts, especially given the latter's preoccupation with massive retaliation and the particulars of nuclear exchange.

The most renowned French counterinsurgency theorists, such as Roger Trinquier and David Galula, were also direct practitioners. They were part of a generation of French officers notable for a significant degree of first-hand combat experience (many of the officers who led the counterinsurgency effort in Algiers were resistance veterans), a lack of regard for the institutions of the Fourth Republic (as evinced by the attempted coup against DeGaulle in 1962), and a conviction that their efforts in Algeria and Indochina were not only necessary to restore France's tarnished grandeur, but also to the defense of western civilization as a whole.<sup>10</sup> The sense of mission many of these officers held can be

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<sup>10</sup> Alistair Horne *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962* (New York; NYRB Press 1977)



encapsulated in the words of one paratrooper officer, Colonel Antoine Artaud, on trial for aiding *pied noir* rebels against the French government in 1960, who declared: “We want to halt the decadence of the West and the march of communism. . . This our duty, the real duty of the army. That is why we must win the war in Algeria. Indochina taught us to see the truth. . .”<sup>11</sup> The French theorists of counterinsurgency, immersed in this atmosphere, saw the new sort of warfare they were engaged in not as a substitute for a conventional sort of warfare -- largely ruled out by France’s strategic position and by nuclear weapons -- but as the face of modern war. Roger Trinquier, one of the most prominent of the French counterinsurgency thinkers, did not title his most influential work *Modern Warfare* idly.

Counterinsurgency thought flourished in French military intellectual circles in the mid-twentieth century, and numerous officers played roles in shaping the discourse within the academies and reviews, but the two who most directly shaped counterinsurgency doctrine as a whole were Roger Trinquier and David Galula, whose impact was felt most strongly in their influence on American counterinsurgency. Both were mid-level officers in Indochina and Algeria, not setters of policy, though they held sizable mid-level commands, the experience of which inflected (and bolstered the credibility of) their written work. There were important differences between Trinquier’s approach and Galula’s, but they shared attributes that the works of other influential French *guerre revolutionnaire* theorists whose work did not catch on in American defense circles, such as Charles Lacheroy and Maurice Goussault, lacked. Trinquier and Galula wrote with a broad, international audience in mind, avoided getting mixed up too heavily in OAS

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174-178

<sup>11</sup> Ibid Page 177

activities (unlike Lacheroy), and emphasized positive aspects of counterinsurgency- what western officers could do, as opposed to what their opponents, part of the vast Communist/eastern conspiracy that French counterinsurgents often imagined, would do – was doing, in their view -- to them.<sup>12</sup>

There are limits to the provable operational influence of any French counterinsurgents, but David Galula, from his time at RAND and Harvard, had a hand in directly shaping American counterinsurgency thought, and Roger Trinquier's work was widely known among American counterinsurgents, even if he was seen as less authoritative than Galula. While both contributed to the operational toolkit of counterinsurgency, their most important contribution – and that of the French to the global project of counterinsurgency more generally – was an articulation of the question of counterinsurgency as a matter of managing turbulent masses of people in an age of ideological ferment, and advancing early drafts of how the project of management should be undertaken. Both saw their stock rise steadily over the long course of the counterinsurgency project's history, as Petraeus-era counterinsurgents elevated Galula in particular to a key progenitor of their vision of war.

Roger Trinquier was born in 1908 and graduated from officer training in 1933. His early career was spent in Indochina and in the French Legation in Shanghai, where he waited out World War II, like most French officers in Southeast Asia, still in the service of the Vichy government. He remained in the army after the liberation of France and volunteered for a paratrooper unit fighting the Vietminh in Indochina. It was there that he first started thinking seriously about guerrilla warfare, and as a major he had a command

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<sup>12</sup> A.A. Cohen Galula: The Life and Writing of the French Officer Who Defined the Art of Counterinsurgency (Santa Monica; Praeger 2012) 168-172

of some twenty thousand, mostly hill tribesmen that Trinquier sought to arm and train to use as counter guerrillas against the Vietminh.<sup>13</sup> After the defeat of the French forces in Indochina at Dien Bien Phu, Trinquier was posted in Algeria, where he took charge of the bulk of the intelligence gathering effort against the FLN in Algiers.<sup>14</sup> Along with Paul Aussaresses, Trinquier was one of the architects of the French victory in what's variously called the Battle of Algiers or the Battle of the Casbah.<sup>15</sup> It was there that he developed the ideas on counterinsurgency warfare to the point of development seen in *Modern Warfare*, which he published in 1961.

“Warfare,” Trinquier declared, “is now an interlocking system of actions-- political, economic, psychological, military-- that aims at the *overthrow of the established authority in a country and its replacement by another regime*” (italics Trinquier's).<sup>16</sup> This war, Trinquier held, was a war between organizations over the allegiance of the people of a given country. Without support of the population, neither the guerrilla nor the military can be said to have won. The guerrilla, according to Trinquier, attempts to control the population through fear spread by terrorism.<sup>17</sup> The goal of the military is two-fold: to control the population (which, along with allowing the military to pursue insurgents more effectively, would also notionally protect the population from insurgent terrorism) and to gather the information necessary to bring its superior force to bear on the insurgent organization. These two goals can only be pursued in tandem, as the population, through which, as in Mao's saying, the insurgents swim like a fish

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<sup>13</sup> Bernard Fall *A Portrait of a Centurion* in Roger Trinquier Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency (trans. Daniel Lee. Westport, CT; Praeger Security International 1961) xi-xv

<sup>14</sup> Horne *A Savage War of Peace* Page 198

<sup>15</sup> Ibid Pages 194-199

<sup>16</sup> Roger Trinquier Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International 1961) Page 5

<sup>17</sup> Ibid 15-17

through the ocean, is the primary source of intelligence. The image of the population that emerges in *Modern Warfare* is that of an inert, predictable mass, a medium for the actions of mobilized minorities of insurgents and counterinsurgents to act upon.

Trinquier stressed the need for “specially adapted organization” and “appropriate methods of warfare” to use in counterinsurgency, which the French military and other militaries around the world either did not have or were just building.<sup>18</sup> One cluster of “appropriate methods” were those involved in making the population undergoing an insurgency legible: zoning, census, identification papers, compulsory enrollment of the civilian population in defense-related organizations.<sup>19</sup> “Control of the masses through a tight organization, often through several parallel organizations, is the master weapon of *modern warfare*,” Trinquier argued.<sup>20</sup> Just as the insurgent activates the inert mass of the population to pursue his goals, so too can the counterinsurgent once the population has been rendered legible.

Trinquier lays out step-by-step instructions-- detailed enough to be copied and taught to officers or soldiers *en masse* but flexible enough to allow for differences in areas to be controlled-- for rendering populations legible and for controlling them once they have been mapped. Once the entire population of the area in question had been divided into districts, subjected to census, issued identification papers and indexed in the file cabinets of the military intelligence bureaus, the next step was to organize. In each district which the military had divided the city on its intelligence map, dependable civilians would be found to be “district commanders,” who would in turn appoint subdistrict commanders,

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<sup>18</sup> Trinquier, *Modern Warfare* Page 4

<sup>19</sup> Ibid Pages 28-29

<sup>20</sup> Ibid Page 28

who would be responsible for ten or so households. These commanders would serve as eyes and ears for the military and would “be able to participate in the tasks of forces of order and carry out simple police missions. Detection, surveillance and occasionally the arrest of dangerous individuals will be managed without difficulty, and the transmission of instruction will always be easy and quick.”<sup>21</sup> This organization would also be capable of restricting the supply of food and other supplies to insurgents. One of this organization's most important assets, however, was basic to its design: anyone who did not join could, by his or her reticence, be considered an outlaw.<sup>22</sup>

The most controversial aspect of Trinquier's work regards his second primary concern, the collection of intelligence. The organized populace was one source of information; when a population is rendered legible – indexed, measured, plotted on maps, enlisted in organizations -- it is easier to find potential informants and to protect them from insurgent reprisal once they've started feeding the military information. Another source is captured insurgents themselves. Trinquier devotes considerable space in his short book on this subject. In a portion of *Modern Warfare* where insurgents are only referred to as “terrorists,” he lays out his philosophy of torture. “The terrorist has become a soldier, like the aviator or the infantryman,” Trinquier claims.<sup>23</sup> Part of the soldier's job is to accept death and suffering, but the terrorist does not accept these things. He strikes and then retreats back into the civilian population. When one is captured, Trinquier argues, is the time to introduce him to the other part of the terrorist's soldierly obligation, that of facing pain for his cause; Bernard Fall referred to this logic as Trinquier's

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<sup>21</sup> Trinquier, *Modern Warfare* Page 29

<sup>22</sup> Ibid Pages 28-31

<sup>23</sup> Ibid Page 18

“Cartesian rationale” for torture.<sup>24</sup>

As an act between soldiers, however, torture cannot be undertaken arbitrarily: the terrorist is to be tortured not as a punishment or for information about attacks he has performed, but for information about the network of which he is a part. This was conception of the use of torture inspired by the cell structure of the FLN, where all an insurgent usually knew was the name of one or two cell members and perhaps a single superior. Trinquier emphasized that this required trained interrogators to perform any torture, conversant in what knowledge is extant of the insurgent's organization and in “scientific” techniques that do not “injure the physical and moral integrity of individuals.” After yielding answers, the terrorist, no more a criminal in Trinquier's view than any other soldier, is to be treated as a prisoner of war, kept from continuing hostilities and released when the war is over.<sup>25</sup>

Arguably, the mystique that surrounded Roger Trinquier and French counterinsurgency more generally was as important to the shape of counterinsurgency as the ideas they generated. Trinquier's interlocutors sold that mystique a broader audience than could be reached by Praeger's publication of *Modern Warfare*. The wars in Algeria and Indochina were grueling, morally fraught, and dramatic. French officers involved in theorizing *guerre revolutionnaire* (or *moderne*, as the case might be) saw themselves as existing at the point of the spear in a battle to defend the west against international communism. Whatever else the French late-imperial wars and the extreme actions and ideologies they brought out in the French military were, they were galvanizing. Many of the specifics of the beliefs of men like Roger Trinquier might have been out of step with

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<sup>24</sup> Fall *A Portrait of a Centurion* Page xvi

<sup>25</sup> Trinquier *Modern Warfare* Pages 18-20

the worldview of most American cold warriors. All the same, the glamour of anticommunist action they cultivated – light infantry action, not technologically-mediated (and probably instantly, globally fatal) war via missile, bomber, and tank – shone like pyrite in the murk of the cavern system that was a Cold War locked in to the logic of mutually assured destruction. The ideas of French counterinsurgency and its mystique have proven functionally inseparable.

Political scientist and journalist Bernard Fall promulgated the French counterinsurgency mystique more broadly than anyone else, and benefited from it himself. A Resistance veteran who undertook risky field research alongside both French and American soldiers (he was killed in such a trip to Vietnam in 1967), Fall cut a dashing figure. His books about the French war in Indochina, *Street Without Joy* (1961) and *Hell In A Very Small Place* (1966) as well as his introduction to the English translation of Trinquier's *Modern Warfare* state many of the assumptions that would go into the American counterinsurgency project and encapsulate the mystique that aided their adoption. The Cold War as presented by Fall (and, by and large, the French officers he spoke for) barely had anything to do with the Berlin Wall, ICBMs, or even the Soviet Union. Mao, partially in the form of his actual regime but even more in the inspiration his strategic/political vision provided to people throughout the developing world, posed the real threat of the Cold War, and countering this threat was the task of the real cold warriors, in Fall's vision. France's defeats in Indochina and Algeria were early warnings of a storm of Third World revolution to come, as the Americans were finding out in their

own Vietnamese intervention.<sup>26</sup>

Reaching American readers in large part through figures like Bernard Fall and the novelist Charles Larteguy (whose novels of the Algerian War, *Les Centurions* and *Les Praetorians*, enjoyed a brief vogue in English translation during the early 1960s), the French counterinsurgent's fixation on countering Maoism – in equal part driven forward by practical, ideological, and psychological motivations – would prove fateful for the shape of the counterinsurgency project going forward. Countering Mao meant taking his emphasis on the political nature of war – the control and support of the population and the use of ideology as a mobilizing factor -- and turning it to counterinsurgent ends. Counterinsurgents differed as to how much military equipment, tactics, or personnel levels should change in a given anti-guerrilla struggle, but all agree that such changes on their own are insufficient without the political element. This political element can only be acquired by taking action amongst the people a given regime would govern, as the Maoists themselves do; Maoist war required counter-Maoist war. Many later counterinsurgents would dispute elements of this idea, placing greater emphasis on elements like state structure than Fall or Trinquier would, but nearly all of them worked with its organizing logic, one way or another.

Trinquier's book was taught in French military academies, which, like their American counterparts hosted a considerable number of foreign officers undergoing training there, particularly from Latin America. After leaving the French military in the wake of the OAS rebellion against DeGaulle (in which Trinquier's level of involvement is unclear) and the victory of the FLN in Algeria, worked in Katanga, Trinquier training

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<sup>26</sup> Bernard Fall Street Without Joy (New York; Schocken 1961) 369-382



Moishe Tshombe's forces during Katanga's attempted secession from the Congo.<sup>27</sup> American defense intellectuals read Trinquier, but the most important export of French counterinsurgency to the United States was in the form of David Galula, Trinquier's comrade and, after the war in Algeria, a research associate at the Center for International Affairs at Harvard.

David Galula was born in Tunisia in 1919, and graduated from St. Cyr military academy in 1940. A year later, he was expelled from the army in accordance with the Vichy government's Statute on Jews. Galula joined the Free French armies and ended the war a decorate combat veteran. A captain in the French forces during the Algerian revolution, he served in the Kabyle mountains, where he developed and applied the ideas he would later expound upon in *Counterinsurgency Warfare* and *Pacification in Algeria*, books written during his postwar career at Harvard.<sup>28</sup>

Trinquier claimed in the conclusion to *Modern Warfare* that the sort of war he calls on the militaries of the west to fight are a mirror image of insurgency: "...it is absolutely essential to make use of all the weapons the enemy employs. Not to do so would be absurd."<sup>29</sup> In his introduction, Galula makes the opposite claim: "It is the same war for both camps in terms of space and time, yet there are two distinct warfares-- the revolutionary's and, shall we say, the counterrevolutionary's."<sup>30</sup> This places Galula on the side of a divide within the French counterinsurgent discourse that is more rhetorical than practical: those like Trinquier who see adapting to the new world of insurgency as a

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<sup>27</sup> Marina Lazreg *Torture and the Twilight of Empire: From Algiers to Baghdad* (Princeton; Princeton University Press 2008) 33

<sup>28</sup> Cohen, *Galula* 205-209

<sup>29</sup> Trinquier *Modern Warfare* Page 89

<sup>30</sup> David Galula *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Greenport, CT; Praeger Security International 1964) xiii

matter of consciously emulating Maoist guerrillas, and those like Galula who agree with the necessity of countering Maoism via its own focus on popular support, but stipulate that this requires playing to the strengths of the Western powers, not simply imitating guerrilla forces.

*Counterinsurgency Warfare* is schematic, in a way that appeals to busy national security policymakers. In it, Galula lays out four laws of counterinsurgency: 1. the counterinsurgent must gain the support of the population, 2. support is gained primarily through the work on an active supportive minority, 3. this support is always conditional on the strength of the counterinsurgent, to be displayed by early military victory and 4. the counterinsurgent's effort must be applied intensively to be effective, which usually means concentrating on a single given part of the country undergoing insurgency (a province, for example) and working from there.<sup>31</sup> Galula might be the originator of the tripartite model of populations that makes such an important part of the counterinsurgent's imagination. This holds that in any given population undergoing an insurgency, there are three blocs within the population: "In any situation, whatever the cause, there will be an active minority for the cause, a neutral majority, and an active minority against the cause."<sup>32</sup> This picture of the body politic would help define how counterinsurgents mapped populations (color-coding villages or districts in maps, for instance, according to where in the three tiers they are) and the schemes of categorization counterinsurgency intelligence apparatuses often applied individuals to under their governance.

Few of the populations imagined in the strategic writings of counterinsurgents

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<sup>31</sup> Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare* Pages 52-55

<sup>32</sup> Galula Ibid 53

have much in the way of agency, or distinguishing features. Trinquier's population was the prize to be won in the battle between insurgent and counterinsurgent, and the source of that most valuable resource, information. The insurgent population is a more sustained object of examination in Galula's work. As with most counterinsurgents, Galula dismisses the "pure" military approach to fighting guerrillas, but his picture of the people en masse limits the counterinsurgent's political options. In Galula's vision, the people act in the support of their material interest, and occasionally cultural concerns – such as the Algerian people's commitment to Islam – will motivate them, but politics, in the broad sense of the struggle over the distribution of power and the definition of societal goals, is basically irrelevant to the average person. Propaganda designed to spread a positive vision of the counterinsurgent's aims was a dead end, he claimed to have discovered in Algeria. He explains this in a dialogue with a fellow French officer in his 1963 RAND report, *Pacification in Algeria*:

"... We will secretly pick these people up from their towns and villages, we will bring them to a secret camp. There we will indoctrinate them in our own ideology. Of course, I expect some rejects. But those who pass the course will be infiltrated back into the area, still in complete secrecy. They will recruit followers and build up a pro-French movement rival to, but operating like, the FLN."

"I wonder what ideology you think you can furnish them with. The rebels have an ideology, simple and effective because it appeals to passion: independence. What can you oppose to that?"

"Humanism, co-operation, social progress, economic development, etc."

"By what precise criteria are these potential leaders going to be selected?"

"Psychological action officers will simply investigate who is well regarded by villagers for any reason, not just because he is a notable."

“I can tell you from my experience in Kabylia that the only criterion that counts is the loyalty of the people, measured by concrete proof and not by words. I bet you that, barring a few happy exceptions; your potential leaders won’t lift a finger for you once they are loose.”<sup>33</sup>

As we will see, later counterinsurgents, especially Americans, proved more enthusiastic for countering guerrilla ideology than was Galula. But in the long run, Galula’s notion of counterinsurgent politics as existing orthogonal to ideological struggle would become central to the counterinsurgency project.

### **The British Mystique: Frank Kitson and Robert G.K. Thompson**

French and British experts have contributed in roughly equal proportions to the global discourse of counterinsurgency. Yet in their first flush of enthusiasm for counterinsurgency doctrine during the early 1960s, American counterinsurgents borrowed more from the British than they did from the French, and worked closely with British counterinsurgency experts in a way they did not with their French counterparts. A number of factors went in to this. American counterinsurgency doctrine was first applied in a major way in Vietnam. As the country’s former colonial overlords, the French were, at one and the same time, failures for having been defeated by the Viet Minh, a bad memory which the Americans sought to distinguish themselves from, and a rival to South Vietnam’s new American patron. Ngo Dinh Diem, the man who created the Republic of Vietnam in the form which the United States sought to bolster with counterinsurgency

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<sup>33</sup> David Galula Pacification in Algeria 1956-1958 (Santa Monica; RAND Corporation 1963) pages 66-67

strategy, gained power only after a sharp urban battle in Saigon in the spring of 1955. This fight pitted Ngo's forces, backed by the CIA (led by Saigon station agent and iconic counterinsurgent Edward Lansdale), against an assortment of other Vietnamese factions backed by French intelligence, in a rearguard effort to maintain French influence in Saigon (and its lucrative drug trade). In a very real sense, French counterinsurgents could be seen as opponents of American counterinsurgents.<sup>34</sup>

On the positive side of the ledger, British counterinsurgency possessed several advantages from the perspective of American policymakers in the early 1960s. The signature British counterinsurgency efforts did not involve Britain attempting to hold on to formal control of overseas possessions, as the French were attempting in Algeria. Instead, they typically entailed the British managing the transition to independence of colonies, such as Malaya and Kenya, which could potentially have gone in directions contrary to British interests. This was a situation with which American policymakers could relate. British counterinsurgency was not widely associated with torture or assassination in the early 1960s. This was due at least in part due to British skill at telling the stories of murky conflicts in places such as Malaya, Kenya, and Yemen in palatable ways, and to their tendency to "lose" massive caches of embarrassing documents, only for them to turn up decades after the events they depict ceased being news.<sup>35</sup> Nor had British counterinsurgents at this time turned against the state, as had a number of veterans of the French counterinsurgency war in Algeria.

More than anything else, though, British counterinsurgency thought had – and has

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<sup>34</sup> Gabriel Kolko Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience (New York; The New Press 1985) pages 86-88

<sup>35</sup> Sam Marsden "'Lost' Colonial Papers Made Public" *The Independent* April 18<sup>th</sup> 2012

– the positive reputation it did and does with American counterinsurgents because British counterinsurgents were – are -- seen as winners. Only twenty years away from the Second World War, American policymakers in the early 1960s saw the British military as fellow victors more generally, in a way the French could not match. But more importantly, the British were understood to have won counterinsurgency wars. The two examples most often cited are also linked metonymically with officers who wrote about them: the suppression of the Mau-Mau rebellion in Kenya, canonized into counterinsurgency lore by Frank Kitson, and the Malayan Emergency, associated most strongly with Robert G.K. Thompson.

Frank Kitson extrapolated from his Kenyan experience in his memoir *Gangs and Counter-Gangs*, published in 1960, and in a special session of the RAND Corporation Counterinsurgency Symposium in April 1962. A captain in rank when he came to Kenya and a colonel in 1962, Kitson, like Trinquier, specialized in intelligence gathering. Kenya was the site of an ambitious mass-resettlement program. Nearly the entire Kikuyu population was routed through a vast system of prisons, internment and work camps, and new model villages according to the dictates of elaborate mechanisms of sorting Africans according to degree of sympathy to the government. Kitson had little to say about this in his writings beyond indicating approval for it. His early work focuses nearly entirely on his own intelligence operations, with the rest of the war as background. That Kitson's first counterinsurgency-related work, *Gangs and Counter-Gangs*, was a memoir, and not a history or strategy guide, is indicative.

In contrast to Trinquier and Galula, Kitson did not engage in or call for elaborate quadrillage or censuses. In the Kiambu district, where he commanded an intelligence unit

during the war, Kitson focused on the development of “contact” information, intelligence which would put his men on the spot to kill guerrillas (Kitson would go on to develop his concepts of “context” and “contact” information in his 1971 book, *Low Intensity Warfare*). Instead of a bureaucratic system of information-gathering designed to encapsulate a society and make it legible from the top down, Kitson developed a bottom-up approach centered on the “counter-gang”: suborned Kikuyu, members of other tribes, settler sons, and British officers (often in blackface), roving the plains of the Kikuyu areas dressed and equipped in the same manner as the Mau Mau “gangs.” This allowed both tactical flexibility in engagements with the enemy and an ability to confuse and penetrate rural Kenyan society: it both gained contact information and allowed those contacts to take place with maximum surprise value. It had the additional value – as did many of the interrogation practices in the internment camps – of turning Kikuyu against Kikuyu and Africans against Africans. Kitson’s contributions to counterinsurgency strategy mostly involved the exploitation of ethnic or sectarian differences to leverage the insurgency’s host society into yielding information and from there, submission. This would take on additional importance in later stages of counterinsurgency’s development.<sup>36</sup>

Kenya transitioned from colony to independent society governed by moderate leaders with close economic ties to their erstwhile colonizers. The manner in which the British made the Mau Mau synonymous with racialized terror, associating the war with dozens of dead European settlers and not tens of thousands of killed (and hundreds of thousands

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<sup>36</sup> Frank Kitson Gangs and Counter-Gangs (Barrie and Rockcliff; London 1960)

of interned) Africans, was an information operations coup by any definition.<sup>37</sup> The Kenya war's use as a model is attenuated, however, by factors such as the naked colonialism of the British settlers in the Kenyan highlands, the raw racism of the tropes deployed by British sources in feeding the fear of the Mau Mau, and the still-sensitive issue of white rule in much of southern Africa. The Malayan Emergency stood – and stands – alone, in terms of presenting the sort of lessons counterinsurgents want to learn- and teach.

From before the war formally ended in 1962 to our own day, the Emergency has functioned as the great showpiece for counterinsurgency strategy, proof that popular insurgencies in rural countries could be defeated within the operational constraints imposed by the Cold War and decolonization. Numerous factors shaped the outcome of the Malayan Emergency, lead among them the ethnic divisions within the country, the concentration of the rebel movement in one minority community, and the upsurge in tin and rubber prices initiated by the Korean War, which boosted Malaya's economy and put potential guerrillas and sympathizers to remunerative work.<sup>38</sup> Counterinsurgents, for their part, tend to isolate one factor as decisive: the implementation of the Briggs Plan, starting in 1950 (two years into the Emergency), which called for the forced relocation of much of Malaya's ethnic Chinese community into "New Villages." The standard rhetoric deployed in accounts of the Emergency from the pro-British side both acknowledges the harsh, authoritarian character of forced relocation, and takes pains to describe at length the many factors they argue ameliorated the situation. These ameliorative factors range from the even-handedness of British troops to the material support provided the New

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<sup>37</sup> David Anderson *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (W.W. Norton; New York 2005); Caroline Elkins *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (Holt; New York 2005)

<sup>38</sup> T.N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press 1999)



Villages to the supposed political quiescence of the Chinese, save for a small handful of isolatable Communist agitators.<sup>39</sup>

This contrast runs parallel to the double purpose that counterinsurgents saw in the New Villages: not only could they win the war, they could create the peace. The New Villages were the foundation of Malaysia, in the telling of supporters of British strategy during the Emergency, both in the sense of being a necessary aspect of fending off the MPLA's effort to define the country, and in a positive constitutional sense. Both journalists like J.M. Robinson and counterinsurgency writers like Robert Thompson contrasted the slow, compromising, pragmatic quality of the work of building a "free" Malaysia – one amenable to the British and their Malay clients – to the supposedly utopian, shallow outlook of the Communists of the MPLA.<sup>40</sup> Strategically, politically, and in terms of the ethos and outlook that counterinsurgents sought to associate with themselves, the Briggs Plan acts a keystone in the discourse of counterinsurgency.

Examining this keystone reveals a number of clear flaws. Whatever the accomplishments of the Commonwealth forces under the direction of the Briggs Plan, it still took twelve years and over three hundred thousand troops to defeat a guerrilla force that never fielded much more than ten thousand full-time fighters. Britain (and the Western side of the Cold War) might have maintained a reliable capitalist state and trading partner in the new Malaysia, but it was not exactly a new birth of freedom. While technically a democracy, authoritarian measures from the Emergency, such as the ability

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<sup>39</sup> David Nagl *Learning To Eat Soup With A Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2002) 87-115

<sup>40</sup> J.B. Perry Robinson, *Transformation in Malaya* (Seecker and Warburg; London 1956) 47-53; Robert G.K. Thompson *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (St. Petersburg, FL; Hailer Publishing 1966) 21-24

to indefinitely hold suspects without trial, remain in force in Malaysia to this day, and the country is essentially a single-party state. Ethnic tensions exacerbated by the strategy of isolating the Chinese and encouraging Malay chauvinism linger to this day.<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, the Malay example is important to counterinsurgents from the “classical” period to today for a number of reasons. Practically speaking, whatever its deficiencies, British strategy in the Malayan Emergency proved that not only could Communist rebels be stopped, but that the energies of decolonization could be channeled into new beginnings favorable to Western Cold War interests. If the Malayan model also presented risks, liabilities, and numerous moving parts all of which could be potentially botched, this also had a certain appeal to counterinsurgents, men who understood themselves as pioneers of a bold new way of both making wars and making societies. The Malayan example was most prominent – and its downsides much less visible – in the period around the Kennedy administration when the American counterinsurgency project was taking shape. Coming at a propitious time and place and answering a number of needs, British strategy in Malaya became enshrined in the counterinsurgency canon in a niche where erasure by future counterinsurgency canon-builders would be difficult. The most important first-hand transmission of the insights of the Malayan experience to the counterinsurgency discourse more broadly came from Robert Grainger Ker Thompson.

Along with encapsulating a set of lessons derived from the Malayan Emergency for American audiences, Thompson participated directly in the American counterinsurgency project in a way few other foreign counterinsurgency strategists could claim. Born in 1919, he is best known for his work during the Malayan Emergency

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<sup>41</sup> Harper, The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya 357-383

(1948-1960) and was Malayan Secretary of Defense for much of that time. Even before the final defeat of the MPLA in Malaya, Thompson led the British Advisory Mission to Vietnam from 1961 to 1965. He gave talks at the RAND Corporation, the high-level Special Group for Counterinsurgency which John Kennedy convened in 1961, and was a correspondent of major counterinsurgency figures such as Edward Lansdale. Thompson's most-cited written work, his book *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, was written in 1966, a year after BRIAM closed its doors and years after more mainstream strategies eclipsed counterinsurgency doctrine in America's approach to Vietnam. *Defeating Communist Insurgency* is of a piece with his record of statements and recommendations on counterinsurgency and the situation in Vietnam dating back from the beginning of his time with BRIAM, though with notable changes in tone from the guarded optimism of his BRIAM reports to the almost regretful tone of his later work.<sup>42</sup>

Much like Trinquier and Galula, Thompson emphasized population control as key to winning guerrilla wars. According to Thompson, occupiers defeat guerrillas by depriving them of support in the local population and by giving the population an alternative to communism in the form of an effective law-abiding government.<sup>43</sup> In *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, with its slight remove from the heyday of his influence, Thompson writes that three things move a population: nationalism; religion and culture; and the desire for material well-being. While counterinsurgents need to mind all three, ultimately, Thompson insists that the desire for prosperity is the surest attribute for the counterinsurgent to work with. Appeals to nationalism and religion typically play

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<sup>42</sup> Robert G.K. Thompson, "Report on Visits to Vinh Long and Vinh Binh Province" 07/12/1963 and "Strategic Hamlet Report" 05/1963 File 170171, Box 371, Foreign Office records, British National Archives

<sup>43</sup> Thompson *Defeating Communist Insurgency* 55-57

in to the insurgent's hands, in Thompson's telling- something the Malayan counterinsurgency managed to avoid and which the government of the Republic of Vietnam did not. To Thompson as to many other counterinsurgency thinkers, Communism had almost no meaning to anyone (outside of small groups of fanatical ideologues) except as a means to social, political, and most of all economic modernization and from there, prosperity.<sup>44</sup> Governments can demonstrate to their people that they can provide prosperity by providing its institutional basis- security and the efficient and fair administration of justice. Building a modern administrative state is the key to winning counterinsurgency war and developing modern economies, an insight that ran alongside social scientific modernization theory, which would have a profound impact on counterinsurgency doctrine.

Thompson did not linger long on the specifics of what "good administration" means for the populations which supposedly benefit from it. The bulk of his work focused on administrative structure: how counterinsurgents should organize themselves, politically and militarily, to create the sort of order that could fend off insurgencies and thrive independently. Beyond material details (cluster secure villages close together, make sure to mind river transport), his notions of what rural administrations should actually do were vague. His ideas about organizational hierarchy were quite specific: the importance of district-level leaders, developing "grass-roots" or "bottom-up" political organizations (whose activities aren't detailed), uniform reporting standards, etc. The main organizational principles Thompson returns to repeatedly are unity of command and

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<sup>44</sup> Thompson Defeating Communist Insurgency 63-69

the delegation of decision-making power as broadly as possible.<sup>45</sup> The difficulties inherent in combining these two distinct mandates provide both a continual source of frustration for Thompson and an alibi for when counterinsurgency efforts fail.

That Thompson – one of the great canonical figures of counterinsurgency – should have so much more to say about organizing counterinsurgents than about the political struggle the counterinsurgent organizes in order to wage is telling. Among other things, this differential demonstrates an awareness on Thompson's part that dwelling too much on what counterinsurgency means on the ground for the people affected by it might be detrimental to the cause as a whole. The realities of counterinsurgency, and especially of harsh population control measures such as prevailed in the New Villages of Malaya or the Strategic Hamlets of Vietnam, do not comport easily with the mores of the democratic countries that back them. If political will is an essential resource in war, especially in protracted insurgency wars, then downplaying the harsh nature of counterinsurgency is a key strategy in managing that other fractious population, the voting public in democracies prone to foreign adventures. This is an awareness shared by other British counterinsurgent writers, such as Frank Kitson and Richard Clutterbuck, and notably underdeveloped in their French counterparts, who were considerably more open about what counterinsurgency entails. American counterinsurgency would develop more along British lines in this respect than French, as later chapters will demonstrate.

In a more important sense, though, Thompson's underdeveloped vision of politics suits his vision for counterinsurgency. In a sense, the political struggle he urges counterinsurgents to wage is a struggle *against politics*. Administration is where the

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<sup>45</sup> Thompson Defeating Communist Insurgency 70-83

counterinsurgent, representing the government, is strong. Politics, the realm of popular contestation over power and the direction of society, is where he is weak and the insurgent is strong, as Thompson tacitly admits when he dismisses appeals to nationalism, culture, or democracy as potential tools for a counterinsurgent. What the counterinsurgent must do is isolate the population from the insurgent – a bearer of politics – and administer them, thereby providing the stability and prosperity to inoculate them from politics (in the insurgent sense) for good and all.

The site of this inoculation – the clinic where the new Malaya was born, and Thompson’s model for how new societies could come into being throughout the developing world – was the New Village. Here, the strategic necessity of separating the guerrilla insurgent from the population from which he drew food, shelter, cover, information, and recruits met the emerging counterinsurgent vision of what post-colonial Malaya would look like. Following the declaration of the Briggs Plan in 1950, approximately five hundred thousand Chinese-Malayan “squatters” were forcibly moved into hundreds of improvised settlements- the “New Villages.” These existed under tight control by Commonwealth authorities: ringed by barbed wire, guarded by Commonwealth and Malay troops, the people within subject to strict curfews, rationing, searches, and interrogation. They were also sites for “civic action,” efforts to improve the lives of the New Villagers and incorporate them into the national community. These ranged from improving village services to political indoctrination to training local militias to take up much of the security work in those villages authorities saw as especially trustworthy. This range of potential civic actions provided a flexible toolkit for counterinsurgents and fodder for the inevitable back-and-forth over which types of action

were most effective.<sup>46</sup>

The counterinsurgent emphasis on civic action goes a long way towards defining population-centric counterinsurgency as a distinct concept. Civic action binds the people to the counterinsurgent, eventually leading them to provide the government with recruits and intelligence where once it provided them to the insurgent, generating both tactical and strategic windfalls. Just as the intelligence provided produces “contacts” with the enemy, so too does civic action create points of contact between the government and the population. Whether that point is supposedly positive and mutually beneficial, as in the provision of medical services, or more or less coercive, as in propagandizing and law enforcement, civic action creates routines and habits of government among the population and helps render it legible and controllable. Moreover, civic action requires some degree of participation from the governed population, perhaps coerced at first, but in theory gradually becoming more voluntary as the government proves its honesty and goodwill. Participation in civic action – the prelude to participation in the self-sufficient civic society, either real or potential, which the counterinsurgent fights for – is the means through which the latent energy of the people is directed away from the dangerous pathways of independent action and channeled into directions of which the counterinsurgent approves. This channeling of popular energy is the key distinguishing factor between counterinsurgency and other methods of dealing with insurgent opponents.

Building and running these villages, along with undertaking civic action and coordinating intelligence-gathering with the police and military units presently engaging

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<sup>46</sup> Thompson, Defeating Communist Insurgency 121-127

guerrilla fighters, were among the tasks which Thompson and later counterinsurgents spent so much energy building bureaucratic structures to undertake. Another task for the counterinsurgent organization, arguably the key to the whole enterprise, was the creation of reporting standards for success (or failure) on the part of a given New Village to develop properly, and from these generating synoptic pictures of the counterinsurgency effort from these reports.<sup>47</sup> Given the asymmetrical nature of the conflict, metrics of development and control were complicated, to say the least. The counterinsurgent needed to determine how controlled a given area would be if his soldiers were not present. Number of guerrilla incidents, participation in local government-aligned political organizations, economic indicators, and the subjective judgment of the local counterinsurgency advisers were among the factors that went into evaluating the status of a given territory. Typically, counterinsurgent reporting standards placed villages, districts, or provinces on a spectrum of control, often color-coded: “red” insurgent-controlled areas shading into “pink” or “yellow” contested zones which, if the counterinsurgent was successful, would become “white” or “green,” controlled by the counterinsurgent.

Given the vagueness and multiplicity both of the standards of reporting and of the many tools at their disposal, counterinsurgents in Malaya had broad leeway in terms of ways of managing the territories assigned them, and Thompson (and most other counterinsurgency strategists) wrote that superior officers should encourage creativity and initiative on the part of their subordinates. Sound advice or not, this license undoubtedly made up some part of counterinsurgency war’s personal appeal- the promise

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<sup>47</sup> Thompson Defeating Communist Insurgency 78-81



of mid-ranking officers having substantial fields to exercise their talents (and their desires for power) freely.

### **The Counterinsurgent Engine of Social Change**

Revolutionary guerrilla strategy prefigures many of the practices and attributes of the idealized end goal of social revolution. Widespread and deeply-rooted organization of the common people, the turning of military weaknesses into strengths via cunning and patience, new leaders arising out of the peasantry, the proletariat, or the slum; these (idealized) versions of the tasks guerrillas perform lie isomorphic to the visions of the societies they struggled to create. The same prefiguration occurs between the strategic principles of counterinsurgents and their social visions. This is never clearer than in the Anglo-American strand of counterinsurgency of which Thompson's work – and the Malayan experience of which he became a symbol – is a central thread. In their own self-image and, to an extent, reality, counterinsurgents engaged in dizzying array of tasks: maintaining and spreading rule of law (even – especially – arbitrary, imperial laws the governed did not consent to), painstakingly establishing best practices of administration and enforcement, utilizing local knowledge to its best effect in diverse communities, embedding communities into growing national economies and using that as a springboard for social improvement. Thompson and similar counterinsurgents understood these tasks as both necessary to defeating insurgents and as the way in which good societies in the developing world could be engineered- and increasingly saw the two goals as identical.

Just as few insurgent commanders would view the situation of a long, grueling

guerrilla war against a more powerful occupier as the actual ideal of their future society, so too would few counterinsurgents see the authoritarian social control and bloody violence which they visited on the societies they fought over as fitting their vision of a future liberal state. The stated purpose of the New Villages – and later population-management measures such as the Strategic Hamlets in Vietnam – were to get rural communities to the point where they could be self-sustaining, prosperous villages, under no harsher control than the rest of the society (as indeed happened with many of the New Villages, many of which are presently towns largely indistinguishable many other largely-Chinese Malaysian villages).

All the same, counterinsurgency seeks to create a new sort of community, populated by new kinds of citizen, not just as an end result of the process of defeating insurgents but through the process itself. Resettlement schemes create new types of villages, allowing the counterinsurgent to restructure both long-standing public space and power arrangements. Civic action shapes the citizen in myriad ways, from embedding them in a variety of new organizations to providing them services that restructure their daily lives. Enforcement and coercion play key roles: the new citizen learns an aversion to the wrong sort of actions, the wrong sorts of ideas, and the wrong sorts of people, and connects them to the new structures in which he is embedded.

The process of counterinsurgency – the active participation and adaptation of both counterinsurgents and controlled populations – and the repeated revisions and recursions involved acted to establish the means and boundaries of popular participation in the liberal states that counterinsurgency campaigns were meant to bolster or create. This is not true simply in the restrictive sense – certain actions and ideas being out-of-bounds –

though of course this facet is crucial, a precondition for the rest. The myriad boundaries of participation created by legal structures, civic action projects, surveillance, and always the discretion of the counterinsurgent backed by arms were meant to form an engine, a mechanism for the channeling of popular energy into a form of propulsion for the creation of a new kind of state and a new kind of society. Counterinsurgency proposed to take one of the most dangerous aspects of the postwar world – the massive outpouring of popular energy surrounding decolonization and socialism – and convert it into a power source for American foreign policy in the developing world. The particulars of each instance of insurgency (and of the ideas of various counterinsurgents) called forth numerous different patterns for the social engines designed to accomplish this conversion, but it is this shared project that makes counterinsurgency a consistent project across the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

This vision of counterinsurgency as social engineering did not originate with men who saw themselves as political thinkers, or as liberals. But the counterinsurgency project they did so much to initiate marks an important development in the history of liberal governmentality. Whatever the political leanings of men like Trinquier, Galula, or Thompson, their visions partook of fundamental liberal tropes: the need for institutions to moderate and channel the potentially destructive force of popular mobilization, the role of expertise, an incremental model of social action (turning one village “white” at a time), the necessity of developing and refining fact-finding regimes as an instrument of social control, the supposed naturalness of their preferred social order (and unnatural origins of opposition to it), the ceaseless tragic duel between qualified men of good will and the destructive forces of entropy (as represented both by the frictions involved in

governance and by the inevitable malcontent agitators). These men were witnesses to self-consciously reactionary attempts to defeat insurgents: the anti-partisan campaigns waged by Nazi Germany and imperial Japan, predicated on putting a dead stop to popular political energy via open terror and mass killing. This was never the goal of counterinsurgency. While the means (and metaphors) may have changed, “classical” counterinsurgency followed the liberal precept that mass politics needs to be managed or elided, not eliminated altogether.

The counterinsurgency project took definitive form when it was undertaken by the prime mover of the liberal side in the Cold War, the United States. American strategists, soldiers, diplomats, and bureaucrats built on many of the precepts from “classical” late-imperial counterinsurgency (while simultaneously constructing and editing the counterinsurgent canon), but added elements that would prove definitive. They linked the liberal underpinnings of counterinsurgency’s political vision to an explicit vision of Cold War liberalism, they significantly elaborated upon the preexisting counterinsurgent literature on the nature of populations and politics, and perhaps most importantly significantly developed an element of counterinsurgency that the British and French tended to underplay: the management of the population of the home front, who in the counterinsurgent vision could be as dangerous to the success of a counterinsurgency war as any guerrilla army. These efforts were both inspired by and helped accelerate fears and desires abroad in American culture at the time, and this gestalt helped bring counterinsurgency not just into defense policy circles but into the broader culture, in the form of novels, movies, newspaper and magazine pieces. Many of these touched (or were touched by) a figure central to the story of American counterinsurgency, Edward

Lansdale.

## Chapter 2: Creating a Counterinsurgent Culture

Few of the elements of the emerging counterinsurgency modality were truly new in the early 1960s. As strategists and policymakers occasionally conceded while formulating the new strategy, the United States had faced insurgent opponents before, from the conquest of Native American lands to the occupations of the Philippines, Haiti, and Nicaragua.<sup>48</sup> The basic lineaments of the strategy – small-unit tactics to contain the military insurgency, political action to deny insurgents support – have been known to empires for centuries. But counterinsurgency came to be a new thing in the world – a mode of thinking and practice worth understanding as a discrete entity – in a deeply context-dependent manner. Counterinsurgents understood their questions (and answers) differently from “small wars” practitioners, colonial officers, or “Indian fighters” (to use names for earlier iterations of thought addressing some of the same problems). Changes in the framing of the political questions regarding the nature of governance and of popular participation in the political process, and in the whole penumbra of cultural notions and practices surrounding these questions illuminate the relevant differences between these ways of approaching the guerrilla problem.

Before the experience of intervention in Vietnam spurred an explosion in counterinsurgency planning within the defense and foreign policy establishments, much of the American contribution to the emerging counterinsurgency project took the form of framing the problems counterinsurgency would seek to solve. Much of this entailed developing a style – of presentation and sometimes of action – that characterized counterinsurgency for much of the rest of its lifespan. More than aesthetic window-

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<sup>48</sup> Frederick Wilkins, “Guerrilla Warfare” in *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* March 1954 Pages 3-10

dressing for policy, these cultural frames for counterinsurgency would prove elementary to the ways the doctrine was developed and applied in future. In the writings and advice of figures such as Edward Lansdale – who became something of a celebrity counterinsurgent in the 1960s, prefiguring similar public faces of counterinsurgency such as Montgomery McFate and David Petraeus – and counterinsurgency-pop-culture such as Eugene Lederer and William Burdick’s novel *The Ugly American*, Americans reconceived the Cold War in the developing world. Both policymakers and every-day magazine readers began to develop a vision of the Cold War as an arena for American individual initiative and the democratic uplift of unfortunate Third World masses. This distanced them from the questions of mass politics, decolonization, and multivalent Cold War geopolitics that defined many of the situations that American policy found itself entering, especially in Southeast Asia. Much of counterinsurgency doctrine revolved around efforts to direct the political energy of decolonization away from radical politics and towards channels acceptable to American Cold War strategy. This could mean any number of things, and as the questions involved grew more urgent, the cultural frameworks through which Americans approached them became more important.

The “cultural turn” in the historiography of American diplomacy provides many (but not all) of the tools needed to grasp how American policymakers – and the American public at large – came to understand counterinsurgency and incorporate it in to their picture of the world. The lenses of gender and race that diplomatic historians have increasingly deployed in the last twenty years yield fruitful results when scholars apply them to American Cold War interventions in the developing world. Most of these interventions took place in countries inhabited by people of color. While the degree of

liberal anti-racist rhetoric deployed by American cold warriors varied (and was at something of a peak in Kennedy's era, when counterinsurgency began to gain traction as a concept), attitudes towards these populations on the part of the American defense establishment and those it sent abroad were always patronizing and essentializing. Prevailing theories of international politics included the belief in a Communist "monolith" composed of peoples depicted as lacking in concepts of individuality, and modernization theory, which arrayed all societies on a spectrum from "traditional" to "modern" (much more on this in the next chapter). Where the sort of open belief in white supremacy that characterized American political thought (and that of imperialists more generally) went into sharp decline after the Second World War, beliefs that centered (a selective interpretation of) the historical experience of white countries, and understood other societies by the degree to which they fulfilled those standards (or did not), remained central to how the American foreign policy establishment approached its work.<sup>49</sup>

The same establishment labored under the weight of several conflicting gender ideologies, as well. As Robert Dean establishes in "Imperial Brotherhood," the members of the foreign policy establishment itself tended to hold to a form of elitist masculinity inculcated in boarding schools and Ivy League universities, which emphasized the duty of elite men to undertake the strenuous work of defending the country (which the masses could not be expected to do without their leadership). Ironically, this masculine code was not enough for reactionaries such as Joseph McCarthy and other cold warriors who emerged from outside the Northeast WASP circles from which much of the Cold War

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<sup>49</sup> Michael Hunt *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, Yale University Press 1987) 159-170; Mary Dudziak *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, Princeton University Press 2011)



national security elite came. After the “loss” of China and of the nuclear monopoly (in part due to Soviet spying), McCarthy and others – often from the Midwest or the South and not notably pedigreed – attacked such Cold War stalwarts as Dean Acheson in strongly gendered language, impugning their manhood and making frequent reference to Eastern establishment cultural signifiers – refined accents, modes of dressing, generally reserved personas that did not take up McCarthy-style public belligerence – to do it. This was perhaps best exemplified by a cartoon in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* depicting Acheson limp-wristedly tossing cream puffs at Joseph Stalin. These attacks severely damaged the foreign policy establishment in the late 1940s and 1950s, indicting their manhood, their social status, and their Cold War strategies simultaneously as weak, womanly, elitist, and vaguely traitorous. Later generations of defense policymakers – especially those around John Kennedy, the first Democrat to become president after Acheson’s downfall – took note and made it a point to project “toughness” both at home and abroad. This would prove consequential for many Cold War interventions, including Vietnam.<sup>50</sup>

Cultural frameworks of race and gender helped get the United States into Cold War interventions in the developing world. Counterinsurgency doctrine attempted to reconceptualize how the United States and its allies would engage in these actions. Gendered and racialized logics helped frame the counterinsurgency project in a number of ways. Counterinsurgency partook of all of the tropes regarding race that Cold War strategy more broadly did. In many respects, the rise of counterinsurgency doctrine, in its quest to operationalize cultural knowledge as usable intelligence, intensified the cultural

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<sup>50</sup> Robert Dean *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press 2001)

essentialism that characterized American Cold War understandings of the developing world. As this and subsequent chapters will examine more fully later, counterinsurgents developed a take on masculinity that linked the values they wished to inculcate into the defense establishment – dedication to village-level work in the developing world, cultural knowledge, a willingness to “get your hands dirty” through labor, rough living, and violence – to virility, renewal of the (men of the) nation’s purpose, and not least, avoidance of the gendered McCarthyite line of attack on liberal Cold War strategy.

In the process of constructing the doctrine, and just as (if not more) importantly, selling the doctrine to the military, civilian authorities, and the public at large, the counterinsurgents of the 1950s and 1960s drew from a wide variety of cultural resources. Arguably, counterinsurgents have been considerably defter, and more successful, in constructing an image of counterinsurgency to sell to the public in their home countries (most importantly the United States) than they ever were in implementing the doctrine in war. Robert Dean refers to the figures around Kennedy who embraced counterinsurgency as “warrior intellectuals.”<sup>51</sup> Along with reflecting the sort of elitist, “muscular Christianity”-tinged image and endless fear of being pink-baited by a latter-day McCarthy that gripped defense intellectuals in the 1960s, the term points to a certain intentionality, a willful marshaling of intellectual and cultural resources and energy—hence the “intellectual” part of the “warrior intellectual” formation.

Kennedy-era defense intellectuals intended to work counterinsurgency in to the mainstream of the culture. They could not rely on inchoate nationalism (and its attendant racism and misogyny) to do their work for them, as their critics on the right could. To

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<sup>51</sup> Dean Imperial Brotherhood 184-187

frame their vision of counterinsurgency, they both sought out long-standing elements of American political culture (all of them inflected by, if not necessarily in a determinative way, racial and gendered logics) and cultivated newer cultural trends that arose as the Cold War progressed. This cultural work was necessary to manage the other turbulent population with which counterinsurgents must concern themselves: the home populations of a state undertaking long, grueling insurgency wars. Later chapters will focus on the intellectual foundations of counterinsurgency in the social sciences. This one will discuss the creation of a counterinsurgent culture, which had a recursive way of coming back to help define the counterinsurgency doctrine it was meant to be promoting. In so doing, it partook of a characteristic dynamic of mid-twentieth century liberalism.

Counterinsurgency grew out of the efforts of liberal world powers to find new modes of governance amidst the revolutionary turbulence that the twentieth century produced with such velocity and regularity. If revolutionary decolonization effected politics and society throughout the developing world, the generalized social turbulence of which it is a species transformed all aspects of life across the globe in the first half of the twentieth century. American society, culture, and politics in the two decades after the end of the Second World War bore the stamp of that turbulence; if not as deeply as societies less insulated by geography and wealth, then deeply enough. Many of the socioeconomic and cultural structures that defined midcentury America, from the consensus school of American history writing to the mass consumer economy to the Cold War foreign policy establishment, emerged from earlier efforts to manage the furies of war, class conflict, intercommunal violence, and economic instability that defined the twentieth century.

That these efforts combined into a network of practices, institutions, and ideas that wielded considerable power in the United States in the mid-twentieth century is relatively widely accepted. The question of how to delineate and name the formation yields no such uniformity. The answers differ in large part according to where a given scholar places the formation's origin point or center of gravity. Ira Katznelson locates the beginning of the "new national state" with the New Deal and the creation of the national security state amidst the Second World War, which formed a "dual state" – strictly procedural in many matters (typically domestic), crusading in others (usually foreign affairs).<sup>52</sup> David Harvey refers to "embedded liberalism," defined by postwar Keynesian economics and labor-management relations, and extending (with variations) beyond the United States and into the rest of the "First World."<sup>53</sup> Others such as Daniel Rodgers take a cultural approach, emphasizing the "Cold War consensus" that came into being in the wake of McCarthyism and defined much of culture and politics in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>54</sup> From this work's standpoint, based in the history of governance, "Cold War liberalism" is as good a name as any.

In keeping with the liberal tradition, American policymakers in a variety of realms -- foreign and domestic, economic and cultural -- attempted to negotiate social change, to develop frameworks whereby they could determine where, and with which instruments, to nurture it and where to stomp it out. Cold War liberals created and maintained numerous structures and heuristics not just for managing changes and social conflicts that would prove (and have proven) debilitating in other historical contexts, but for

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<sup>52</sup> Ira Katznelson Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time (New York, Liveright 2013) 18-20

<sup>53</sup> David Harvey A Brief History of Neoliberalism (Oxford, Oxford University Press 2005) 11-12

<sup>54</sup> Daniel Rodgers Age of Fracture (Cambridge, Harvard University Press 2011) 15-20

channeling the energies involved into growing and stabilizing their system. For instance, they had substantial success managing the labor question – one of the least tractable of the great modern social conflicts up until the end of the Second World War -- with federal bureaucracies, the encouragement of distinctly non-revolutionary union leadership, and cutting portions of the industrial working class in to the benefits of the rising tide of American prosperity. Similarly, Cold War liberals found they could contain the influence of dangerous ideologies, such as fascism or communism, through education, mass culture, and where all else failed, the power of the police.<sup>55</sup>

Examples of these means of governance developed for and applied to the liberal management of social conflict could be added, and most of them share common lineaments. The most pertinent of these lineaments are: the engagement of a mass public which was permitted some modicum of participation (often in the form of some sort of making a strictly delimited choice- GM or Ford, Eisenhower or Stevenson); the maintenance of key elements of decision-making, implementation, and most importantly, the maintenance of boundaries of the permissible, securely in the hands of management layers insulated thoroughly but not totally from popular pressure; and fertilization by the waters of the unprecedented degree of prosperity and security from economic competition the United States enjoyed in those decades. The systems involved were sufficiently subtle – and powerful – that domestic critics immersed in it, on the right but especially on the left, struggled to name or define it pithily, rigorously, and in its full scope. This tension helped produce both substantial creativity, from the radical sociology

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<sup>55</sup> Arthur Schlesinger The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom (New York, Houghton Mifflin 1949); Godfrey Hodgson America In Our Time: From World War II to Nixon, What Happened and Why (Princeton, Princeton University Press 2005) 67-133; Stephen Whitfield The Culture of the Cold War (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press 1991) 53-76

of C. Wright Mills to the literary explorations of James Baldwin, and the frustrated recourse to the imagery of Nazis, Soviets, and other totalitarians on the part of the New Left (and portions of the far right) when faced with the difficulty of defining their tasks and their enemy.<sup>56</sup>

For all of its power, the cracks in the system of Cold War liberalism are evident enough, and were even at the time. White supremacy, for instance, could not be so easily dismantled or shunted aside with money, social services programming, or earnest appeals to better nature. Nor could questions of women's place in society be confined by a newfound cult of domesticity – the “nuclear family” – even one so richly fertilized by broad-based middle class prosperity. If the ticking of those particular time bombs was not particularly audible to the national security managers, the maintenance of American world power in the face of the Cold War and decolonization was not the sort of problem they could afford to consider solved, or even contained. To say that the foreign policy establishment resorted to strategies defined by the same basic themes of the liberal management of change that characterized midcentury American society more generally – real but strictly bounded popular participation, elite management of power, and reliance on economic prosperity and growth – is accurate, but there is more to the story. None of these were simple stratagems; if they entailed a degree of hypocrisy, they also reflected (as hypocrisy tends to do) real values, rooted in serious thought and in lived experience, shared by millions of people and inflected by a long history.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Jeremy Varon Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies (Berkeley, University of California Press 2004) 93-106

<sup>57</sup> Richard Barnett, Roots of War (New York, Penguin 1973); Hunt Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy 150-159; Michael Latham The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present (Ithaca, Cornell University Press 2011) 25-32

Moreover, as a system of moderated, modulated change, Cold War liberalism, foreign or domestic, could not afford to be static and required continual adjustment to new problems and conditions. This proved a considerable strain, especially considering the (real and perceived) dangers of adjustment leading to subversion of the system as a whole. These were not always simple technical fixes. Given that the system relied on a certain threshold of mass consent within the American public, maintaining it involved substantial adjustments of the expression of liberal values, and the workings of liberal governance. The beginnings of official recognition of the civil rights movement was one of the more consequential examples of these adjustments within the body of Cold War liberalism. It certainly was not solely motivated by genuine changes of heart, of recognition of the full humanity of the racialized other. Nor was it purely cynical, an effort to burnish the US's image for the Cold War and prevent damaging internal conflict. Most of these changes within American liberalism entailed both calculation and the sincere expression of values- indeed, it can be hard to separate the two, in the productions of this particular mode of governance.

Counterinsurgency, along with whatever else it is, represents one of these adjustments within the larger system of midcentury American liberalism, and one of the more substantial ones. Subsequent chapters will discuss what this adjustment meant in terms of the US's actions in Vietnam and other sites of intervention. Management of the counterinsurgent home public involved a distinct, if parallel, set of operations to managing turbulent populations abroad. Counterinsurgents self-consciously presented their doctrine as a critical antidote to entropy, of purpose and of thought, within the foreign policy establishment, as well as a means to contain Communism. Given the

centrality of the Cold War to American politics and society at the time, as well as the uphill battle counterinsurgents faced in selling a grueling and often nebulous form of war to the American public, some boosters of the doctrine came to see it as more than a necessary strategic tool. It could be a rejuvenation, spackle in the cracks of entropy, for American society as a whole. In keeping both with the characteristic lineaments and institutions of American Cold War liberalism, and with its equally characteristic intermingling of cynicism and sincerity, the key figure in selling counterinsurgency not just as a strategy – something America needs – but as something America *wants*, was an ad man.

### **The Lansdale Legends**

Key elements of the American counterinsurgency project bear the marks of the influence of Edward Geary Lansdale, a man who belongs to a characteristically American category: famous spies. Intelligence services breed legends, an ironic inevitability for clandestine organizations, but the American espionage services – and the Central Intelligence Agency in particular – stand alone in terms of producing individual clandestine agents who become publically well-known. These range from James Jesus Angleton (the architect of the CIA's domestic spying program) to Gust Avrokotos (portrayed by Philip Seymour Hoffman in *Charlie Wilson's War*) to Lansdale, arguably the most famous of them all.

Spy fame usually comes after the agent's career is over. This was not so for Lansdale, a CIA agent from 1950 to 1956 (in his own telling) and an at-large counterinsurgency expert and advisor for over a decade thereafter. In 1955, while Lansdale still worked in



the clandestine service, a major novelist published a book with a titular character widely (but possibly erroneously) believed to be modeled after Lansdale: Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*. In 1958, two years after Lansdale supposedly ceased work as an agent but near the height of his influence in policy circles, Eugene Burdick and William Lederer's bestseller *The Ugly American* appeared, with yet another titular character whose similarities to Lansdale are considerably less ambiguous than Greene's depiction. While still in government employ, Lansdale was the subject of public interviews, newspaper pieces, and magazine write-ups.<sup>58</sup> His public persona cut a large figure during a period straddling the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s.

Edward Lansdale lived much of his life in the shadow of a legend partially generated by himself. Born in 1908, Lansdale was a successful advertising executive in California before joining the Army during World War II, where he became an intelligence officer working in Asia. At some point close to its founding in 1947, Lansdale became a clandestine agent of the Central Intelligence Agency, as well as a colonel in the Air Force. Lansdale's legend rests primarily on three verified aspects of his career, and one unverifiable belief. Lansdale worked as an adviser to the Filipino government during the Hukbalahap Rebellion and claimed substantial credit for winning the war; Lansdale attempted a similar feat in South Vietnam, and was an instrumental early ally of Ngo Dinh Diem; Lansdale participated in Operation Mongoose and other efforts to subvert and overthrow Fidel Castro's rule in Cuba; Lansdale figures prominently in the lore surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy, typically as a shadowy figure with

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<sup>58</sup> Jim Lucas, "Bad News for Red Warlords – Lansdale Heads for Viet Nam" *Washington News* 1961/10/14; Richard Critchfield, "Lansdale Works Invisibly" *Washington Star* 1965/10/18; "Gen. Lansdale: Mystery Man of South Vietnam" *New York Journal-American* 1966/02/13; Jack Lasco, "Our Mysterious Edward G. Lansdale" *Saga* 1967/03

dirty hands. Taken together with his own public utterances and the literary works associated with him, Lansdale came to act as a metonym for three quite disparate visions of American intelligence work. These can be characterized roughly as the Lederer-Burdick vision (after the co-authors of *The Ugly American*), the Greene vision (after Graham Greene, author of *The Quiet American*), and the Stone vision (after Oliver Stone, director of the film *JFK*).

In the Lederer-Burdick vision, promulgated not just in *The Ugly American* but in numerous magazine and newspaper pieces as well as Lansdale's own memoir and his official biography, Lansdale represents all that's best in American intelligence work, especially in the Third World. He is an ever-ebullient warrior for simple American values, favoring a ready smile and optimistic words over guns (though willing and able to use the latter), a culturally-sensitive guy's guy, a man willing to go the extra mile to put developing countries on the path of true freedom. The Lederer-Burdick vision draws primarily from Lansdale's experiences in the Philippines. In the Greene vision, found not just in *The Quiet American* and its adaptations but in Joan Didion's *Democracy* and the works of several counterinsurgency critics, Lansdale represents the tragic aspect of American foreign policy. He is a naïf, blundering into situations past his understanding, blinded by certainty of his own knowledge and by moral rectitude, exacerbating problems everywhere he goes. The Greene vision draws primarily from Lansdale's time in Indochina. Finally, the Stone vision, promulgated not just by Oliver Stone but by Norman Mailer, numerous JFK assassination conspiracy theorists, and radical critics of American foreign policy, where Lansdale came to represent the worst aspects of American global power. He is a sinister power broker and clandestine operative, the trigger man for a deep

state apparatus determined to destroy everything liberal and good. This picture draws from (an exaggerated version of) Lansdale's deeds throughout his career, but especially from his work against the Castro regime.

Tricksters – or grifters, to use a less exalted and perhaps more appropriate term – operate in the liminal spaces between vision and reality. Every version of Lansdale, including the most positive and his own account of himself, would grant that the man was a trickster. Lansdale was quite capable of taking advantage of the exaggerations within and gaps between accounts of himself, as when he poked fun in his memoirs at depictions of himself as a puppet-master controlling the fates of whole societies, thereby effacing the real roles he played.<sup>59</sup> To understand Lansdale (as much as the incomplete and murky record will allow) and his role in American counterinsurgency doctrine, history needs to illuminate these spaces, while simultaneously attempting to comprehend them in their liminality, as Lansdale himself did.

Luckily, the murkiest parts of the Lansdale legendarium contribute the least useful material to the study of counterinsurgency. Lansdale's part in the Kennedy assassination cannot be verified and would not be especially pertinent to counterinsurgency as a doctrine in any event. His involvement with Operation Mongoose, while falling into the broad category of efforts to foil Communism in the Third World, come closer to (unsuccessfully, fitfully) promoting insurgency than countering it. Lansdale's activities in the Philippines and Vietnam – their reality and even more the myths built around them – form the basis of his substantial contributions to the American counterinsurgency project. While no clearer than any complex historical event, and made less clear still by official

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<sup>59</sup> Edward Lansdale, *In The Midst of Wars* (Harper and Row, New York 1971) Pages 51-52

secrecy, a rough space of facts can be carved out regarding Lansdale's record in these areas, which can form a starting point for demystifying his counterinsurgent record.

Lansdale made his reputation in the Philippines, and his time there takes up the bulk of his memoirs, *In the Midst of Wars*, published in 1972. Perhaps the most important liminal space in which Lansdale plays is that between boastfulness, modesty, and the reader's awareness of the projection of both. This is on boldest display in his accounting of his role in the suppression of the Hukbalahap Rebellion. Lansdale goes out of his way to attribute the success of the anti-Huk campaign to Filipinos, especially to Ramon Magsaysay, and to downplay his own efforts. All the same, Lansdale is the narrator, the viewpoint of the reader's exposure to an otherwise little-known conflict, and every important event, including Magsaysay's rise to power and the implementation of his counterinsurgency strategy, happens in Lansdale's presence and with his assistance. Lansdale certainly did not demur in any meaningful sense from being depicted as the man who won the Huk War and kept a key Cold War domino upright. The seeming contradiction between Lansdale accepting the laurels of victory over the Huks and his apotheosizing of Ramon Magsaysay is resolved less by duplicity and more by policy: as far as Lansdale was concerned, finding and promoting the right sort of people is near the heart of counterinsurgency practice. This emphasis on personal qualities (and the bureaucratic structures that foster them) will appear again in counterinsurgency thinking in varying and provocative ways.<sup>60</sup>

Lansdale's time in Vietnam is split in two. In the mid-1950s, he worked in Saigon as an adviser to Ngo Dinh Diem. In the interstitial period between the signing of the Geneva

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<sup>60</sup> Lansdale *In The Midst Of Wars* Pages 32-59

Accords in 1954 and the NLF's resumption of guerrilla warfare against the Republic of Vietnam in 1960, American efforts around Diem centered less on combatting Communism and more on solidifying Diem's regime. Again, Lansdale both effaces and burnishes his own record in Saigon at this time, attributing much to local partners such as Diem and Cao Dai militia leader Trinh Minh The, acting as a neutral viewpoint character.<sup>61</sup> But there would be no story for him to tell if American power and especially that of the CIA was not central to Diem's rise to and maintenance of power in South Vietnam.

From his appointment of Prime Minister (made after American pressure) to his ascension to President of the Republic (in an election rigged with help from the CIA) to his eventual assassination (authorized by the American embassy, though well after Lansdale fell out of favor there), Diem's rule was defined by its relationship to American intelligence services. Diem may have made history – he was not a puppet, to allude to a seemingly perennial, and perhaps overemphasized, debate in Vietnam War historiography – but he did not make history just as he pleased. He operated in the context of American interest in the region, and for a crucial period, Lansdale was the conduit of that interest and the power that it wielded. We will address the second act of Lansdale's career in Vietnam, his time as a sort of roving, unofficial counterinsurgency observer/adviser around the time the CORDS program attempted to revive counterinsurgency strategy after 1966, briefly in a later chapter. It was his time in Saigon in the 1950s that inspired much of the legend around him- and which led him to be associated with Alden Pyle of *The Quiet American*.

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<sup>61</sup> Lansdale *In The Midst of Wars* 184-201

The task of judging to what extent Lansdale determined events in the Philippines or Vietnam runs into the classic historiographical problem of the individual's effect on history. That is not a problem this work will solve. In all likelihood, Lansdale was more important than he made himself out in moments of strategic self-effacing dissimulation – if nothing else, the money he publically denied distributing to pro-American figures in the Philippines and Vietnam certainly greased the wheels of Cold War strategy – but not in the way he liked to present himself. Edward Lansdale, primarily through the use of money and blackmail, was able to promote Ramon Magsaysay and help elect him President. Magsaysay's strategies, formed in collaboration with Lansdale, did a great deal to convince the Huks to cease fighting the Filipino government.<sup>62</sup> Lansdale was an early, enthusiastic backer of Ngo Dinh Diem. He was only one among several, but unlike most of those, he was on the spot in Saigon with money, arms, and expertise at such key moments as the Battle of Saigon.<sup>63</sup> He shaped American policy towards power politics in Saigon at a time when a few figures on the ground could have an outsized effect- so much so that as the American footprint in South Vietnam increased and new figures with different visions, such as Maxwell Taylor and Roger Hilsman, came to take over parts of the American effort there, they found many reasons to be displeased with precedents set, in part, by Lansdale.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Benedict J. Kerkvliet The Huk Rebellion: A Study of Peasant Revolt in the Philippines (Lanham, MD, Rowman and Littlefield 1977) Pages 266-269; Alfred McCoy, Policing America's Empire: The United States, the Philippines, and the Rise of the Surveillance State (Madison; University of Wisconsin Press 2009) Pages 377-383

<sup>63</sup> Gabriel Kolk, Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience (New York; the New Press 1991) Pages 87-89; Marilyn Young The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990 (New York; Harper Collins 1991) 48-49; Seth Jacobs America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and American Intervention in Southeast Asia (Durham; Duke University Press 2004) 132-133

<sup>64</sup> Frances Fitzgerald Fire In The Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam (New York; Little Brown 1972) Pages 269-270; Cecil Currey, Edward Lansdale: The Unquiet American (Boston; Houghton

To the extent that Lansdale's contributions to counterinsurgency doctrine touched on mundane operational reality – the sort of thing one could realistically teach to other counterinsurgents – they pertained to the concept of “civic action.” While Lansdale had a good deal to say on prioritizing small-unit tactics, stealth, and intelligence (and downplaying heavy weaponry) in counterinsurgency tactics, he was not unique in this. Where Lansdale proved operationally important was in redefining civic action as a proactive tool in counterinsurgency campaigns. Within US military circles in the 1950s, civic action was understood as largely reactive- something the military undertook on an ad-hoc basis in situations such as occupations, emergencies caused by natural disasters, or on goodwill missions to allied countries. Officers concerned with civic action understood it as broadly directed towards engendering good will in the beneficiary population, but always as a means towards a specific end. It was Lansdale (and the counterinsurgents, especially civilians in the Kennedy administration, who were influenced by him) who established “civic action” as a term for a wide variety of activities, from building infrastructure to providing medical service to propaganda, meant to “win hearts and minds,” in the famous counterinsurgent cliché. Along with appealing to the people materially, civic action would show American goodwill and understanding of development issues, and provide finely-grained intelligence on local communities which could aid in defeating insurgents. Lansdale was not the first to see how providing for some of the material needs of a population undergoing an insurgency could bind the people and the counterinsurgent together, but he did explicate it for an American policy

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Mifflin 1988) Pages 237-239; Roger Hilsman, Interview 14, 1970/08/14, Oral History Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library

audience in a way that combined contemporary strategic and economic developmental concerns with a broader vision of what American counterinsurgency was to mean.<sup>65</sup>

In most respects, it is less the reality of Lansdale's accomplishments that matter – others could have done what he did for Diem and Magsaysay – and more the myth surrounding them, and the ways in which these myths were incorporated in American counterinsurgency. Lansdale, the man who lived (and wrote policy recommendations) and Lansdale, the public persona who lived half of his life in the shadow of quasi-fictional depictions of himself, cannot be fully extricated from each other. The same can be said of the contributions to the American counterinsurgency project made by Lansdale the man and by Lansdale the myth. Moreover, the single greatest contribution Lansdale made to counterinsurgency *was myth itself*. Myths could be deployed by counterinsurgents directly. Lansdale claimed to have exploited the myths of Filipino villagers to frighten Huks; this involved mutilating Huk corpses in a manner consistent with the attacks of a mythical vampire-like creature from Filipino folklore. He also spun yarns of manipulating the Vietnamese interest in fortune-telling to bolster confidence in the Diem regime, rigging omen books to predict success for Diem and failure for the NLF.<sup>66</sup> There is no unbiased record of these operations with which to judge their efficacy, and mutilating corpses undoubtedly frightens (and angers) enemy fighters for perfectly rational reasons, quite apart from patronizing orientalist psychologizing.

More importantly, Lansdale showed counterinsurgents that a different kind of myth – a myth which Lansdale himself played a major role in creating – could be used to manage

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<sup>65</sup> Edward Lansdale, "Civic Action in Southeast Asia" Box 45, Edward Lansdale Papers, Hoover Institute; Edward Lansdale, "Civic Action in Counter-Insurgency" Box 45, Edward Lansdale Papers, Hoover Institute

<sup>66</sup> Lansdale, *In The Midst Of Wars* 72-73; 226-227



another fractious population: the domestic voting population of democracies undertaking difficult counterinsurgency wars. Far more important than his (deeply spurious) knowledge of the folkways of Southeast Asia, Lansdale's marshaling of the myths of the United States – and of Cold War liberalism more broadly – proved foundational to the American counterinsurgency project, from his day to the doctrine's resurgence in the 2000s. Lansdale's mythopoeia overran his inclination (or ability) to control it. Like many great American grifters, from P.T. Barnum to L. Ron Hubbard, it is unclear to what degree Edward Lansdale believed his own legends, both those about himself and those about the world at large, but he could project enough belief to sell his points broadly.

The basic lineaments of the Lansdale-counterinsurgency myth are as follows: the most important battlefields of the Cold War are in the developing world: Latin America, Africa, and especially Southeast Asia. In these places, Communists appeal to the frustrations of the people towards underdevelopment and unresponsive government, in order to grow movements and subvert existing regimes. Lansdale described Communists as insincere in their concern for the developing world, but as willing to undergo the difficult, painstaking work of converting people and subverting regimes (what might be called “organizing political movements” in a less tendentious discourse), village by village, and eventually province by province and country by country. To defeat them, Americans, partnered with friendly local regimes, needed to match the Communist approach. They needed to make the rural masses' problems their own, they needed tight, wide, and deep village-level organization, they needed finely-grained local knowledge, they needed strategic flexibility, they needed the determination to undertake a long, grinding sort of war. Most of all they needed ideology, a fighting faith that could move

the people and which could be taught in simple terms, at least in part through the example of the counterinsurgents themselves. With such an ideology, not only could the counterinsurgents defeat Communism in the Third World, they could jumpstart social, economic, and political development, and restore the United States' supposedly-flagging sense of purpose, in line with some of John Kennedy's rhetoric. Lansdale's counterinsurgency (in its mythic form, in any event) was true *counter*-insurgency-fighting insurgents by emulating them, to opposite ends.<sup>67</sup>

This myth of counterinsurgency, as conceived of by Lansdale, propagated by his contemporaries, and modified, refuted, debated, and generally mooted by counterinsurgents ever since, envisions the struggle against Communism in a distinctly idealist vein. Here, idealist is meant in the dual sense of aspiring to nobility of spirit and of prioritizing ideas, morale, and other internal factors over material conditions. The Lansdale myth repeatedly warns against reliance on what, to more conventional minds, would appear to be the United States' main advantage in the struggle against global Communism: overwhelming advantages in terms of wealth, industrial base, manpower, firepower, and general logistics capability. Doing so would be both ineffective – Communist strategy is designed with American material advantages in mind – and counterproductive. It weighs American strategy down, rendering it less flexible and its practitioners less agile.

In a practice which helped cement his legend while simultaneously reducing his conventional bureaucratic effectiveness, Lansdale goaded (and leaked stories of his goading) men associated with conventional, materiel-heavy war such as Robert

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<sup>67</sup> Edward Lansdale, "Defense Action In The Cold War" 1961/12/21 Box 45, Edward Lansdale Papers; Lansdale, In The Midst Of Wars, 104-107

McNamara, at one point early in the Kennedy administration peremptorily dumping a collection of low-tech weapons (supposedly) captured from NLF fighters in Vietnam on to the desk of the bewildered Secretary of Defense. “The enemy in Vietnam uses these weapons,” Lansdale explained to McNamara (or, anyway, told his biographer, Cecil Currey, that he explained to McNamara). “Always keep in mind about Vietnam that the struggle goes far beyond the material things in life. It doesn’t take weapons or uniforms or lots of food to win. It takes ideas and ideals. Let’s at least learn that lesson.” Whether or not this soliloquy actually took place in front of Robert McNamara in the 1960s or only for Currey decades later, it reflects Lansdale’s fundamental beliefs on counterinsurgency. Old rifles or the newest air-to-surface munitions- both were vulgar matter next to ideas and action, the things that actually won “hearts and minds.”<sup>68</sup>

Lansdale’s idealism was that of the ad man, his original profession. This is not primarily true or important in the sense that his idealism was hypocritical, though in many respects it was. Advertising acts by appealing to individual desires. In Lansdale’s vision of counterinsurgency, the individual – the American man on the spot, in the village – mattered. The organization mattered only insofar as it selected and equipped the right individuals. This vision proved powerfully seductive to American men who, like much of the foreign policy elite of the mid-twentieth century, were immersed in individualistic myths -- ranging from “muscular Christianity” to progressive volunteerism to the frontier mythos -- from birth. The vision of Americans -- enervated by education, consumerism, and general easy living at home -- revitalized by idealistic, individualistic Cold War action in the developing world, was first widely propagated by Lansdale and the myths

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<sup>68</sup> Currey, Edward Lansdale Pages 1-2

surrounding him. Lansdale believed he could game the folk beliefs of Filipinos and Vietnamese to his advantage; his record is considerably better (and more provable) in playing to the inner beliefs of Americans. Moreover, Lansdale's vision emphasized communication, the promulgation of ideas and values, as key to counterinsurgency. In fine marketing fashion, Lansdale thought about communication more in terms of the means of effective messaging than in the value of the message itself (it's not hard to imagine a latter-day Lansdale speaking in terms of "virality"). Following the basic pattern of advertising as laid out by early definers of the field such as Edward Bernays and Bruce Barton, the visions Lansdale sold by foregrounding immediate problems (such as the needs of villagers in a given situation) as well as hazy abstractions ("freedom"), while creating a rhetorical space which obviates questions of power and structure.<sup>69</sup>

Beyond his frequent references to the Founding Fathers, what Lansdale meant by "freedom," or what he thought it would mean, practically speaking, for the people of the Philippines, Cuba, or Vietnam, was never clear. Lansdale was equally vague as to what the best way to serve local villages via civic action looked like. Whether or not this vagueness was intentional, it served two purposes. For the counterinsurgent, strategic vagueness about the structures and actions of power allow for greater range of flexibility (and deniability) of action for people acting within Lansdale's idealistic paradigm. It also took the fight off the enemy's turf. Insurgents, whatever their differences, functioned by exploiting the advantages of popular mobilization and solidarity built on a shared vision of politics, which included answers to such concrete issues of power as land distribution and political representation. Lansdale's vision represented an effort to shift the

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<sup>69</sup> Edward Lansdale, "The True Americans" 1960-06-03 Box 45, Edward Lansdale Papers; Lansdale, In The Midst Of Wars passim

conversation in the developing world from these questions of collective power to matters of individual dreams and desires, while never surrendering the pre-existing grip on power exercised by the American client states implementing counterinsurgency. It sought to replace the praxis of collective action with a metaphysics of individual fulfilment. Counterinsurgency prefigured the discovery, on the part of liberals the world over in the late twentieth century, that the socialist vision could be defeated more easily and more thoroughly by evading – or simply shrinking – the space of the political altogether, in favor of spaces (notionally) favoring individualistic action.

Lansdale never presented anything like a meaningful, nation-level counterinsurgency plan- an item of evidence for his self-presentation as a humble adviser to more important figures such as Magsaysay and Diem. He was not a system-builder along the lines of David Galula, Robert G.K. Thompson, or later American counterinsurgents such as Robert Komer. His voluminous reports and memoranda were almost entirely anecdotal (to say nothing of unverifiable) and opinion-based, doubtless one of many aspects of Lansdale's work in counterinsurgency that drove more responsible bureaucratic figures such as McNamara and Hilsman to treat his advice gingerly.<sup>70</sup> If Lansdale's body of (declassified) advisory work is to be taken seriously and not as simply inept in its lack of specificity, then a picture emerges where beyond an embrace of civic action, counter guerrilla tactics, and broad independence (and budgets) for officers pursuing such projects, detailed national-level counterinsurgency policy is actually unnecessary. The vision that emerges instead is every village and province in the counterinsurgent nation becoming a field of experimentation, a site for counterinsurgents – often young American

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<sup>70</sup> Roger Hilsman, To Move A Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy (New York; Doubleday 1967) Page 419

men working alongside the most “modern” elements of the allied regime – to take initiative and to show their mettle. Much as prices, policies, and national identities are meant to do in liberal political theory, a counterinsurgency policy would naturally harmonize out of the give-and-take of dozens, hundreds, perhaps thousands of grassroots experiments, freely undertaken, gently encouraged and regulated from above, and adjusting to changing conditions on the fly. This dynamic reproduces one of the oldest traditions of imperialism – the colonial periphery as a space of freedom for men from the imperial metropole to implement designs and exercise mastery and virtuosity – in conceptual language acceptable to Cold War liberals. Much of what was new in this concept of (post)-imperial governance grew up in the discussion around which sort of person was the right sort of person for counterinsurgency.

Lansdale’s conception of counterinsurgency conflated strategy and personality to a remarkable degree, which perhaps also speaks to a vision shaped by the demographic-driven hermeneutics of advertising. Men adhering to strategies – such as Robert McNamara and Maxwell Taylor -- Lansdale found wanting did so, both in his telling and in those of many subsequent counterinsurgents, because of their personalities: hidebound, bureaucratic, easily fixated by large numbers and big equipment and indifferent towards human factors. Men who adhered to Lansdale’s vision – primarily Lansdale himself, and a select few companions, generally Asians such as Ramon Magsaysay or Trinh Minh The -- were of an altogether different type: adventurous, empathetic, devil-may-care with rules and regulations but earnestly supportive of the democratic aspirations of the people of the developing world.<sup>71</sup> While such early counterinsurgency theorists as Robert G.K.

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<sup>71</sup> Lansdale, *In The Midst Of Wars* 196-199; Currey, *Edward Lansdale* 236-244

Thompson put significant conceptual weight on the importance of personnel selection, Lansdale accelerated and reified the tendency to see counterinsurgency as a matter of getting people with the right personal qualities into key positions, an important counterinsurgent conceit to this day.<sup>72</sup> One of Lansdale's key contributions to counterinsurgency is his enumeration of the qualities of the sort of man (almost always a man) needed to advance America's Cold War interests in the developing world, both through in his own presentation of self and in his descriptions of ideal counterinsurgents. Lansdale was not alone in this task- indeed, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, this was a question abroad widely in American culture.

### **Americans, Ugly and Otherwise**

Cultural depictions of other places and the conflicts therein have long had an outsized effect on American foreign policy, especially when a given venture requires widespread consent from a public that is educated about foreign countries largely through popular culture. Fictional depictions typically do not play a causative role in foreign policy decisions, but can go a long way towards framing the understandings of the world that go into these decisions, inflecting the ways they are undertaken. Counterinsurgents themselves took some effort in framing global conflicts and American responses to them in such a way as to incline the American public, as well as policymakers, towards taking up a counterinsurgency strategy. To the extent this worked, it was helped along by a

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<sup>72</sup> Mark Moyar A Question of Command: Counterinsurgency from the Civil War to Iraq (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009)

larger cultural conversation occurring in the late 1950s and early 1960s about relations between Americans and the developing world, in the context of the Cold War.

We can understand this conversation as part of the continual adjustment made by American Cold War culture to pressures placed on it from without and within. The pressures from outside are evident enough: decolonization, the Cold War, the “loss” of China and of Cuba – America’s great mission field and its conveniently-located playground, respectively – to communism. These pressures would have compelled change to American Cold War strategy, but not necessarily to its culture; it’s not hard to imagine a reaction of isolationism or open white supremacist revanchism in response to these outside events. Interior pressures produced by the Cold War and cultural structures, in part put in place as bulwarks against the stresses of modernity which helped generate the Cold War, pushed American popular thought on interaction with the developing world in a different direction. These pressures included abiding fear of nuclear war, genuine curiosity about “new” places encouraged by improving travel and communications technology, and the suppression of many openly bigoted responses to the larger world through reference to the negative example of Nazi Germany.

Counterinsurgents could make use of several of these tensions to sell the concept of counterinsurgency, but more than anything, what helped them was the sense abroad that individual American citizens could do comparatively little for the Cold War. The Cold War represented a cultural quandary for the American culture of voluntarism. It encompassed everyone – at the very least, everyone lived in the shadow of the bomb – but at the same time, seemed to actually *involve* very few people, and those essentially as cogs in a machine bigger than any one person could comprehend. At the same time,



traditional fields of service for American volunteerism – social welfare, crafting goods for the poor, etc. – were becoming foreclosed by the increasing scope of the state and of consumerism, and in some cases, like that of missionary work in China, by the Cold War itself. Applied to the Cold War, this frustrated voluntarism found a number of outlets, from civic defense training to Red Scare witch-hunts, and most importantly for our purposes, a desire on the part of Americans to involve themselves in the drama of the developing world. Several lineaments of this desire – its emphasis on the action of individuals and small groups; its anxieties about the supposed superiority of Communists at appealing to the people of developing countries; its fascination with comprehending (and in some instances mastering) other, “exotic” cultures; its gender politics and promotion of an intellectual, altruistic, but far from nonviolent masculinity – provided convenient biting points for the gears counterinsurgents sought to turn to transmit their doctrine in to the mainstream.

Critic and historian John Hellmann places William Lederer and Eugene Burdick’s 1958 novel of the Cold War in Southeast Asia, *The Ugly American*, in the exalted company of Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Sinclair’s *The Jungle* as one of the works of fiction that spurred a major public conversation on a given political issue.<sup>73</sup> Like those predecessors, *The Ugly American* could not have made the impact it had on its literary merits, which are few, or on its thoroughgoing exploration of a complex topic, which it lacks and which is seldom a strength for any novel. *The Ugly American* struck a chord with a significant portion of the American public, tying its issue – the failings of American diplomacy in

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<sup>73</sup> John Hellmann *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York; Columbia University Press 2013) 17-30

the developing world – to deep emotional, moral, and aesthetic longings within many Americans.

Novels such as these do not create movements, but they identify a given political idea with a set of easily understood and emotionally charged narratives and symbols, giving them more purchase with the American public at large- though at the risk of subsuming a larger movement into a sentimental tableau. The central message conveyed by *The Ugly American* is that America is failing in the developing world, but not for lack of Cold War conviction or effort and money expended. Instead, the failure lies with American values – as carried by American individuals – not being effectively conveyed across the world. This message resonated powerfully with millions of Americans for whom the Cold War was both a daily facet of their lives – a sword of Damocles over their heads – and at the same time distant, unapproachable, and unresponsive to their individual efforts. *The Ugly American* offered a different perspective on the Cold War, where individual Americans could make a difference and the fear of nuclear war (somewhat) receded.

If *Uncle Tom's Cabin* relied on tropes from sentimental romances of its time and *The Jungle* gestured towards the realism then current in literary circles, *The Ugly American* exemplified the didacticism of mid-twentieth century American middlebrow. Structurally, *The Ugly American* is a procession of loosely-connected vignettes set in a fictional Southeast Asian nation of Sarkhan, a rough composite of the three countries of Indochina along with Thailand. Like most of the real countries in the region at the time, Sarkhan was host to a Communist insurgency, while the United States was allied with its government. The individual vignettes largely consist of the tales of a given American (or group of Americans) and their efforts to advance America's interest in Sarkhan and

prevent its fall to Communism. Most of them act as object lessons about the sorts of values and behaviors that would benefit America's project in Sarkhan (and by extension much of the developing world)- or, more often, which would harm it.

These behaviors and values cluster into types which would be familiar to the readership *The Ugly American* attracted. The bad Americans were effete, lazy, ignorant. They were organization men. They were creatures who had adapted to outmoded ways of doing things; most notably Ambassador Louis Sears, a loyal party-man and time-server, only involved in foreign service due to the hoary tradition of awarding diplomatic posts as patronage prizes. These characters were seldom evil but always inadequate, both to the cause of freedom in Sarkhan and, the reader suspects, to nearly anything else. Most importantly, they were disengaged, uninterested in Sarkhan and its people, seeing their time there as means to an end, typically advancement of a career that begins and ends in the United States. Good Americans, for their part, were virile, active, curious. They were individualists who adapted readily to the new environment. They weren't always right, but they were always up to the task. Most importantly, they were engaged with Sarkhan and with individual Sarkhanese, learning their language and building personal relationships with its people. These included the Lansdale manqué Colonel Hillandale (Lansdale's feats of patronizing orientalist astrology are repeated in the novel as Hillandale's strategic coups) and the titular ugly American, Homer Atkins, who engages the people of Sarkhan by going to a village and applying his engineering skills in a variety of simple ways to improve the villagers' lives.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> William Lederer and Eugene Burdick, The Ugly American (New York; Norton 1958)

Ironically enough, one group of people already acts like the good Americans, to great effect: Communists. In *The Ugly American*, Communism is considered self-evidently wrong, but as possessed of fiendish advantages in competition for the allegiances of the developing world. According to Lederer and Burdick, the Soviet government, unlike that of the United States, has the strategic vision necessary to prioritize struggle in the Third World. Moreover, it possesses the command structure and organizational culture to produce fanatically dedicated village-level organizers of subversion and to back them in protracted campaigns. The authors depict the American effort in the developing world as being dominated by feckless dilettantes, and so the Communists are winning in Sarkhan- and for less money than the Americans spend in losing. They insist that American foreign policy needs to change if it wants to match the Communists in the developing world.<sup>75</sup>

In the world Lederer and Burdick create, policy warrants considerably less attention than the affect, comportment, and capabilities of individual Americans. When policy comes up, it drives towards the central theme of the book, the necessity of linking the best Americans and people of the developing world into small-scale, personal relationships. To that end, in a manifesto at the end of the book, the closest thing to a protagonist, Ambassador Gilbert MacWhite, lists a series of policy prescriptions. Almost all of them are, essentially, problems of human resources; finding the right people (by selecting for language skills and long-term dedication) and seeing to it they conduct themselves the right way (living humbly, interacting with Sarkhanese or whoever their opposite numbers happen to be, and so on). The other major recommendation works according to the same

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<sup>75</sup> Lederer and Burdick, *The Ugly American* 50-56; 128-130

logic: deemphasizing big development projects – highways, power plants, and the like -- and concomitantly encouraging a profusion of small, village- and district-level endeavors.

Quite apart from any developmental advantages small projects – like the bicycle-driven mill Homer Atkins installs in one village or the canning techniques a housewife referred to as Mrs. Martin bestows upon the fascinated Shan people – might endow (Lederer and Burdick make few claims about those), these small projects embedded Americans with Sarkhanese (or their real world analogues). In doing so, Asian villagers would learn that Americans have their best interest in mind, thereby allowing Americans to lead them to progress, economic development, and sustained alliance with the US in the Cold War. At one point, Homer Atkins's wife Emma provides long broom handles to the women of her village – who evidently were incapable of thinking up that sort of thing on their own without an American to show them how – literally straightening their backs for them.<sup>76</sup> This sort of action would beat the Communists at their own game, showing Americans had both the grit and the good will to make village-level problems their own, thereby winning over the people of the developing world, one village at a time. “All you need,” one character says, is to “send more people like the Martins,” and, by implication, the other useful, true Americans in the book.<sup>77</sup>

In *American Orientalism*, historian Christina Klein describes *The Ugly American* as partaking in a “middlebrow aesthetic of commitment.”<sup>78</sup> Klein locates this ethic in a number of texts that emerged in the 1950s and early 1960s surrounding American involvement in the developing world, and especially Southeast Asia. *The Ugly American*

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<sup>76</sup> Lederer and Burdick, *The Ugly Americans* 198-201

<sup>77</sup> Ibid 127

<sup>78</sup> Christina Klein *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley, University of California Press 2001) 61-63

was only the most didactic in terms of foreign policy- and indeed, its didacticism hurt it even with politically-sympathetic critics, though seemingly not with the reading public at large. Stories crafted less towards specific policy goals still helped frame the counterinsurgent culture of civic action, individual and village-scale involvement, and Cold War struggle in the developing world as a matter of personal growth and fulfillment through service, as well as a strategic necessity.

*Reader's Digest* churned out numerous pieces, both fictional and non-fictional, in this vein throughout the 1950s and 1960s. They told stories of figures like Jim Thompson, American textile entrepreneur based in Thailand and provider of the silk that went into the costumes of the first production of *The King and I*, itself a fable of modernization through personal contact between Westerners and “less developed” cultures. Thompson’s enterprise – which, as *Reader's Digest* reporters Francis and Katherine Drake noted, was small-scale and respectful of local mores -- was upheld as an example of what American development aid in Southeast Asia could and should look like, uplifting the benighted Thais with the good example of a given American and his know-how.<sup>79</sup> More conservative than many of the counterinsurgents surrounding the Kennedy administration, *Reader's Digest* placed particular emphasis on the cost-savings of putting individuals, volunteer groups, and businesses in the forefront of American interaction with the developing world. This was counterpoised to “wasteful” big government foreign aid spending, in line with some of Dwight Eisenhower’s efforts to fight the Cold War within a tight budget. As the crisis in Vietnam deepened, the Kennedy administration and those around it placed much less emphasis on the budgetary elements of small-scale

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<sup>79</sup> Francis and Katherine Drake, “Jim Thompson and the Busy Weavers of Bangkok” *Reader's Digest* October 1959

(what future, internet-influenced generations might call “nimble”) action, but retained much of the ideological and aesthetic thrust.

*Reader's Digest* was also instrumental in popularizing such works as *The Ugly American* and the memoirs of Tom Dooley, relief worker and popularizer of a peculiar blend of anticommunism, liberal developmentalism, and a personal take on Catholicism where the emphasis on gruesome martyrdom bordered on camp. A medical doctor, former Navy corpsman, and CIA asset allegedly recruited by Edward Lansdale himself, Dooley came to fame through his memoirs of his relief work in the refugee camps of Vietnam and Laos in the aftermath of the French withdrawal from Indochina in 1954. Combining a (by most accounts sincere) empathy for the suffering of those dislocated by war and the violence of the revolution in North Vietnam with gruesome accounts of often apocryphal Viet Minh atrocities, Dooley's accounts in such bestsellers as *Deliver Us From Evil* and *The Edge of Tomorrow* put Southeast Asia on the map for many Americans, in a way that demanded urgent action. Here again, we see a narrative of small-scale, individualistic involvement – Dooley and his small, put-upon staff of aid workers -- in the drama of development and revolution in the developing world, in this case with an added emphasis on the importance of belief.<sup>80</sup>

What sustained him, Dooley insisted, was a love for the people of Southeast Asia and above all, his Catholic faith. Faith transformed him from a “playboy,” in one scholar's description, to someone who lived and worked for the greater good, serving the people of

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<sup>80</sup> Thomas Dooley *Deliver Us From Evil* (New York, Farrar Strauss Giroux 1956); Thomas Dooley *The Edge of Tomorrow* (New York, Farrar Strauss Giroux 1958)

Southeast Asia, the United States, and God.<sup>81</sup> The American side in the Cold War, the long-suffering people of the developing world, and individual Americans innervated by prosperity could all achieve redemption through direct, personal involvement in the developing world in a spirit of faith and devotion. After all, in Dooley's depiction (as in Lederer and Burdick's), there are only two kinds of Asian- the kind grateful for aid (provided it came in a culturally-sensitive way), and the kind fanatically devoted to Communism and destruction. Dooley died of cancer in 1961, at the age of thirty-four. Counterinsurgents would come to emphasize the degree of devotion – though not, generally, of the specifically religious or Catholic – necessary both to see through a long guerrilla struggle and to deal patiently with the masses in the developing world who were their charge, in a way Dooley – and more importantly, his broader readership – would find familiar.

What these works and other examples of the “aesthetic of commitment” abroad in American culture at the cusp of the 1960s share is an emphasis on the action of individuals. In *The Ugly American*, not only do individual Americans, representing homely but strong American values, do the most good in Sarkhan- they are the only ones who do much good. Within the genre, this holds true across the spectrum of Cold War activity. In high diplomacy, in aid work, and in military action, finding and promoting the right kind of American – understood as representing the virtues of the American people, and not the institutional machinery built up around it – comes across as the most important element of success. In this high tide of American liberalism, two seemingly disparate goals – the search for individual purpose on the part of Americans in the midst

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<sup>81</sup> Seth Jacobs *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia* (Durham, Duke University Press 2004) 154-155



of prosperity, and success in the life-or-death struggle of the Cold War – came to be harmonized in this vision of action in the developing world.

Much of what ordinary, individual Americans can contribute to the Cold War as envisioned by Lederer, Burdick, and other middlebrow-commitment writers, falls squarely into the category which Edward Lansdale and later counterinsurgents understood as the primary distinguishing act of counterinsurgency: civic action. While the sort of civic action programs actually implemented in counterinsurgency campaigns tended to be considerably more bureaucratic than those envisioned in romances of engagement such as *The Ugly American*, their fictional doppelganger emerged at around the same time that American policymakers began re-envisioning the use of civic action as a weapon in the Cold War, especially in the developing world.

One of the paperback editions of *The Ugly America* screamed from its cover, “Is President Kennedy’s ‘Peace Corps’ The Solution To The Problems In This Book?” Teaching school, overseeing engineering products, administering to the sick, promoting civic participation (in the official bodies of friendly regimes)- all of these and more were presented like a menu of options for Americans to undertake (or, more often imagine themselves undertaking), a way to contribute to Cold War victory, human freedom, and personal growth all at once, and all overlain with exoticism, adventure, and danger. This ethos proved – continues to prove – highly seductive to many Americans, especially younger, educated men and women. As we will see in later chapters, John Kennedy himself formed perhaps the most important bridge between the ethic of participation, as Klein describes it, and the construction of counterinsurgency as a strategic project.

Along with appeasing the sensibility of Americans and framing the adaptation of civic action as a strategic priority, an understanding of the Cold War in the developing world in terms of individual capacity performed an important political task: evading the reality of mass politics. In many areas of the developing world, mass politics took forms dangerous to American interests. The decolonization process as a whole threatened to break down the entire paradigm of the bipolar Cold War which allowed Americans both to conceive of themselves as standing uniquely for freedom, and which framed the strategic vision of American policymakers. The participation ethic of American middlebrow liberalism reframed the questions of politics in the developing world as a matter of enabling the right people – the good, practical people of America and the eager learners of the Sarkhans of the world – to solve practical, notionally a-political problems. Doing this provided a cultural context for the efforts on the parts of counterinsurgents to reframe politics in the developing world. Just as in the middlebrow participation texts, counterinsurgency bracketed essential conflicts between differing visions of what decolonization would mean, how developing states would be governed, and how they would fit into a world order defined by a Cold War. Through civic action, counterinsurgents undertook to redefine societies using a vision of politics that emphasized those elements Cold War liberalism had integrated into itself: individual rights and attainment, and capitalist development economics.

Many American counterinsurgents did not take Edward Lansdale especially seriously, viewing him as an amateurish gadfly, and the framers of counterinsurgency doctrine typically did not take novels that much into account in their work. They understood their task as being considerably more complex than the solutions that Lansdale, Lederer, or

Burdick would or could present, even as Lansdale continued to hover around official counterinsurgent circles. But just as in *The Ugly American*, specific policy recommendations were beside the point in the earliest American contributions to the counterinsurgency modality. What the cultural depictions of counterinsurgency and the emerging doctrine shared heading into America's deepening involvement in Vietnam was an emphasis on individualistic solutions – from village-level interactions to specialized personnel selection training for counterinsurgency – to problems of mass politics in the developing world.

### **Chapter 3: Vietnam and the Emergence of the American Counterinsurgency Project**

The disparate threads of counterinsurgency doctrine existed at least since the Second World War and arguably for much longer, but it was the decolonization crises of the early 1960s that wove them into the form we recognize today. However far counterinsurgency strategy has strayed from the assumptions of the Kennedy era in subsequent decades, it has retained elements of its origins in its makeup, like a Camelot watermark. This is in part due to the operations of institutional memory within the foreign policy and defense elite. But there are deeper, structural similarities between the moment in the early 1960s when counterinsurgency emerged as a coherent doctrine developed and undertaken by the most important liberal state, and other, subsequent moments of crisis. The most important factors include the continuing crises of decolonization and the Cold War; the linking of insurgency war strategy and political movements seen as harmful to American interests; and the emergence of theories of socioeconomic development which purported to be of practical use to foreign policy decision-making. These factors spurred the bringing together of anti-guerrilla military practices, developmentalist social science, and the practices and momentum of bureaucracies and armies into the discourse of counterinsurgency we know today. It was people in and around the Kennedy administration that did most of the work in creating this formation. The years after 1963 would see counterinsurgency wax and wane as an organizing concept for American interventions, but its delineation and application at a key moment in the American struggle with a restive world has guaranteed that the doctrine will remain an important articulation method for American power for the foreseeable future.

### **The Insurgency Era**

So strongly associated are counterinsurgency doctrine and the Kennedy administration that the early 1960s are sometimes called “the counterinsurgency era” by military historians. The phrase is the title of a history by former CIA employee and RAND Corporation analyst Doug Blaufarb which focuses mainly on the Kennedy years. Defense studies publisher Praeger Security International began releasing a line of “PSI Classics of the Counterinsurgency Era” in the mid-2000s, rereleasing works by David Galula, Robert G.K. Thompson, Napoleon Valeriano, and other leading counterinsurgents of the 1950s and 1960s. Praeger’s rereleases coincided with the return to prominence of counterinsurgency doctrine as applied by the American and allied forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, a period sometimes referred to as the “second counterinsurgency era,” in a conscious reference to the early 1960s.

But a counterinsurgency era can only be summoned into being by an era of insurgencies, real or perceived. The world was no stranger to civil war or insurgency during the Truman and Eisenhower administrations. In the early nineteen-sixties, however, several factors worked together to move the problem of insurgency from the margin to the center of American strategic concerns. These included the accelerating pace of decolonization, the decline of those powers (ranging from the European empires to US-aligned regimes in Latin America and Southeast Asia) which once acted as guarantors of order in much of the world, and the shifting of Cold War competition away from the dangerous trip-wires of Central Europe and Northeast Asia and towards the developing world.

Decolonization was the most important single driver of the American embrace of counterinsurgency. The dangers and opportunities of decolonization motivated American policymakers to take the developing world more seriously, and conditioned the strategies they developed to influence those areas. The most dramatic examples of the energies unleashed by decolonization – bloody, protracted independence struggles, such as those in Algeria and Indochina – are only a subset of the sort of risks the American foreign policy elite saw when it gazed out over the prospect of the developing world.

The transitional period of the late 1950s and early 1960s saw insurgency become inextricably associated with the anticolonial vision in its most expansive sense. Trends in decolonization and global politics since the end of the Second World War had produced hopes, fears, and frustrations that drove a growing mass of the populations of the developing world to take up insurgency war. The hopes generated by the first wave of decolonization stirred people throughout the world. The many disappointments of formal independence – the mismatch between the great dreams of new nationhood and the grinding reality of underdevelopment, dependence, and internal division -- convinced millions that social revolution was the only way to make decolonization anything other than an empty promise. The tenacity of the forces arrayed against radical social change (and, in some rearguard cases, formal political independence) in the developing world guaranteed that the conflicts that arose would be protracted and ferocious. The mismatch in terms of military power in favor of the forces of order and stability insured that these conflicts would have to be undertaken as insurgencies. Insurgency mobilizes the strategic advantages possessed by anticolonial revolutionaries: support of the population, finely-grained area knowledge, and the will to continue a protracted struggle, often enough

motivated by the utter dearth of alternatives. Perhaps insurgency grew in the minds of both the West and the developing world to become almost synonymous with decolonization because the inequities of power that drive populations to insurgency war are analogous to the disequilibrium between the dream and the reality of decolonization.

An indication of just how diverse the worries over decolonization were in the counterinsurgency era lies in some early Kennedy administration defense briefings.<sup>82</sup> Counterinsurgency may be closely associated with Vietnam, but in early 1961 the struggles Kennedy and his advisors worried most about were in Laos, Cuba, and the Congo. It's worth noting that with the exception of Laos, none of the countries listed had recently engaged in an armed struggle pertaining to formal independence. Belgium gave up the Congo without a war and Cuba had been formally independent since 1902. Even those developing countries not in the throes or immediate aftermath of a formal independence struggle when Kennedy took office were still struggling with issues whose roots lay in colonial or neocolonial pasts (and presents). The factors driving the threat of insurgency in these countries included long-term underdevelopment, unbalanced relationships with current or former patron states, political division (often to the point of paralysis), and a general mismatch between national aspirations and state capability. Given how ubiquitous these factors were throughout the developing world, it's unsurprising that Washington would come to insurgency as a danger to a vast range of states and thereby to American interests throughout the world.

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<sup>82</sup> Walt Rostow to John Kennedy, "Intelligence Inputs to 'New Look' At Our Limwar Posture" (NSF Box 326 File 02/01/1961-02/17/1961, John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library); Roger Hilsman to Dean Rusk, "Internal Warfare and the Security of the Underdeveloped States" (Box 5, Roger Hilsman Personal Papers, John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library)

The single largest burst of new independent state formation may have come during the Eisenhower administration – when most of Southeast Asia as well as Africa north of the Zambezi became formally independent – but the Kennedy administration saw a continuation of this pattern alongside an intensification of the political risks associated with decolonization. Formal independence for the colonies was still not a given. As Kennedy took office in 1961, bloody independence struggles continued in Malaya and Algeria, and began in southern Africa, home to the last major holdouts of formal imperialism and white rule. Signals to the effect that formal independence would not be enough to satisfy the poorer nations mounted in the late fifties and early sixties. The Cuban revolution, the ongoing struggle over the future of Indochina, and the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement showed that the developing world had ambitions beyond formal independence, and these could prove vexing for American strategy. To borrow a phrase from Malcolm X – a man who drew great inspiration from the decolonization struggle -- uttered on the occasion of Kennedy's assassination, it seemed that the chickens were coming home to roost.

The Truman and Eisenhower administrations understood the task of containment of communism as entailing the support of friendly Western European countries, up to and including funding their efforts to hold on to their colonies. None of the major figures in these administrations had any particular love for colonialism, which they regarded as an embarrassing throwback, but the exigencies of America's Cold War alliances, as well as their patronizing attitudes towards colonized peoples, made the decision to support colonialism relatively easy. These alliances were still in place when Kennedy took office, but quite apart from any differences of opinion about the ethics of colonialism, the



European powers seemed increasingly incapable of holding on to their colonies or of ensuring stable, self-beneficial transitions to independence on their own.

Take the case of the most powerful of the old imperial powers, Britain. Britain and its allies took twelve years and over a thousand friendly casualties to defeat the Malayan Races' Liberation Army, a force which never numbered more than ten thousand fighters. In Kenya, the British took eight years to reign in a loose federation of peasant rebel bands, a group feared and despised by much of the Kenyan population. In both instances the British only succeeded in creating friendly post-colonial regimes in these countries through the expedient of encouraging ethnic divisions and forcibly uprooting and resettling restive populations. Whatever they may have contributed to the Cold War alliance, in the developing world Britain and France as interventionist powers were increasingly grave liabilities on America's strategic balance sheet.<sup>83</sup>

As for the sort of friendly local regimes America relied on during the Cold War, they looked increasingly shaky, as well. Cuban strongman Fulgencio Batista's fall in 1959 and the inability of America's "miracle man," Ngo Dinh Diem, to defeat the National Liberation Front in Vietnam both pointed to the fact that traditional strongman politics would not be enough to stop popular insurgencies anymore. Empires and caudillos had long represented stability, however unpalatable, to American policymakers. Both seemed increasingly incapable as Kennedy entered office.

Serendipitously for the United States, the likelihood of the Cold War turning hot in Europe was shrinking along with the feasibility of Britain and France's world role. With

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<sup>83</sup> Odd Arne Westad The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Time (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press 2007) Pages 111-119

the abandonment of the concept of “rollback” of Soviet gains, and continuing Soviet disinclination to spread their influence on the continent any further, Europe became an unviable Cold War battleground. Indeed, with the arms race having entered a stage where any serious war could become a matter of nuclear annihilation for both sides with the push of a button, any sort of superpower conflict that seemed like it could lead to open fighting between the armed forces of the superpowers became increasingly unlikely. The ferment in the developing world provided a new, less fraught, but still potentially rewarding arena for Cold War competition. The nature of most developing world conflicts – protracted, low-intensity insurgency in small, poor countries – further reduced the likelihood that any given conflict would spiral into nuclear war.

All of these factors converged in the early sixties to elevate insurgency in the minds of official Washington. Insurgency went from being a strategy to a problem in its own right, a metonym for the vexing issues of decolonization in the context of the Cold War. American policymakers had long connected social revolution, Communism, support for the Soviet Union, and threat to the United States with each other, no matter how tenuous the links of the chain of association often were. To some American strategists, this meant that anticolonial struggle could now be added to the Cold War monolith of anti-American forces. But most American policymakers, in part due to strategic considerations but largely due to their political worldviews, did not take this straightforward view. There was an ambivalence at the heart of American policy towards decolonization during the Cold War. The work of negotiating this ambivalence was guided by social science.

### **The Governing Rationality of Modernization**

That a great power would take some measure of authority over a less powerful part of the world, and in exchange aid its development, is a concept at least as old as that of economic development itself. It was one of the main justificatory pretenses of imperialism at least since the early European encounters with the New World and, in one form or another, continues to influence foreign policy and aid work today. Moreover, those undertaking these civilizing missions could always avail themselves of whatever legitimizing discourse was pertinent at the time, from the religious to the strategic to the preferred mode after the late nineteenth century, the social scientific. As such, the Kennedy administration was not unique in its desire to extend power over smaller countries with the pretense of helping them, and it was not unique in using social scientific justifications to do so, and the mixture of sincerity and calculation administration figures approached their actions with was well within the normal range for leaders of world powers.

What was unique was the convergence of issues surrounding decolonization and the Cold War at the end of the fifties, and the way foreign policy elites and social scientists (and some key figures were both of these simultaneously) developed a self-consciously new way of seeing, talking about, and coping with these issues. Decolonization and its Cold War context encouraged them to develop a discourse that promised rational control over a difficult, multifaceted, and frightening situation. This discourse came to be known as “modernization theory.” Modernization emerged from the American Cold War academy, and as such was meant to be a practical, applicable body of knowledge and techniques from its inception. It defined the field of operations – governing theories and metaphors, ways of seeing problems and of refining these

insights, and a range of potential solutions – of development and foreign policy for American policymakers for most of the sixties. Counterinsurgency developed into what it is today – a self-conscious political project – in large part due to its theorization and implementation by modernization theorists and those influenced by them.

Much of the framework used in this chapter for describing modernization – particularly the concept of “governing rationality” – comes from the later works of Michel Foucault, and that of a number of his interlocutors. Foucault’s notions of governmentality are complex, multivalent (to the point where he occasionally indulged in puns: consider the range of meanings possible in the phrase “governing discourse”), and unfinished. The portions of them most germane to the work at hand are those connected to the formation of bodies of knowledge, techniques, and operations (rhetorical and conceptual) that make up the shared operating assumptions of a given governing regime, or, to use Foucault’s phrase, an “art of government.”<sup>84</sup> That Foucault developed much of his theory of governmentality through examining changes in liberalism is no coincidence. Liberalism can be read as an ideology that has constructed itself through assiduous attention to the arts of governing, in all of its many forms across different circumstances. At many moments of its history, liberalism takes its cues more from the possibilities of governance than from an overarching set of principles or a given direction in which history is meant to go. The techniques of modernization substantially defined Cold War liberalism, particularly in its existence as a governing ideology (as opposed to a set of aspirations).

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<sup>84</sup> Gordon, Colin “Governmental Rationality: An Introduction” in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds., The Foucault Effect (Chicago; University of Chicago Press 1991) Pages 1-53

Modernization is a variation of structural functionalism, the sociological paradigm that held the commanding heights of the American social sciences academy throughout the mid-twentieth century. Structural functionalism joined a number of other discourses – game theory, Keynesian economics, consensus school historiography -- in an effort to patch the holes that the twentieth century had punched into liberalism. An arc of turmoil beginning (at the latest) with the outbreak of the First World War and extending through depression, political turmoil, still more and bloodier war, and the struggles of decolonization, forced continuous adaptation on to those liberal institutions and states that did not crumble under the strain. All of the social sciences were enlisted in this effort to engineer and explain a functioning liberal democratic system for the twentieth century. Structural functionalism was one of the most ambitious efforts in this vein, one that in turn generated multiple concepts that would become important parts of the logic of liberal governance.<sup>85</sup>

Structural functionalism purported to explain social action as the establishment of equilibria between individuals and social structures, and between the varying social structures of society. This equilibrium is established and maintained by the performance of the functions that social structures – ranging in form from belief systems to rituals to organized institutions – came into existence or else evolved to provide, and the individual's adjustment and active participation in these structures. The same functions – ranging from the meeting of psychological needs to various kinds of political leadership – are the same across societies, even when the structures that arise to perform them differ. Mapping these structures and their functions was the central charge of sociology,

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<sup>85</sup> Nils Gilman Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America (Baltimore; Johns Hopkins University Press 2003) Pages 12-20

according to the structural functionalists. Though not lacking in ideology themselves, the structural functionalists identified themselves more with their conception of positivist social scientific method and thereby as free of norms and value judgments.

Unlike many previous (and subsequent) generations of positivist social scientists, the structural functionalists chose not to take the seemingly more enumerable areas of economics or electoral politics as the material for their main analytical thrust. They focused instead on value systems. Leading the way in this was Talcott Parsons, arguably the central foundational figure of structural functionalism and the author of *Toward a Theory of Social Action*, a work which set much of the agenda for the school. His research and that of his followers purported to reveal consistent “pattern variables,” pairs of opposed values that a given actor – an individual, an institution, or a society – could oscillate between. Examples of these dyads include traditional/modern, self-oriented/other-oriented, particularist/universalist; these and many more made up a range of binary switches, not unlike those in the early digital computers which began spreading around the time Parsons was writing. The state of a given actor was, in many respects, governed by the position of these switches. The main research question for structural functionalists and those whose work was influenced by them was to evaluate the pattern variables prevailing in a given setting, largely through conducting surveys and interviews.<sup>86</sup>

The foundational theoretical literature of structural functionalism avoided the sort of concrete claims that other sociological paradigms, such as those drawing from Marxism, make about political power and historical change. Indeed, in some cases this

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<sup>86</sup> Talcott Parsons *The Structure of Social Action* (Glencoe, IL, The Free Press 1937)

tendency went so far as disincline major figures from claiming originality for their work. Talcott Parsons, the sociologist most strongly associated with the rise to prominence of structural functionalism in the American academy, argued that the material *The Structure of Social Action* was not original to him, but was a mere synthesis of what earlier liberal social scientists, especially Emile Durkheim, Vilfredo Pareto, and Max Weber, were already converging upon.<sup>87</sup> More than a specific school (which would mean a particular agenda), structural functionalism was, in Parsons's telling, a stage in the development of the social sciences. It was a paradigm that showed modern society as it was, in the full light of modern development and free (in the imagination of its practitioners, if nowhere else) of ideological dogma.

Ironically, this posture of apolitical, value-free expertise on the part of structural functionalists helped make their work highly appealing to politicians and bureaucrats. The structural functionalist schema – particularly the sort of legible social coding the concept of pattern values allowed – loaned themselves readily to use as a governing rationality. Parsons himself studiously avoided recommending policy uses for his methodology, but rendering a given social order into a set of binary switches presents both a way of creating and organizing social knowledge, and a means of imposing power – simply toggle the switches.

Modernization theory was an extension of the structural functionalist paradigm into international relations, born at a tense moment in the history of liberalism. Decolonization, in particular the more radical phase that began after many colonies won formal independence, presented a demanding challenge to liberalism. The newly

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<sup>87</sup> Gilman Mandarins of the Future Page 74

decolonized had undertaken many of the solutions prescribed by liberalism – formal national independence, the formation of institutions such as parliaments and markets, induction into international bodies. The failure of these measures in the developing world, and the efforts on the part of the people of the developing to seek new forms of politics beyond the confines of Cold War liberalism represented a challenge to American policymakers, both strategically and ideologically. Structural functionalism possessed a number of useful discursive facets for liberals facing these challenges. The discourse's emphasis on stability reassured liberal readers that whatever the failures of liberal methods in the decolonizing world, radical solutions would only make things worse. At risk of courting terminological confusion, structural functionalism has a great deal of "functionality" in the technological sense- even the model of societies as being manageable through the expedient of switching variables would remind the mid-twentieth century reader of the control mechanisms in advanced machines such as airplanes, or even the conveniences in his own home or car. It is a usable theory.

Structural functionalism's equation of stability with working institutions gave policymakers a potential field for intervention. The ways structural functionalism devised to comprehend and describe social structures provided legible, tangible facts, which could become foci for debate and action. Works such as Daniel Lerner's *The Passing of Traditional Society* (1958), which focused on the Middle East, and Lucian Pye's work on Southeast Asia (*Guerrilla Marxism in Malaya*, 1952, and *Personality, Politics, and Nation Building in Burma*, 1962) are monuments of structural functionalist fieldwork, whatever else they are, the products of years of intensive and extensive social science shovel work. These works framed decolonization as a problem of development, and



development as a problem of institutions and individual aptitude. The analysis was useful to Americans attempting to grapple with the developing world, but the sheer weight of effort, unearthed facts, and tonal seriousness behind them proved at least as vital as their actual content to the adoption of modernization theory by American officialdom. This body of work within the larger enterprise of structural functionalism came to be called modernization theory.

Modernization was, in many respects, the most ambitious of the offshoots of mid-twentieth century liberal social science, a determined effort to identify ways to change the pattern variables of whole societies, to recode social values to the ends of American foreign policy and, in the modernizer's understanding, to improve the world. Perhaps because of these ambitions, or perhaps because forerunners like Parsons had already done the humble work of synthesizing the work of the elders, modernization entered institutional life stamped thoroughly with the image of a founder: Walt Whitman Rostow, who published *The Stages of Economic Growth* in 1960, when he was holding a post in economic history at MIT, the same year he became an advisor to John Kennedy's presidential election campaign. Parsons attempted to efface the presence of his own fallible viewpoint in his theoretical work; Rostow swore a Carthaginian oath when he was a sixteen year old freshman at Yale that he would be the one to definitively disprove Karl Marx.<sup>88</sup> This contrast in attitude would continue forward into the respective careers of the linked discourses of structural functionalism and modernization.

Rostow sought to make good on his vow to debunk Marx by theorizing international economic development, and *The Stages of Economic Growth* was his definitive

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<sup>88</sup> David Milne *America's Rasputin: Walt Rostow and the Vietnam War* (New York; Hill and Wang 2003)  
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statement. In it, Rostow describes a scheme for understanding all of human history through economic development. Every society (in Rostow's conception, the societies in question are all nation-states and correspond to the national boundaries of the late 1950s) is in one of five stages of economic growth. The first stage is "traditional society," which is where every society starts and in which stage many societies, according to Rostow, remain. Those societies that move out of that phase go through the rest of the stages in a manner similar to a rocket launching into orbit: there is the preparation for "take-off" into industrialization, there is the take-off itself, there is the "drive to maturity" as defined by high mass consumption, and then, if the conditions are right and the society makes the right decisions, the country will enter orbit around its now mature industrial economy, which he termed "the age of mass consumption." This is where all societies were headed, though at markedly different paces. The rightful concern of all societies was to advance through the steps as quickly and smoothly as possible.<sup>89</sup>

In keeping both with the mores of structural functionalism and his own polemical intentions towards Marx and Marxism, Rostow roots his theory of economic development in culture. Much of Rostow's critique of Marx consists of depictions of Marx's economic determinism and supposed determined ignorance of the cultural. Moreover, Marx's supposed disregard for culture and personal character, in Rostow's view, was a sign of the fanaticism that inhered both in Marx and Marxism, a precursor of totalitarianism creeping up (as these precursors so often did for believers in totalitarianism) in the attitudes taken up in the ideology's early polemical works.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Walt Rostow The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press 1961) 4-16.

<sup>90</sup> Rostow, Stages of Economic Growth 145-152

Rostow would make no such mistake; culture, especially as it pertained to personal attitudes of pragmatism, took on a great deal of analytic weight in *The Stages of Economic Growth*. Societies, according to Rostow, enter the phase of preparation for takeoff by developing or adopting improved production technology, agricultural technique, and most importantly capital management systems that allow for a sufficient amount of capital to be accumulated and invested into further growth and development. Uneven development of these attributes comes down to cultural difference. Rostow maintained that the personalities of elites are key to economic development. Those societies where the elites value entrepreneurship and progress and who “regard modernization as a possible task” will be the ones to develop; the rest will stagnate.<sup>91</sup> Rostow himself doesn’t use the structural functionalist phrase “pattern variables” but they’re clearly there. The societies that proceed with modernization choose innovation over tradition, self-directedness over other-directedness, achievement over ascription, freedom over authority: and their success is a consequence of these choices.

Rostow had a clear idea of how to find the personality types that drive progress. Military men, merchants, managers and social reformers, in Rostow's view, all share a practical basis to their decision-making and an interest in the benefits of progress. It is on the sort of practical, everyday considerations that people like those have to make that progress towards maturity is built on, and it is ideological conceptions that stand in their way. From persecution of Protestants (Protestants here acting as a sort of shorthand for the early modern version of everything modernization requires) to oversensitive protection of national prerogative on the part of new states, ideology – seemingly any

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid Page 17

ideology other than liberalism -- stands as the main impediment to modernization. Without it, only physical limitations, which barely feature in *The Stages of Economic Growth*, could slow the accession of all societies to full modernity. In particular, Rostow describes Communism as the most pressing threat to modernization, a “disease of the transition” away from traditional society:

It is in such a setting of political and social confusion, before the take-off is achieved and consolidated politically and socially as well as economically, that the seizure of power by Communist conspiracy is easiest; and it is in such a setting that a centralized dictatorship is easiest; and it is in such a setting that a centralized dictatorship may supply an essential technical precondition for take-off and a sustained drive to maturity: an effective modern state organization.<sup>92</sup>

Rostow also informs his contemporaries that history will judge them on how well they fight this disease by “creating partnerships” with non-Communist elites in developing countries.<sup>93</sup> This was structural functionalism turned into a fighting faith.

Rostow held that modernity and tradition are on two different ends of a scale, and that modernity is a good that all societies should seek. This posed a problem: Communism could not be considered good, nor could it be considered traditional. Rostow resolved this problem by referring to Communists as “scavengers of modernity” or a “disease of the transition” to economic maturity. Communism was an interloper, a stain on the process of history, a virulent infection but one which, like cholera, could be reined in by sanitary measures, if one could “organize effectively those elements within [a developing society] which are prepared to get on with the job of modernization.”<sup>94</sup> Rostow understood development as getting people with the right values into the right places to make the right decisions. This presented an opportunity for people cognizant of the truths of

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<sup>92</sup> Rostow *Stages of Economic Growth* Page 163

<sup>93</sup> Ibid 164

<sup>94</sup> Rostow *The Stages of Economic Growth* Pages 162-164

modernization and with a certain degree of power- they could toggle the switches that led to take-off by encouraging or following those right people, institutionalizing their values, and vigilantly avoiding deviations from the path.

This was how Rostow understood America's role in the modernization process in the developing world, and this idea had a deep and lasting effect on the emerging American counterinsurgency discourse. In a talk at Fort Bragg, to an audience that consisted largely of military officers from US allies in the developing world, Rostow laid out the connections, as he saw it, between his take on modernization theory and America's negotiation with decolonization. "We seek," Rostow said, "two results; first, that truly independent nations shall emerge on the world scene; and, second, that each nation will be permitted to fashion, out of its own culture and its own ambitions, the kind of modern society it wants."<sup>95</sup> Fighting guerrillas, according to a speech Rostow gave at Fort Bragg in 1961, was not counter-revolutionary, a way to impede decolonization, but rather necessary to supporting the real revolution: the process whereby developing countries "are changing their ways in order to create and maintain a national personality on the world scene and to bring their people the benefits modern technology can offer."<sup>96</sup> Rostow made clear that military officers like the ones assembled, along with "doctors, teachers, economic planners, agricultural experts, [and] civil servants" were the people with the necessary skills and mindsets to make modernization happen.<sup>97</sup> Counterinsurgency wouldn't simply protect modernizing regimes; it would forcibly promote the values (and the people holding those values) that led to economic take-off.

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<sup>95</sup> Rostow, Walt *Countering Guerrilla Attack* in Franklin Mark Osanka, ed. Modern Guerrilla Warfare (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1961) Page 466

<sup>96</sup> Rostow, "Countering Guerrilla Attack" Page 465.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid 466-471.

Rostow's work acted as a keystone for many of the assumptions of the governing rationality of modernization theory. It rendered the challenges of decolonization and development legible by mapping their supposed trajectory. Like any good (or, at any rate, usable) map, it also provided a key; visible signs of stasis, change, danger, and opportunity that could guide policy decision-making. Along with legibility, modernization theory provided better ideological and even ethical justifications for American actions than anticommunism on its own could. Rather than attempt to stem the changes wrought by decolonization struggle, modernization would show Americans how to channel the energy generated by these struggles to ends at once idealistic, practical, suited to America's Cold War aims, and the direction in which history was going. Modernization theory was all of the lessons a certain kind of Cold War-era liberal had learned from the previous fifty years, turned into a theory of history and guide to international affairs.

Auxiliary characteristics of *The Stages of Economic Growth* were almost as important to its adoption by the foreign policy as its content. It was an overarching theory of history that could be grasped by reading one book under two hundred pages in length. It was patriotic without engaging in *déclassé* jingoism. Rostow called, in the spirit of John Kennedy's inaugural address, for renewed vigor and youthful optimism while also taking great pains to maintain an air of realism. Modernization was an ideal teleology for American liberalism as it existed in 1961, and suited the Kennedy administration's image of itself – youthful, daring, innovative, tough-minded but idealistic – perfectly.

As an intellectual who would go on to take a major role in shaping foreign policy during the Cold War, Walt Rostow is second only to Henry Kissinger in influence. Other

modernization thinkers, such as Lucian Pye and Douglas Pike, were also directly involved in Vietnam policy and the formation of counterinsurgency doctrine. Ironically, the policy with which Rostow himself is most strongly associated, massive punitive bombing of North Vietnam, is the sort of war often understood as the direct opposite of counterinsurgency. Despite this, Rostow was definitional to the counterinsurgency project, both in terms of helping to provide the intellectual framework for the counterinsurgent idea of politics and governance, and in terms of directly shaping and implementing counterinsurgency policy in Vietnam during the Kennedy administration. Counterinsurgency's operating assumptions and its implementation during the Kennedy administration – and to a lesser extent, thereafter – were both indelibly stamped by modernization theory. This imprinting of theory on to a military doctrine was aided by the American military establishment's lack of interest in developing new strategies to deal with guerrilla conflicts in the developing world.

### **Flexible Response and Army Resistance to Counterinsurgency**

John Kennedy came into office with a certain interest in counterinsurgency. Some of his first meetings with the National Security Council were dedicated to the topic, and he discussed guerrilla warfare as a threat in speeches as early as 1958.<sup>98</sup> It is only possible to speculate as to the source of this interest. Kennedy had a long-standing relationship with the ruling regime in South Vietnam, dating back to his support for Ngo Dinh Diem's accession to power in the 1950s, and this regime was facing a strong insurgent threat.

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<sup>98</sup> Michael McClintock Instruments of Statecraft: U.S. Guerrilla Warfare, Counter-insurgency, and Counter-terrorism, 1940-1990 (New York; Pantheon Books 1992) 161-163

During his brief administration, Kennedy displayed a certain boyish enthusiasm for the muscularity, gadgetry, and individualistic derring-do of the Special Forces, and these were all traits with which counterinsurgents often liked to link their doctrine, then and now.<sup>99</sup> In a more serious vein, counterinsurgency was part of a larger strategy of actively thwarting communist gains in the developing world. Kennedy and his advisors called for “flexible response” capability, matching the communists at flashpoints with commensurate levels of force, from guerrillas to nuclear weapons. This was opposed, in Kennedy administration discourse, to Dwight Eisenhower’s “massive retaliation” strategy, where any crossing of certain lines by the Soviets would lead to nuclear retaliation – a strategic concept that seemed to point the way to Armageddon. The strategic and the aesthetic considerations involved met at certain points. Flexible response and counterinsurgency appealed to Kennedy personally, particularly the elements that stressed the impact that individuals could make in smaller, less conventional conflicts. It’s not for nothing that the Peace Corps, along with counterinsurgency, was a Kennedy administration project. The similarities (and elided differences) between the two point to significant elements underlying Kennedy’s vision: small groups of idealistic but rugged young people, aiding the developing world economically and militarily, showing that Americans could get dirty in the villages and jungles as well as any communist.

When Kennedy asked what was being done about guerrilla warfare, the answers he got, especially from the military, did not satisfy him. American military forces had fought opponents that could be called insurgents – irregular forces using guerrilla tactics – long before the term “counterinsurgency” came into being. The Army had fought lengthy campaigns to suppress Native American and Filipino resistance to American rule. The

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<sup>99</sup> David Halberstam The Best and the Brightest (New York; Ballantine Books 1969) 124



Marine Corps had essentially governed several Latin American states in the early twentieth century and in the process developed a body of knowledge about the relationship between imposed governance and the suppression of insurgency that was encapsulated in the 1940 *Small Wars Manual*. American officers – including future counterinsurgents such as Roger Hilsman – had both led guerrilla forces against Axis occupiers in Europe and Asia, and fought Axis-aligned guerrillas in those same places. As far as the American military of the early 1960s was concerned, it knew how to handle such fights.

While encapsulating the logic that would come to make up “flexible response” doctrine in his 1960 book *The Uncertain Trumpet*, Kennedy advisor General Maxwell Taylor sounded most of the key themes that the Kennedy administration would apply to Cold War military policy. They included the need for a “limited war” capacity, the concomitant diversion of resources away from the Air Force and towards the Army (Taylor's own branch), the fatal moral risk of “massive retaliation,” and vague hints that Eisenhower and Nixon's strategy was that of old men afraid to fight. Indeed, all of the concepts associated with Kennedy's defense policy were present in the book except one: counterinsurgency. The word itself did not appear, and while Taylor made reference to the need to bolster American capabilities to fight limited ground wars, he never explicitly discussed fighting guerrillas. Vietnam only made it in to *The Uncertain Trumpet* as part of a laundry list of international trouble spots, and he offered no specific measures to resolve the situation there. Flexible response, as Taylor described it, seemed like a better way to fight the Korean War than a way to engage with the newly decolonized world.<sup>100</sup>

Counterinsurgency may have needed flexible response to enter the official

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100 Maxwell Taylor *The Uncertain Trumpet* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1960)

agenda, but flexible response, as far as the Army was concerned, did not need counterinsurgency. Flexible response promised an increased role for the Army in the Cold War struggle, and with it increased funds; counterinsurgency promised increased supervision from civilian leaders while performing a job well outside of the core competency of the Cold War-era Army, dedicated as it was to large-scale conventional battle. In an account of the Army's war in Vietnam that placed great weight on the generals' failure to adopt counterinsurgency, historian Andrew Krepinevich relates several anecdotes illustrating the Army's stonewalling techniques. When Kennedy queried Maxwell Taylor as to the development of special training for counterinsurgency, Taylor assured Kennedy that “we good soldiers are trained for all kinds of things. We don't have to worry about special situations.”<sup>101</sup> Krepinevich depicts Kennedy as able to decree that counterinsurgency would be a priority, but as unable to make the military regard the problem of fighting guerrillas as one with a social or political dimension. Army leadership believed it needed more and better equipment and a command structure under Army control to defeat the insurgency in Vietnam, not civic action or nation-building.

The content of *Tactics and Techniques of the Counter-Insurgent*, a manual issued in 1961 by the MAAG (Military Assistance Advisory Group) in South Vietnam, then commanded by General Lionel McGarr, reinforces Krepinevich's picture. In it, the subsection on “Psywar and Civic Action” consisted of a mere four pages, while a subsection on “the Employment of Dogs” covered seven pages. The bulk of the manual consisted of protocols for patrolling, tables of organization and equipment, and other conventional military content. Its section on civic action consisted almost entirely of platitudes: soldiers should behave respectfully towards civilians, regional commanders

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101 Andrew Krepinevich *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1986) Page 30

who establish good civil-military relations will make the Army's job easier, etc.<sup>102</sup>

The following section, on operations in “controlled areas,” contained a classification system for Vietnamese hamlets that the military would use sporadically throughout the conflict: “Red” hamlets that were enemy territory, “Pink” hamlets that were in the process of being cleansed of Viet Minh elements, and “White” hamlets that were won over. McGarr's manual includes some specific instructions as to how each type of hamlet is to be treated, and these instructions are the most telling available as to the Army's official idea of its social role in Vietnam. In Red hamlets, random peasants were to be (politely, the manual instructs) kidnapped by soldiers and made to guide patrols through the countryside, on the understanding that if insurgents attacked the patrol, the peasant would be shot on sight. The manual writer's use of the passive voice leaves it unclear as to whether the peasant would be murdered by insurgents or by counterinsurgents. The headman of the hamlet would also be responsible for enumerating the inhabitants of his demesne and producing them in public in the event of Viet Minh attack, so that the occupiers could count the villagers: any missing were assumed to be insurgents or sympathizers. As hamlets came to be “Pink” or “White,” restrictions on movement would be removed, the manual writer stresses, to “avoid replacing one form of tyranny with another equally as undesirable.”<sup>103</sup>

Even in the sections dedicated to the control of villages, McGarr's manual pays little attention to the specifics of controlling villagers. The authorial voice strongly implies that the occupiers have guns and Vietnamese villagers listen to armed authority, and that that is all that is necessary (or seemingly) to say about the matter. The manual

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102 McGarr, Lionel *Tactics and Techniques of the Counter-Insurgent* Vietnam Country File, Box 204, MAAG File, JFKL April 1961, Pages 87-90.

103 McGarr, *Tactics and Techniques* Pages 90-95.

places emphasis on patrol patterns and lines of command between diverse service arms (infantry, rangers, etc.), even when discussing social control of groups of foreign people. McGarr was not proposing doctrinal complacency: his manual places much greater emphasis on mobile groups of lightly-armed troops and cooperation with allied forces (in this case, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam) than was normal in American military doctrine at the time. Army officers such as McGarr and Taylor realized that their service would need to behave differently in order to bring the National Liberation Front (NLF) to ground, but not so far out of their core competency as to require a radical revision of priorities.<sup>104</sup>

*Tactics and Techniques of the Counter-Insurgent* appeared in April 1961. A few weeks previous, McGarr sent a memo to Nguyen Dinh Thanh, one of Ngo Dinh Diem's secretaries, arguing that while the Vietnam Country Team's counterinsurgency plan was sound, all counterinsurgency activities needed to be placed under the command of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. No such activities should be under civilian control, "as this would give the military responsibility without commensurate authority."<sup>105</sup> McGarr's approach was not entirely out of sync with the plan established by the Vietnam Country Team working out of the Saigon embassy, which argued that the counterinsurgency effort needed a single coordinating body, rather than the numerous agencies then working in South Vietnam.<sup>106</sup> The State Department officials who drafted the plan probably did not consider the Army to be the right body to take up this coordinating task, but given that the counterinsurgency effort was part of the war, whatever else it was, and given the conventional division of labor in the American foreign policy and defense establishments,

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104 Lionel McGarr, *Tactics and Techniques*.

105 *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1961-1963, Vol 1, Vietnam 1961, Document 18

106 *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1961-1963, Vol 1, Vietnam 1961, Document 1

McGarr had a point. The Army's lack of interest in forms of counterinsurgency which forefront political and social action forced the counterinsurgency thinkers to search for other channels through which to put their vision into effect.

### **Developmentalist Counterinsurgency**

Part of the imprint that the Kennedy administration that lingers in counterinsurgency to this day is the heavy involvement of civilian policymakers and strategists in forming and implementing counterinsurgency doctrine. Social scientists, diplomats, and bureaucrats of one stripe or another played (and play) key roles in transmitting political ideas and generating action and commitment to changes in counterinsurgency strategy, especially when the military is hesitant about the strategy (to say nothing about the political ideas of the civilians pushing it). One of the earliest and most important civilians to play that role was Walt Rostow. Rostow became an adviser to John Kennedy during the 1960 election campaign and was appointed Deputy National Security Adviser when Kennedy took office before moving to the Policy Planning Council at the State Department. While at the former post, Rostow began his brief but active partnership with Robert Komer. A former CIA agent and staffer to National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, Komer began his counterinsurgency career by advocating for "civic action" and police training for friendly Third World regimes and later came to play a lead role in the CORDS project, Lyndon Johnson's belated attempt to apply counterinsurgency principles in Vietnam. Rostow and Komer generated much of the early bureaucratic energy to meet Kennedy's demand for new strategy to meet the challenges coming from the developing world. While their ideas on strategy in Vietnam would later drastically diverge, they

began with similar premises: that modernization was a key to fighting insurgency, and that counterinsurgency could prove salutary to socioeconomic modernization in developing countries.

That the military and the Defense Department were not taking counterinsurgency seriously, especially in its social and political dimensions, was a point of agreement between Rostow, Komer, and other civilian counterinsurgents from the beginning. Many of Rostow's recommendations to Kennedy as to how to proceed in creating a counterinsurgency capacity were based on the flaws he saw while inspecting the Special Warfare School at Fort Bragg, then the Army's leading institution for unconventional warfare development. In a March 1961 report to Kennedy, Rostow found a variety of glaring flaws in the Special Warfare School's anti-guerrilla training, which ranged from technical inadequacies (such as a lack of helicopter training) to bureaucratic problems (such as a lack of coordination with the CIA), with a focus on the Special Warfare School's lack of training in "the political and psychological aspects of special warfare."<sup>107</sup> In an internal memo, Robert Komer agreed with Rostow's critique, and made explicit the connection between the problems at Bragg and the Army's failure to consider counterinsurgency part of its core mission: the Army, he noted, "seems to be using the current great interest in counter-guerrilla operations as an excuse to beef up its own special forces primarily for US general war guerrilla missions. This of course is hardly the purpose of the exercise."<sup>108</sup>

This would leave the definition of counterinsurgency as a governmental project largely in the hands of civilians, concentrated in the State Department, the office of the National

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107 Walt Rostow to John Kennedy, March 27<sup>th</sup> 1961, NSF, Box 325 File 6

108 Robert Komer to Walt Rostow, May 23<sup>rd</sup> 1961, NSF, Box 326 File 05/31/1961

Security Advisor, and the Central Intelligence Agency. As insurgency conflicts took up more of the Kennedy administration's attentions as time went on, these figures and their ideas became increasingly important. At the heart of their strategic concept of how to cope with the strains of decolonization was a daring hope: that the strains themselves were a source of energy that could propel security and development in the newly decolonized world forward simultaneously. Properly managed, the counterinsurgents held, political agitation on the part of the people of the developing world could produce outcomes conducive to American Cold War policy. Modernization theory, as applied to security policy, would be the way to make that dream a reality. American policymakers could use the tools of statecraft – newly conceived in the light of structural functionalist theory – to channel the energies of decolonization into a liberal, pro-American direction.

What this management would look like is clearer in their more abstract visions than in the messy realities on the ground in Southeast Asia. One such plan that foreshadowed some aspects of the Kennedy administration's approach to counterinsurgency was sent to Rostow by Kenneth Young, an employee of the oil company Standard-Vacuum (later to become Mobil) who toured Southeast Asia in 1959. Citing experiments in rural community planning that he saw in Thailand and Laos, as well as South Vietnam's Agrovillage program (an early South Vietnamese experiment in rural resettlement discussed later in this chapter), Young proposed a sweeping program of "agrimetros" to extend across the national boundaries of Southeast Asia. Enticed by the proposition of enhanced security against Communist guerrillas and a better way of life, peasants would move to new model villages which would include all the necessary seeds for economic development: schools, clinics, modern sanitation, marketplaces, etc. The

peasants would then be organized into militias that would both defend the new “compound clusters” against Communist attack and act as promoters for the modern way of life found in the agrimetros. Young argued for the construction of a belt of these communities along the Mekong River, beginning in northern Thailand and running through Laos and Cambodia on its way to South Vietnam. Involving as it did massive investments and unlikely cooperation between fractious regimes, Young’s plan never gained traction, but Rostow thanked Young warmly for his input.<sup>109</sup>

Officials at the State Department were also mulling the efficacy of relocation programs for defeating insurgencies. Ed Rice, of the Department’s Far East bureau, issued a report that Robert Komer flagged for Rostow’s attention. Rice discussed the problems that governments of developing countries faced in dealing with guerrilla insurgencies. Rice emphasized gaining popular support for the beleaguered governments and argued that the best way to gain this support was through economic improvements, literacy programs, and other developmentalist means. Rice also made reference to Mao’s metaphor of the people being the water in which the fish – the guerrilla – swims. Rural resettlement programs would not only provide development, but also “separate tanks” for the “fish” (aka the people) and the guerrillas. Rice did not enthusiastically adopt this proposal, arguing that if done improperly it could backfire and lead to increased discontent, but he did leave it in the toolkit of social solutions to insurgency. Rice’s report was adapted three months into the Policy Planning Council’s memorandum *Counter Guerrilla Operations*, thus making his take on insurgency official wisdom of the State Department.<sup>110</sup>

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109 Kenneth Young to Walt Rostow, 02/17/1961 (NSF, Box 326, File 6, JFKL)

110 Ed Rice to Policy Planning Council, 03/20/1961 (NSF, Box 326, File 6, JFKL); *Counter Guerrilla*



Rostow's definitive statement on counterinsurgency came towards the end of his interest in the concept, and contains within it the seeds of his turn away from counterinsurgency and towards advocacy for massive bombing of North Vietnam, the strategy with which he is most widely associated. Rostow and Komer were members of a committee dedicated to the study of guerrilla warfare. The head of this committee was Richard Bissell, the Deputy Director for Plans at the CIA and a man later to become famous as the director of the botched Bay of Pigs invasion. The exact origins or remit of this committee are vague: Rostow and Komer's records refer to "the Bissell Committee" in passing, and in his memoirs Bissell off-handedly refers to being asked by President Kennedy to "head a task force on . . . the deterrence of guerrilla warfare," but quickly moves on from the topic.<sup>111</sup> To judge from the content of the few reports the committee issued and its known participants, it appears that the committee largely consisted of CIA agents and CIA-connected officials within the State Department and the office of the National Security Advisor, with little or no military participation. The final report of this committee was drafted by Rostow's staff and edited by Rostow personally.

The Bissell Committee Report states the case for modernization-based counterinsurgency succinctly: the newly decolonized world is undergoing a "revolutionary" process of economic and social change. Communists have presented themselves as the representatives of this change, and it is America's task to prove the Communists wrong and to get on the right side of the rising developing world (and to get the developing world on the right side of the Cold War). To do this, the United States must "locate, encourage and nurture those elements of national leadership – political,

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*Operations* 06/13/1961 (NSF, Box 325, File 06/01/1961, JFKL)

111 Richard Bissell Reflections of a Cold Warrior: From Yalta to the Bay of Pigs (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) 149

military and social – which show ability to guide and administer the unsettled community and thus to create a measure of stability and forward momentum.”<sup>112</sup> By supporting the right people in developing countries – that is, the bearers of modernization, most especially military leaders of a progressive slant – Americans could see to it that security from internal subversion and economic and social development blossom simultaneously. The dangers of decolonization can become opportunities, correctly harnessed.

The report also contains a section on foreign support for insurgency campaigns. Here, Rostow lays out a case for the United States taking “offensive counter-measures” against regimes believed to be in support of insurgencies. Echoing an exchange of memoranda he had with Bissell a few months earlier, Rostow argues that the United States was well within its rights to engage in reprisal actions when presented with clear evidence of cross-border support for guerrilla insurgencies.<sup>113</sup> Rostow’s emphasis on this point in one of his statements on counterinsurgency might have pointed him away from counterinsurgency, ironically enough, as he worked out its logic. Rostow’s biographer David Milne argues that Rostow lost all interest in counterinsurgency by early 1962, and that this occurred because of Rostow’s unswerving fealty to his own counterinsurgency logic. If the insurgents in South Vietnam were being supported by the Communists in North Vietnam, then no amount of counterinsurgency would stop the war. Only stopping the flow of supplies and soldiers from North Vietnam would allow Rostow’s developmentalist counterinsurgency model to do its work. Once Rostow made this realization, Milne argues, he transformed from one of the major proponents of counterinsurgency into the most persistent evangelist for strategic bombing of North

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112 NSF, Box 326, File 12/01/1961, JFKL

113 Ibid; Richard Bissell to Walt Rostow, *Basic Doctrine re the Support of Violence Across Borders* 07/06/1961 (NSF, Box 326, File 07/15/1961 JFKL)

Vietnam within the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Milne's argument is backed by the fact that Rostow ceased producing and collecting research and memoranda on counterinsurgency after February 1962.<sup>114</sup>

The Kennedy administration's interest in counterinsurgency did not fade away entirely with Rostow's. John Kennedy's interest, along with the push for further retooling of counterinsurgency coming from officials from the State Department, the National Security Advisor's office, and the CIA, led to the issuance of two National Security Action Memoranda touching directly on counterinsurgency by the White House in late 1961 and early 1962. NSAM 119, issued on December 18, 1961 and drafted initially by Robert Komer, called for the "development of methods for supporting whatever contribution military forces can make to economic and social development by underdeveloped countries." The memorandum went on to define "civic action" as the use of military forces on projects including "training, public works, agriculture, transportation, communication, health, sanitation . . ." Encouraging countries facing insurgencies to engage in these civic action tasks could prove vital to the success of friendly regimes. NSAM 124, issued on January 18, 1962, called for the creation of Special Group (Counterinsurgency), a high-level task force assigned to study the problems of counterinsurgency and to foster inter-departmental cooperation in coping with insurgencies and subversion. SGCI was to include representatives from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the State Department, the Defense Department, the Attorney General's office, the Agency for International Development, the CIA, and the President's military representative (Maxwell Taylor, at that time).

Neither presidential action produced much in the way of results. NSAM 119 led

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114 Milne America's Rasputin 87-89

to a scramble as assorted interested governmental bodies made reports of the progress they had already made in civic action programs, and in the cases of both the Peace Corps and the military, to argue vociferously that the terrain of civic action should be theirs alone.<sup>115</sup> Special Group (Counterinsurgency) met as ordered, but perhaps predictably given the make-up of the group, did not create an agreed-upon counterinsurgency strategy. General Lyman Lemnitzer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, insisted that the military had a perfectly workable counterinsurgency plan, along the lines delineated by Lionel McGarr in his MAAG manual. None of the other members of the task force had sufficient interest or political will to attempt to force the United States military to create a new doctrine. Interagency competition and bureaucratic inertia drowned out the call for new ideas, at least at the highest levels of government.

Rostow, Komer, Bissell, and other counterinsurgency thinkers failed to make their vision of counterinsurgency take hold with the military, the American institution most readily identified with winning wars. The military believed that the civilian thinkers' emphasis on civic action and nation-building were naïve and premature, especially in Vietnam, a country already facing an active insurgency. As General Earl Wheeler, Army Chief of Staff from 1962 to 1964 put it, "the essence of the problem in Vietnam is military."<sup>116</sup> The more socio-politically oriented school of counterinsurgency, the predecessor of the counterinsurgency school that exists to this day, had to articulate itself through means other than those provided by the Army of the early 1960s. Perhaps fittingly, in keeping with Rostow's insistence that counterinsurgency was a means to allow the United States to foster independent nation-states in the Third World, the space

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115 Sargent Shriver to John Kennedy, Memorandum re Military Civic Action, 01/08/1962 (NSF Box 412 File NSAM 119 JFKL)

116 Krepinevich The Army and Vietnam 37.

that allowed Kennedy-era counterinsurgency its fullest expression developed in the relationship between the State Department and South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem.

### **Operation Sunrise and the Strategic Hamlet Program**

Ngo Dinh Diem had his own ideas about counterinsurgency. These ideas hewed considerably closer to those developed within the civilian counterinsurgency circles than did those of the US military. Like the members of the Bissell Commission, Diem saw counterinsurgency as a problem of governance which the military could help solve, not as a military problem that could be solved with the help of civic power. When Roger Hilsman, director of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, came to Vietnam in early 1962, he initially found in Diem's attitude more grounds for hope that a developmentalist counterinsurgency program could be implemented than he would have left behind in Washington. Hilsman was a West Point graduate and a veteran of the Office of Strategic Services, and after leaving the State Department in 1964, he spent the rest of his career as a professor of government at Columbia. During the Second World War he led detachments of Burmese guerrillas in combat against the Japanese. He was favored by President Kennedy and on good terms with those generals with comparatively open minds regarding counterinsurgency. He took many of his own ideas with him to Vietnam, but the recommendations he would send back to Washington would reflect the changes these ideas underwent when they were exposed to those of Diem and his circle.

The Diem regime was already experimenting with mass rural resettlement/development programs. 1959 saw the beginning of the Rural Community

Development Program, better known as the Agrovillage project, under the control of Ngo Dinh Diem's brother Nhu. Nhu was considered by most Americans the wild card of the Ngo family, alternately seen as a self-serving conniver and a starry-eyed ideologue. Nhu's Agrovillage program was marred by problems that support both characterizations of his personality. The program was meant to create new rural communities that would provide both security and the seeds of economic growth to the Vietnamese peasantry. What it actually produced was a scattering of poorly-organized, half-constructed rural communes populated by peasants alienated by their forced relocation, broken promises of land reform, laggard economic development programs, and tyrannical rule by cadres of Diem's political party, the Can Lao. Scholars argue over the sources of the Agrovillage idea and its problems. Some claim that the program was a ploy to create a manageable peasantry beholden solely to the Ngos from the beginning; others argue that Diem and Nhu had long been interested in independent rural development programs and sincerely believed that by uplifting the peasants, both Vietnam's future and their rule over it would be secured.<sup>117</sup> Given the clear identification in Diem's mind between South Vietnam's political survival and his own, it appears likely that both political machinations and genuine nationalist and developmentalist ideas shaped his policies.

The travails of the Agrovillage project did not end the Ngos's interest in resettlement as a way to combat the insurgency, promote rural development, and secure their hold on the countryside. Their interest was piqued by the successful application of forced resettlement in another insurgency war nearby: the Malayan Emergency. The British and their Malay allies defeated a Communist guerrilla insurrection against the

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117 Philip Catton *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS; University Press of Kansas, 2002) Pages 51-72; Kolko, Gabriel *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York; The New Press, 1985) Pages 95-96

Commonwealth-aligned Malaysian state in a campaign that lasted from 1948 to 1960, and which culminated in the forced relocation of much of Malaysia's ethnic Chinese community – the community from which most of the rebels were drawn – into new “secure” villages. The Foreign Office established a British Advisory Mission (BRIAM), consisting largely of veterans of the Malay campaign, in South Vietnam in 1960. One of its leaders was Robert G.K. Thompson, a leading architect of the relocation strategy and a major early counterinsurgency theorist. Thompson grew close to the Ngo brothers and advised them on counterinsurgency strategy, marketing himself as the authentic face of counterinsurgency experience, in contrast to other westerners surrounding the Saigon regime. In his memoirs published well after his time in Vietnam, Thompson depicts the American presence in Vietnam as mostly consisting of well-meaning blunderers, whose perspective was too shallow to comprehend the sort of war they were fighting: “Americans . . . never understood that to win the war they had to build a country.”<sup>118</sup>

Thompson's prescriptions for defeating insurgency entailed a post-colonial nation-building project that looked tacitly but unashamedly to the colonial past. In his counterinsurgency manuals, Thompson studiously avoided specifying whether the counterinsurgent he was addressing was a colonial officer, an anticommunist nationalist, or, as was the case in Malaya, a post-colonial authority working with the old colonizers, implying that the role of all three was essentially the same. The counterinsurgent builds the nation he is protecting primarily through providing law and order. He provides order by sealing the population off from the guerrillas, and when this is done, can prove himself a provider of law, justice, and economic development to the underdeveloped

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<sup>118</sup> Robert G.K. Thompson Make For The Hills: Memories of Far Eastern Wars (London; Leo Cooper, 1989) 127

people under his charge. Thompson nods toward modernization theory in his strategic writings, but it is clear that his emphasis is on finding the right sort of people and giving them lee-way to engage in the post-colonial exercise of providing order, law, and authority, and less on the details of economic and social development.<sup>119</sup>

Roger Hilsman and Robert Thompson met soon after Hilsman arrived in Saigon in 1961. Neither Hilsman's memoirs nor his memoranda relate the character of their conversations, but ideas similar to Thompson's idea of rural strategic relocation as the key to winning the war in Vietnam emerge in Hilsman's work thereafter. Like Rostow, Hilsman was a scholar and was inspired as much by the vision of modernization theory as he was by his guerrilla experience. Both of these, in the context of the Army's failure to seriously consider the socio-political elements of counterinsurgency and Thompson's persuasive presence as the leader of one of the only successful counterinsurgency campaigns, would go into Hilsman's February 1962 report, *A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam*.

“The problem presented by the Viet Cong is a political and not a military problem – or, more accurately, it is a problem in civic action.” Thus begins the substantive part of Hilsman's *Strategic Concept*. Breaking with Rostow over the issue of North Vietnamese supplies for the NLF in South Vietnam, Hilsman insisted that the NLF relied almost solely on supplies, intelligence, and recruitment pools from the villages. The villages needed to be cut off from the NLF, and equally importantly, tied into “the network of government administration and control.”<sup>120</sup> As these provinces were cleared of NLF and

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119 Robert G.K. Thompson Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam (St. Petersburg, FL; Hailer Publishing, 1966)

120 Roger Hilsman, *A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam* 02/02/1962 (Hilsman records, Box 3 Folder 6 JFKL) 9



became showcases for the bounties of peaceful economic development that the Republic of Vietnam could provide, the method would spread to other provinces until the entirety of South Vietnam was free of Communists and capable of sustaining a well-organized civil society in the bargain.

The centerpiece of Hilsman's strategy was the strategic village (later renamed the Strategic Hamlet -- hamlets being small groups of villages, and the preferred unit for reorganization once the plan was put into place). The populations of the strategic villages would be drawn from peasants induced to leave their old, comparatively indefensible villages; Hilsman tersely acknowledged that there might be some resistance to relocation before moving on to a discussion of village fortifications. These peasants would move into the new, fortified strategic village compounds, which were situated in Army-designated "white" zones, that is, zones with no guerrilla activity. Further security within the villages would be provided by an internal security system provided by the South Vietnamese police, which would create a census of the new villagers, issue identification cards, and enforce strict curfews and other rules. The villagers themselves would be organized into self-defense units, responsible for repelling guerrilla attacks on the village. Civic action teams, largely composed of South Vietnamese but with American oversight, would fan out across the country, providing services and making the new hamlets both secure and economically attractive.

Part Old West stockade, part Peace Corps outpost, the strategic hamlet was to be both the weapon that would win the war against the NLF and the building block of the new Vietnam. Conceptually, the hamlets were an amalgam of American and Vietnamese visions of modernization. They were designed to be the conduit through which the

energies generated by decolonization would be channeled away from communist visions and towards an anti-communist reality. In keeping with the emphasis modernization theory laid on locating and promoting those with modern, practical viewpoints, the civic actions teams that would service and run these hamlets were to include doctors, teachers, engineers, and agricultural experts, as well as police officers to establish intelligence networks within the villages and army officers to train the self-defense force. The Ngos, for their part, laid particular emphasis on self-sufficiency, calling for the hamlets to be structured in such a way that the villagers would provide as much of the labor and organization as possible. How much of this was due to ideological influence – especially the odd and obscure Confucian-Catholic mishmash ideology known as “Personalism,” which Nhu in particular was thought to be taken with – and how much was a matter of expedience (“self-sufficient” villages costing the central government less) is a matter of debate. The strategic hamlets were to be a canvas for a wide variety of ideological visions of what the rural areas of the developing world could be painted.

Vision and strategy went hand in hand, in the planning offices if not in reality. The hamlets would perform a concrete purpose in the war against the NLF. With the strategic villages of one province providing both a base of operations and a proof to the peasantry of the surrounding countryside that the South Vietnamese government was serious about improving their lives, the influence of the government would spread and the sphere of Communist influence would shrink. The strategic village model would be adopted in the surrounding provinces, spreading like an “oil blot” (a favorite metaphor of counterinsurgents). This approach would allow greater scope for economic and social development, thus further solidifying the regime and allowing it to finally stamp out the

NLF.<sup>121</sup>

Hilsman's report impressed President Kennedy, and even received a friendly hearing from the officers at the newly reorganized Military Advisory Command, Vietnam (MACV).<sup>122</sup> For a few brief months in 1962, a strategic concept that mated an emphasis on small-unit anti-guerrilla warfare and a developmentalist, modernization-inflected socio-political approach to the problem of insurgency was official doctrine for the American effort in Vietnam. The small scale with which Hilsman proposed to begin this new way of conducting the war (he proposed a grand total of 1,250 American and British personnel to effect his plan) and the lack of another coherent strategy undoubtedly aided the rapid adoption of Hilsman's concept.<sup>123</sup> But even on a small scale, Hilsman's vision proved unfeasible because it was subject to the action of people outside his control: the Diem regime, the US military, and the NLF most prominent among them.

Operation Sunrise, undertaken less than two months after Hilsman made his report, was supposed to be the first step in implementing his strategic vision. It was a failure, both in terms of faithfully applying Hilsman's concept and in terms of aiding the larger counterinsurgency effort. Operation Sunrise was an attempt to create a belt of strategic hamlets in Binh Duong province, just north of Saigon. The plan appears to have originated with the Ngos: both Thompson and Hilsman opposed the plan and insisted it was a misapplication of their ideas. General Paul Harkins, one of the MACV commanders who approved of Hilsman's strategic concept, opposed the plan but claimed it was cleared with the approval of his predecessor, Lionel McGarr. The consensus of the

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121 Hilsman, *A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam*

122 Roger Hilsman To Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy (Garden City, NJ; Doubleday, 1967) Pages 438-439

123 Hilsman, *A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam* 25

counterinsurgency thinkers arrayed around MACV was that Operation Sunrise attempted to create too many strategic hamlets too quickly and with too few resources, in an area that was too unsafe to allow for any developmental work to go forward. Hilsman criticized the Ngos for choosing to begin their rural reconstruction program by forcibly relocating villagers. As Operation Sunrise began, he claimed to always be in favor of beginning the hamlet program by modifying villages that already existed, a position that appears nowhere in the *Strategic Concept*.<sup>124</sup>

Hilsman's criticisms were borne out by the results of Operation Sunrise. Starting on March 22, 1962 and continuing throughout the summer, South Vietnamese Army forces forced over three thousand villagers from their homes, creating ill will against the Diem regime. The new villages the peasants were forced into were incomplete and required forced labor from their new inhabitants to finish, and few of the promised amenities were ever provided. The South Vietnamese officials involved showed little interest in "civic action" programs, favoring ideological harangues directed towards the peasants, encouraging them to show nationalist fervor and create their own communities. American or other allied civic action teams were slow to reach Binh Duong, in large part due to Diem's insistence that every individual aid worker be approved by himself, personally.<sup>125</sup> Unable to keep NLF members out of the villages, the strategic hamlets became recruiting grounds for guerrillas. Within six months of the beginning of Operation Sunrise, it became clear that Binh Duong province was not to be the birthplace of a new Vietnam. MACV already regarded the project as a false start, and the Ngos lost

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124 03/31/1962 memorandum from Roger Hilsman to Maxwell Taylor (Roger Hilsman records, Box 3 File 8 JFKL)

125 06/18/1962 memorandum from Roger Hilsman to Averell Harriman (Roger Hilsman records, Box 3 File 8 JFKL)

interest, Ngo Dinh Nhu even going so far as to argue that the problem with the strategic hamlets was that they were *too* well-equipped, thereby sapping the peasants' self-sufficiency.<sup>126</sup> Operation Sunrise sputtered to a halt, leaving Binh Duong no safer from the NLF than it was before, and far from a starting point for a new Vietnam.

Hilsman remained involved in American decision-making in Vietnam until his resignation from the State Department in 1964 and continued to have a hand directing policy in areas concerning his vision of counterinsurgency. He opposed the widespread use of American air power as tactical support for ground operations against NLF forces, continued to call for increased emphasis on civic action programs, and gave tentative support to crop destruction in NLF-dominated areas.<sup>127</sup> But without a workable cluster of strategic hamlets to act as a conduit for American aid and influence – an “oil spot” that Americans could work to expand – Hilsman's efforts amounted to scattered attempts to nudge the American policy juggernaut onto a track marginally more in line with his ideas. The hamlets never lived up to either the strategic or the developmental potential that Hilsman and other counterinsurgency thinkers saw in them. Journalism reporting the forced relocation, appalling living conditions, and strategic irrelevance of the camps made its way back to the United States, forcing Hilsman to declare at a press conference, “it must be stressed that the strategic hamlets are not concentration camps.”<sup>128</sup> As Diem's regime began losing legitimacy, an increasing portion of Hilsman's attentions was spent both shoring up Diem's reputation and in trying to convince the regime to cease antagonizing its own people and the foreign press. After the Buddhist crisis of the

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126 Catton, *Diem's Final Failure* Pages 172-177

127 07/28/1962 memorandum from Roger Hilsman to Averell Harriman (Roger Hilsman records, Box 3 File 8 JFKL)

128 09/15/1962 State Department press release (Roger Hilsman records, Box 3 File 13 JFKL)

summer of 1963, official opinion in Washington began to turn against Diem. On November 2, 1963, both Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu were assassinated, with tacit American approval. Strategic hamlet construction continued, but was no longer considered part of a unitary, war-winning effort; ironically, this was considered a virtue by some American aid officials, who saw the top-down leadership structure of Operation Sunrise as its downfall, and held that the American role should be to support local initiatives by province chiefs.<sup>129</sup>

The hamlet program was a vehicle for liberal theorizing about the relationship between insurgency, development, and nation-building for some time after it lost its initial luster. By the time the Gulf of Tonkin incident would massively enlarge the American presence in Vietnam, the military and foreign policy establishments had decided to pursue more conventional military victory. As we will see in the next chapter, counterinsurgency strategists who would continue to pursue their doctrine after the Tonkin Resolution, such as Robert Komer, would do so in the context of a massive American conventional military effort, the results of which would dramatically shape counterinsurgency doctrine going forward.

The operational blunders involved in Operation Sunrise and in the strategic hamlets more generally (the Saigon regimes continued to build them throughout the war) were dramatic enough to divert attention away from the ways in which the theory behind the hamlets failed to address the basic issues behind the war. American policymakers' belief in the ability of the Saigon regime to find the right people to build and man the right infrastructure to make a democratic South Vietnam a reality echoed the misapprehension

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<sup>129</sup> Rufus Phillips Why Vietnam Matters (Annapolis; Naval Institute Press 2008) 133-139

that Ngo Dinh Diem was the right man to run Vietnam because of his supposedly modern, westernized outlook.<sup>130</sup> Both beliefs elided the basic structural conflicts in Vietnamese society that no amount of better leadership, and no level of reform congruent with the retention of the Ngo regime or an American client state in southern Vietnam, could fix. But the failures of application of the theory provided an alibi for the theory itself; if the application could be perfected, then the theory would not need to change. In the case of the counterinsurgents themselves, their theory was placed on the back burner after the deaths of Kennedy and the Ngos, but it wouldn't stay there for long. For the American war in Vietnam as a whole, the pattern of tinkering with application to avoid considering their basic purpose would go on until the end.

In many respects, liberalism is still looking for a way to apply its powers to the restive parts of the world that will allow it to preserve its theory. Kennedy-era counterinsurgency was a failure on its own terms, but viewed in terms of the history of ideas, it was a resilient approach that survived to be articulated again after its initial failure. Later American defense intellectuals, facing problems similar to those encountered by Rostow, Komer, Hilsman et al, would revisit counterinsurgency and in many cases receive a better hearing than did their predecessors. In so doing, these counterinsurgents made their own stamp on the concept, changing it significantly from the idea that the Kennedy-era thinkers originally articulated. Significantly, the failures of Kennedy's counterinsurgency initiatives, especially the Strategic Hamlet Program, decisively informed later generations of American counterinsurgency doctrine. But for all the changes between Hilsman's *Strategic Concept* and the 2006 *Counterinsurgency Manual*, Petraeus and other 21<sup>st</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Jacobs, Seth *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and US Intervention in Southeast Asia* (Durham; Duke University Press 2004)

century counterinsurgents operated within a conceptual realm first defined by Hilsman and his peers. Counterinsurgency, from the early 1960s to the present, was less a solution than it was a set of problematics: how to engineer restive societies in ways favorable to the counterinsurgent, in a world where formal imperialism was not an option. This problem, and much of the spectrum of solutions on offer to it, was first articulated by the counterinsurgency thinkers facing the blossoming decolonization crises of the early sixties.



#### **Chapter 4- The Politics of Surveillance and Assassination: CORDS and the Pivot to a New Foundation for Counterinsurgent Governance**

*“The history of pacification was a history of people impressing their wills and ideas on programs and making them go.” – Robert Komer, 1970*

Counterinsurgency boosters in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries developed a peculiar interpretation of America’s failure in Vietnam. For conservative American politicians and counterinsurgents alike, rethinking the American experience of Vietnam became a pivotal part of their interpretative framework for problems far afield from Southeast Asia. The counterinsurgent interpretation begins with the premise that counterinsurgency, properly applied, could have defeated the National Liberation Front and created a stable South Vietnam, winning the war. American policymakers, the counterinsurgents purport, did not pursue counterinsurgency consistently or rigorously enough, and so the war was lost. These policymakers, in this telling, failed to pursue counterinsurgency because the American defense establishment believed in a different mode of war which relied on the overwhelming strength of the United States to militarily destroy the Vietnamese revolution, neglecting the social and political aspects counterinsurgency forefronts.<sup>131</sup>

According to the counterinsurgent telling, American strategists and policymakers chose wrongly when presented with a number of crucial choices. The generals and politicians

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<sup>131</sup> Andrew Krepinevich, The Army and Vietnam (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press 1986); Lewis Sorley A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam (New York, Houghton Mifflin 1999); John Nagl, Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam (Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2002)

chose to pursue a “conventional,” “enemy-centric” strategy as opposed to “population-centric” methods. They chose “big unit war” instead of the smaller, nimbler tactics favored by counterinsurgents. They opted to direct the war themselves instead of “nation-building” with their South Vietnamese partners. Above all, the roll call of “conventional” Cold Warriors involved in Vietnam – Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, William Westmoreland, even erstwhile counterinsurgent turned apostle of strategic bombing Walt Rostow -- chose complacency, an embrace of the “traditional” American way of war, over innovation and real leadership.<sup>132</sup>

The dichotomies counterinsurgents use to compare themselves to “traditional” strategists map neatly onto the ways Silicon Valley entrepreneurs compare themselves to older, more structured corporations such as automakers (or, indeed, governments). Not for nothing did early internet-booster and management theorist Tom Peters describe his project as dismantling everything for which Robert McNamara – a man counterinsurgents associate with the industrialized war they despise – stood.<sup>133</sup> This dynamic would become a rhetorical feedback loop when tropes from the “new economy” rhetoric of the late twentieth century would enter into the counterinsurgency revival in the early twenty-first. Proponents of counterinsurgency borrowed the “new economy’s” emphasis on speed, flexibility, and granular knowledge. Critics could highlight renewed emphasis on surveillance, the breaking down of community solidarities and attendant social atomization, and a general culture of woo and hype both within the “second counterinsurgency era” and in Silicon Valley (which underwent a boom – the beginnings

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<sup>132</sup> Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* 258-276

<sup>133</sup> Thomas Frank, *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy* (New York, Anchor Books 2000) 185

of Web 2.0 – roughly contemporaneously with the resurgence of counterinsurgency after 2006).<sup>134</sup>

This counterinsurgent account of the Vietnam War that emerged in the 1980s posits that the two schools of strategic thought – for convenience, we can then the “counterinsurgent” and the “conventional” – existed in more-or-less fully formed articulations which began competing for influence when American involvement in Vietnam began. The counterinsurgents always faced an uphill battle, in this telling, struggling against the inertia generated by the sheer mass of the Cold War defense establishment and the (purportedly) deeply conventional traditions of American strategic thought. With persistence and highly-placed friends such as John Kennedy, however, counterinsurgents managed to get a hearing as American involvement in Vietnam intensified.<sup>135</sup>

At this point, perspectives among counterinsurgents diverge. Depending upon the teller, either the Kennedy-era counterinsurgency practitioners erred, or the conventional fighters refused to give them a fair chance, or the end of the Diem regime (and the Kennedy administration soon thereafter) pulled the plug on a promising strategy, or some combination of these things occurred to deny counterinsurgency victory in Vietnam between 1960 and 1963. In any event, counterinsurgency no longer enjoyed the strategic primacy (or at least prominence) after the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that it did during Kennedy’s “Camelot” era. The conventional side of American Cold War strategy, represented by the likes of Robert McNamara, Lyndon Johnson, and William

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<sup>134</sup> Daniel Monk, “Hives and Swarms: On the ‘Nature’ of Neoliberalism and the Rise of the Ecological Insurgent” in Mike Davis and Daniel Bertrand Monk, eds. Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism (New York, The New Press 2007)

<sup>135</sup> Douglas Blaufarb The Counterinsurgency Era (Glencoe, The Free Press 1977)

Westmoreland, had the initiative, and the war would go their way to its inevitable ignominious failure.<sup>136</sup>

Some counterinsurgents, when telling the story of their doctrine (especially early drafts in the 1980s), stop there- Camelot fell, the technowarriors took over, the Republic of Vietnam was doomed.<sup>137</sup> But as time went by, a sequel to this Kennedy-era initial struggle for a counterinsurgency strategy took on greater prominence in the memory of counterinsurgency's development. This second set-piece clash between counterinsurgents and conventionals centered on efforts to develop the Civic Operations and Revolutionary Development Support project, or CORDS. The brainchild of defense policymaker and CIA agent Robert Komer, CORDS entailed pivotal developments to counterinsurgency doctrine, in many respects defining what the doctrine would become after America's intervention in Vietnam ended. It also proved a tantalizing historical counterfactual possibility to many counterinsurgents in the decades to come- what if CORDS got the same resources the big-unit war and bombing of North Vietnam got?<sup>138</sup>

Komer himself helped encourage the implicit pitting of conventional and counterinsurgent war. His two signature creations were CORDS itself, and his 1972 book-length RAND report *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing*, an account of his struggle to create, shape, and manage CORDS according to his counterinsurgent specifications. As the title indicates, it is an account of the ways bureaucratic inertia impeded the

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<sup>136</sup> Krepinevich, The Army and Vietnam; Mark Moyer, Triumph Foresaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2006)

<sup>137</sup> Blaufarb, The Counterinsurgency Era

<sup>138</sup> Richard Hunt, Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnamese Hearts and Minds (Boulder, Westview Press 1995); Mark Moyer, Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism in Vietnam (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press 1997)

implementation of counterinsurgency, and is arguably a minor classic of the man-versus-bureaucracy theme in literature.<sup>139</sup>

Komer – nicknamed “Blowtorch Bob” for his blistering interpersonal style and the heat he was capable of bringing to bear in bureaucratic disputes – certainly had his fair share of complaints about impediments to his vision. He sought to change entrenched structures and standard operating procedures, and in many respects succeeded (whether he could ever have succeeded enough to actually win the war his way is another question altogether). But a reading that posits that CORDS and the big-unit war were necessarily a dichotomy, that the one could only be pursued at the expense of the other, is an artifact of the period after Komer left CORDS, with much of it coming about in the last decade of the twentieth century and after. Komer, as he was organizing and running CORDS, understood that his vision could only go forward with the support of the massive resources the American military could bring to bear in Vietnam. For their part, even the most conventionally-minded American generals, even William Westmoreland, knew by the time CORDS began operation in 1967 that counterinsurgency was an important element of any vision of victory in Vietnam.<sup>140</sup> The differences between counterinsurgent and conventional while the Vietnam War raged was more a matter of emphasis, degree, and perspective than an absolute difference of operational strategy. That counterinsurgents often now see the two as diametric opposites is likely the product of (ironically enough) bureaucratic pressures forcing participants to identify with one or the other side of the supposed conflict.

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<sup>139</sup> Robert Komer Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on US-GVN Performance in Vietnam (Santa Monica, RAND Corporation 1972)

<sup>140</sup> Robert Komer, “Organizational Concepts Governing Integration of Civil/Military Responsibility for Pacification (RD) Under COMUSMACV” report dated 05/05/1967 (Box 11, Pacification Study Group, CORDS Central File, RG 472, USNA II)

Along with the work William Westmoreland provides the counterinsurgent school by standing metonymically as an intellectual and rhetorical contrast to themselves, counterinsurgents relied on the “conventional” war in Vietnam for two broad categories of assistance. The first was the simple mundane provision of security and resources. Small, partially-civilian teams undertaking civic action, propaganda, or even “counter-infrastructure” assassination work would have been easy pickings for NLF guerrillas without the security provided by American and ARVN conventional forces, and could not have existed in the first place without the material backing of MACV. Second, the massive war raging all around the counterinsurgents provided the brackets for the social and political space in which CORDS could experiment with new practices of governance for turbulent populations. These experiments would prove fateful for the course of counterinsurgency doctrine as a whole.

CORDS conspicuously lacked the grandiosity of the Strategic Hamlet vision, a plan to replicate model villages across the length and breadth of South Vietnam. Part of the reason for this is no doubt practical and incidental: by 1967, when Komer created and began running CORDS, the social fabric of South Vietnam was in such a shambles due to the war that the sort of broad-scope, schematic social reengineering envisioned by Rostow, Hilsman, et al in early 1962 was simply impractical. The war destroyed thousands of villages, Saigon and other cities absorbed hundreds of thousands of refugees, and the security situation was far too chaotic in too many places to allow even for an “oil spot” of model counterinsurgent villages to develop. But even in counterinsurgency’s earlier days, Robert Komer never displayed the social vision that characterized his former boss in Kennedy’s National Security Council, Walt Rostow, or

other Kennedy-era counterinsurgents. This makes it all the more surprising that unlike Rostow, who lost his focus on counterinsurgency in favor of massive strategic bombing of North Vietnam, Komer maintained a belief in population-centric counterinsurgency doctrine. That Rostow, the visionary of modernization theory, should abandon the strategy that attempted to implement his theories on the ground in Southeast Asia, and Komer, the bureaucratic infighter fixated on practical results, came to champion counterinsurgency, confuses the counterinsurgent telling of their own doctrinal history.

Fundamentally, the point of divergence between Kennedy-era counterinsurgency and counterinsurgency as envisioned in the CORDS project was not a matter of ideals, or even of practices, but of emphasis and of envisioned framework for social action. Rostow, Hilsman, and the other Kennedy-era counterinsurgents saw society as the *field* of their efforts. In their visions, they would comprehend the social order of Vietnam (or wherever else they could implement the strategy) with the tools of their social science, and then guide their resources accordingly in a quest to reshape the social order in question. They would protect a given regime by building a new sort of nation. This vision still lives within counterinsurgency doctrine to this day. But later counterinsurgents, Komer lead among them, understood society differently, beyond Komer's noted personal cynicism. Komer, William Colby, and many future counterinsurgents came to view society – in Vietnam and eventually much of the rest of the world – as the *means* of their efforts, not simply the field. Rather than replace the society as a whole with a new, progressive version of itself immune from Communist blandishments, Komer's counterinsurgency sought to engineer existing Vietnamese society into exposing and destroying its own subversive elements. The main innovation that that CORDS brought

to counterinsurgency was an emphasis on “counter-infrastructure” war, that is, attempts to locate and destroy the political and logistical infrastructure of the National Liberation Front guerrillas. Along with being a strategic military innovation, this focus brought with it important changes in the counterinsurgent conception of society.

CORDS is most famous as the institutional home of the Phoenix program, which has attracted critics from its day to ours as one of the signal atrocities of the American war in Vietnam.<sup>141</sup> Defenders of counterinsurgency counter that Phoenix was a small part of CORDS, and that assassinations, in turn, were a small part of Phoenix.<sup>142</sup> These defenders are not wrong: CORDS had numerous branches, overseeing fields as diverse as psychological operations, Revolutionary Development support (as implied in its name), economic aid, agricultural assistance, and youth/sports programs. The Phoenix program also captured considerably more people than it killed (a not uncommon result for policing and military programs). Ultimately, though, the various branches of CORDS all pointed towards Phoenix. All of them – aid programs, police training, propaganda – were dedicated to rendering the Vietnamese peasantry legible, pliable, and if possible, active in the pursuit of the agenda of the United States and the Republic of Vietnam. This was understood by the late 1960s as entailing, almost in its entirety, the destruction of the National Liberation Front. If civic action defined Kennedy-era counterinsurgency, counter-infrastructure defined CORDS.

In distinction with the self-image of post-Vietnam counterinsurgency boosters, who often depict themselves as distrusters of the statistics and industrial methods of the McNamaras

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<sup>141</sup> Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, Counter-Revolutionary Violence: Bloodbaths in Fact and Propaganda (Andover, Warner Modular Publications 1973); Douglas Valentine, The Phoenix Program (New York, William Morrow 1990)

<sup>142</sup> Hunt, Pacification; Moyar, Phoenix and the Birds of Prey



and Westmorelands of the world, Komer and the rest of CORDS understood their task as a series of maneuvers aimed at optimizing the performance of Vietnamese (and American) institutions, as measured by the goal of NLF infrastructure “neutralized.” The infamous body count was not just a fixation of technowar, but of the Vietnam War’s largest counterinsurgency project, as well. Writing retrospectively in the mid-1970s, the list of institutions that Komer felt had failed him and CORDS in general was long, thoroughgoing enough to impel Komer to spin off a theory of bureaucratic inertia almost off the cuff as he was writing it, and practically coextensive with the set of institutions Komer attempted to optimize for the purposes of destroying the infrastructure of the NLF.<sup>143</sup>

No governing modality is complete without at least one standard, built-in alibi for failure. Counterinsurgency can boast of a substantial repertoire of them. These include reference to the fecklessness of democratic politicians and publics unwilling to undertake the cost of long wars, and the bull-headedness of conventional military men unable to understand the counterinsurgent way of war. Komer’s alibi essentially synthesized these two tropes and spun the result into a theory of bureaucracy, of machines dedicated to a given purpose and “doing their thing,” as he put it (perhaps borrowing some “hep” language from the young soldiers he met in Vietnam), and unable to change unless flexibility is built in to their structure.<sup>144</sup> This is still a popular take among counterinsurgents to explain their issues with military bureaucracies, from Komer’s day to David Nagl’s, and

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<sup>143</sup> Komer, Bureaucracy Does Its Thing 151-162

<sup>144</sup> Komer, Bureaucracy Does Its Thing 106-126

in classic liberal fashion places the onus for change on to individuals, their attitudes, and the educations that produce them.<sup>145</sup>

The CORDS project was undone both by the rock upon which all American efforts in Vietnam dashed – the resistance of the Vietnamese people – and on the very force that brought it into existence and sustained it: the American war machine in Vietnam. The sheer scale of the war, the massive destruction and social dislocation it entailed, even when restrained by concerns for collateral damage, was such that CORDS was never able to generate a sufficiently stable base for “revolutionary development” on the village level, either for its own sake or for it to feed the intelligence machine of the Phoenix Project. RD teams and their American helpers took on numerous projects, as the monthly reports sent back to CORDS HQ in Saigon detail, and Phoenix killed and interned tens of thousands of real or suspected VCI. But no stable field of governmental force could be generated across South Vietnam so long as the basic opposition between the Vietnamese people’s disinclination to be ruled by those not of their choosing and the American determination to keep the Vietnamese domino upright continued to coruscate, in the form of guerrilla resistance, overwhelming conventional response, and their attendant social crises.

What CORDS and Phoenix could accomplish was a reconceptualization of the task of counterinsurgency that would outlive the Vietnam War. CORDS altered the political vision of counterinsurgency. Nation-building lost some of its socially-constructive connotations (though they were never eclipsed entirely), and became more of a matter of engineering social structures in a securitarian direction. Instead of channeling the

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<sup>145</sup> Nagl, Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife 213-226

energies of decolonization and revolution into an alternative revolution of liberal capitalist development, CORDS sought to disperse those same energies into myriad capillaries of surveillance-data-generating institutions and activities. These would in turn render the Vietnamese people legible: a database of salient facts, names, addresses, dates of birth, occupations, education levels, political inclinations, duties undertaken or shirked- all of the information a government might want to know, across the length of South Vietnam. This was something the Republic of Vietnam and the United States struggled to attain, but never quite managed, impeded in no small part by the destruction their war unleashed. The end goal was to eventually set this newly-legible society to surveilling and regulating itself, primarily by removing threatening members. The dream of counterinsurgency lost none of its ambition; a legible South Vietnam that self-regulated in the American Cold War interest was still quite a tall order. But the shift to CORDS changed counterinsurgency's emphasis from the normative – the ideal state end-goal -- to the procedural, the best practices through which actors could implement designs. In this respect, the changes in counterinsurgency tracked with – perhaps prefigured -- the transition in dominant liberal governing modes from Keynesian, “embedded” Cold War liberalism to the neoliberalism that emerged as the 1970s wore on.

### **From Tonkin to CORDS**

Until the final end of the Vietnam War in 1975, relatively few US initiatives ever really ended permanently, once began. The remnants of previous strategies continued to exist in desultory fashion, carried forward by bureaucratic inertia, case studies in the sheer difficulty of removing a line-item from a near-limitless military budget for good and all.

Throughout the “big unit” stage of the war after the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, many of the pilot programs from the earlier, pre-Tonkin “counterinsurgency” stage of the conflict kept going. They built strategic hamlets (always a good rationale for ARVN to move troublesome populations) and engaged in civic action, though without the resources, coordination, or attention the program directors felt they needed. Memoranda from counterinsurgents such as Charles Bohannon and Rufus Phillips exude a certain glumness starting in 1964.

In a United States Operations Mission report from March of that year, Bohannon states that counterinsurgency efforts had been “running up a down escalator” for most of the previous year.<sup>146</sup> Phillips, the most skeptical of the uniformed military out of the Kennedy-era counterinsurgents, lamented in September 1965 that, while USOM continued its mission to promote ground-level civic action for counterinsurgency, it had “been relegated to the back seat” and that all the resources were held by military men, both ARVN and American, who continued to see USOM pacification advisers as mere “purveyors of means.”<sup>147</sup> Lansdale remained indefatigably upbeat, as always. But as the sixties wore on he spilled his steady stream of memoranda and reports into a deepening void of official indifference. “The main problem in carrying out rural construction (pacification),” Lansdale grumbled in a 1965 report, “is that too few high echelon Americans or Vietnamese understand it.”<sup>148</sup> Some of that indifference was the pointed

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<sup>146</sup> Charles Bohannon, “Counterinsurgency Comments” 03/31/1964. Box 1, Charles Bohannon Papers, Hoover Institute

<sup>147</sup> Rufus Phillips, 09/23/1965 memorandum to Charles Mann re USOM support for rural construction. Box 1, Edward Lansdale Papers, National Security Archive

<sup>148</sup> Edward Lansdale, “People’s Programs” memorandum dated 04/16/1966; Edward Lansdale “Rural Construction” memorandum dated 02/09/1966 (Box 2, Edward Lansdale Papers, National Security Archive, Washington DC); Edward Lansdale and Rufus Phillips, “Thoughts on Rural Construction: Concept and Organization” report dated 09/25/1965 (Box 1, Edward Lansdale Papers, National Security Archive)

disregard of figures such as McNamara, Komer, and Maxwell Taylor for Lansdale himself. Much of it was the reconfiguration of strategies and priorities that came about after the Tonkin Resolutions.

Kennedy-era counterinsurgents of Edward Lansdale's vintage promised a great many things to their patrons, but one thing they generally could and did not promise was quick solutions. Village-level war, winning hearts and minds, oil-spots of security and development spreading across the land: these were slow metaphors. Their concept of counterinsurgency was meant to do a thorough job of creating new, friendly client regimes, and did not misrepresent the amount of time that would take (beyond the misrepresentation involved in implying that any amount of time would be sufficient in the case of America's goals in Vietnam). The great success story of population-centric counterinsurgency war, the British victory in the Malayan Emergency, took twelve years to finally quash a small guerrilla insurgency largely hosted within a ghettoized ethnic minority. Three of the other major counterinsurgency wars took eight years apiece: the Mau Mau emergency, the First Indochina War, and the Algerian Revolution. The latter two resulted in bruising failures for the counterinsurgent powers, and the Mau Mau were only defeated and a friendly postcolonial regime installed in Nairobi at a near-unsustainable cost for postwar Britain. Among the many virtues the counterinsurgents proposed to hone in the American leadership of the mid-twentieth century, patience, resolve, and the willingness to fight extended, grueling wars were chief among them.

The failure of earlier counterinsurgency strategies, the introduction of large numbers of US combat troops after the Gulf of Tonkin Resolutions, and the upward spiral of force in the Vietnam War produced both liabilities and opportunities for counterinsurgency

strategists who could adapt to the new conditions of the war (in a way that Lansdale, for one, generally could not). Robert Komer was in a prime position to make good on these opportunities. A bureaucratic fixer and policy crafter, a self-described “connoisseur of Third World adversity,” Komer possessed experience with Kennedy-era counterinsurgency, an ongoing interest in population-centric war, and good relations with Lyndon Johnson. This trifecta was a rare combination in the defense establishment by 1967 (Komer’s erstwhile boss, Walt Rostow, was quite close with Johnson – almost unheard of for someone who was, like Rostow, close with John Kennedy -- but had ceased focusing on counterinsurgency years before).<sup>149</sup>

Kennedy-era counterinsurgency sought to channel the revolutionary energies of decolonization into building friendly regimes. To the extent that the leaders of the conventional military effort in Vietnam post-Tonkin, such as Westmoreland and McNamara, thought about the energy behind the Vietnamese revolution, they sought to quash it outright via military force, thereby providing the security that would allow for the sort of nation-building that the counterinsurgents who held the strategic reins before them also sought. What Komer provided with his plan for CORDS was a way to accomplish the goals of counterinsurgency with the means provided by the massive conventional war machine that the Americans had built in Vietnam, as well as the state machinery of the Republic of Vietnam.

As Deputy National Security Adviser, Komer produced a number of papers in 1965 and 1966 arguing for a reorganization of the war effort in Vietnam in order to place the civil and political aspects of the war on a more equal footing with the military. Komer argued

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<sup>149</sup> Frank Leith Jones Blowtorch: Robert Komer, Vietnam, and American Cold War Strategy (Annapolis, Naval Institute Press 2013) 135

this could only be accomplished by putting all civic-action-related programs under a single bureaucratic demesne, run by a single manager (this came to be such an important component of what would come to be the CORDS vision that early on it was called “the single manager concept”). This manager should have as much authority as possible – preferably equal to the MACV military commander – and should also be embedded, somehow, with the Saigon regime. This coincided with the advice of figures like Robert G.K. Thompson, who had left BRIAM before it dissolved in 1965 and had been writing for the RAND Corporation thereafter.<sup>150</sup>

By most accounts, Lyndon Johnson respected Komer, whose blunt, direct rhetoric appealed to a President who felt beset by “pointy heads” (many of whom were too closely tied to Johnson’s predecessors for the President’s taste) with more ideas than results.<sup>151</sup> Moreover, the Presidency was looking for new solutions to the running sore of Vietnam. In March 1966, Johnson issued National Security Action Memorandum 343, appointing Robert Komer his Special Assistant for “the direction, coordination and supervision in Washington of U.S. non-military programs for peaceful construction relating to Vietnam.” This empowered Komer to make inquiries about the situation in Vietnam and write memoranda on them, which he did at a vociferous clip and always in support of the single manager concept. This was the period that earned Komer the nickname “Blowtorch Bob,” reflecting the opinions of Americans in Saigon, such as

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<sup>150</sup> Michael Gravel, ed. The Pentagon Papers Vol 2 567-565; Robert Komer, “Report on Saigon Trip” memorandum dated 04/19/1966 (Box 9, Robert Komer File, National Security Files, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin TX)

<sup>151</sup> Pentagon Papers, Vol 2. 542-546, 567

William Westmoreland and Henry Cabot Lodge, that Komer's insistence on wholesale reorganization of the war effort was importune and gratuitous.<sup>152</sup>

The most notable of Komer's memoranda at that time was drafted in August 1966 and entitled "Giving a New Thrust to Pacification." In it, we see the characteristic elements of Komer's rhetoric, one well-adapted to the bureaucratic politics in which he was embedded: wide-ranging criticism of a sensitive point paired with breezy optimism that solutions to the problems he lays out are well within the reader's toolkit. He argued that while the main unit war against the NLF was going well, the "village war" – "securing the countryside and getting the peasantry involved in the war against the Viet Cong" – was lagging, due to misunderstood priorities and scattered efforts. The assets to win the village war were all present, Komer claimed; all that was needed was the right organization to continuously provide village security, foster "revolutionary development," and otherwise integrate the Vietnamese countryside into the war effort, and from there, into a pliable, American-allied Republic of Vietnam.<sup>153</sup>

This proved persuasive to President Johnson. In November 1966, Komer was authorized to go to Saigon, with the rank of Ambassador, to establish a new umbrella group for civic action- Civic Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, or CORDS, which officially began in July 1967. In keeping with his confidence, his belief in the power of properly-rationalized bureaucracies guiding massive industrial machines, and his

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<sup>152</sup> National Security Action Memorandum 343, National Security Files, LBJ Library

<sup>153</sup> Robert Komer, "Giving a New Thrust to Pacification" memorandum dated 08/03/1966 (Box 3, Pacification File, Robert Komer Papers, National Security File, LBJL



propensity for telling those in power what they like to hear, Komer asserted to Johnson that with CORDS, the war would be over in eighteen months.<sup>154</sup>

### **Defining the CORDS Demesne**

Few of the constituent programs of CORDS were truly new. Even its most distinctive element, the Phoenix Program, pre-dated Komer's arrival in Saigon. Phoenix's bureaucratic lineage is traceable to the CIA "counter-terror" teams, which were renamed Provincial Reconnaissance Units, which in turn were seconded to the province- and district-level joint intelligence centers Phoenix set up. Perhaps the closest one can find to an original program began under the CORDS aegis is the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES), which set out to systematically gather information on each hamlet in South Vietnam through monthly reports sent back by the CORDS-appointed District Senior Advisors. At bottom, though, the HES was, like much of what CORDS brought about, the instantiation and consolidation of long-term counterinsurgent plans rather than a new concept. HES fits especially closely with CORDS's initial general purpose: to rationalize and optimize the flow of information and authority within its massive bureaucratic demesne.<sup>155</sup>

The first programmatic statement CORDS released after Komer arrived in Saigon was known as "Operation Takeoff," in a recall to the economic development theories used by Komer's erstwhile boss and prior counterinsurgency enthusiast, Walt Rostow. Takeoff largely entailed dedicating the resources and men the United States devoted to

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<sup>154</sup> Marilyn Young, *Vietnam Wars: 1945-1975* (New York, Harper 1991) 212

<sup>155</sup> "Hamlet Evaluation System Briefing" (Box 7, Reports and Memoranda, CORDS File, RG 472, United States National Archives II)

Vietnam post-Tonkin to certain programs that harkened to pre-Tonkin counterinsurgency strategy. These included support for South Vietnamese Revolutionary Development teams, the Chieu Hoi defector-encouragement program, police reform, land reform, and refugee aid.<sup>156</sup> CORDS also included within its bailiwick groups attacking “Viet Cong infrastructure” (which would become the ubiquitous “VCI”), which various CIA-directed precursors to the CORDS-coordinated Phoenix Project, such as the Counterterror Teams and Provincial Reconnaissance Units, were already pursuing. Takeoff was not a new program, like Operation Sunrise, or even the innumerable conventional military actions given the “operation” tag. It was a consolidation and intensification of innumerable existing programs, as well as an effort to place these programs closer to the center of American strategy in Vietnam. These sort of operations, not the sort of broad-scope reconceptualization both of the war and of Vietnamese society as seen in the Strategic Hamlet program, were more suited to CORDS’s institutional repertoire more generally.

CORDS became a clearinghouse for studies of the Vietnamese countryside and its people. They collected reports by researchers from RAND, the Asia Foundation, and assorted other think tanks, and generated many reports on their own, evaluating numerous aspects of pacification. The primary reporting mechanism for CORDS came via the Province- and District-level Senior Advisors, who were in many respects the key executors of the CORDS vision. The monthly reports the Province-level Senior Advisors sent back were the main mechanism by which CORDS HQ in Saigon understood its progress, and make up a sizable portion of the program’s existing public archive. The District-level Senior Advisors were responsible for much of the oversight of the Phoenix

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<sup>156</sup> Ellsworth Bunker, “Report 13” Report dated 07/13/1967 (Vietnam Virtual Archive record 2120810002)

Program, the ground-level actions of which were usually headquartered out of District Intelligence Operations Coordination Centers (DIOCCs). The monthly reports from Provincial Advisors make up a large swath of the CORDS archive that has been declassified thus far, as well as a substantial portion of Robert Komer's reportedly inexhaustible diet of reports, memoranda, and studies.<sup>157</sup>

The provincial advisers were, for the most part, military men; majors, lieutenant colonels, and colonels in the United States Army. Some, especially early on, were civilian employees of USAID, and we have no way of knowing how many were, like Komer, doing double-duty as CIA agents or assets. Their reports vary across the provinces and from man to man, naturally enough- as one Phoenix hand put it, it often felt that in the forty-odd provinces, there were forty-odd wars against forty-odd warlords (here, it's unclear whether the speaker meant solely NLF guerrillas or the ARVN authorities the CORDS men were often at odds with).<sup>158</sup> The sort of flexibility Komer sought to inculcate through granting his provincial lieutenants substantial independence would tend to exacerbate these qualities, as did the genuinely decentralized nature of guerrilla war in the provinces. Here, as in the question of the single manager, Komer borrowed from Robert Thompson.

That said, it is possible to generalize about the reports as a body. Little of what we find falls in line with the stories told by either latter-day counterinsurgency boosters or defenders of Westmoreland and the big-unit war. In keeping with their origin mostly in the Army (and often in Infantry, Artillery, or Armor), much of what the provincial advisors report has to do with the military situation- statistics on encounters with NLF

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<sup>157</sup> Provincial Advisors Report File, CORDS Central File, RG 472, USNA II

<sup>158</sup> Valentine The Phoenix Program 132

fighters, results of fights, enemies killed and captured and weapons recovered. This comes close to resembling the dread “body count,” the bureaucratic bete-noire of critics both of the “technowar” pursued by the McNamaras and Westmorelands and of the war more generally.

But almost all of the reports also included sections on political developments (most often meaning mounting RVN elections- little enough of the illegal politics outside of the Saigon government’s demesne found their way into these reports); statistics on economic activities, including US-sponsored building and aid programs; the progress of the Chieu Hoi program for encouraging NLF defectors; descriptions of the civic action and propaganda projects of local Revolutionary Development cadres; and reports on Phoenix, euphemism-laden paragraphs full of numbers of “VCI (Viet Cong Infrastructure) neutralized” and the woes of cross-bureaucracy cooperation. In general, these are written in the register familiar from most official American reports from the war in Vietnam: measured in tone, cautiously optimistic, and statistic-laden. What intimations of failure they included modulated somewhere on a range from only that trace necessary to secure more materials, men, and political pressure (a common enough refrain in Province Advisor monthly reports) to something like an open acknowledgment of the failure of American strategy (seen, in the Province Advisor reports, most commonly in those reports lodged in March 1968- the reports that came immediately after the Tet Offensive).<sup>159</sup>

CORDS was still consolidating itself when the Tet Offensive threw the whole war in Vietnam – the American war as well as that of the Vietnamese revolution – into a new

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<sup>159</sup> February 1968 Province Advisory Report, Box 53, Quang Tin Reports, Provincial Advisors Report File, CORDS Central File, RG 472, USNA II

and, for some time, unknowable stage. Among other things, it made clear that CORDS could not win the war within eighteen months of the summer of 1967. It brought the old dilemma of “security versus development” into the harshest relief possible- if the NLF was capable of that sort of coordinated country-wide attack, could Revolutionary Development or Regional Forces/Provincial Forces cadre be spared from defensive duties to pursue “nation-building?” A friend of Komer’s, Army and CIA officer John Paul Vann, began formulating his Accelerated Pacification Program in the spring of 1968, in the wake of Tet, calling for an emphasis on effective American-South Vietnamese cooperation and the embedding of small US forces in Vietnamese villages, as the US Marines pursued in Quang Nghai and Quang Tin provinces.<sup>160</sup>

Komer’s own strategic vision also centered on security but diverted from Vann’s in subtle ways. The two would grow apart, in part due to these differences and in part over Vann’s public insistence that the entire statistical epistemology Americans, including Komer, used to understand the war was flawed (there are certain parallels between Komer’s relationship with Vann and Walt Rostow’s relationship with Komer).<sup>161</sup> Some of this can be explained by their respective positions in the American war bureaucracy. Vann, an Army officer, a Corps-level coordinator for CORDS pacification projects, a witness to earlier military fiascos such as the battle of Ia Drang, understood security in terms of the war against the NLF (and, increasingly, PLAVN units from North Vietnam) in the field. In certain respects, this is a callback to the geographical imagination of

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<sup>160</sup> John Paul Vann, “A Six Point Program for Accelerated Progress” 04/26/1968 (Box 10, Reports and Memoranda, CORDS File, RG 472, USNA II); Francis “Bing” West, The Enclave: Some US Military Efforts in Ly Tin District, Quang Tin Province: 1966-1968 (Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, 1969)

<sup>161</sup> Jones, Blowtorch 191-194, 204

Kennedy-era counterinsurgency; US units could secure certain villages, provide security (and, theoretically, development, should the resources exist), and expand from there.

Komer, at the center of his communications web in Saigon, inhaling reports and producing numerous high-level analyses of the lineaments of the American war effort, increasingly understood security post-Tet as entailing the destruction of the NLF's existence in the villages. In certain respects, the chaos in the countryside post-Tet made Komer's vision of the village war more realistic. The NLF exposed and expended numerous cadre during the Tet Offensive, promoting less-experienced replacements and severely harming its effectiveness in some places, and increasing PLAVN involvement sometimes created tensions and confusions with local NLF infrastructure. All of this opened up opportunities for Phoenix, apertures through which it could pierce the armor of secrecy and anonymity the NLF relied upon to pursue its war. Moreover, the sheer shock of Tet opened space for new strategies, which both Vann and Komer (alongside his deputy, CIA agent William Colby, a major Phoenix proponent) could exploit to push their respective strategies. Finally, Tet foreclosed upon the idea of a truly socially constructive vision of American victory in the Vietnam War. As Komer's biographer, Frank Leith Jones put it, "in the wake of Tet, old notions that had survived beyond the establishment of CORDS began to die – 'hearts and minds' could not be won by pajama-clad RD cadres preaching 'reform from below' or by the State Department's faith that elections or radical land reform would create rural resistance to the Viet Cong."<sup>162</sup> At last, nation-building was to mean constructing a state capable of sufficient surveillance and elimination capacity to destroy its internal enemies, not to mean the development of a

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<sup>162</sup> Jones, Blowtorch 203

certain standard of living or progressive social structure, except insofar as the latter purposes served the former.

### **Phoenix and “Revolutionary Development”**

The archive of the Phoenix program, being a CIA-led operation largely dedicated to assassinating or imprisoning civilians, is still mostly classified. It’s unknown how often actions such as assassinations of NLF sympathizers, torture, or blackmail would have found their way into reports in any event. Declassified reports allude to the program frequently, in the bloodless statistical language of the monthly advisor reports, but detailed descriptions of its operations come largely via after-the-fact firsthand accounts and investigative journalism. Much of the discourse about Phoenix revolves around questions as to whether or not it was an assassination program and to what degree its crimes – which even its strongest proponents admit were real – have been exaggerated or given undue centrality. Apologist historians such as Mark Moyar and Richard Hunt deploy the many tasks beside assassinating VCI – gathering intelligence, encouraging defections, capturing VCI – as proof for what they claim is a more nuanced portrayal of the program.<sup>163</sup>

For the purposes of an intellectual history of counterinsurgency as a technique of governance, one can more or less split the difference. The evidence suggests that Phoenix undertook enough assassinations that a reasonable person would conclude that that they were central to Phoenix’s operations. That the assassinations (and the activities that went

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<sup>163</sup> Hunt, Pacification 239-241; Moyar, Phoenix and the Birds of Prey 49-51, 202-208

along with it) had a larger purpose – the creation and maintenance of a sustainable US-client state in South Vietnam – no more obviates that point than does pointing out that Ford Motor Company has a larger purpose of turning a profit makes it something other than a carmaker. At bottom, though, the killings say less about the governance project of counterinsurgency than do the institutional arrangements that counterinsurgents devised to make the killings (and arrests and defections) possible, and the ways in which those became increasingly important to the “other war.” Shifting the energy of the “other war” towards counter-infrastructure – the apprehension and destruction of the National Liberation Front’s underground support system, the logistical, intelligence, and political systems that embedded the NLF in Vietnamese society – was a crucial conceptual leap for counterinsurgency doctrine. This is more important for our purposes than the program’s human rights record. Such champions of Phoenix’s strategic brilliance as Mark Moyar see the turn away from reform efforts and towards counter-infrastructure as part of the program’s genius, though he also attributes this to “an environment that encouraged selfishness” preventing the Saigon regime from implementing meaningful reforms, without further explication.<sup>164</sup> In an older sense of the word “genius” – as meaning something like “essential character” – he is not wrong.

Counter-infrastructure can be fruitfully contrasted to civic action as strategic frameworks for counterinsurgency, though the two are by no means mutually exclusive. Both are efforts to turn the central advantage of guerrilla armies – their support amongst the civilian population and the informational, logistical, and political assets that entails – into liabilities. Civic action campaigns seek to woo villagers away from the guerrillas by

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<sup>164</sup> Moyar, Phoenix and the Birds of Prey 43



providing an alternative; according to American counterinsurgency practices, this would engage their political energies alongside their material self-interest. Counter-infrastructure campaigns seek to develop means to locate guerrillas and their supporters within the civilian population and “neutralize” them, which, like civic action, works better the more local collaborators are involved, both in terms of efficiency (these are the local informants that the various “intelligence centers” are meant to consolidate) and as far as the politics of nation-building goes.

Proponents of both strategies would cheerfully grant that the two methods work together, and arguably that they require each other. Civic action can produce a population inclined to cooperate with (and provide intelligence to) counter-infrastructure efforts, and counter-infrastructure can make villages safe for (and, arguably, dependent on) civic action campaigns. Both methods can trace their insights – and their fundamental flaws – to liberal premises: namely that rural communities in the developing world can and should be approached as so many individuals that can be wooed or “neutralized” toward or away from any given stance, provided the right material inputs – a pallet of rice, a propaganda leaflet, a bullet – are distributed in the right places and at the right times. Indeed, both can be seen as efforts to force the rural communities of Vietnam into this mold, by disrupting other ways of life – either traditional or revolutionary – and eliminating those who would build a different social structure.

CORDS yoked responses to the single greatest political question in Vietnam (barring national independence) – land reform – to the logic of security and legibility. Liberal, peaceful, and partial redistribution of land away from large landowners and towards the South Vietnamese peasantry was always a part of developmentalist counterinsurgency

schemes, and a continual sticking point with regimes in Saigon which largely answered to the big landlords. Laments over how slow and incomplete such programs were feature consistently in American reports on Vietnam. A 1967 CORDS report and action plan on land reform entailed a number of recommendations, lead among them the formation of Village Land Councils, whose responsibilities would be to create cadastral maps of their villages as well as adjudicate disputes about land use (or redistribution). Under this plan, the RVN government and its American advisors would redistribute land solely in areas with a heavy NLF presence, and beneficiaries of this, as well as larger landowners more generally, would be encouraged to sell their land in exchange for shares of RVN-backed industrial enterprises.<sup>165</sup> Along with aiding the “psychological” aspect of the war against the NLF and promoting Vietnamese industrialization, the intelligence-gathering aspects of this scheme are readily apparent. In this way, and in innumerable other interaction sites between the South Vietnamese state and its people that CORDS nurtured and coordinated, civic action fed counter-infrastructure the legible picture of South Vietnamese village society it needed.

At bottom, both approaches to counterinsurgency reflect the fundamental befuddlement of Cold War liberalism in the face of decolonization and revolution. State Department public affairs analyst Douglas Pike, in his controversial studies of the Viet Cong based on defector reports and captured documents, made explicit one of the basic elements of the confusion under which the American Cold War state labored- the idea that the National Liberation Front was, essentially, like the American troops (especially advisors) in Vietnam, simply in reverse. They were not an outgrowth of a genuine political movement

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<sup>165</sup> L. Wade Latham to Robert Komer, “Land Reform- A Ten Point Action Plan” undated 1967 (Box 22, Reports and Analyses File, CORDS Central File, RG 472, USNA II)

in South Vietnam, but simply another group attempting to win over the peasantry, through fair means or foul. This is not too different from how Pike and other counterinsurgents saw friendly regimes, such as the Saigon government.<sup>166</sup> Both civic action and counter-infrastructure partake in this elision of the politics of structural opposition and differing visions of the national community, in favor of an intensive focus on the politics of provision of services or of the elimination of dangerous elements.

Part of the incomprehension on the part of the national security managers when faced with the revolution in Vietnam was the certainty that Communism was essentially monolithic, and so the NLF must be operating according to diktat from Moscow or Beijing. But more than that, their self-image as *managers* prevented them from understanding actors for whom politics was more than developing mechanisms to solve problems in a setting where questions of value are already decided. They could comprehend the NLF leadership as fanatics, or as managers like them, but could not see them as engaged in a project to fundamentally remake the social order in Vietnam according to a rational, self-initiated plan- and they certainly could not conceive of the Vietnamese people as a whole as a meaningfully informed and consenting partner in such an enterprise.

But in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive, as the continued resilience and lethality of the NLF and its support structure made itself plain, counter-infrastructure took on a special degree of importance, and civic action efforts became increasingly confused and

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<sup>166</sup> Douglas Pike, Viet Cong: The Organization of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (Cambridge, MIT Press 1966) 109-118

contradictory given the situation of chaos in South Vietnam.<sup>167</sup> This shift brought out the contrasts between a counter-infrastructure-based counterinsurgency strategy and earlier efforts. Nation-building via creating an infrastructure for liberal political and economic development versus nation-building via creating the capacity for surveilling a society and eliminating wayward forces are different projects, even if neither side of the strategic coin can be entirely effaced.

Changes in the envisioned and actual uses of the Revolutionary Development cadres are a key pivot in the development of counterinsurgency doctrine during the CORDS years. They illustrate the changes that accompanied the change in emphasis from civic action to counter-infrastructure, as well as some of the continuities between the two approaches that were (and are) ever present. As the name implies, these small bodies – typically around fifty members to a cadre (at least on paper) – of men, under the command of a Saigon-based Ministry of Revolutionary Development, began their existence under the influence of developmentalist counterinsurgency doctrine. They were meant to be part of the Kennedy-era vision of counterinsurgency as a matter of ground-level engagement in the villages and hamlets, protecting villagers by armed force on the one hand, but on the other encouraging not just development, but “revolutionary” development. This was civic action that wore the liberal-modernization-as-revolution concept promulgated by Rostow, Hilsman, and other Kennedy-era counterinsurgents on its sleeve.

Whose revolution this was – who steered it, to whose ends -- was never clear, and attempting to answer that question gets into the program’s murky parentage. The CIA was heavily involved in funding and supporting the RD cadres from their inception, so

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<sup>167</sup> James Zunbrunnen, “Tracing the Viet Cong Infrastructure” Report dated 04/26/1969 (Box 3, General Records, Pacification Study Group, CORDS Central File, RG 472, USNA II)

much so that CORDS officials worried about the program being seen as too much of a CIA program.<sup>168</sup> The CIA was close with Ngo Dinh Nhu before his assassination, and the RD cadre model – especially the “revolutionary” tag – bears some of Nhu’s hallmarks. These include the insistence that Revolutionary Development encourage villages to engage in “self-help” (which often amounted to coerced labor on RD projects). This was a reflection both of the Diem brothers’ interest in “Personalist” ideology, which insisted on the centrality of individual, notionally-volunteer action, and of the Diem regime’s disinclination to expend resources on the countryside that could instead be put into the Army or used to secure loyalty from officers and officials. How much the post-Diem GVN officials or the CIA agents working with them to form the Revolutionary Development cadres after 1965 knew or cared about Nhu’s Personalist vision, or whether they simply thought that in a country where established politics was clearly unpopular that “revolution” was a good brand to deploy, is unclear.<sup>169</sup>

From early on, the RD teams and their American advisors used social services provision as an intelligence-gathering tool. A CIA agent, Tom Donahue, developed the “Census Grievance,” wherein RD cadre would fan out in villages and ask the inhabitants both about material needs that the South Vietnamese government might not be meeting, and about NLF activity in their areas. Donahue and the other American and South Vietnamese officers involved in setting up the RD cadre saw Census Grievance as both social service provision – when the budget was there, anyway – and explicitly as an intelligence-gathering tool that could help direct the “counter-terror” missions RD cadre

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<sup>168</sup> Valentine, *The Phoenix Program* 55-70

<sup>169</sup> Thomas Ahern, *The CIA and the House of Ngo* (Langley, VA; Center for the Study of Intelligence 2000) 157-159

embarked upon. These same agents understood the RD teams as precursors to the Phoenix Program. They were at work forming DIOCCS and PIOCCS for intelligence gathering and counter-infrastructure strikes before Komer came on the scene and before Phoenix had an official institutional existence.<sup>170</sup>

Opinions differ as to how much importance Robert Komer specifically gave to such Phoenix precursors before he took charge of CORDS, though the range of opinion seems to converge on the idea that Komer knew about and supported the RD teams and counterterror as a concept.<sup>171</sup> Komer, before and after his time as chief of CORDS, tended to write more in terms of high-level bureaucratic organization and functioning than about what, specifically, subordinates should be up to. What we do know is that the basic structure Komer everywhere insisted upon: all “other war” tasks (i.e. all civil affairs, aid work, police assistance, and paramilitary counter-infrastructure warfare) run by a single manager, at every given geographical level of the war (district, province, corps, and country), for the purposes of unity of command and intelligence sharing. The question of whether this structure would have placed more focus on the developmentalist side – civic action, “hearts and minds,” et al -- had the Tet Offensive not intervened is impossible to answer with any certainty.

But Komer’s comrades in the CIA, well before he arrived in country, were already moving towards a model where developmental work was woven into intelligence-gathering specifically for counter-infrastructure attacks. This was in line with many aspects of European counterinsurgency doctrine (indeed, Commonwealth officers such as the Australian Ian Tiege worked alongside CIA officers on Phoenix precursors) whom we

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<sup>170</sup> Valentine, The Phoenix Program 67-69

<sup>171</sup> Valentine, The Phoenix Program 146-149; Jones, Blowtorch 165

know Komer read and respected.<sup>172</sup> Ultimately, it was this CIA-developed Phoenix structure that Komer instantiated across South Vietnam with CORDS. Whether CORDS just happened to run Phoenix as part of its larger program or whether Phoenix was the true core of CORDS is in certain respects a moot question. They were isomorphic to each other both in structure and in general purpose.

Phoenix attracts attention both from those critical of the American war in Vietnam and those supportive of it for apposite reasons- for critics, because they see it as brutal and cruel; for supporters, because they see it as the glimmer of an alternate reality where the US won, if only it has pursued Phoenix early or assiduously enough. The brashest of academic apologists for the Vietnam War, Mark Moyar, even proclaims that Phoenix was a success- this is in keeping both with Moyar's riding the wave of post-9/11 counterinsurgency enthusiasm and his laying the blame for American failure in Vietnam on failure of nerve. He is half-right. Phoenix was relatively successful, though at no point did it ever truly achieve Komer's dream of a system that would unify American and South Vietnamese intelligence and counter-infrastructure efforts.<sup>173</sup> It killed many important NLF political and military officers with less expense and collateral damage than the "big war" generally did. The NLF was genuinely worried by the program.<sup>174</sup>

In the end, though, the Saigon government was overthrown and Phoenix could not stop it. This, given the lofty promises of victory made by leaders of CORDS/Phoenix, renders it a failure. It ultimately came to grief for many of the same fundamental structural reasons

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<sup>172</sup> Valentine, The Phoenix Program 49-51

<sup>173</sup> John Tilton, "Phung Huang Reexamination" Report dated 07/29/1971 (Box 11, Henry Lee Braddock File, Pacification Study Group)

<sup>174</sup> Moyar, Phoenix and the Birds of Prey 271-280; Gabriel Kolko, Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience (New York, The New Press 1985) 397-400

that America was doomed to fail in Vietnam from the beginning. The reports of Phoenix officers tell of the same unreliable local allies and strategic confusion that American narratives of “conventional” war in Vietnam tell. More than fixable problems, the failure of South Vietnamese institutions to produce results, or of American aid to do more than keep a moribund client state barely alive, were issues with their roots in the very foundations of the political situation in Vietnam. The Saigon regime lacked legitimacy, and the NLF did not. No amount of aid would grant the Saigon regime legitimacy, and to uproot the NLF would entail destroying Vietnam. A sustainable US-allied South Vietnam was a contradiction in terms from the beginning.

After Tet, the ways in which South Vietnam would need to be built with security in mind became increasingly explicit. The RD cadre joined other nation-building-cum-paramilitary bodies – the Regional Forces, the Popular Forces, the National Police – in Vann’s Accelerated Pacification Program and in numerous other of the welter of initiatives that made up the Vietnam War, undertaking raids in the countryside and aiding in Phoenix’s attacks on VCI. Much of the reportage sent back by provincial advisors to CORDS HQ concerns their efforts to make these forces over into effective fighters, and whether this meant field auxiliaries for the big-unit war, effective adjuncts to domestic security operations such as Phoenix, or actual providers of “development” services varied from place to place and time to time, but tended towards paramilitarization as the war went on.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> MACV Pacification Plan: 1969, Report dated 05/24/1969 (Box 7, Pacification Study Group, CORDS Central File, RG 472, USNA II); August 1969 Kien Phong Province Report (Box 14, Kien Phong Province Advisors Reports, Province Advisor Reports, CORDS Central File, RG 472, USNA II)



Komer's successor as head of CORDS (and future CIA director) William Colby insisted that Phoenix was a concept, not a program. In this conception, when counterinsurgents undertook actions – raids, propaganda, Colby's pet project of bolstering the National Police – that aided in the destruction of the NLF's civilian political infrastructure, they were partaking of the Phoenix project, whether or not Phoenix was their home in some bureaucratic sense. While this has become something of a defensive shibboleth for apologists in the years after Phoenix's crimes were revealed, it was also something Colby was writing at the time.<sup>176</sup> One need not accept this argument in its exculpatory mode to understand its descriptive merits. Notionally, anyone attacking VCI was participating in Phoenix, the concept, and this was more important in Colby's telling than Phoenix, the institutional body with actual (indictable) employees attached to it, though the intelligence centers dedicated to Phoenix purposes give a certain programmatic reality to the concept that Colby's statements elide.

More to the point, Phoenix as a concept outlived the war it tried and failed to win. The strategic building and use of developmentalist nation-building to embed counterinsurgent forces within a population and to render that population legible was not unique to Phoenix. But Phoenix, given its post-Tonkin birth, post-Tet rise to prominence, and post-Vietnam War status as a missed opportunity, was unique at the time in terms of how it negotiated the relationship between development and security with which counterinsurgency doctrine always struggled. Phoenix and CORDS, and interpretations of them by later generations of counterinsurgents and their academic supporters, embodied a shift towards understanding national development in directly securitarian

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<sup>176</sup> William Colby, Report on Internal Security dated 12/12/1970 (Box 12, General Files, Pacification Study Group, CORDS Central File, RG 472, USNA II)

terms. Instead of directing the turbulence of revolution into liberal democratic channels, it skimmed the froth of chaos that revolution generates to fuel a machine that would eliminate revolutionary or otherwise unfriendly elements. It was a mode of counterinsurgency with its eyes on present Vietnam, not on the future Vietnam Kennedy-era counterinsurgents imagined. This proved to be a potent example for leaders of wars on a strict timetable. Time and budget constraints work to preclude grand reconstructive visions and to encourage the laying-on of some socially redemptive gloss to counterinsurgency wars in order to belay home-country dissent- not an easy combination of circumstances.

Vietnam took up the vast bulk of counterinsurgents energies as it was going on (it has been over forty years and it still takes up a certain amount). But other counterinsurgency programs at roughly the same time as CORDS reveal the same reconceptualization of the relationship between the counterinsurgent state, its population, and its enemies. The (somewhat ironically-named) Camelot Program, began in 1965 and undertaken by the US Army's Special Operations Research Office operating out of American University, sought to develop a massive database of social facts on assorted restive societies (starting with several Latin American countries) for use in modeling counterinsurgencies and, if the need arose, guiding strategy if the US became involved in internal wars in countries studied.<sup>177</sup> Journalists revealed the program to the public and a diplomatic row with some of the countries it studied led to Camelot's termination before it could finish any of its national studies, but the ambition is evocative of the kind of instrumental fact-gathering that would come to propel CORDS. DARPA-funded studies in the Thai countryside –

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<sup>177</sup> Camelot Program file, AUSORO records, American University, Washington DC

including those of Charles Murray, before he began his career of reviving race science – took the aid programs established under the developmentalist auspices of the Kennedy and even Eisenhower eras and tinkered with ways in which they could be turned into instrumental modifiers of behavior in restive populations, often via the expedient of withholding food supplies.<sup>178</sup>

At its most fundamental, counterinsurgency entails the management of popular energies, towards ends that populations in revolutionary situations typically do not gravitate towards- support for a hegemonic power and its clients and a managed liberalism with more or less democratic formal structures (if often undemocratic in practice). As the war in Vietnam wore on and as some of the promise of the height of the postwar boom in the capitalist countries began to wear off, the notion that this management could take place via engaging the hopes and aspirations (real or imagined) of the people of the developing world began to fade. This notion of developmental counterinsurgency and “winning hearts and minds” never was entirely effaced from the doctrine. Instead, counterinsurgents instrumentalized it in the service of a new idea of the state which they would construct to manage revolutionary turbulence. Development and nation-building came to be seen less as end goals and more as means towards the creation of a subtly different sort of society, a state whose main project was rendering its population legible and controllable as a goal in and of itself. Learned in Vietnam, this shift would prove fundamental to counterinsurgency’s trajectory going forward.

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<sup>178</sup> Eric Wakin, Anthropology Goes To War: Professional Ethics and Counterinsurgency in Thailand (Madison, Center for Southeast Asian Studies 1998) 98-101

### **Counterinsurgency and the Emergence of Neoliberal Governance**

A linguistic shift occurred after the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and the introduction of large numbers of American conventional combat troops into South Vietnam: “counterinsurgency” was still in use, but in the language of MACV and the Pentagon the term “pacification” became more common. Counterinsurgency was a strategy, an organizing concept for a given conflict as a whole; pacification was a job, a single line item on the array of tasks facing the massive, multifaceted American-led military machine in Vietnam, much like logistics, air support, and so on. From the failure of the Strategic Hamlet Program to the end of the Vietnam War, the development of the counterinsurgency project took place largely through refining the methods of pacification in the context of a larger, conventional war, as well as efforts to raise the priority of pacification to the level counterinsurgents thought it deserved.

The period between 1967 and 1973 in particular proved critical for the shape counterinsurgency would take after the end of the Vietnam War. Counterinsurgency would reemerge as a strategic concept (as well as continuing on as a task, ala pacification) after its defeat in Vietnam. But the change in conceptualizing pacification/counterinsurgency also entailed a change of focus, from ends to means. Pacification between 1967 and 1973 drew out the elements of counterinsurgency that emphasized developing tools and methodologies for rendering populations legible and pacifying them, and sidelined the strains that entailed reconstructing societies along counterinsurgent lines. This change would characterize counterinsurgency to the present day.

This does not mean that counterinsurgency lost its broader social vision- far from it. Counterinsurgency in this period developed along lines parallel to those drawn by other liberals of the period, who wove methodologies of economics or social policy – monetarist economics, behaviorist social science, neorealist international relations -- into comprehensive social visions without necessarily meaning to do so. In all of these one could read a design of the shape of society in the methods and means to manage a given social problem, a set of ends divined out of notionally value-neutral means. These visions came to partially constitute neoliberalism as a mode of governance and as a worldview. Counterinsurgency, as it developed after the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, deserves to be ranked alongside these other intellectual formations that began life in Cold War liberalism but which played a formative role in the neoliberalism that would succeed it.

As with neoliberalism more broadly, all of these modalities, including counterinsurgency, functioned by (and arguably existed in order to aid in) bracketing questions of value, politics, and power. These brackets allowed those operating within the modalities a certain enhanced freedom to develop intellectual and operational frameworks devoted to conceptualizing, debating, refining, and implementing strategies to meet certain goals – economic development, crime reduction, educational attainment -- without the intellectual labor or uncertainty of questioning the goals themselves.

One of the signal transitions from the Kennedy period to the Johnson and Nixon administrations in terms of Vietnam war strategy was that counterinsurgents, while continuing to insist that had they been listened to more in the beginning the situation facing them would have been better, left off articulating such broad sociopolitical visions of the Vietnamese future after the failure of Operation Sunrise and the deaths of Kennedy

and Diem. Counterinsurgents never ceased criticizing officers such as William Westmoreland for emphasizing the conventional, big-unit war over counterinsurgency, from Westmoreland's day to our own. But it was precisely the intense focus that MACV and much of the Pentagon directed towards attrition, bombing, and other "conventional" means of fighting the NLF that put the counterinsurgents of the post-Tonkin period in a position where their ideas could adapt into a more broadly-applicable framework. It is this framework that would live on as a core technique of neoliberal governance.

One aspect of the Vietnam War that encouraged this transition is a fact that Westmoreland's defenders seldom tire of ruefully pointing out: that without the security provided by conventional American combat troops, the pacification war could never have gone forward. More importantly, as the conventional war took on a logic of its own, it took the larger social question out of the hands of the counterinsurgents and directed their energy towards the development of means and methods, and the details of their implementation. The sheer destructiveness of the American war in Vietnam, the refugee crises, rapid urban growth, economic chaos, and social dislocation it created, rendered dreams of engineering the country along any given schema while the war was going on anachronistic. Ramping up the scale of the United States' commitment to the Vietnam War also accelerated the timetable according to which the American public expected results- the point of putting in hundreds of thousands of troops and billions of dollars into the war was to produce rapid positive results. This is an altogether different time-frame than most counterinsurgency strategists work with, including those who promulgated the models – most notably the Malayan Emergency and the Huk War – of successful counterinsurgency abroad at the time.

Instead, counterinsurgency in the wake of the Tonkin resolution became the management of the turbulent, ever-changing social and political situation the war created, the true sociopolitical legacy of Robert McNamara and William Westmoreland. The future towards which counterinsurgents after the Tonkin Resolution worked lost the shine and definition that the counterinsurgent horizon had during Camelot years and came to be defined negatively- the end of the NLF's ability to challenge the power of the Republic of Vietnam. This transition can be illustrated through reference to the signature counterinsurgency programs of the pre- and post-Tonkin eras: the strategic hamlets and the Phoenix program respectively. The hamlets, for their many failings, were meant to create a new Vietnam by forging it from the village level up. The Phoenix program sought to physically eliminate the NLF infrastructure, that is, to steer the fate of Vietnam by eliminating rival visions for its futures through the expedient of killing and imprisoning their exponents.

Throughout the morphology of neoliberal governing modalities, one discerns a peculiar double-game with norms. Critics often depict neoliberalism as an economic/philosophical acid dumped over society, burning away all norms and values other than those of (the peculiar neoliberal concept of) the market.<sup>179</sup> While neoliberal thought has proven generally effective at questioning and disrupting ideas of social solidarity widely-agreed during the post-WWII era, neoliberals are not unaware that markets come from somewhere and require support, be it institutional, normative, or in some other mode.

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<sup>179</sup> David Harvey A Brief History of Neoliberalism (Oxford, Oxford University Press 2005)

Recent scholarship has emphasized the relationship between neoliberalism and ideas of the state as well as neoliberalism and heteropatriarchal family norms.<sup>180</sup>

While neoliberal policy nostrums erode state power in many areas (whilst bolstering it in others) and the cultural changes free-market capitalism brings in its wake subvert many traditional cultural attachments, few neoliberals see themselves as being opposed to the state or the family tout court. Many key neoliberal thinkers see them both as indispensable supports for the market order and prime examples of institutions that market logic can bolster and improve. Indeed, at its most robust, in work like that of Gary Becker on the family or James Buchanan on the state, the neoliberal project makes a case that when functioning properly, powerful normative institutions such as the state and the family continuously re-inscribe the order of the market onto society. Neoliberalism rights the ship to allow these functions to continue as they should, for the benefit of the market order.<sup>181</sup>

The early American counterinsurgency efforts in Vietnam contained an important normative strain. Hilsman, Lansdale, Rostow, and the others – to a certain degree, John Kennedy himself – had a vivid, if unrealistic and inchoate, vision of what South Vietnam should and could be. Modernization theory in general was, essentially, a normative theory of economic development, insisting on the priority of normative systems over institutional arrangements, material factors, or anything else that may play into economic and social development. In this respect it made a fitting accoutrement to a Cold War

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<sup>180</sup> Bethany Moreton To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise (Cambridge, Harvard University Press 2009); Melinda Cooper Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism (Cambridge, Zone 2017); Quinn Slobodian Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism (Cambridge, Harvard University Press 2018)

<sup>181</sup> Gary Becker, Treatise on the Family (Cambridge, Harvard University Press 1981); James Buchanan Liberty, Market, and State: Political Economy in the 1980s (New York, New York University Press 1985)



liberalism that sought to combat supposedly godless, coldly instrumental Communism (and abjuring certain instrumental modes of thought to its right, such as fascism or the precursors to neoliberal market fundamentalism) by proclaiming its humanism. The norms in question included the bourgeois freedoms of speech, assembly, religion, and property; the value and continued existence of both material and cultural progress; due process of law; the structures of formal democracy; and economic prosperity understood as a matter of growth and individual (and family) consumption.

Much of the thrust of modernization theory drove towards finding ways to use social means to foster these individualist norms. The lineaments of counterinsurgency during the Kennedy years traced many of the lines modernization theory developed in its norm-fostering effort. In just the way that individual values and societal good were understood as creating a sort of positive feedback loop in “modern” societies such as the contemporary United States, so too would the form of the Strategic Hamlets envisioned by Hilsman and others – new, clean, rationally laid-out, encouraging of maximum peasant participation – follow their function in terms of providing “security” from the NLF and economic development for the Vietnamese countryside.

The normative aspects of counterinsurgency did not disappear once CORDS took the reins of the pacification effort, even to the extent it’s possible for any organization to efface itself of norms. Development, both political and economic, were still spoken of in reports and memoranda as important, and CORDS followed Vietnamese elections closely.<sup>182</sup> The “Revolutionary Development Support” element of the CORDS acronym was not an idle addition. CORDS oversaw youth programs, refugee relief efforts,

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<sup>182</sup> William Colby “Political Plan for Vietnam” Report dated 02/08/1969 (Box 5, Pacification Study Group, CORDS Central File, RG 472, USNA II)

education (both political and otherwise), and numerous other projects in line with the normative principles laid out by earlier American counterinsurgency efforts in Vietnam.

If Komer's reign at CORDS signaled a change in the normative charge of American counterinsurgency doctrine, it wasn't a matter of lowered moral standards, nor was it simple enhancement of official American cynicism. Komer talked about democracy and oversaw the assassination of civilian dissidents; Roger Hilsman and the other, notionally more idealistic, Kennedy-era counterinsurgents talked about freedom and oversaw the forcible relocation of thousands of villagers into what amounted to prison camps. The hypocrisy score is sufficiently close between the two models to make it an unhelpful comparative heuristic.

All the same, the consolidation of CORDS engendered a shift in how norms related to the counterinsurgency project. The promise of counterinsurgency, in any of its guises, is that security and development go hand in hand. Kennedy-era counterinsurgency projects such as the Strategic Hamlet program sought to generate security by promoting development (though they were never able to break the chicken-egg infinite regression loop of requiring security to foster development and vice-versa). CORDS reversed these poles (and remained trapped in an inverse of the same loop). While many of those involved in the CORDS project undoubtedly believed that the Revolutionary Development programs they fostered were beneficial to the people of South Vietnam, Komer and other upper-echelon leaders were always clear that the first priority of such programs was to render the population of the country legible, and the enemies within it, the NLF and its sympathizers, visible and vulnerable. The Strategic Hamlets were meant to be a reservoir for the energies of decolonization to be pooled and channeled towards liberal

development schemes. The myriad of territorially uneven programs administered by a welter of different American and Vietnamese agencies that characterized CORDS, more than directly affecting change, sought to track, trace, and measure the communities undergoing revolutionary upheaval. This processing system would then channel both the information gained and what it could of the violent passions of (counter-)revolution into the removal of dangerous elements.

“Revolutionary Development” entailed, along with assorted social welfare benefits, embedding cadre loyal to the Saigon regime as well as American advisers among the people of the countryside, engaging in censuses and surveys of popular opinion, fostering social services (including police), and encouraging local pro-Saigon organizations. In short, it involved creating a comprehensive grid of legibility over the South Vietnamese countryside, and arraying it with both attractors (social welfare benefits, community organizations) of informants and penalties for those who would remain outside of it. This ambition was always present in the American counterinsurgency project in Vietnam, as witnessed in the structure of the Strategic Hamlet program. Komer and CORDS placed it in the forefront and attempted to restructure vast swaths of both the American and Republic of Vietnam war machines around it. Komer sought to create a new, joint American-Vietnamese machine to feed the core of the CORDS system: the Phoenix Program and its counter-infrastructure strategy. Creating a self-sustaining structure dedicated to the illumination – and elimination – of rogue elements within the state became the purpose of the nation-building project.

In this way, Komer ushered counterinsurgency doctrine into conceptual line with other neoliberal governance techniques which were converging into familiar form at the same

time. Many such techniques, from changes in welfare policy and policing to monetarist economics, engaged with the normative standards of various political actors and movements, but in all of them, the norms were a means to an end. The end was a particular vision of governmental functioning, a harmonization of the supposedly-naturally occurring behaviors to create an orderly and prosperous social system and the removal of impediments to that natural harmony. In all cases, this was less of a total conceptual break with earlier liberal governing logics, such as that of Keynesian fiscal policy, Great Society-style welfare programs, or Kennedy-era developmentalist counterinsurgency. All of them sought to arrange systems – social welfare bureaucracies, macroeconomic regulation systems, strategic hamlets – that would create and maintain the natural harmony of interests that lies at the heart of the dream of liberalism of any variety, neoliberalism included.

Most of them sought to do so by taking actions that were both – barring the usual failings and hypocrises – driven by a variety of norms and meant to impart those same norms onto the systems (and those embedded within them) that they were constructing. Neoliberal governance forms often worked in a normative vein, but this was generally instrumental. Economists from the Chicago school as well as neoliberal legal philosopher Richard Posner engaged with conservative, often Christian norms surrounding marriage and sexuality not from any religious conviction, but from the idea that conservative family structures were the best supports for a market system and bulwarks against the social welfare state.<sup>183</sup> This instrumental relationship with norms – beyond the overarching value of a social system free from any state or social movement interference

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<sup>183</sup> Cooper, Family Values 25-66

which might encourage the independent power or agency of the working class and poor – runs throughout neoliberal governing forms. Counterinsurgency, as reconceived by Komer, partakes of this trend, and this change in the doctrine's lineaments since the Kennedy era helps explain its enduring appeal to decisionmakers who tend to prefer neoliberal governing techniques.

The central task of counterinsurgency -- managing the furies of revolution (and other forms of popular ferment, including counterrevolution in some instances) to the benefit of American power -- was destined to be a multigenerational project, with many iterations, internal controversies, and shifts in response to changing patterns of political forces. As an application of liberal governance in situations suboptimal to its flourishing, counterinsurgency would necessarily be sensitive to changes both in the intellectual conceptions of liberalism and in the real world conditions in which it sought implementation. Moreover, counterinsurgency was one of the great tasks of liberalism in the twentieth century, part of its bulwark against the revolutionary forces that defined much of the era. As such, it is only natural that counterinsurgency contributes, sometimes in a prefigurative sense, to changes within liberalism even as changes within liberalism work on it.

### **Conclusion: Liberalism and the Governance of Turbulence**

Insurgency and counterinsurgency clashed in round after round of intensifying struggle in the 1960s and early 1970s. The passions of decolonization fed insurgents; the strength of the United States at the height of its power, and its determination to reign in communism, fed counterinsurgency. These were sources of vast energy. Like a storm, drawing on the energy of pressure systems and cold fronts, their conflict raged over the world, reaching its most frightful intensity in Southeast Asia. As the Vietnam War ended both sides found their energy scattered and depleted. The sheer length, intensity, and scale of the struggle in Vietnam altered the relations of forces with which strategy, both that of the US and those who might oppose the US, must reckon.

By the final end of the Vietnam War in 1975, decolonization was a more-or-less established fact, only defied by increasingly isolated white settler states in Southern Africa. Moreover, it became increasingly clear that decolonization was not the great boon to international communism that western strategists in the 1950s and 1960s feared. Communist Vietnam quickly fell to fighting with fellow communist regimes Cambodia and China. Efforts on the parts of newly-decolonized countries to assert themselves en bloc made a splash – particularly their efforts at creating commodity-producer cartels – but these were fought and, ultimately, contained, on the plane of high-level diplomatic politics, in summit meetings and the chambers of the United Nations, not generally on the battlefield or among the masses of the people.<sup>184</sup> Vietnam may have proven that the

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<sup>184</sup> Vijay Prashad The Poorer Nations: Towards a Possible History of the Global South (New York, Verso 2014)

American colossus could be fought and beaten with a guerrilla strategy, but only at a ghastly cost. Some – the people of Angola, East Timor, Mozambique, Namibia, and Northern Ireland, to name a few – would follow the road again of insurgency again in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War. But both occupied people and occupiers would find other routes than those pursued by insurgent and counterinsurgent in the great vortex of midcentury Southeast Asia.

Counterinsurgency emerged as a mode of thought and action in response to new and, to the Western powers, frightening forms of self-assertion on the part of the people of the developing world. As the methods (and the larger international context for their application) changed, so too did the modes of response. The concomitant failures both of the American effort in Vietnam and of numerous developing-world popular movements to replicate the success of the National Liberation Front engendered substantial shifts in strategic and political thinking both in Western capitals and in guerrilla encampments. American strategic planners reacted strongly to the failure of Vietnam, with a substantial portion of the defense establishment eschewing not just counterinsurgency, but the sort of protracted, open-ended occupations and military commitments that were usually a precondition for counterinsurgency, tout court. Counterinsurgency doctrine and its proponents did not go away, but they did lose significant power and influence, especially in the US Army. The period from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s is typically seen in counterinsurgent intellectual circles as lost years, and for some, counterinsurgency only “came back” in the 2000s with the Iraq Surge.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins 1986 268-274); David Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era: Transforming the Military for Modern Wars* (Washington, D.C., Georgetown University Press 2009) 25-46; David Fitzgerald, *Learning to Forget: US Army*

For their part, strategists of a number of militant anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist movements, particularly those unable to engage their enemies in the same way the Vietnamese revolutionaries did the US and the Republic of Vietnam, took a new approach to guerrilla warfare. Rather than conceiving of their enemy strictly as the force occupying whatever they conceived to be their homeland, and their constituent people to be the inhabitants of that home, militants in the 1970s began to conceive their struggles in explicitly global terms, and to tailor their strategies accordingly. Palestinian militants, from groups such as Fatah and the People's Front for the Liberation of Palestine, were in the forefront of this reconceptualization. A number of factors inclined Palestinian militants away from strategies bound by the territorial dimensions of nation and region or by the political dimensions of the occupier, as is the case in the guerrilla strategic thought of Mao and Giap.

Perhaps prime among these factors is the transnational existence of the Palestinian diaspora. Other include the many-fold internal divisions within Palestinian nationalism which ruled out the sort of relatively united front the Vietnamese revolutionaries were able to present; the strength of the Israeli military occupation of the homeland they desired to liberate; and the long sequence of betrayals and repression Palestinian activists and diasporic communities experienced at the hands of purportedly-sympathetic Arab regimes such as Jordan and Syria. International guerrilla strategy made use of the increasing inter-connectedness of global society in the 1970s via advances in communications and transportation technology (including, crucially, international commercial air travel), as well as a genuine wave of internationalist left-wing militancy

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Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Practice from Vietnam to Iraq (Palo Alto; Stanford Security Studies 2014 39-59)



that arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s, inspired in part by the revolution in Vietnam. Moreover, also inspired by Vietnam and other guerrilla wars of the mid-twentieth century, there came to exist in leftist radical circles a certain romanticization of the abilities of small groups of highly-motivated militants to inspire revolutionary change via the force of their example (and the way that example could be broadcast and amplified via modern media), ala the *foco* strategy of Che Guevara and Regis Debray.

The Palestinians who made this shift saw themselves as global guerrillas, swimming in the sea of a global people opposed to the rule of the equally global power of the US and its allies. Palestinian militants never lost the connection between their actions and the guerrilla campaigns that preceded them, including the Vietnamese example. But globalizing the struggle changed the scale – and, inevitably, the methods – to such an extent that it shifted the conceptual grounds, both of the struggle and the counter to it. This is how terrorism/counterterrorism came to efface insurgency/counterinsurgency, for several decades starting in the mid-1970s. With changes in the pattern of the struggle came changes in the conceptualization of the politics surrounding both the struggles themselves and the methods used to pursue or hinder it.<sup>186</sup>

There exists a degree of mediation in both terrorism and counterterrorism that is absent from the classical guerrilla strategy pursued by Mao and Giap, even when guerrillas applied what most would agree were “terrorist tactics,” as during the Tet Offensive. The central divide of classical insurgency – occupier versus people – blur when other entities come into the picture, and nothing blurred this line (never an absolute in any event) more than terrorist strategy’s emphasis on global public opinion. Moreover, however much

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<sup>186</sup> Paul Joseph Chamberlin *The Global Offensive: The United States, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Order* (Oxford; Oxford University Press 2015)

classical communist insurgents may have borrowed from vanguardists such as Lenin, Mao or Giap's concept of popular struggle was much broader than that of later insurgents pursuing terrorist tactics. The latter are inevitably a matter of a small elite willing to mount spectacular, often suicidal, attacks, often far from home, enabled by small clandestine networks. The symbiotic relationship between population and militant remained in place, but the global strategy inevitably weakened it by bringing other factors into play- as illustrated when Japanese Red Army terrorists, acting on behalf of the PFLP, took advantage of the ubiquity of Japanese tourists the world over to mount bloody airport attacks in Europe in the 1970s.

Such attacks, in turn, were meant to place pressure not just on the occupier, Israel, but on Israel's allies such as the United States, Israel's enemies who could be seen as insufficiently oppositional (or who otherwise harmed Palestinians) such as Jordan and Egypt, or "global public opinion," which could leverage one, some, or all of those actors. This pressure would then translate to gains for the Palestinian national cause. This dynamic was not unknown to earlier guerrillas, such as the NLF in Vietnam, still less their counterparts in the Algerian Revolution. But it became both more central to guerrilla strategy and more abstract in the wake of the Vietnam War. In all, international terrorism in the 1970s and after operated on a much more abstract, symbolic plane than did revolutionary insurgent guerrilla warfare. The same is true for counterterrorism in terms of its relationship to counterinsurgency.

If international terrorism suited the straitened circumstances of Palestinian militants in the 1970s (and their imitators), counterterrorism suited those of the United States as its defense establishment processed – or else studiously avoided processing – its failure in

Vietnam during the same period. Terrorism had been around for some time, and there had been concurrent waves of terrorist panic – one surrounding the end of the Napoleonic Wars and fears of Jacobins and Bonapartists, another around the turn of the twentieth century centered on anarchists, yet another near the Russian Revolution which invoked fear of Bolsheviks – for a century before PFLP started making waves. There were aspects, alluded to above, that made international terrorism more salient than it was before in the 1970s, but they are not sufficient to explain, on their own, the eagerness with which actors within the American defense intellectual establishment not just took on terrorism as a target, but, as Lisa Stampnitzky brilliantly lays out, developed an entire new field of study around the phenomenon of terrorism.

Stampnitzky argues that while counterinsurgency and counterterrorism share many themes (and in some instances personnel, notably those clustered around the RAND Corporation), there's a fundamental conceptual difference at the heart of counterterrorism: counterterrorism conceives of the terrorist and counterterrorist as opposites. The terrorist is insane, irrational, driven by fundamentalism of one kind or another; the counterterrorist is not. Counterinsurgents were not above characterizing their foes as irrational, especially given the association in the structural-functionalist social science framework many of them carried between ideology and irrationality. But by and large, counterinsurgents understood themselves as the other side of the insurgent coin, as playing the same sort of game Mao, Che, or Giap played but on the other side- indeed,

many of them expressed a sort of wry admiration for their opposite numbers. Counterinsurgency sought to tap the same energies that insurgents did.<sup>187</sup>

Counterterrorism, especially as it developed in the later 1970s and into the 1980s, refused the idea that the energies that fed terrorism had any legitimacy or use to anyone but the worst actors. More than a moral attitude, this distinction both reflected and played into the dynamic of abstraction that defined international terrorism – and counterterrorism – as a strategy. The political ambitions of terrorism, such as a free Palestine, were quite distant from the means that Palestinian terrorist groups came to apply, a tragic corollary to the impossible situation the Palestinian people found themselves in thirty years out from the Nakba. For its part, the political ambitions of counterterrorism stopped at finding politicians willing to call terrorism evil and pursue robust counterterrorism strategies (such as funding elite counterterrorist units, and the think tanks that strategized for them). Counterterrorism only acquired the sort of grand social political scope that counterinsurgency had when counterterrorism was press-ganged into becoming a global strategy after 9/11- and almost instantaneously failed, bringing counterinsurgency into vogue again (to fail at a considerably slower, less embarrassing clip).<sup>188</sup>

Counterinsurgent writers, as a group, coalesce on a chronology that holds that the “counterinsurgency era” was definitely over when the US pulled out of Vietnam, if not before. When (or even if) a second such era began varies from account to account, but most are in agreement that if such an era relies on the US military establishment embracing counterinsurgency doctrine, it could have begun no again no earlier than 2006.

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<sup>187</sup> Liza Stampnitzky *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented “Terrorism”* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press 2013) 60-82

<sup>188</sup> Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror* 49-59

American military strategy in the aftermath of Vietnam rebuilt itself around the two things in which American strategists, then and now, have near infinite faith: declarative speech acts and aerial bombardment. Much of early counterterrorist strategy involved the former; the latter was near the heart of the strategies inherent in the doctrines promulgated by and associated with Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and Chief of Staff Colin Powell, which later came to be called “the Powell Doctrine.”

There was little unanimity in the US defense establishment in the years between the end of the Vietnam War and 9/11, as the various services and assorted strategists jockeyed over the shape of American posture in the world or aspects of strategic doctrine. But seemingly across the spectrum of people who mattered, from those engaged in the comparatively humble work of reestablishing command and esteem in the military such as Colin Powell to the techno-fetishists of the “Revolutionary in Military Affairs” grouped around Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, counterinsurgency was not just rebuked- it was simply off the agenda. Something – strategic discretion in terms of avoiding “endless entanglements” and seeking handy “exit strategies” before engaging in intervention, new military technologies, the changing nature of the world and the fall of international Communism – could always be enlisted by American defense leadership in the last quarter of the twentieth century to, if not declare insurgency and the dynamics that gave rise to it irrelevant (though the Rumsfeldian, neoconservative-aligned wing of the establishment came close), at least hand-wave it away in favor of more proximate, or

anyway genial, concerns. As far as counterinsurgents were (and are) concerned, the counterinsurgency era was definitively over.<sup>189</sup>

The era may have passed- but did counterinsurgency actual pass from the scene between 1975 and 2006? Service divisions play some role in this periodization. Counterinsurgent (and unconventional warfare in general) theorizing took on increasing importance in some areas of the civilian defense establishment, such as the CIA, as it waned in the military. Post-Vietnam counterinsurgents like Andrew Krepinivich and John Nagl thought mostly in terms of optimizing the performance of their branch, the US Army, not other branches or civilian actors such as the CIA. Much of late-twentieth century military doctrine (and the politics it answered to) prevented the US military from undertaking the sorts of prolonged presences in foreign countries that would force counterinsurgency to the fore of the military's attention. It did not prevent intervention in general, but drove it underground, often into the hands of civilian intelligence agencies. Counterinsurgents have always struggled for recognition of the validity of their doctrine (and the concomitant career rewards) as much as they have for their doctrine's application. This, more than any real cessation of counterinsurgency war, is what has led counterinsurgents to think of the post-Vietnam, pre-Iraq era as a recession for the doctrine. American counterinsurgency reduced in scale and was undertaken sub rosa (often illegally), by civilian intelligence services, not by the military; that defined the era of counterinsurgency's recession between 1975 and 2006, not counterinsurgency going away altogether.

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<sup>189</sup> Steven Metz and James Kievit, "Strategy and the Revolution in Military Affairs: From Theory to Policy" (Strategic Studies Institute, Carlisle PA, 1995); James Kittfield, Prodigal Soldiers: How the Generation of Officers Born of Vietnam Revolutionized the American Style of War (Washington; Brassey's, 1995)

This work lacks the space to make a full accounting for the changes counterinsurgency underwent in its decades largely in the hands of the CIA and applied to its covert wars, most notably in Central America in the 1970s and 1980s. Applied in struggles that, far from engaging the attention and efforts of the full Cold War defense establishment at the height of its power, was often undertaken illegally, hidden from Congressional oversight, counterinsurgency became part of a shadow world of what scholar Michael Klare defined as “low-intensity warfare.” Counterinsurgency became part of a spectrum of options for waging the late Cold War in a context of continuing – but increasingly fractured and multipolar – anti-colonial struggle and post-colonial power struggles within the developing world, and in this it was joined by what Klare calls “proinsurgency,” the nurturing and supporting of insurgency in unfriendly regimes. While not unknown to the American intelligence community before 1975, as witnessed by its support for anti-Castro Cuban movements and opposition to Mossadegh in Iran, proinsurgency came into its own after the end of the Vietnam War, as open intervention became a less viable option for American power. Support for the Contras in Nicaragua, Jonas Savimbi’s UNITA in Angola, and the mujahedin in Afghanistan in their insurgencies against leftist power bases joined American support for the right-wing regimes in El Salvador and Guatemala against the peasant insurgencies besetting them as coequal parts of American Cold War strategy.<sup>190</sup>

Many of the lineaments of counterinsurgency that had been forming in the CORDS years grew more defined under CIA aegis in Central America. A number of factors served to

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<sup>190</sup> Michael Klare, “The Interventionist Impulse” in Michael Klare Low Intensity Warfare: Counterinsurgency, Proinsurgency, and Antiterrorism in the Eighties (New York; Pantheon Books 1988) 49-80; Peter Kornbluh, “Nicaragua: U.S. Proinsurgency Warfare Against the Sandinistas” in Klare, Low Intensity Warfare

sever, nearly completely, the link between counterinsurgency and any sort of progressive, liberal ideology that counterinsurgents liked (and would later learn to like again) to tout. Being largely underground, counterinsurgents felt less need to manage the American public and gain their approval. In the aftermath of Vietnam and numerous revelations of abuses by the defense establishment and the Presidency, the public, particularly liberals, were less likely to grant that approval in any event than they were to be before (or since). What's more, under the Reagan administration, liberalism, long an assiduous foe of communism the world over, came to be semi-officially understood as soft, unfit for Cold War struggle. One glaring piece of evidence for this is the way that counterinsurgency in the 1980s existed cheek by jowl – undertaken by the same agencies, with much of the same personnel and budgets – with proinsurgency which encouraged forces, such as the mujahedin, even less capable of pretending to be liberal or democratic than Diem or his successors. Democracy in general came to be understood as less central to freedom by many on the Western side of the late Cold War, even the (neo)liberal conception of it, than it once was.<sup>191</sup>

Counterinsurgency never lacked some remnant of its Cold War-era aversion to open expressions of reactionary sentiment on the part of its foreign partners- some counterinsurgents, then and now, blame Diem's fall in part on the odd, vaguely-right-wing but certainly anti-liberal mishmash philosophy of "personalism" that he pursued. But counterinsurgency's avowed liberalism grew less unanimous as the Reagan period went on. The closer to the situation on the ground in El Salvador a given counterinsurgent got, the clearer it was that the middle ground that the Carter administration (and, early on

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<sup>191</sup> Michael Latham The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy From The Cold War to the Present (Ithaca, Cornell University Press 2011) 177-182



at least, the Reagan administration as well) tried to steer between the FMLN guerrillas and the openly revanchist right-wing death squads barely existed. The CIA seldom had a problem, even in the more liberal periods of the Cold War, funding far-right actors. As Cold War conservatism came into its own alongside neoliberalism in the Reagan period, counterinsurgents erased the idea that the sort of freedom they had to offer to the people of the developing world was mutually exclusive with what far-right actors such as CIA asset and Salvadoran death squad leader Roberto D'Aubuisson, Angolan rebel leader Jonas Savimbi, or mujahedin Gulbuddin Hekmatyar had to offer.<sup>192</sup>

This was “negative freedom” as applied to Cold War politics. While neoliberalism, either in its mainstream domestic mode or as it influenced the counterinsurgency modality, is not totally opposed to welfare state measures (if they can be argued to ultimately safeguard market structures- witness the approval of figures like Milton Friedman for certain universal basic income schemes), it entails a very different idea of people and communities as political actors. Reaganite pro-insurgency in Nicaragua, Angola, and Afghanistan possessed some pretense of engaging the political energies of the people of those countries, though in Nicaragua it was very difficult to sustain the fiction that the Contras were popular and in Angola it was clear to most observers that Savimbi's UNITA relied on tribal divisions and a cult of personality (along with American and South African aid) to sustain itself more than on any groundswell of support among the Angolan people as a whole. Conservative activists connected to these pro-insurgency campaigns – including a young Jack Abramoff – sometimes entertained an image of

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<sup>192</sup> William LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill; University of North Carolina Press, 1998) 219-236; Dan Siegel and Joy Hackel, “El Salvador: Counterinsurgency Revisited” in Klare, *Low-Intensity Warfare* 115-121

themselves as swashbuckling guerrillas for freedom, outdoing the heirs of Che and Mao at their own game, in a manner that might be familiar to counterinsurgency enthusiasts of a more liberal stripe in the early 1960s. But this was largely the *schadenfreude* characteristic of a certain sort of spy- or more often, a certain sort of spy-hanger-on. Sustaining a government is harder than undermining one, as the CIA out of all the arms of the American defense establishment is in a position to know. That sort of sustenance demands a more robust and realistic assessment of a given political situation and possible responses to it, even if these emerge in spite of an ideological interest in avoiding that sort of reckoning. This was the project that defense thinkers, largely grouped in and around the CIA, shaped existing counterinsurgency ideas to meet, particularly in El Salvador and Guatemala.<sup>193</sup>

While American counterinsurgency doctrine would, again, come to evince concern for the material conditions of the populations it seeks to manage and encourage practitioners to ameliorate them, there was little in the way of the sorts of popular-welfare projects undertaken by the American-trained and advised counterinsurgency efforts in Central America. Indeed, there was barely any pretense that American counterinsurgency as applied in El Salvador and Guatemala, largely in the form of training and aid to regime military forces, would result in a better future for Salvadorans or Guatemalans, except in the strictly prophylactic sense of preventing whatever sort of bad future Communist insurgents allegedly had in store for them. Given that the largest massacre in the history of the western hemisphere since the end of the Spanish conquests, the El Mozote massacre of 1981, took place by US-trained “elite” counterinsurgency troops in the

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<sup>193</sup> Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 1962) 192-194; Sam Kleiner, *Meet the Conservatives Who Campaigned for Apartheid South Africa* (The Nation, 07/09/2013)

Salvadoran Army's Atlacatl battalion, this was barely even a fig leaf. Indeed, rather than attempt to cover themselves by reference to an ideologically-defined greater good, the Salvadoran regime and its American allies covered up the old-fashioned way: with a cover-up, an effort to keep the story of El Mozote from getting out. After all, as one CIA hand in El Salvador put it: "the death squads worked."<sup>194</sup>

Some of this was the simple brutality of power unchecked by restraints or oversight, applied to people understood – by both the regimes who governed them and the regimes' allies – as culturally (and, without usually saying as much, racially) inferior, justified by the then four-decade-old Cold War consensus. But it also illustrated just how far liberalism had come from the halcyon period of the mid-Cold War in terms of its conception of governance. If the US-backed counterinsurgent states in Guatemala and El Salvador (or the US-backed insurgents in Angola, Nicaragua, and Afghanistan) offered virtually nothing to their people – except for punishment for their transgressions – that is both due to material/political circumstances and perfectly in keeping with neoliberal principles of government's purpose. Whatever it is previous generations of counterinsurgents, such as those who implemented the Strategic Hamlet Program, might have promised the people of Morazan had one transplanted them to 1981 El Salvador – new homes, political representation, an opportunity to channel their political energies into a (counterinsurgent-managed) nationalist democratic liberalism -- neither the tiny, autocratic governing elite of that country, nor the CIA men who armed and trained the Atlacatl battalion, nor the CIA's civilian politician bosses in Washington, considered advisable for governments to offer as a general rule.

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<sup>194</sup> Mark Danner, The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War (New York; Vintage, 1993 110-139); LeoGrande, Our Own Backyard 235

To the extent government interacts with populations under neoliberalism, it does so to create space for the logic of the market to work. This means both institutional and geographic space. Reagan administration officials attempted to use their aid, especially early in the process, to steer the Salvadoran military away from unsightly extremism, even as Ronald Reagan himself speculated that the excesses of the right-wing death squads led by figures like “Blowtorch” – a familiar nickname in the history of counterinsurgency – Roberto D’Aubuisson were in fact false flags committed by leftists to discredit the right. More importantly, on the ground, CIA trainers working with the Salvadoran military (from which the death squads generally recruited) taught principles of legibility to their charges, where the social geography of their demesne could be divided up and classified according to salient characteristics – level of rebel activity, but also demographic traits – which could guide counterinsurgent action. These trainers were aware of what that sort of legibility would mean to the residents of places such as San Vicente or Morazan provinces in El Salvador- American proxies turning those provinces into free-fire zones. While this was not explicit in the case of CIA-backed counterinsurgency in Central America, the dynamic of reducing peasant and indigenous communities either to a state of bare, transparent legibility and compliance to the regime, or else to nonexistence (as the Guatemalan government eventually began to pursue regarding its Mayan population), aligns with neoliberal dynamics of clearing obstacles to a governing logic construed as natural and normal.<sup>195</sup>

Neoliberal, Reagan-era counterinsurgency faced the same problem of the population counterinsurgents – occupiers in general – always have. By the late 1970s, liberal ideas

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<sup>195</sup> LeoGrande, Our Own Backyard 223-226; Michael McClintock, The American Connection Volume Two: State Terror and Popular Resistance in Guatemala (London; Zed Books 1985) 240-258

about population began to change, just in time for the CIA's efforts to hamper democratization in Central America. Both neoliberal and Cold War liberal counterinsurgents agreed that populations are essentially politically inert. But there was a subtle and important shift as to what led to their activation, where counterinsurgency followed the shifting logics of liberalism in its rediscovery of the power of identity in the 1970s and after. Neoliberal counterinsurgents, like their Kennedy-era predecessors, still believed in the specter of agitational minorities, often the frustrated and ambitious, stirring up popular discontent and steering the people away from their otherwise contented lives. They still tied these agitators to a Cold War enemy; the Cubans in particular loomed large enough in reality and larger still in fantasy during the late Cold War, in Central America and southern Africa. But neoliberal counterinsurgency sought out an aspect in late-imperial colonial warfare that Kennedy-era counterinsurgents typically downplayed- inter-communal difference as a tool for legibility and control. Race, ethnicity, religion, and tribe all became highly salient variants for the management of populations under post-Vietnam counterinsurgency, and in a much more robust manner than allowing that some communities had been more thoroughly infiltrated by agitators than others. The return of difference coincided with both a variant on liberalism and a counterinsurgency doctrine much more skeptical of social solidarities than was the liberalism of the Cold War.

The manipulation of difference had always been present in "classical" counterinsurgency, especially as undertaken by the British in Kenya, Malaya, and eventually Northern Ireland. But American counterinsurgency doctrine in Vietnam did not play this element up. There were a number of reasons for this. The particular sort of racist attitudes the

American brought to bear in Vietnam saw the Vietnamese (and to an extent Asians in general) as a monolith. Vietnam is a relatively ethnically homogenous society; both the French and the American occupiers made use of resentments between the minority Montagnard peoples in the hills and the lowland ethnic Vietnamese majority to raise Montagnard units, but this was not something that could alter the strategic balance of the war. Religious differences were salient during the war, as well, with Catholics being regarded as reliable anti-communists (and as more “modern” than the majority Buddhists), and members of Vietnamese syncretic sects such as the Cao Dai were seen as potential power bases for anti-communism (the Cao Dai refused to second their militia to Edward Lansdale in 1966, even after no less a figure than Clark Clifford offered them assurances). But especially after Diem’s rule came to be seen in Washington as having foundered on the rocks of its narrow Catholic sectarianism, few in defense circles were willing to put much weight on the reed of religious difference.<sup>196</sup>

Moreover, the vision of society and population held by the defense policymakers in Washington and the social scientists who influenced them held that identity as we understand it would grow less and less salient as time went on and society “modernized.” This is one respect where liberals and communists of the mid-twentieth century, including the National Liberation Front and the Hanoi regime, stood in broad agreement with each other. Loyalties of ethnicity, race, religion, tribe, were at best bearers of features that might, by accident, aid the modernization process – the apocryphal attachment to learning on the part of Jews or of self-improvement on the part of certain

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<sup>196</sup> 12/10/1965 Edward Lansdale memo to Henry Cabot Lodge (Edward Lansdale Papers, National Security Archive, Box 1); “The Cao Dai” 05/01/1968 Edward Lansdale memo to Ellsworth Bunker (Box 1607, Provincial Advisory Team Records, CORDS Records, RG 472, US National Archives II)

Protestant sects – but more often, especially in “traditional” societies like those found in Southeast Asia, could only be understood as impediments. What was needed – according to both liberal and communist modernizers – was a remaking of the population which would, among other things, render what identity-based differences occurred in the population irrelevant, at best. It’s an open question of whether American defense thinkers would have disregarded this aspect of modernization theory and embraced exploiting communitarian differences had it been more strategically feasible to do so in Vietnam. But as it happens, the ideology (of both counterinsurgent and insurgent) and the situation aligned to place the exploitation of difference, rather than the encouragement of an instrumental homogeneity, on the back burner of American counterinsurgency during its big moment. Counterinsurgents such as Edward Lansdale and Roger Hilsman understood themselves as being in the business of improving, consolidating, and rededicating social solidarity in Southeast Asia, and would never have allowed that they were breaking it down. The ascension to modernity in their conception of development may have been stressful, but ultimately it made a greater whole, not more divisions.

Counterinsurgency as theorized and applied after Vietnam through the Iraq Surge brought identity into its conception of governance the same way the counterinsurgents of the time pursued their war more generally: *sub rosa*, through the back door, via proxy, with the occasional deniable wink. The recovery of the importance of difference in the broader culture during the neoliberal era has entailed a full spectrum of registers from genuine desire to learn from and respect the other to open bigotry. So has counterinsurgency’s application of the same. In whichever spirit it is applied, affixing lenses of communitarian difference to counterinsurgency’s legibility apparatus coincides with a

prevailing occupation of neoliberal governance: identifying and classifying population subdivisions according to their performances in a number of categories related to production, consumption, and the development of their human capital, and crafting policies to steer populations towards more optimal outcomes.

In much of what they did, the largely CIA-based counterinsurgents of the 1980s were aided by the indirect nature of their effort; they were largely responsible for training forces undertaking counterinsurgency missions in Guatemala and El Salvador, not performing the tasks themselves. If they taught that defeating insurgents meant rendering the communities in which they arose legible, which in turn meant creating categories and instruments by which the communities could be evaluated, they did not need to tell the sort of men manning the officer corps of those countries that this could – and almost inevitably would – mean evaluating communities along ethnic, religious, geographical, and class lines. El Mozote was in an “excluded zone,” so far, so liberal, a designation based on supposedly-objective metrics such as frequency of guerrilla contacts, etc.

But that zone in Morazan province, and that specific village in that zone, possessed characteristics that Salvadoran officers applying supposedly objective liberal governance logic could read into his grid of decision- ethnic Mayans, Protestant religion (this was before evangelical Protestantism in the isthmus was fully tamed by American interests), a history of resistance to landowners and their representatives in the Salvadoran government. Simply by existing in concentrations, communities with such traits were understood to be security threats, and were targets for indiscriminate violence, as in El



Mozote and elsewhere. In Guatemala, insurgent came to mean Mayan and vice-versa, leading to mass slaughter of Mayans.<sup>197</sup>

Much like the case of color-blind policing policies in the United States, preexisting communal divisions, neoliberal policy prescriptions, and the negotiations of thinkers and policymakers between those two concepts, as well as a general societally-accepted forswearing of open bigotry, interact in complex ways. This brings forth both complex adaptations to the legibility and control techniques of occupiers, and cracks in the façade of liberal governance as the contradictions involved drive communities to resist and collaborators to crave the ability to speak their prejudices – which are, after all, an important part of their legibility mechanism, their most important tool – openly. It was in Reagan’s interest (or Obama’s) to smooth over the inequitable demographic logic of the violent maintenance of the boundary lines that make up neoliberal society. The likes of Roberto d’Aubuisson (or Darren Wilson), left with the task of physically applying that violence, found themselves with other discursive motivations: self-exculpation, self-legitimation, evasion of consequences, the stammering fury of the spear-carrier left hanging by his bosses. These drives – one to hide the crimes that bolster the regime and one to speak the logic of the regime and its violence openly – clash, more and more openly, as the neoliberal order ages.

By the time the Reagan administration took charge of American foreign policy, the governance logic of liberalism had swung definitively away from governing through provision towards governing through delimiting. Instead of channeling the energies of a people into a project of creating a new society, liberal governance sought to manage a

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<sup>197</sup> Danner, The Massacre at El Mozote 11-20

people to channel its energies into a preestablished channel. The goal of counterinsurgency in Central America was that of rendering the turbulent populations of the rural areas legible for the purpose of governing, largely understood as the sorting of social solidarities into those acceptable to the regime and to those unacceptable. Counterinsurgents in late-twentieth century Central America often defined the latter via demographic traits, such as Mayan ethnicity, and pursued the violent breaking of social solidarities – the elimination of communities -- perceived as threats to the existing governing structures. The sort of social programming-cum-social mapping present in the CORDS era barely existed, let alone the vaunted developmentalist ambitions of Kennedy-era counterinsurgency projects. After defeat in Vietnam but leading up to America's ultimate victory in the Cold War, counterinsurgency continued to pace shifts in liberal governance modalities, as neoliberalism replaced the managerial liberalism of the high Cold War. Freedom and governance came to be understood as operating largely in the negative: the reduction of threats to the proper, natural order of the market and the rebuilding of that order where needs be.

As it turned out, it would be the issue of rebuilding supposedly natural free market orders that led to the reuniting of the civil and military ends of the American defense establishment, as well as a partial reintegration of “classic” developmentalist midcentury counterinsurgency, into the “second counterinsurgency era” of the early twenty-first century. Both Bush administrations proved capable of containing the threat to the American-dominated world order posed by Saddam Hussein's Iraq. But the younger Bush and his successors proved incapable of rebuilding that order – any order – in Iraq

after going past his father by ending the Saddam regime and attempting to install a US-friendly liberal democratic regime in the country.

If Reagan-era counterinsurgency is outside of the scope of this work, the “second counterinsurgency era” associated with David Petraeus and the Iraq Surge is outside of the scope of the historical profession in general, at any rate until sufficient time has passed and the archives become available. One important aspect of the development of the counterinsurgency governmentality in the wake of the Iraq War is the context of an intensively self-reflective defense establishment. Earlier counterinsurgency theorists looked far afield in history to find lessons for Malaya or Vietnam, but twenty-first century counterinsurgents (and strategists within the developed-world militaries in general) have a degree of support – financial, political, technological -- for research of all kinds, as well as mandates to apply “Lessons Learned” (to borrow the title of one influential US Army body), of the sort that Kennedy- or Reagan-era counterinsurgents could hardly dream. A dense thicket of mutually-entangled defense centers, think tanks, schools, and journals such as *The Small Wars Journal* encourage a body of defense intellectuals – a much larger, more thoroughly professionalized body than ever existed before – to produce endless volumes of analysis and to take in a vast swath of material for that analysis, scrutinizing conflicts past and excavating counterinsurgent role models. The practical upshot of this was that the second counterinsurgency era entailed a conscious engagement with the legacy and writings of the first counterinsurgency era, along with taking on characteristics that counterinsurgency doctrine adopted after that era’s fall.

Though much of the actual action of the counterinsurgency wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (and given the global reach of the War on Terror and the partial application of counterinsurgency concepts to it, any number of potential other places) was and remains secret, the wars themselves were national efforts, openly involving both the US military and civilian agencies. As such, the conversation around counterinsurgency was anything but sub-rosa in the early decades of the twenty-first century. Journalists fulsomely praised David Petraeus as a strategic genius, the US Army/Marine Corps Field Manual-Counterinsurgency became a bestseller, and the reflected glamor of Petraeus and counterinsurgency – so ardently yearned for after the bloody failure of Rumsfeldian “shock and awe” to even meaningfully consider postwar outcomes – shone on counterinsurgent writers and thinkers in a manner not seen since the days of Edward Lansdale, if then.<sup>198</sup>

Few of what the counterinsurgents of the twenty-first century proposed was truly new-something some counterinsurgents admitted at times. To the extent there was significant innovation, it was in the ancillary purpose of counterinsurgency, which goes along with managing turbulent populations abroad: managing potentially restive (and enfranchised) populations in the home country undertaking the counterinsurgency campaign. After the failure of Rumsfeldian “shock and awe” strategy to even consider post-invasion outcomes in Iraq and years of bloody fumbling led by generals ill-equipped for occupation work, the American defense establishment, and to a lesser degree the American people, craved reassurance that things were in the right hands. David Petraeus could have been custom-built for that role: seen as steely and calm where Bush and

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<sup>198</sup> Thomas Ricks The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008 (New York; Penguin, 2009)

Rumsfeld blustered, thoughtful and bookish where Tommy Franks or Ricardo Sanchez came off as boorish or unimaginative; spare, self-reserved, open to both the lessons of the past and the possibilities of the future.

His (pre-Broadwell-affair-revelation) celebrity reflected on to counterinsurgency strategists, placing them in the public eye unlike any had been since the days of Edward Lansdale. Australian Army officer David Kilcullen, who served as an advisor to Petraeus in Iraq, saw his books become bestsellers. Anthropologist Montgomery McFate, founder of the Human Terrain Project, which sought to recruit social scientists to do strategic fieldwork in counterinsurgency zones, was widely feted in the media, which touched equally on her whimsical countercultural demeanor, her work with the military, and the ways in which she negotiated the supposed contradictions between the two (breezily, as it turned out). Petraeus's strategy in Iraq primarily involved lessening violence for a long enough time for the US to pull its troops out of the country with some semblance of credibility intact. Given that, providing a face to the war that the country as a whole, including a great many liberals who value the performance of expertise and cultural competence, could believe in may have been the single greatest strategic utility of second counterinsurgency era doctrine.<sup>199</sup>

We will not know the full effects of the actual content of the counterinsurgency doctrine applied in Iraq/Afghanistan/GWOT until more time has passed and archives are opened. One salient characteristic shared between the home-front-public-relations side of twenty-first century counterinsurgency and its substantive content is a focus on the strategic

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<sup>199</sup> George Packer, "Knowing the Enemy" (The New Yorker, 12/18/2006); Noah Schactman, "Army Anthropologist's Controversial Culture Clash" (Wired, 09/23/2008); Thomas Ricks, "The COINdistas" (Foreign Policy, 11/30/2009)

value of finely-grained cultural knowledge in counterinsurgency. The seed of the exploitation of the politics of difference, planted in the aftermath of Vietnam, blossomed into the light in the works of figures like David Kilcullen, Montgomery McFate, and Jim Gant, an Army officer and author of the “Tribe By Tribe” memo, later published in book form. As the title of Gant’s work suggests, twenty-first century counterinsurgency placed much stock in managing and utilizing tribal identity differences, as the key to legibility in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the main handle by which to organize security, services, or whatever else. This was in many respects directly analogous to the sort of politics of tribal division pursued by colonial officers since the early modern period, though typically (especially at the higher levels, facing the home-country public) this was swaddled in a language of respect for diversity and desire to comprehend the other borrowed from late twentieth century cultural anthropology (and, one suspects, the contemporary field of human relations).<sup>200</sup>

One of the features that made counterinsurgency attractive to early twenty-first century liberals wasn’t just the strenuousness and mission-calling that appealed to their midcentury equivalents (in some cases, presumably, parents), but the idea that cultural knowledge, anthropological thinking, and thoughtful, even sensitive, diplomacy, is what wins wars. As counterinsurgency theorist David Nagl put it to no less an icon of early twenty-first century liberalism Jon Stewart, a counterinsurgent has to “be polite, be civil, be prepared to shoot everyone you meet.” Cultural intelligence and sensitivity, personal lethality (note that it goes “shoot everyone you meet,” not “call in an airstrike on etc.”),

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<sup>200</sup> David Kilcullen, “Twenty-Eight Articles” (Small Wars Journal, 03/29/2006); Jim Gant, “One Tribe At A Time” (Small Wars Journal, 10/26/2009); Montgomery McFate and Janice Laurence, eds. Social Science Goes To War: The Human Terrain System in Iraq and Afghanistan (Oxford; Oxford University Press 2015)

and the frisson between the two, with all the pathos it implies, spoke powerfully to a certain mindset. As for its effects on the actual course of the struggles in which it was deployed, counterinsurgent popularizers such as journalist Thomas Ricks praise Petraeus, counterinsurgency, and the attendant tribal diplomacy as the architects of the “Anbar Awakening,” where the Sunni tribes of Anbar Province in Iraq turned on Al Qaida after careful politicking by clever Army counterinsurgents, thereby winning the war and allowing the troop drawdown. Anbar Province later became the birth place of the Islamic State, which was spurred both by long-standing Sunni-supremacist tendencies in the region and the resentment caused by overtly sectarian policing – following its own politics of difference – by the Shia-dominated post-withdrawal Baghdad regime. But by this time, the new counterinsurgency had served its purpose for the Americans in Iraq- a plausibly deniable retreat.<sup>201</sup>

How strategists wove the disparate strands of governing technique into an overarching logic – from Iraq to the American homeland – during the second counterinsurgency era will require other works to trace. What unites the second counterinsurgency era with the first is a drive on the part of liberal powers to manage a turbulent world. The contexts of these struggles have changed drastically, from Cold War and decolonization to the unipolar moment of the immediate post-Cold War era and the emergence of many opponents to it, connected less by ideology (though radical Islamism shows up prominently) than by general dissent against the neoliberal world order. So, too, has the face presented to the world by liberalism changed, and many of its policy prescriptions,

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<sup>201</sup> Thomas Ricks, The Gamble 59-73; Patrick Cockburn, The Age of Jihad: Islamic State and the Great War for the Middle East (New York; Verso, 2016) 315-324

from the embedded, unitarian, welfare-state liberalism of the immediate postwar years, flourishing under the Beveridge Plan and military Keynesianism, to a market-driven, individualistic neoliberalism, which many of its earlier proponents believed had as a first task the dismantlement of what previous liberals had built.

Most of the analysis around the history of liberalism in the second half of the twentieth century stresses discontinuity. Glancing from the political records of Franklin Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan (or Barack Obama), or from the work of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. to that of Cass Sunstein, or simply from the background political assumptions of the Democratic Party in the 1960s to the 2010s, is enough to explain why that is.

But the truly important ideological formations – socialism, conservatism, liberalism – cohere across a wide (though, it's important to stress, less than comprehensive) spectrum of contexts along the length of modern history. They do this because they encapsulate distinct ranges of attitudes towards the most fundamental dynamics of political and social change extant in modern historical time. The basic questions of what a society defined by the activity of masses of people in a context of rapid and self-conscious change, especially economic and technological development, have not been answered definitively, regardless of the pretenses of actors across the ideological spectrum to have done so. This is true in no small part because while the questions remain the same, the context – the “facts on the ground” which provide the handle by which thinkers and/or actors could attempt to put into place their vision of the answers to the questions posited by modernity – change rapidly. At their most advanced, all of the ideological formations of modernity bear within them mechanisms to respond to these changing contexts, and varying explanations to what causes them.



As the nineteenth century progressed, liberals increasingly found themselves both politically and intellectually mediating between the claims of ideologies – and ideologues – to their left and right. Some of this was situational, reflecting the political positions liberals held in societies featuring increasing class struggle and other conflicts. Many strains of liberalism held (and hold) to the idea of the harmony of interests, that social (or international, or indeed most forms of) conflicts are not natural or inevitable and do not need to be resolved by the victory of one side or another. This inclined liberals to seek dynamics outside of the revolution-counterrevolution cycle that defined much of European and increasingly world politics starting after the French Revolution.

Seeking the harmony of interests did not generally entail a retreat from the politics of social conflict. But it did entail the enlistment of a staggering range of ideas, practices, and paradigms to redefine and steer politics and society in such a way that did not openly entertain either the overthrow of established structures, especially capitalism or class society, as a whole, or else the wholesale repression of social change and the regression of society to one or another safer point in the past. None of this is to imply that liberals did not impede liberatory social change in some circumstances, or did not aid it in others, or did not engage in repression in some cases or only engaged in repression across the board. In the broad history of ideology, virtually every means, method, and idea have been deployed by movements belonging to every ideological strain, even if some are more characteristic to one ideology than others. But much of the thinking and action behind liberalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be understood as an attempt to preserve or advance a number of principles and practices orthogonal to either the overthrow of established hierarchies or their bolstering. What these principles and

practices are vary between times and places, but typically include the “bourgeois freedoms” of speech, press, religion, etc., constitutional governance, social mobility, and market economy.

Assorted liberals throughout the twentieth century and beyond have striven mightily with one another over the decades attempting to boil the ideology down to a pure line. “Classical liberals” insist the ideology went wrong when Progressives and New Dealers allowed for greater government interference in the economy; what are now termed “social liberals” declare that any form of liberalism that did not make dismantling oppressions of race and gender a priority is no true liberalism. Whatever the term “liberalism” might mean in a given partisan polemical context, modifications to the suite of liberal values are typically responses to the tectonic shifting of the terrain of social struggle, and the efforts of liberals to keep their political feet. In some cases it involves shifting “right” or “left,” but it’s the act of negotiation that, in many respects, defines liberalism in the context of the turbulence of the politics of the modern era.

The Cold War, especially between the end of the Korean War and the rise of the Reagan administration, was a period where liberalism stood in a relatively clear definition as a political project in its own right. A number of factors went into this: the eclipse of the far right after the destruction of the Third Reich (and the absorption of much of what remained of the global right into a Cold War project helmed by liberals); divisions in the left, which encouraged cooperation between liberals and more moderate leftist elements, such as European social democratic parties; the overwhelming power of the United States; genuine fear (and often overestimation) of Soviet power and a conviction that the Soviets drove much of Communist agitation globally; and the ideological flexibility and

creativity displayed by liberals, primarily in the US and much of the rest of the English-speaking world, in navigating the turbulence of the most ferocious age of ideological conflict between 1914 and 1919. Contemporary liberals, especially American commentators, have made a trope of harkening back to the Cold War as an era of ideological confidence and moral certainty. This is not a notably accurate picture – it's hard to say a group of people that frightened of Communism was truly confident – but the fact that liberals draw it at all speaks to the contrasts in terms of ideological definition between their period and those they harken back towards.<sup>202</sup>

Liberals have, from at least the time of the French Revolution, had a fraught relationship with revolution as a concept. Indeed, many of the discursive means liberals have used to parse revolution – to separate the good from the bad and parse when precisely a given revolution goes from the former to the latter, to predict where they might spring up and what forms they might take, to consider alternatives, and so on – prefigure the concerns and methods they bring to other discourses, including governance.<sup>203</sup> Despite some enthusiasm for sudden overthrow of absolutist regimes in the decades surrounding the French Revolution, during the long arc of modern history, liberals became less comfortable with revolution as more radical ideologies, such as socialism and anarchism, grew to make the concept their own over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Liberal thought contained within it a strong and vital vein running from Alexis de Tocqueville to Matthew Arnold to Robert Michels to Walter Lippmann that considered revolution a necessary, occasional evil at best and the major threat to

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<sup>202</sup> Michael Ignatieff, "The Burden" (New York Times, 01/05/2003)

<sup>203</sup> Hannah Arendt On Revolution (New York; Penguin 1962); Francois Furet The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century (Chicago; University of Chicago Press 1999)

liberalism's values and accomplishments – moderately democratic constitutional states, bourgeois freedoms, and a capitalist world economy – at its more likely worst. Liberalism's task, in this vein, was in no small part to moderate social change in just such a way as to prevent revolutions from breaking out.

The anti-revolutionary strain of liberal thought profoundly influenced the structural-functionalist school that dominated liberal social sciences in the mid-twentieth century, and which played such a strong influence on counterinsurgency's social assumptions. But between the power and prosperity of the United States in the mid-twentieth century, and the crisis of decolonization, a strange shift occurred in liberalism's ongoing negotiation with revolution. The window of acceptable revolution opened, slightly and briefly. The "right kind of revolution" – one in line with contemporary liberal thinking, or anyway, useful to Cold War aims – came to be seen as something that the liberal superpower could allow, or even encourage. In this conception, the energies that revolution unleashed weren't to be dammed or dissipated by constitutional, cultural, or simple repressive structures- they were to be encouraged, channeled into the ends of the Cold War. Some of this came from hope generated by American success- much of it came from fear that the strains of decolonization and the Cold War would leave no other option.

The same admixture of confidence (generated in part by the eclipse of revolutionary and openly reactionary forces in the United States) and fear – of communism and its potential influence on the protean energies unleashed by decolonization – that helped define liberalism relatively sharply from its rivals to the right and left also helped generate the creativity that would enter into liberalism's renegotiation with revolution in the mid-

twentieth century. The signal product of that negotiation – which would long outlive much of the context of its creation – would be counterinsurgency doctrine.

At its most fundamental, counterinsurgency replicates one of the signal liberal responses to the tensions and agonies of the revolution-counterrevolution dyad: what counterinsurgency critic Laleh Khalili calls the replacement of politics by procedure and policy. In Malaya, Algeria, Vietnam, El Salvador, and numerous other points around the globe in the second half of the twentieth century, there existed situations that were, in the starkest sense, political: struggles over power, who would wield it and how, and how power would shape society. In each situation, there was an organized force dedicated to overturning an established relationship of power fundamental to the constitution of their societies as they existed at the time. Not only were their goals radical, but so were their means- the mobilization of the population as a whole, a prefigurative raising of the new societies they dreamed of creating to defeat the social order that actually existed. Revolutionaries pursued the hazards of guerrilla warfare, as outlined by Mao Tse Tung, the executor of perhaps the most shocking and total overturn of a given social order in modern times, both as a practical expedient given their material weaknesses and as a political good in and of itself. They believed that the rigors and organizational necessities that went into a successful guerrilla insurrection would mold the new society – and the individual people living within it – that they hoped to create.<sup>204</sup>

What many liberal counterinsurgents, especially in the 1960s, hoped to accomplish was to find something other than the radical overthrow of the existing society that would occupy the effervescent political energies of the populations of the developing countries.

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<sup>204</sup> Laleh Khalili Time in the Shadows: Confinement in Counterinsurgencies (Palo Alto; Stanford University Press 2013) 169-171

Given the state of midcentury liberal social thought about power and ideology, and given the chaotic situations on the ground in these countries, it makes sense that the form these efforts most often took was in attempting to channel the energies of decolonization towards questions of process, rather than of power. These processes were sometimes the processes of governance – participation in the formal governing structures of the countries in question, to the extent these structures allowed – but more often they were the process of economic development, understood by midcentury liberal social scientists as being every bit as schematic and comprehensible as the ways in which a bill becomes a law according to the US Constitution. This was the “real” revolution, according to figures like Walt Rostow, and the midcentury enthusiasm for Founding Fathers/American Revolution nostalgia was well-represented by counterinsurgents such as Edward Lansdale, who insisted the American revolutionaries were his model, and the best model for “democratic revolution” across Southeast Asia.<sup>205</sup>

Counterinsurgents often understood themselves as pursuing the strategies of Communist revolutionaries such as Mao, Che, and Giap against the acolytes of those very figures. This, like most clichés, serves to obfuscate more than it clarifies, but there is one important extent to which it is true. Just as Communist insurgent strategists pursued guerrilla war both as a practical necessity and a prefiguration of the sort of society they envisioned after the war was over, so too does the counterinsurgent reveal lineaments of the order they seek to build in the means they undertake to build it. The counterinsurgent’s never-ending process of attempting to find best practices, reform its bureaucracies for maximum efficiency, create better informational apparatuses, find the

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<sup>205</sup> Edward Lansdale *In The Midst of Wars: An American in Southeast Asia* (New York; Harper and Row 1972 341-342)

best people to undertake its tasks; these mirror the liberal preoccupation with refining and adapting the best forms of governance, over and above the questions of social power. All ideologies generate governmentalities. But none rival liberalism in terms of sheer fecundity of governmental logics, adapted to the wide variety of crises liberalism's position between liberation and hierarchy occasions. None approach the way liberals have of enshrining given governmentalities – in all of their subjectivity and changeability – as founding principles of a given regime, over and above “political” considerations of the distribution of power.

Even as counterinsurgency shed some of its high-modernist developmentalist gloss after the end of the Vietnam War, this prefigurative quality in counterinsurgency remains. Whether it was the strategic hamlets as villages of upwardly-mobile, newly-consumerist peasants or an Iraq whose tribal and communal relationships approximate contemporary liberal ideas about diversity, liberal counterinsurgency remains a liberal, ersatz form of people's war, undertaken by a power with a vested interest in avoiding the locally-occurring forms of popular organizing pursued by their opponents, in no small part because the occupying power in question intends on removing its people – soldiers and civil servants, generally – from the equation at the nearest opportunity.

Counterinsurgency, for all that it waxes and wanes in popularity in western military circles, continues to outlive the moment of its formation and remains an important and changing instrument in the repertoire of liberal governance, both responsive to and partially formative of changes in liberalism writ large over time. The problem of managing turbulent populations did not go away with the end of the Cold War, just as it did not come into existence after 1945. The late Cold War saw changes in the relationship

between the United States, insurgent movements, and the developing world at large, and the eclipse of large-scale leftist revolutionary activity with the fall of the Soviet Union and the concomitant refocusing of Western attentions, shifted the field of forces sufficiently as to engender substantial changes to both liberalism generally and counterinsurgency specifically.

If liberal society experienced an “age of fracture,” in Daniel Rodgers’s phrase, after the 1960s and into the era of neoliberalism, then so too did the array of threats liberals understood themselves as facing fracture. Communism was never the monolith presented to western publics by their ruling bodies. But enough of the revolutionary energy of decolonization and frustration with the status quo throughout the world was captured by Communists of various stripes in the mid-twentieth century that a liberal form of warfare designed to counter it – to mimic it and beat it at its own game – made sense. Substantial modifications to the doctrine, to allow for countering insurrections organized according to different political and social logics, would have seemed superfluous. This arrangement began to erode nearly the same time that the sort of consensus liberalism of mid-twentieth century America did. Neoliberalism came to replace the sort of liberalism Kennedy or Rostow would recognize, and while it presents the fractured face of a society of self-seeking monads, its logic is unitary enough. The movements embraced by turbulent populations living in the world neoliberalism has shaped come from a wide spectrum of religious fundamentalisms, nationalisms, the crime and decay fostered by neoliberal economic arrangements themselves, and every now and again, those bearing the red flag of old. Whether neoliberal counterinsurgency will adapt multiple frameworks to tackle each sort of insurgency, or whether it will apply the same logic towards them all, is as



open of a question as whether neoliberalism will continue as the central ideological logic of the global ruling class.<sup>206</sup>

While the geopolitical context changes, many of the factors that encouraged liberals of the mid-twentieth century to develop and employ counterinsurgency doctrine remain relevant today and look to do so for the immediate future. The United States (and, to a lesser extent, other liberal democratic powers) continue to attempt to regulate the world system through force, which in some cases leads to military occupations of fractious, turbulent, distant lands, or prolonged efforts to bolster friendly regimes beset by insurgencies. Masses gather and their energy finds outlets which are generally confusing or unfriendly to the liberal capitalist world order or the interests of liberal world powers—more, more fractious, and arguably more dangerous, outlets than the comparatively unified and straightforward ideologies of communism and decolonization. Counterinsurgents still seek to direct that energy into their preferred channels, both for positive reasons (genuine belief in the doctrine’s efficacy; visions of new, liberal democratic capitalist social orders in the developing world) and negative, mainly the impracticability of more directly suppressive measures of dealing with developing world turbulence for reasons of cost, economic, military, and diplomatic.

For all of those reasons, to say nothing of the many resources the US military in general and counterinsurgents in specific have poured into “lessons learned” centers and other nodes for the institutional memorization of strategic options, counterinsurgency remains in the toolkit of imperialistic liberal democratic powers. If there is something likely to change this – the sort of change that will reshuffle the way the major powers look at the

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<sup>206</sup> Daniel Rodgers, Age of Fracture (Cambridge; Harvard University Press 2011)

problems of insurgency, on the order of the changes wrought by decolonization which ushered counterinsurgency into the world – it would be similar epochal historical shifts in global political economy and in the actions of the masses to define their social worlds. Whether the spiral of crises brought by climate change, the rise of illiberal powers such as Russia and China to prominence on the international stage, or the sequential failures of liberalism in much of the world will occasion such a shift – will allow, encourage, force, or free liberal powers to embrace more robustly and openly destructive form of dealing with the determination of populations to steer their own destinies – only time will tell.

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