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Reconsidering American Strategy in Vietnam

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Americans long have sought answers, even blame, for their lost war in Vietnam. Literature on the conflict's military dimensions – at least those works arguing the war was winnable – contend the United States squandered its chances for victory in Southeast Asia because of a misguided strategy. Such narratives claim that, once President Lyndon B. Johnson deployed American ground combat troops to South Vietnam, General William C. Westmoreland, head of the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), pursued an ill-advised strategy of attrition. Rather than concentrating on population security and counterinsurgency, Westmoreland instead wrongly engaged in a conventional war aimed at little more than racking up high body counts.[1] Worse, the storyline continues, MACV's commander implemented this strategy despite being presented with a clear alternative from US Marine Corps commanders operating in the northern provinces of South Vietnam. There, marines focused more appropriately on winning the "hearts and minds" of the local population. Their supposed successes implied that Westmoreland had missed a grand opportunity to win the war in Vietnam.

Nowhere was this better illustrated than on *Life* magazine's cover in late August 1967. With his back to the camera, a young Vietnamese boy on crutches strolls beside an American marine carrying fishing poles in one hand and rifle in the other. According to editor George Hunt, Ngo Cuoc, called "Louie" by his American companions, is "bright, tough and high-spirited." His habit of calling marines "Sweetheart" and his crutches, provided by a US medical team, point to the kindhearted warrior image so

1 For an example calling Westmoreland's a "search and destroy" strategy, see George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 4th ed. (New York, [1979] 2002), 179. Robert D. Schulzinger argues the "tokens of progress in the war became the 'body count'": *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941–1975* (New York, 1997), 182. For an alternative view, see Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York, 2014).

carefully constructed on the magazine's cover. But for the rifle and military jeep in the photograph's background, "Louie" and his fishing partner might be heading to the local pond in almost any rural American town. Despite a full-scale war raging for nearly two years, the image is one of compassion rather than destruction. Coupled with the picture, the cover story's title, "To Keep a Village Free," indicates that the US Marines in Hòa Hiệp had found a better way to help South Vietnam protect itself from the dangers of a staunch communist insurgency. Their mission was not only to defend but also to befriend.[2]

This idyllic depiction on *Life*'s cover has become a mainstay of historical critiques condemning American strategy in Vietnam. Take, for instance, Andrew Krepinevich's well-received *The Army and Vietnam*. In a scathing analysis of the US Army's performance, Krepinevich denounced senior military leaders for their obsession with conventional tactics in a war requiring a more enlightened strategic approach. To the former West Point faculty member, the army "left counterinsurgency to the RVNAF [Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces], while US commanders went out in search of the big battles." Moreover, when presented with a different approach, the marines' Combined Action Platoon (CAP) concept, the army's reaction "was ill-disguised disappointment, if not outright disapproval." The missed opportunity could not be more discouraging. If only army leaders had broken free of their conventional mindsets and listened to their marine brethren, who believed that the CAP model of saturating the countryside with small, American-led security units offered a surer path toward victory, the war might well have turned out differently. "Casualties would have been minimized, and population security enhanced," argued Krepinevich.[3]

Such counterfactuals found broad acceptance in both postwar memoirs and scholarly monographs. In his 1970 account *Strange War, Strange Strategy*, marine general Lewis W. Walt argued that of all the innovations in Vietnam "none was as successful, as lasting in effect, or as useful for the future as the Combined Action Program." Less than a decade later, RAND analyst Douglas Blaufarb opined that CAP tactics, "if used on a wider scale, could have made a

2 George P. Hunt, "Louie, the Boy on the Cover," and Don Moser, "Their Mission: Defend, Befriend," *Life*, August 25, 1967, 3, 25.

3 Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, 1986), 168, 174, 176. More recently, John Southard has argued that "American generals initiated an annihilation strategy against an enemy that chose a different approach": *Defend and Befriend: The US Marine Corps and Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Lexington, KY, 2014), 5. The latest addition to the literature is Ted N. Easterling, *War in the Villages: The US Marine Corps Combined Action Platoons in the Vietnam War* (Denton, TX, 2021).

vast difference in the war for the countryside."[4] More recent pundits followed suit. Foreign-policy analyst Max Boot contended in 2002 that Westmoreland's "big war stymied pacification efforts" and thus "the Combined Action Program was never more than a sideshow to the army's conventional campaign." In *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, John Nagl similarly blamed MACV's commander for his narrow-minded advocacy of a "'search and destroy' strategy." Despite encouraging results – Nagl contended that the CAP program "worked almost immediately" – Westmoreland ignored prevailing evidence and refused to "widen the concept to include army units."[5] In short, the general chose a strategy of firepower over winning hearts and minds.

Such conventional wisdom, however, presents a flawed picture of American strategy under Westmoreland. MACV's commander, like his successor Creighton Abrams, never subscribed to an "either–or" approach to confronting a political–military threat inside South Vietnam's borders. At no point did Westmoreland concentrate solely on conventional battle at the expense of counterinsurgency. Likewise, the general never believed local civic action or pacification programs were a magic bullet to convince Hanoi's leaders their own war was unwinnable. In reality, American strategy from 1964 to 1968 rested on a belief that South Vietnam faced a dual threat – both conventional and unconventional – requiring a similarly comprehensive response. A reexamination of American strategy under Westmoreland and the marines' Combined Action Program reveals no "missed opportunity," a conclusion that raises important questions about the limits of American military power abroad in the mid-1960s and how historical myths can distort interpretations of the past.

Westmoreland's War: Myth versus Reality

If one accepts claims that the US Army in Vietnam simply conducted "search and destroy" missions supporting an imprudent strategy of attrition, the marines' Combined Action Program surfaces as an attractive

4 Lewis W. Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy: A General's Report on Vietnam* (New York, 1970), 105; Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: US Doctrine and Performance, 1950 to Present* (New York, 1977), 257–8.

5 Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York, 2002), 307; John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago, 2002), 156–8. Of note, the US Army's manual on counterinsurgency used CAPs as a historical vignette because the program was "a model for countering insurgencies": Department of the Army, Field Manual 3–24, *Counterinsurgency*, December 2006, 5–25.

alternative. Clearly, popular narratives of the Vietnam War build from the foundation of attrition warfare. Veterans and historians alike have condemned Westmoreland for relying "mainly on massive operations conducted by brigade and division and multi-division sized forces."[6] Rather than concentrating on population security and helping build bonds between rural inhabitants and the Saigon government, MACV's commander chose instead to grind down the enemy through superior firepower.[7] Almost all the clichés of Vietnam are present in these indictments – attrition, search and destroy, body count. Worse, the supposed infatuation with killing the enemy led to untold civilian suffering as murder, rape, torture, and abuse, at least according to one account, became "virtually a daily fact of life throughout the years of the American presence in Vietnam."[8] Not merely had Westmoreland lost the war through his faulty strategy: he also oversaw the destruction of a countryside and its people.

As compelling as this narrative appears, especially for Americans seeking to lay blame for their lost war, reevaluating the historical record finds that Westmoreland waged a far different war. First, the general used the word "attrition" not simply to describe combat operations but to portray the war in Vietnam as a protracted conflict. In mid-1965, Westmoreland wrote to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Earle Wheeler that US forces would be in for the "long pull." Describing the escalating conflict that summer, MACV's commander saw "no likelihood of achieving a quick, favorable end to the war."[9] Two years later, Westmoreland repeated the warning both privately and publicly. In a January 1967 message to Wheeler, the general concluded

6 Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: US–Vietnam in Perspective* (San Rafael, CA, 1978), 119.

7 Lewis Sorley, for example, argued that the general's approach was "to wage a war of attrition, using search and destroy tactics, in which the measure of merit was body count": *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (New York, 2011), 90. For a review of Sorley that highlights the biographer's quest to vilify Westmoreland, see Andrew J. Birtle, "In Pursuit of the Great White Whale: Lewis Sorley's *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam*," *Army History* (Summer 2012), 26–31. For a nuanced counterargument to claims made by Sorley and Nagl, see Dale Andrade, "Westmoreland Was Right: Learning Wrong Lessons from the Vietnam War," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 19, 2 (June 2008), 146–50.

8 Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York, 2013), 6. See also Anthony James Joes, *The War for South Viet Nam, 1954–1975*, rev. ed. (Westport, CT, 2001), 117; in this telling, the "number of enemy dead became an obsession, encouraging commanders to shoot first and ignore the political consequences."

9 Westmoreland to Wheeler, June 24, 1965, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968* [hereafter cited as *FRUS* with volume and year], vol. III, *Vietnam, June–December 1965* (Washington, DC, 1996), 42.

the enemy was "waging against us a conflict of strategic political attrition in which, according to his equation, victory equals time plus pressure." That April, Westmoreland spoke at the annual luncheon of the Associated Press. While praising his soldiers' accomplishments, the general summarily dismissed notions of gaining an easy victory. "I do not see any end of the war in sight."[10] Even when the president called Westmoreland and Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker home in November to offer "proof" of the war's progress to support a White House–directed salesmanship campaign, the two warned that the American effort in Vietnam was "not a short-range proposition."[11] Attrition, in truth, meant more than just body counts.

Second, Westmoreland never subscribed to a strategic approach in which killing was the ultimate goal. The so-called search-and-destroy strategy was a term constructed by critics aiming to simplify MACV's multifaceted concept for waging a complex war. To both his subordinates and the larger American public, Westmoreland was clear – the threat to South Vietnam required more than simply applying firepower. The general saw his principal objective as maintaining and expanding military and political control in key population areas while seeking to "restore security, develop Vietnamese allegiance to the GVN [Government of South Vietnam], and to degrade the effectiveness of the Viet Cong [VC] apparatus."[12] Westmoreland believed pacifying South

10 Westmoreland to Wheeler, January 2, 1967, quoted in William Conrad Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War. Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships, Part IV: July 1965–January 1968* (Washington, DC, 1994), 530; "Text of Westmoreland's Address at AP Meeting and of His Replies to Questions," *New York Times*, April 25, 1967. In his memoirs, Westmoreland argued he had no "expectation and made no prediction whatsoever as to terminal date": William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, NY, 1976), 172.

11 Peter Grose, "War of Attrition Called Effective by Westmoreland," *New York Times*, November 20, 1967. Of note, that same year MACV's campaign plan explicitly concluded that, "despite known losses, [the enemy] has been able to maintain a proportional counter buildup to the growth of US … forces": John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945–1975* (Lawrence, KS, 2009), 181. Westmoreland facilitated the impression that progress was being made in late 1967, an inopportune mistake given the enemy's Tet Offensive of early 1968. On the president's salesmanship campaign, see Larry Berman, *Lyndon Johnson's War: The Road to Stalemate in Vietnam* (New York, 1989), 114–38.

12 Wheeler to Sharp and Westmoreland, November 20, 1965, Folder 7, Box 2, Official Correspondence, Series I, W. C. Westmoreland Collection, p. 2, US Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania [hereafter cited as MHI]. It is important to note that Westmoreland never relied solely on the term "search and destroy" strategy when outlining his approach to the war. That September, the general also stated in an MACV directive that "the ultimate aim is to pacify the Republic of Vietnam by destroying the VC – his forces, organization, terrorists, agents, and propagandists – while at the same time reestablishing the government apparatus, strengthening GVN military forces, and re-instituting the services of the Government": quoted in John M.

Vietnam meant destroying not only enemy main-force units but also the political infrastructure that sustained a deep-rooted insurgency.

Without question, Westmoreland's faith in the ability of American military force to strengthen the bonds between the civilian population and the Saigon government was misplaced. It is doubtful that any foreign force entering into the long Vietnamese civil war could have fortified such bonds. Still, the general grasped the struggle's larger political aspects. As he publicly declared in April 1967, "I think it's impossible in view of the nature of the war – a war of subversion and invasion, a war in which political and psychological factors are of such consequence – to sort out the war between the political and the military."[13]

Westmoreland's point about subversion and invasion is crucial when considering the viability of the marines' Combined Action Program. The National Liberation Front (NLF) insurgency posed a multilayered threat within South Vietnam's borders. As the 1965 MACV command history noted, in facing the insurgent menace, "it was apparent that RVNAF strength was insufficient for both offensive operations and support of the pacification program." Nor did it help that Saigon's government appeared "unstable and ineffective" to the point that MACV considered it in "near-paralysis."[14] Yet the insurgency and Saigon's political woes represented only a portion of the threat to South Vietnam's future.

Of particular concern to Westmoreland were the armed forces of North Vietnam, "which were backing the uncompromising political stance of Hanoi with significant military capability." MACV had to consider not only the insurgency's political cadre and local militia units but also People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) regulars. In 1966 alone, the American command estimated

Carland, "Winning the Vietnam War: Westmoreland's Approach in Two Documents," *Journal of Military History* 68, 2 (April 2004), 558. Krepinevich, a critic, relies heavily on this term in his chapter "A Strategy of Tactics" in *The Army and Vietnam*.

13 "Text of Westmoreland's Address at AP Meeting." Less than a year earlier, Westmoreland had emphasized that the enemy's "determined campaign to gain control of South Vietnam" was indeed a campaign against "its land, its people, and its government": text of cable from General Westmoreland, August 26, 1966, in *FRUS, 1964–1968*, vol. IV, *Vietnam, 1966* (Washington, DC, 1998), 604.

14 Command History, 1965, 2, Headquarters, USMACV, Secretary of Joint Staff (MACJ03), Entry MACJ03, Military History Branch, Box 2, RG 472, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland [hereafter cited as NARA]. One 1967 report saw benefits in fighting the enemy near the border. "It takes much longer and costs more casualties (particularly civilian casualties) to defeat the enemy forces once they have become entrenched in the populated areas": "A Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War: 1965–1972, Vol. 4 – Allied Ground and Naval Operations," Geog. V. Vietnam-319.1, US Army Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC, 51 [hereafter cited as CMH].

Hanoi had infiltrated some 48,400 soldiers into South Vietnam. (Another 25,600 infiltrators *may* also have entered, though hard intelligence proved elusive.)[15] Even if Westmoreland had wanted to concentrate on securing the South Vietnamese population from the insurgency, PAVN regular units precluded him from focusing exclusively on one type of threat.

So too did the larger mission from President Johnson. The March 1964 National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 288 stated that the US objective in Vietnam was a "stable and independent noncommunist government."[16] Westmoreland's military strategy thus derived from the broad principle that Saigon's government needed to function in a secure environment. Military victories alone were insufficient for achieving this ambitious political goal. Of course, security required military action, and Westmoreland developed plans that included destruction of PAVN forces, protection of the people, liberation of populated areas dominated by the NLF, and destruction of enemy base areas inside South Vietnam.[17] Thus, any focus on battle had to facilitate larger objectives of helping develop and maintain a viable local government. As Johnson articulated in late 1966, success "must also be brought about through the effective application of broad and comprehensive politico-economic-sociological-psychological programs designed both to improve the well-being of and to orient the population toward the central government."[18] Had Westmoreland concentrated solely on body counts, he would have been out of step with the mission articulated by civilian policymakers.

15 Command History, 1966, 19, 22, Headquarters, USMACV, Entry MACJ03, Box 3, RG 472, NARA. On the interrelationships between the conventional war and pacification, see Carland, "Winning the Vietnam War," 554. A lack of firm intelligence, according to one US Marine Corps (USMC) captain, put "Marines in the unhappy position of having to 'lead with their chins' in order to make contact with the enemy": quoted in Robert B. Asprey, *War in the Shadows: The Guerrilla in History* (Garden City, NY, 1975), 1155.

16 NSAM 288 quoted in Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, 45.

17 Supporting tasks in USMACV Command History, 1967, 339, Office of Secretary, Joint Staff, Mil. Hist. Branch, Entry MACJ03, Box 5, RG 472, NARA. The Joint Chiefs also listed MACV's "essential" requirements in late 1965: assist the government of South Vietnam to defeat the VC and extend governmental control, conduct combat operations to secure bases and lines of communication, defend major population centers, conduct securing and civic action operations, and conduct search and destroy operations against the VC and VC bases. Of note, search and destroy composed only one element of these requirements. See Wheeler to Sharp and Westmoreland, November 20, 1965, MHI.

18 Johnson quoted in USMACV Command History, 1967, 307, NARA. For a discussion about problems devising strategy at the national level, where unexamined assumptions about the utility of force drove debate inside the Johnson White House, see Gordon M. Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam* (New York, 2008), 177–82.

Certainly, offensive operations were necessary to Westmoreland's strategic concept. In 1965 alone, Hanoi sent seven regiments and twenty separate battalions down the Hồ Chí Minh Trail into South Vietnam. Adopting a strictly counterinsurgency approach made little sense unless coupled with plans to defeat these North Vietnamese regulars. As Westmoreland noted, the "essential tasks of revolutionary development and nation building cannot be accomplished if enemy main forces can gain access to the population centers and destroy our efforts."[19] Still, MACV focused on population security. Despite the presence of large enemy formations, Westmoreland believed the insurgency inside South Vietnam "must eventually be defeated among the people in the hamlets and towns." To accomplish this goal, however, meant securing the country from well-organized and equipped forces while simultaneously securing the people from "the guerrilla, the assassin, the terrorist and the informer."[20] Westmoreland argued that American troops could contribute best in the first category while the South Vietnamese could make better progress in the second. The problem, as MACV saw it, was that communist forces were drawing the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) away from the population. Thus, if American units could construct a shield behind which the ARVN could operate, insurgents would be cut off from external support and, over time, population security attained.

MACV's resultant three-phase strategic concept first sought to "halt the losing trend" by the end of 1965. To do so required defending political and population centers while strengthening the RVNAF and preserving areas under governmental control. Next, Westmoreland would resume the offensive to destroy enemy forces and reinstitute rural construction activities. During this crucial phase, MACV hoped to expand pacification operations by providing security to the people. This point, often underappreciated by Westmoreland's detractors, served as the centerpiece of US military strategy inside South Vietnam. Offensive operations were not an end unto themselves. Rather, American troops would "participate in clearing, securing,

19 Text of cable from General Westmoreland, August 26, 1966, *FRUS, 1964–1968*, vol. IV, 605; information on enemy regiments is in Prados, *Vietnam*, 153. On Westmoreland's strategy achieving positive results, see Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History, 1946–1975* (Novato, CA, 1988), 365. Of note, PAVN main-force units often did avoid direct confrontation with US and ARVN forces, thus requiring a tactical response that surely resembled classic counterinsurgency operations.

20 *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking in Vietnam* (Senator Gravel ed.), 5 vols. (Boston, 1971–2), vol. IV, 606. MACV believed that the enemy was "augmenting their capabilities for the gradual transition to conventional warfare": USMACV Command History, 1965, 14, NARA. See also Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (Cambridge, 2006), 407.

reserve reaction and offensive operations as required to support and sustain the resumption of pacification." Only by securing cleared areas could allied troops help extend the government's control over the population. In the final phase, Westmoreland sought the insurgency's complete destruction while offering assistance to the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) for maintaining internal order and protecting its borders. Though MACV ostensibly aimed to complete this final phase by the end of 1967, Westmoreland warned that any timeline for American withdrawal would depend on enemy resistance.[21]

Without question, Westmoreland's was an ambitious strategy, arguably outside allied troop capabilities. Yet to discount that strategy as simply "search and destroy" or "attrition" misses the nuances of a complex war and a reasoned American approach to fighting it. Far from being wedded to a conventional approach, Westmoreland realized the importance of the village war, local politics, and limiting civilian casualties. Moreover, he understood the effect a burgeoning American presence was having on the local population. While emphasizing the necessity of US forces moving at will through the countryside, he also stressed that they should "constantly demonstrate their concern for the safety of noncombatants – their compassion for the injured – their willingness to aid and assist the sick, the hungry and the dispossessed."[22] Clearly, this balancing act required skill and maturity on the part of American soldiers and marines. Westmoreland was asking them to simultaneously destroy and build. Still, MACV's commander realized the final battle would be "for the hamlets themselves" and, as such, American forces would be drawn "toward the people and the places where they live."[23]

21 Overview of MACV's concept in USMACV Command History, 1965, 141–4, NARA; Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, 45; and *FRUS, 1964–1968*, vol. IV, 414–15. Westmoreland offers his perspective in *A Soldier Reports*, 175–6. Of course, MACV never fully accomplished its goal of clearing populated areas of communist influence. Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts note that *The Pentagon Papers'* "analysts deduced a prognosis for victory by the end of 1967 in this plan. But the wording of the plan was imprecise about the terminal date … and Westmoreland maintained that he neither stated nor intended a prediction of victory for 1967": *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, DC, 1979), 132.

22 Minimizing Non-Combatant Battle Casualties, October 9, 1965, MACV Directives 525-3, MACV Command Historian Collection, MHI. On NLF propaganda, see USMACV Command History, 1965, 9, NARA. On the American presence, see U. S. Grant Sharp and William C. Westmoreland, *Report on the War in Vietnam* (Washington, DC, 1969), 105.

23 Quoted in Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, 71. On Westmoreland attempting to "enforce strict rules of engagement designed to minimize civilian casualties and property damage," see Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962–1967* (Washington, DC, 2006), 407.

Contemporary counterinsurgency doctrine supported such operational concepts. So too did prevailing theories on revolutionary warfare. The army's field manual on "Counterguerrilla Operations" advised commanders to pay special attention to local inhabitants and assess their loyalty, morale, and strength of will for resisting insurgencies. Moreover, doctrine recommended that US forces make "maximum use of existing police and paramilitary forces."[24] In fact, internal defense was deemed the host nation's primary responsibility, with Americans advising and assisting. Providing security meant more than military action. Thus, as the marines' counterinsurgency manual noted: "A number of diversified actions such as tactical operations, psychological warfare, civil populace control, and civic action (political, social, and economic) are conducted concurrently."[25] Both doctrine and theory, however, suggested a sequential approach to counterinsurgency. Marines might conduct a number of concurrent operations but providing security ranked first among all other considerations. The message was clear. Defeating the enemy preceded pacification and government stability.[26]

Of course, the enemy's defeat required important contributions from local forces. South Vietnam's military structure included not only the ARVN but also regional and local militia units that Westmoreland needed to consider. MACV thus proposed to accentuate the unique strengths of both US and South Vietnamese forces. Relying on their advantages in mobility and firepower, American troops would operate against large enemy formations away from population centers. Because of their "greater compatibility with the people," the ARVN and local militia units would secure the population

24 Department of the Army, Field Manual 31-16, *Counterguerrilla Operations*, February 1963, 23–4; Department of the Army, Field Manual 31-16, *Counterguerrilla Operations*, March 1967, 29. In the early 1960s, Americans often used the words "counterinsurgency" and "counterguerrilla" interchangeably.

25 Department of the Navy, FMFM 8-2, *Counterinsurgency Operations*, December 1967, 42. On marine doctrine modeling army doctrine, see Andrew J. Birtle, *US Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942–1976* (Washington, DC, 2006), 399.

26 Accepted French notions clearly influenced American thinking. In his popular treatise on counterinsurgency, French officer David Galula laid out a systematic process for a successful strategy. Galula's first step, "destruction or expulsion of the insurgent forces," set the foundation for counterinsurgents who would then reestablish authority over the population and destroy the insurgents' political organization. See David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York, [1964] 2005), 107. For a recent critique questioning the success of Galula's own counterinsurgency operations in Algeria, see Grégor Mathias, *Galula in Algeria: Counterinsurgency Practice versus Theory* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2011). Of note, Westmoreland also relied on the experiences of US Army units stationed in Korea that had been "involved in extensive civic action since the armistice in 1953": The Situation in I Corps, November 15, 1965, 1965 Folder, Box 4, William E. DePuy Papers, MHI.

once cleared of enemy influence.[27] Westmoreland worried, though, that, as pacification efforts expanded in 1966 and 1967, local Popular Forces (PFs) – in essence, village militia – might not meet the demands of providing village security. Still, MACV envisioned a symbiotic relationship between American and South Vietnamese allies. US forces would help the ARVN dislodge the communists from contested locales while militia units would help control these "cleared" areas. Only then would allied operations have a "lasting effect."[28]

The varying capabilities within the South Vietnamese defense establishment matched the war's grand mosaic. Given vast regional differences in geography, demographics, and political support for the Saigon government, strategic flexibility remained a priority throughout Westmoreland's tenure. MACV thus determined that all operations "would be conducted through centralized direction, but decentralized execution."[29] In reality, Westmoreland had little choice. The heavily populated Mekong Delta presented immensely different challenges than provinces along the Laotian border or the demilitarized zone (DMZ) between North and South Vietnam. Whereas residents in the southern delta encountered a largely insurgent threat, US marines in the northern provinces grappled with NLF and North Vietnamese main-force units which had infiltrated the country via the Hồ Chí Minh Trail. Hence, the conventional tactics employed by the US Army's 1st Cavalry Division at the famous 1965 battle in the Ia Đrăng Valley, while wholly appropriate against PAVN regiments, often proved counterproductive in more populated areas. As one MACV officer recalled, "each situation required different military tactics and a different mixture of military and political" action.[30]

27 Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 176. For a discussion on local "territorial forces," see James Lawton Collins, Jr., *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950–1972* (Washington, DC, [1975] 2002), 71–4. In the words of a senior ARVN general, one of the "major goals of MACV in South Vietnam was to help the RVNAF improve their combat effectiveness so that they would eventually be capable of defending their country unaided." See Ngo Quang Truong, "RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination," in Lewis Sorley (ed.), *The Vietnam War: An Assessment by South Vietnam's Generals* (Lubbock, TX, 2010), 153.

28 Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, 15; for problems with expansion, see Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder, 1995), 74. It is important to note that the inability of the CAP program to expand because of this limitation proved Westmoreland's fears well founded.

29 USMACV Command History, 1966, 341, NARA.

30 Phillip B. Davidson, *Secrets of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA, 1990), 20. The best work on the November 1965 Ia Đrăng battles remains Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway, *We Were Soldiers Once … and Young* (New York, 1993). The division used similar tactics in the densely populated Bình Định province during 1966 as part of Operations Masher/White Wing and Thayer.

Figure 1.1 US Army officer William Westmoreland (center) with Nguyễn Cao Kỳ (right), Chief of the Vietnam Air Force, in Đà Nẵng (July 18, 1964).
Source: Michael Ochs Archives / Stringer / Michael Ochs Archives / Getty Images.

The war's mosaic nature is worth considering when evaluating arguments that a nationwide adoption of the marines' Combined Action Program would have led to victory. Westmoreland understood early on that there was no single answer for the complex political–military conflict that was at once a war of internal subversion and one of external invasion. By necessity, MACV's strategy was multifaceted. Never did Westmoreland concentrate solely on a "big unit war" at the expense of counterinsurgency. Historian John Prados has usefully summarized the elements of Westmoreland's approach "as isolation of the battlefield, pacification of the villages, and main force combat."[31] All of these elements factored into the larger objective of sustaining an independent, noncommunist South Vietnam. The US Marine Corps, however, believed they had found a better way.

The Marines Weigh In

In March 1965, the first contingent of marines landed at Đà Nẵng in Quảng Nam province. Their mission, to defend American air bases supporting the

31 John Prados, "American Strategy in Vietnam," in David L. Anderson (ed.), *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War* (New York, 2011), 251.

bombing of North Vietnam, called for setting up three defensive "enclaves" at Phú Bài, Đà Nẵng, and Chu Lai. By June's end, seven battalions were operating in I Corps, the five northernmost provinces of South Vietnam. Designated the III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) under the command of Major General Lewis W. Walt, the security force had no immediate plans for conducting nonmilitary civic action programs.[32] Base security ranked as the primary focus in these early months. Walt, though, was anxious to protect the local civilian population and soon gained Westmoreland's approval to conduct more ambitious operations against the NLF insurgency. As the marines expanded from their enclaves, they met more than just isolated guerrilla units. In August, during Operation Starlight, the marines battled a full NLF infantry regiment in the coastal lowlands near Chu Lai. Inflicting more than 700 enemy casualties, the operation indicated that protecting the population would require heavy fighting.[33]

Walt, however, concluded that defending his base areas required pacifying the population and weeding out the insurgency. Security meant patrolling, and patrolling meant close contact with South Vietnamese civilians. Judging that the main threat came from local guerrillas, III MAF commanders advocated a clear-and-hold approach in which hamlets would be taken apart "bit by bit," cleared of enemy influence, and then put back "together again."[34] Such an approach obviously put civilians in a vulnerable position. As the official Marine Corps history noted, civilians in combat zones "presented difficulties. The first attempts to evacuate them were difficult; the people were frightened and did not trust the Marines." Moreover, the Americans had to make grim

32 On the deployment and early mission of III MAF, see Willard Pearson, *The War in the Northern Provinces, 1966–1968* (Washington, DC, 1975), 6; Keith F. Kopets, "The Combined Action Program: Vietnam," *Military Review* 82, 4 (July–August 2002), 78; and Allan R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York, 1980), 565. On lacking a formal organization for civic action, see William D. Parker, *US Marine Corps Civil Affairs in I Corps, Republic of Vietnam, April 1966 to April 1967* (Washington, DC, 1970), 2. Michael E. Peterson argues that the "CAP concept was inaugurated as an experiment and as a 'filler' tactic to extend base defense": *The Combined Action Platoons: The US Marines' Other War in Vietnam* (Westport, CT, 1989), 32. In the spring of 1965, there were some 18,000 marines covering roughly 239 square miles (620 square km) with a civilian population of 77,000 people: Parker, *US Marine Corps Civil Affairs in I Corps*, 6.

33 More on the expanding mission can be found in Sharp and Westmoreland, *Report on the War in Vietnam*, 99, 109, and *The Pentagon Papers* (Senator Gravel ed.), vol. III, 459.

34 USMC Colonel Edwin H. Simmons, quoted in Michael A. Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam: The Marines and Revolutionary Warfare in I Corps, 1965–1972* (Westport, CT, 1997), 70; for patrolling see Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 570; for the guerrilla threat, see Cosmas, *MACV*, 402. On the necessity of governments to "first establish strategic bases" as part of any counterinsurgency campaign, see John J. McCuen, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War: The Strategy of Counterinsurgency* (St. Petersburg, FL, [1966] 2005), 324.

choices when facing stubborn resistance. "Although attempts were made to avoid civilian casualties, some villages were completely destroyed by supporting arms when it became obvious that the enemy occupied fortified positions in them." Both Westmoreland and Walt might have seen pacification as the "ultimate goal," yet early experiences suggested counterinsurgency could be just as destructive as conventional warfare.[35]

Still, Walt deemed population security key and the village war central to victory. The III MAF commander learned, though, that as marines expanded outward insurgents often flowed back into "liberated" areas. Worse, one officer recalled, the ARVN, supposedly maintaining security in cleared areas, "came not to stay, but to loot, collect back taxes, reinstall landlords, and conduct reprisals against the people." To remedy this problem, marines in Phú Bài formed a Joint Action Company with local PFs to help disrupt NLF activities.[36] Despite these tactical innovations, Walt increasingly disagreed with Westmoreland over strategy. The MACV commander worried that continued occupation of defensive enclaves along the coastline would cede the countryside to enemy main-force units. Westmoreland later argued that, with the enemy "free to recruit in regions the Marines had yet to enter and to operate in nearby hills with impunity, every subsequent move … to extend the peripheries of the beachheads would become progressively more difficult and would make the beachheads more vulnerable." Walt retorted that the bulk of I Corps' population resided along the coast. Strikes against communist main-force units were necessary, but providing day-to-day population security mattered most.[37]

35 Jack Shulimson and Charles M. Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup, 1965* (Washington, DC, 1978), 82. On the relationship between extension of base security and marine influence, see ibid., 133. For pacification as the "ultimate goal," see Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 82.

36 William R. Corson, *The Betrayal* (New York, 1968), 174. For the Joint Action Company, see Lawrence A. Yates, "A Feather in Their Cap? The Marines' Combined Action Program in Vietnam," in William R. Roberts and Jack Sweetman (eds.), *New Interpretations in Naval History: Selected Papers from the Ninth Naval History Symposium Held at the United States Naval Academy, 18–20 October 1989* (Annapolis, MD, 1991), 310.

37 Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 200; for the marines' response, see Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 75; and Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 567. The account of the Bình Nghĩa CAP by Francis J. West, Jr., is illustrative as it highlights the "system of small, relentless patrols" used by the marines to cover a "village" that was a "two-mile long complex of six hamlets": *The Pragmatists: A Combined Action Platoon in I Corps* (Santa Monica, CA, 1968), 5, 11. On the traditional marine view of countering insurgencies, see United States Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual* (Washington, DC, 1940), SWM 1-7, 1–15; Victor H. Krulak, *First to Fight: An Inside View of the US Marine Corps* (Annapolis, MD, 1984), 190. A contemporary marine pamphlet bolstered claims about population security leading to victory: "A guerrilla force can exist only if it has the cooperation of the people."

Westmoreland, for his part, believed conventional enemy offensives required a response. The I Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ) particularly troubled him. Roughly 200 miles long and varying in width from 30 to 80 miles (50–130 km), I Corps included more than 2.5 million inhabitants living on a diverse landscape – coastal lowlands, a hilly piedmont region, and jungle highlands. Regional transportation facilities, according to one American officer, were "poorly developed."[38] Geographical concerns aside, Westmoreland worried most about the enemy buildup just outside South Vietnam's boundaries. All but one of I Corps' five provinces bordered either Laos or the DMZ separating the two Vietnams. Westmoreland thus felt it urgent to "prevent the enemy from generating a major offensive designed to 'liberate' the provinces" in I Corps.[39] Intelligence reports of the enemy deploying anti-aircraft weapons southward and stockpiling supplies just outside South Vietnam's borders only heightened his fears. So too did the fact that the number of main-force NLF battalions in I CTZ doubled during 1965, reaching fifteen by year's end. In March 1966, two full PAVN regiments attacked a Special Forces camp in Thừa Thiên province.[40] Westmoreland could not ignore local insurgents within the villages, but neither could he disregard the conventional threat to South Vietnam.

While Walt and Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, commander of the Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, agreed with MACV on the need for a "multipronged effort," they lashed out at criticisms that their "offensive pace" was "inordinately slow." Walt acknowledged the fifteen confirmed enemy battalions and sensed an increasing threat in late 1965. Yet the infiltration of PAVN units into South Vietnam reinforced marine views that MACV's strategy,

Such arguments, though, downplayed the support the NLF received from North Vietnam. See "A Marine's Guide to the Republic of Vietnam," 38, Folder 09, Box 01, Peter Swartz Collection, Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas [hereafter cited as TTUVA]. Larry E. Cable argues that marine doctrine was "predicated upon the notion that success in counterinsurgency operations rested ultimately upon the effective application of force": *Conflict of Myths: The Development of American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and the Vietnam War* (New York, 1986), 167.

38 I CTZ data from "A Marine's Guide to the Republic of Vietnam," 12–19, TTUVA; and Pearson, *The War in the Northern Provinces*, 2–5. At peak strength in 1968, III MAF in Vietnam numbered 85,755 marines. In 1969, the US Marine Corps as a whole reached its peak strength for the entire war at 314,917: Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 560.

39 Westmoreland quoted in *The Pentagon Papers* (Senator Gravel ed.), vol. IV, 336. The marines' official history acknowledged that "III MAF forces simultaneously faced large-scale attacks from NVA [North Vietnamese army] and VC units throughout I Corps": Gary L. Telfer and Lane Rogers, *US Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese, 1967* (Washington, DC, 1984), 7. See also Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 108.

40 Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 200–1; Pearson, *The War in the Northern Provinces*, 6.

aiming to "attrit the enemy to a degree which makes him incapable of prosecuting the war," was "inadequate."[41]

In truth, Walt's and Krulak's criticisms missed their mark on two levels. First, the marine commanders underappreciated that enemy main-force units operating so close to sanctuaries outside South Vietnam did not require the population's support for survival. Without question, relationships between main forces, smaller units, and hamlet organizations existed in the marines' "three-front war." Success in pacification, however, did not lead necessarily to starvation and thus defeat of the enemy's big units.[42] Second, Krulak in particular mislabeled MACV strategy as simple attrition. More accurately, Walt wrote Westmoreland in late 1965 that he understood his primary missions were "to defend the established bases … to support the RVNAF effort, and to provide a security shield behind which the ARVN can develop a rural construction program." Clearly commanders debated how best to create such a shield, yet Krulak's assessment that MACV did not understand the critical importance of the people was simply wrong.[43]

Westmoreland unquestionably saw enemy main-force units as the most pressing threat to South Vietnam's security. Yet his skepticism about the marines' concept resulted not from some narrow devotion to attrition but rather from a clear-sighted understanding of the war's environment. The tasks MACV assigned to I Corps units illustrate a balanced approach with which Walt and Krulak actually agreed. Westmoreland directed the marines to develop and protect secure base areas, coordinate their operations with the RVNAF, maintain reserves for exploitation, and conduct a "vigorous rural

41 Krulak, *First to Fight*, 198. On the marines' "three-pronged strategy," see Bruce C. Allnutt, *Marine Combined Action Capabilities: The Vietnam Experience* (McLean, VA, 1969), 8. On Secretary of the Navy Paul H. Nitze criticizing III MAF's pace, see Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 91.

42 Ward Just, "It's a 3-Front War in I Corps Area as Marines Fight for Pacification," *Washington Post*, April 13, 1967. On marines misjudging the enemy, see Cosmas, *MACV*, 403. Walt argued after the war that insurgents "must have a friendly population, not actively friendly, but sympathetic": *Strange War, Strange Strategy*, 81. Robert Buzzanco concludes that Krulak's proposed "solutions, more air power and pacification, were neither militarily appropriate nor politically feasible": *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era* (New York, 1996), 250.

43 Walt to Westmoreland, November 19, 1965, 5, Folder 7, Box 2, Official Correspondence, Series I, W. C. Westmoreland Collection, MHI. Touring I Corps in November 1965, Westmoreland's operations officer, William DePuy, found that, outside "the Marine enclaves, the VC have been gaining in strength while the ARVN has barely been holding its own." DePuy equally worried about "insecure areas" due to problems with the pacification cadre being able "to provide long term hamlet-by-hamlet security": "The Situation in I Corps," MHI. Of course, MACV struggled throughout the war to successfully secure the population.

construction program." Stressing protection of the people, III MAF operations were to "concentrate on heavily populated areas to clear villages and hamlets in the coastal region. Such operations would require maximum mobility, discriminatory use of firepower, and flexibility in adjusting to the situation."[44] Given concerns over the ARVN's lackluster rural pacification efforts, Westmoreland unsurprisingly advocated marine participation in local area security. Even Krulak admitted the Vietnamese military had "little stomach" for the day-to-day task of protecting the population. Moreover, a singular approach to pacification miscalculated the reality of available manpower resources. When asked in late 1966 how many Americans were needed to secure and pacify South Vietnam, Marine Corps commandant Wallace M. Greene, Jr., said it would take "as many as 750,000 troops."[45] Surely Westmoreland would have welcomed that number.

Leaders in the Hanoi Politburo equally debated the appropriate role of military force in their strategy to unite Vietnam. The decision to commit PAVN regulars did not come easily. Yet after tumultuous deliberations among party leaders, some of whom advocated a more cautious approach, General Secretary Lê Duẩn's campaign to escalate the war militarily won the day. Never losing sight of the political struggle, Lê Duẩn argued it was necessary to "smash the enemy's military forces." Thus, the armed struggle played a "direct and decisive role."[46] By 1965, Hanoi had committed itself to full-fledged escalation. Both the military forces and civilian population in I Corps witnessed the results. Journalist Robert Shaplen reported in 1967 that the enemy was employing "sophisticated Russian howitzers, artillery, mortar,

44 USMACV Command History, 1965, 144–5, NARA. For similar tasks assigned to US Army units during Operation Fairfax around Saigon, see Cosmas, *MACV*, 404. Westmoreland's emphasis on "maximum mobility," however, meant that US clearing operations in populated regions would be characterized by a transience that ensured they had little lasting impact on pacification.

45 George C. Wilson, "Gen. Greene Decries Gloom over Pacifying Viet Interior," *Washington Post*, November 17, 1966; Krulak, *First to Fight*, 195. While conducting a dispersed area security mission in Bình Định, the ARVN 22nd Division was trounced by several NLF regiments, thus leaving a lasting impression on Westmoreland: Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 76. Still, in his official report, Westmoreland argued that, to succeed, pacification had to be a "genuinely Vietnamese endeavor although supported by United States advice, military support, commodities, and funds": Sharp and Westmoreland, *Report on the War in Vietnam*, 229.

46 Political Bureau's Resolution on South Vietnam, November 1963, 8, 13, Folder 09, Box 01, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 06-Democratic Republic of Vietnam, TTUVA. See also Merle L. Pribbenow II, "General Võ Nguyên Giáp and the Mysterious Evolution of the Plan for the 1968 Tết Offensive," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3 (Summer 2008), 2–3. In late 1963, the Politburo was already speaking in terms of developing a "general offensive and general uprising" to win final victory in South Vietnam.

and rockets" just south of the DMZ.[47] Marine intelligence indicated in late 1967 that forty-three PAVN and eighteen NLF battalions were operating in I Corps alone, not including the DMZ. If some Hanoi leaders still thought in terms of protracted warfare, Lê Duẩn was undeniably seeking a decisive battlefield victory to force the collapse of Saigon's "puppet army" and the expulsion of US troops from Vietnam.[48]

Thus, marine criticisms that Westmoreland's strategy failed to account for local security undervalue Lê Duẩn's own commitment to winning the war through decisive military action. Such assessments equally dismiss the parallels between marine and army approaches to civic action and assisting the local population. Both services agreed that aggressive patrolling and offensive operations kept the enemy off balance. Marines in Vietnam likely supported army Lieutenant Colonel John McCuen's contention that local "militia should be the backbone of self-defence." Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Smithers's belief that "the Viet Cong ultimately must be challenged and defeated in the village and the hamlet where they maintain their primary effort" would also have gained approval.[49] One US Army War College student in early 1968, assessing the two services' approaches to civic action, found the concepts adopted by the two to be "identical." Even in South Vietnam, Westmoreland took interest in the marines' County Fair program despite concerns that pacification-oriented programs

47 Robert Shaplen, "Viet Nam: Crisis of Indecision," *Foreign Affairs* 46, 1 (October 1967), 96. On logistical support from the population, see Warren Wilkins, *Grab Their Belts to Fight Them: The Viet Cong's Big Unit War against the US, 1965–1966* (Annapolis, MD, 2011), 139. David W. P. Elliott, though, notes the near-symbiotic relationship between main-force units and the insurgency. "The threat of the big units in the mountains relieved pressure from the guerrillas in the delta, who in turn recruited and sent supplies to the big units." See Elliott, "Hanoi's Strategy in the Second Indochina War," in Jayne S. Werner and Luu Doan Huynh (eds.), *The Vietnam War: Vietnamese and American Perspectives* (Armonk, NY, 1993), 71.

48 Operations of US Marine Forces, Vietnam, September 1967, Folder 11, Box 08, Larry Berman Collection (Presidential Archives Research), TTUVA; Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012), 89; Ang Cheng Guan, *The Vietnam War from the Other Side: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (New York, 2002), 103. The marines' official history notes that the enemy escalation along the DMZ in 1967 and the need to respond to that threat "dashed any hopes that the Marines may have had to push a strong population control strategy": Jack Shulimson, Leonard A. Blasiol, Charles R. Smith, and David A. Dawson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968* (Washington, DC, 1997), 608.

49 McCuen, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War*, 108; Samuel W. Smithers, Jr., "Combat Units in Revolutionary Development," *Military Review* 47, 10 (October 1967), 37; for aggressive offensive operations, see Cable, *Conflict of Myths*, 168. Birtle argues persuasively that "Army efforts to bolster village security differed from Marine activities more in style than in substance": *US Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine*, 401.

might dissipate US strength and leave American units vulnerable to enemy main-force attacks.[50]

Programs like the County Fair – in which marines surrounded a village to root out insurgents while concurrently establishing dental and medical aid stations, conducting a census, and providing "native entertainment" – illustrated a population-centric approach.[51] Officers such as Walt and Krulak might acknowledge the presence of PAVN regulars in I Corps but they still believed that defeating the insurgency would lead to local security and the enemy's ultimate downfall. Marines participating in Operation Golden Fleece, consequently, sought to protect farmers during the harvest season. If the NLF were kept from collecting rice taxes, the population might see clear rewards from receiving governmental protection. Yet whether through commodity distribution or medical care, the marines' "emphasis was on short-term, high-impact, low-cost projects."[52] Few questioned whether such projects would be sustainable, especially in the absence of American troops and support. But, by the summer of 1965, the marines had already convinced themselves that they alone held the key to victory in Vietnam.

CAPs: The False Alternative

Still tied to their enclaves in mid-1965, marines at Phú Bài drafted plans to incorporate local Popular Forces into their base security system. By integrating militia platoons with marine rifle squads, the allies might enlarge their enclaves thanks to additional manpower from these newly combined units. Marines would enter a nearby village and provide military training to the PFs, while patrolling the local countryside and participating in civic action. Encouraged by upbeat reports, Walt authorized an expansion of the program in January 1966. By July, III MAF had thirty-eight Combined Action Platoons spread across the three marine enclaves. Each of these CAPs consisted of one thirteen-man marine squad and a PF platoon of thirty-four

50 William J. Ankley, "Civic Action – Marine or Army Style?" 8, 13, January 11, 1968, Student Essay, US Army War College, MHI. As Ankley found, the Marine Corps did not even possess a "published reference on the subject of civic action," instead relying on "the texts published by the Army's Civil Affairs School." Of note, the US Army defined "civic action" as the "use of preponderantly indigenous military forces on projects useful to the local population at all levels," whether they be education, training, or economic development: ibid., 2. For County Fairs, see Jack Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War, 1966* (Washington, DC, 1982), 233.

51 Krulak, *First to Fight*, 187.

52 Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup*, 144; Parker, *US Marine Corps Civil Affairs in I Corps*, 10, 29.

South Vietnamese.[53] According to one veteran, the scheme was simple. "If the PFs could be properly trained in firearms and squad tactics, if they could be instilled with pride and discipline, they just might be transformed into a viable, cohesive unit to augment the CAP Marines in the villes." Paternalistic notions aside – could Americans truly instill pride in rural villagers? – the marines did their best to coordinate with Vietnamese district chiefs. Though Walt wanted to establish seventy-five CAPs by year's end, fifty-seven combined platoons were operating by the opening of 1967, an impressive growth even if it was not as much as Walt had hoped.[54]

The program's expansion meant that recruiting capable marines for CAP duty quickly became a concern. Though ostensibly admitting only volunteers, the program accepted many men who were "volunteered" by their commanders. Moreover, participants needed a level of maturity to train local militiamen while facilitating a village's economic and social growth. A CAP School at Đà Nẵng consequently taught a wide array of subjects, from Vietnamese language and customs to civic action and patrolling techniques. An emphasis on military training illustrated that many CAP marines were not infantrymen but came instead from combat support units.[55] More importantly, the volume of tactical instruction belied arguments that marines promoted a less violent approach to counterinsurgency. Of all the CAP pacification progress indices, "destruction of organized VC military forces" ranked first. Thus, the training of local militia endeavored to "bring the PF soldier to a state of military proficiency by which he is capable of providing his own village/hamlet defense." Certainly, CAP marines supported "nation-building activities," but contemporary directives on village pacification made clear that security mattered most. Thus, CAP members heard familiar tasks in their

53 Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War*, 239; Kopets, "The Combined Action Program: Vietnam," 78; Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era*, 256; Truong, "RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination," 154. Within the first 4 CAP villages were 16 hamlets with a combined population of some 14,000 people: Allnutt, *Marine Combined Action Capabilities*, 9. A thirteen-man marine squad included a squad leader and three four-man fire teams. A navy medical corpsman and marine radio operator were assigned to each Combined Action Platoon.

54 Al Hemingway, *Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD, 1994), 4. Edward F. Palm also speaks of the need to "train and inspire the PFs" in "Tiger Papa Three: A Memoir of the Combined Action Program, Part I," *Marine Corps Gazette* (January 1988), 34. Figures are from Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 32. It is important to note that, while the CAP program unfolded, "regular Marine battalions stationed in the region lent support by conducting small-unit patrols and search-and-destroy operations": Birtle, *US Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine*, 399.

55 Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 33, 48; Telfer and Rogers, *US Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese*, 193; Southard, *Defend and Befriend*, 48–50.

mission briefs: seek and destroy the Viet Cong, defend against VC attacks and subversion, and develop the PFs' ability to resist the insurgency.[56]

Such phrases should not surprise, given received wisdom on the relationships between security and pacification. Marines presumed that, once they gained the trust of the local militia and then the people, villagers would provide them with intelligence on the NLF's military operations and political infrastructure. In short, the marines believed "security for the rural population remained the basic requirement for pacification." Senior leaders at MACV agreed wholeheartedly. Ambassador Robert Komer, head of MACV's revolutionary development program, noted that "sustained territorial security" was the "indispensable first stage of pacification."[57] Perhaps, but did progress in security truly lead to pacified areas? Given that MACV defined pacification as linking the South Vietnamese villager to a distant central government in Saigon, such notions rested on dubious hypotheses. Not only was defining and measuring security difficult but, even once the area was secured, many villagers found little reason to throw their support behind a shaky Saigon government. CAP members surely aspired to a "unity of interest between the South Vietnamese villager and the individual Marine."[58] Yet too often the local populace maintained its own agenda while navigating through a complex war in which the threat of returning insurgents made throwing one's open support behind American troops a dangerous proposition.

As the CAP program expanded, so too did opportunities for daily contact with the rural population. Official reports suggested encouraging results. A combined action unit in a village usually served to keep the indiscriminate use of American firepower away, surely important for building relations with local militia. Between August and December 1966, some 39,000 Popular

56 Training goal in 3rd CAG Command Chronology for the period June 1–30, 1969, July 14, 1969, 3rd Combined Action Group, Box 300, Records of the USMC, RG 127, NARA. Indices can be found in Parker, *US Marine Corps Civil Affairs in I Corps*, 17. For the CAPs' role in village pacification, see Robert D. Campbell, *Analysis of the Marine Pacification System* (Alexandria, VA, 1968), 5.

57 R. W. Komer, "Impact of Pacification on Insurgency in Vietnam," 5, August 1970, Folder 5, Box 15, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 01-Assessment and Strategy, TTUVA. MACV's "Guide for Province and District Advisors" equally claimed that the "key to pacification [was] the provision of sustained territorial security": 2–6, February 1, 1968, Historian's Files, CMH. For marines' belief in security, see Telfer and Rogers, *US Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese*, 183; for intelligence from the people, see Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy*, 82. Komer's program was known as Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS).

58 Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War*, 243. Francis J. West, Jr., found that NLF units might leave an area "but return often enough (once or twice a year) to keep their power recognized by the villagers": *The Enclave: Some US Military Efforts in Ly Tin District, Quang Tin Province, 1966–1968* (Santa Monica, CA, 1969), vi.

Forces had deserted, yet none involved troops assigned to combined action units. Other figures noted that PFs assigned to CAPs were achieving impressive "kill ratios" against the Viet Cong. One report boasted that these trends "underscore the improved military performance that is possible through the melding of highly motivated professional Marines with heretofore poorly led, inadequately trained, and uninspired Vietnamese."[59] The lessons were clear. With the proper leadership, local militia could defeat the NLF insurgency, provide security to the population, and help turn the tide of a stalemated war.

Below the surface, however, problems were brewing. The "crash course" in language and cultural instruction left marines ill equipped to deal with the intricacies of South Vietnam's village life. As journalist Frances FitzGerald found, American troops walked "through the jungle or through villages among small yellow people, as strange and exposed among them as if they were Martians." Because many battalion commanders resisted giving up their best marines, the quality of CAP members ran the gamut from "outstanding to abysmal."[60] Thus, through a lack of professional education, persistent language difficulties, the environment's unfamiliar nature, and the uneven quality of the marines themselves, the CAP program actually exposed larger issues with American intervention in Vietnam. One marine made a common assumption that potentially undermined the very presence of combined action units. "Anyone seen or heard moving around in the dark of night was considered to be VC and shot without hesitation." Such aggressiveness may have kept local insurgents off balance but also risked innocent civilian casualties as marines shouldered the responsibility for village security. ARVN Lieutenant General Nguyễn Đức Thắng, for example, opposed the combined action concept because he felt the South Vietnamese were "inclined to sit back and let the Marines" do all the work.[61]

59 Figures in Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War*, 240. Although the official narrative suggested marines lived among the people, at least one CAP veteran noted that "most of the Marines stayed very close to the compound – except when ambushes or patrols called." See James Walker Trullinger, Jr., *Village at War: An Account of Revolution in Vietnam* (New York, 1980), 118.

60 Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston, 1972), 370; the quote "outstanding to abysmal" can be found in Kopets, "The Combined Action Program: Vietnam," 79. For language problems, see Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 24. According to one veteran, "officers were aware from their own surveys that over 40 percent of the Marines disliked the Vietnamese": Robert A. Beebe quoted in John Prados (ed.), *In Country: Remembering the Vietnam War* (Lanham, MD, 2011), 95.

61 Nguyễn Đức Thắng quoted in Hunt, *Pacification*, 108. For shooting without hesitation, see Barry L. Goodson, *Cap Môt: The Story of a Marine Special Forces Unit in Vietnam, 1968–1969* (Denton, TX, 1997), 114.

In fact, the Popular Forces remained a nagging weakness. Lieutenant Colonel William R. Corson, the CAP program's first director in February 1967, argued that PFs were "the building blocks upon which a successful strategy in Vietnam could have been based."[62] While many marines sympathized with their ill-equipped, untrained allies, harsh realities undermined Corson's lofty aspirations. For one thing, district and village chiefs controlled PF units, not the marines. CAP sergeants and corporals thus found their influence circumscribed by a separated chain of command. As advisors, marines could coordinate and cajole but not command. Edward Palm, a CAP patrol leader, noted that this separation inhibited relationships with the local militia. "Despite numerous suggestions, complaints, and threats, we were never able to form integrated, cohesive patrolling teams. It was the luck of the draw every time out." Perhaps unavoidably, Palm recalled the "inevitable suspicion" that "our PFs were in league with the enemy and were tipping them off about our patrols."[63] True, PF soldiers were a mixed lot. If marines coming from combat service support units "lacked skills in scouting and patrolling," some PFs joined up for the sole reason of avoiding conscription into the regular army. Thus, the marines' official history arrived at a somber evaluation. "The PFs were to provide continuous security in the hamlets, but events had proved conclusively that they were incapable of carrying out their mission."[64]

If local militia effectiveness proved elusive, the growing conventional threat in I Corps during 1967 equally placed strains on the CAP program. As Hanoi sent more PAVN units into South Vietnam's northern provinces, marine commanders dispatched their own troops forward into battle. Walt found his Vietnamese counterparts slow to pick up the pacification slack. Worse, large-scale military operations not only ravaged the countryside but also drove thousands of villagers out of their homes and into resettlement camps. Even before the "border battles" of late 1967, at least 300,000 people

62 Corson in Hemingway, *Our War Was Different*, 51. "A Marine's Guide to the Republic of Vietnam" noted that "PF members are full time volunteers recruited within their native villages and hamlets to protect their own families and property": 8, TTUVA. Experience, however, suggested otherwise. As one marine lieutenant colonel recalled, "*not one* PF" in his battalion's tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) "was a resident of either village … all the eligible resident males, who should have been members of the PF platoons, were gone! They had been drafted into the ARVN, joined the VC, or deserted the village": Max McQuown quoted in Telfer and Rogers, *US Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese*, 190.

63 Palm in Hemingway, *Our War Was Different*, 35; Edward F. Palm, "Tiger Papa Three: The Fire Next Time," *Marine Corps Gazette* (February 1988), 67; for chain-of-command issues, see Yates, "A Feather in Their Cap?" 312; and Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War*, 240.

64 Shulimson and Johnson, *US Marines in Vietnam: The Landing and the Buildup*, 146.

in I Corps had become refugees. The Tet Offensive in early 1968 caused a further spike in the number of displaced persons.[65] Not only did Combined Action Platoons struggle to meet demands of this human suffering, they found it increasingly difficult to maintain their own security. While Walt hoped to expand the CAP program, his combined action marines were suffering two and half times the number of casualties as their PF counterparts. So many CAPs had been overrun during the Tet Offensive that III MAF decided "to reduce their vulnerability by operating thereafter as mobile units without a fixed base." Though controversial, the pronouncement meant the marines more closely mirrored the mobile advisory concept adopted by MACV in mid-1967.[66] Walt and Krulak might disparage Westmoreland's focus on the "big unit war" but Lê Duẩn's commitment to military action left them little choice but to follow suit.

Because of this dual threat – from outside South Vietnam's borders and inside its villages and hamlets – the marines' aspirations of providing lasting population security ultimately came up short. Without question, CAPs put their shoulders into it. In a two-month summer period of 1966, the combined action unit at Fort Page engaged in more than seventy firefights. During the 1967 national election period, III MAF as a whole conducted an average of 1,240 small-unit patrols, ambushes, and company-sized search-and-destroy missions a day. The results, however, proved disappointing. *Los Angeles Times* correspondent Jack Foisie found that, even "after the areas behind the US line of advance have been cleared of the enemy, harassment continues unless the villages are garrisoned."[67] Yet III MAF never possessed the manpower

65 Refugee numbers can be found in Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 575; and Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam*, 133. Millett argues the "NVA penetration across the DMZ sent strategic reverberations throughout III MAF and produced new concern at MACV with the pattern of operations in I Corps": *Semper Fidelis*, 576. On resettlement camps, see Prados, *In Country*, 97. For the impact of Tet on marine pacification operations, see Shulimson et al., *US Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year*, 604–6.

66 CAP casualty rates can be found in Birtle, *US Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine*, 400. On operating as mobile units, see Yates, "A Feather in Their Cap?" 316. On MATs, see Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965–1973* (Washington, DC, 1988), 236; and Terry T. Turner, "Mobile Advisory Teams in Vietnam: A Legacy Remembered," *On Point: The Journal of Army History* 16, 4 (Spring 2011), 34–41. Of course, one might question the marines' ability to bridge the cultural gap and gain the trust of local population given that no CAP unit developed intelligence of the impending Tet Offensive in early 1968.

67 Jack Foisie, "Marines Command Viet Militia Force," *Washington Post*, June 23, 1966; for Fort Page, see Shulimson, *US Marines in Vietnam: An Expanding War*, 242; for III MAF average, see Operations of US Marine Forces, Vietnam, TTUVA. Hennessy notes that "Civic Action was really conducted in the 'spare time' of the marines, because large-unit, base defense, and counter-guerrilla operations accounted for 35 percent, 50 percent, and 15 percent of their effort, respectively": *Strategy in Vietnam*, 93.

to sustain its security advances. Moreover, a garrison state hardly encouraged loyalty to Saigon's government. Marines involved in both large-unit and combined action operations surely made inroads against the insurgency by keeping the enemy off balance and driving wedges between the population and the NLF. The question of sustainability, though, remained. As one senior ARVN officer recalled, the "security attained was not a guarantee that it would be immune to enemy spoiling actions and that the trend was irreversible. The results only reflected the situation at a certain time; they did not represent the kind of solid, permanent achievements that defied retrogression." One CAP veteran was more succinct: "We had managed neither to protect our village nor secure the support of the people."[68]

Contemporary literature, however, presented a sanguine picture. Laying the foundation for future "lost opportunity" narratives, marines highlighted the number of villagers voting in the 1967 election. Mayors, once "scared off by the Viet Cong," were returning to their hamlets. The *Marine Corps Gazette* boasted of militia taking "heart from the Marines' firepower and combat aggressiveness" and that civic action was having a "significant role in the transformation" of villages under the Corps' protection.[69] Corson himself offered up impressive figures. In hamlets with CAPs, four out of five hamlet chiefs resided full time in their homes. "In hamlets without a CAP," the program director claimed, "29 per cent have functioning hamlet councils; in those with a CAP 93 per cent have reached this level of progress." Corson even maintained in a 1967 interview with the *Washington Post* that 1,000 marines were providing security for 250,000 people. (Journalist Ward Just called the remark "startling.")[70] Even civilian think tanks such as the Hudson Institute offered measured praise. One 1967 report acknowledged that the CAPs had "not

68 Tran Dinh Tho, "Pacification," in Sorley (ed.), *The Vietnam War*, 258; Palm, "Tiger Papa Three, Part I," 35.

69 Election results can be found in Wilson, "Gen. Greene Decries Gloom over Pacifying Viet Interior." See also David A. Clement, "Le My: Study in Counterinsurgency," *Marine Corps Gazette* (November 1967), 20; George Wilson, Jack Childs, Norman MacKenzie, and Michael Sweeney, "Combined Action," *Marine Corps Gazette* (October 1966), 29. One Marine Corps officer claimed that successful revolutionary development meant a "hamlet has become a community of responsibility": Richard C. Kriegel, "Revolutionary Development," *Marine Corps Gazette* (March 1967), 40. For a counterargument, see Palm, "Tiger Papa Three: The Fire Next Time," 68.

70 Figures in Corson, *The Betrayal*, 187; Just, "It's a 3-Front War." Corson's claims are worth questioning. Even in the most famous memoir of a CAP unit, *The Village*, Francis J. West, Jr., concluded that "the Marine command wished to clearly demonstrate the wisdom of combined units. This they were never to do to their own satisfaction, let alone that of the US Army. The combined units seemed too fragile, the American role too temporary, other demands for US manpower too powerful": *The Village* (New York, 1972), 256.

eliminated the infrastructure in every hamlet," nor "have they ever been able to feel they could leave a village safely behind." Nonetheless, they promoted an enhanced "mobile defense capability … based on local intelligence." As the report concluded, the combined action approach "should be applied to a solid mass of villages, as they [CAPs] have not been up to now."[71]

Despite these glowing testimonies, the marines' inability to link security with social and economic development plagued the CAP program and illustrated fundamental inconsistencies with the larger American presence in South Vietnam. In areas in which they operated, combined units often increased the level of security among the local villages and hamlets. Yet physical control of the population hardly addressed social grievances or economic hardships. In truth, development rarely achieved "revolutionary" levels. In large part, the Saigon government was still grappling with ways to extend its influence into the rural countryside. As *The Pentagon Papers* authors realized, "despite their good intentions to work through the existing GVN structure, the Marines found in many cases that the existing structure barely existed, except on paper, and in other cases that the existing structure was too slow and too corrupt for their requirements."[72] Too often the governmental chain from hamlet to Saigon was either broken or indifferent to the people's needs. As much as marine officers wanted to help win villagers' "allegiance and loyalty," no foreign occupation force could serve as a surrogate for functioning local government. And no amount of tactical skill in providing village security or in training PF militia could overcome inherent weaknesses within the South Vietnamese political community. Too many rural people simply felt out of step with their government in Saigon.[73]

To his credit, Westmoreland gave I Corps' leadership space to experiment with CAPs while confronting the PAVN threat across South Vietnam's border. Arguments that MACV vetoed plans for expansion of the program fall flat. In the end, the Marine Corps itself allocated less than 2 percent of its

71 Raymond D. Gastil, *Counterinsurgency and South Vietnam: Some Alternatives* (Croton-on-Hudson, NY, 1967), 11–19. For a more recent, and fuller, account of the CAPs, see Jim Seaton, "A Political-Warrior Model: The Combined Action Program," *Armed Forces and Society* 20, 4 (Summer 1994), 549–63.

72 *The Pentagon Papers* (Senator Gravel ed.), vol. II, 535. For social and economic inequities, see George R. Vickers, "US Military Strategy and the Vietnam War," in Werner and Huynh (eds.), *The Vietnam War*, 124. It is important to note that destruction of enemy combat units did not necessarily mean elimination of the NLF political infrastructure: Tho, "Pacification," 221.

73 Krulak quoted in Yates, "A Feather in Their Cap?" 310. See also Jeffrey Record, *The Wrong War: Why We Lost in Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD, 1998), 139. The government of South Vietnam is given as part of the problem in Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 115.

manpower to CAPs.[74] In late 1967, for instance, 1,343 marines and 2,074 PF members were assigned to combined action units. Never did the program exceed 2,500 marines, even when III MAF reached its peak of roughly 85,000 troops in 1968. Despite such a large presence, Westmoreland reasoned that III MAF controlled only 2 percent of the terrain and 13 percent of the population in all of I Corps.[75] As with "security," the word "control" surely held diverse meanings. Still, the few villages in which the CAPs operated hardly served as a paradigm for marine operations in the country's northernmost provinces. Westmoreland correctly realized, given Hanoi's intentions, that scattered combined action units did little to secure the population from the main-force threat. In Douglas Blaufarb's words, the marines' failure "to link the various CAPs together into an interlocking and mutually supporting network" only exacerbated the MACV commander's concerns.[76] Marines, however, tended to blame such shortcomings on Westmoreland's strategy of attrition.

While this popular narrative has appealed to a broad audience for decades, it ignores the realities behind MACV strategy and the tactical problems and solutions shared by the US Army and Marine Corps in Vietnam. In his official report on the war, Westmoreland noted that "cordon and search" and County Fair operations, "first developed by the Marines," were adopted by all ground commands. Though Walt disagreed with MACV's emphasis on larger, offensive operations, he conceded during and after the war that he could not ignore enemy main-force units.[77] Moreover, Westmoreland argued

74 Allnutt notes that, in 1968, "Marine Corps strength in Vietnam was about 80,000, and the number of CAPs ranged around 100, meaning that less than 1.5% of the Marines in Vietnam were in the Combined Action Program." The CAPs did, however, suffer 3.2 percent of all Marine casualties, indicating the amount of effort spent on security. See Allnutt, *Marine Combined Action Capabilities*, 11–12.

75 Figures are from Operations of US Marine Forces, Vietnam, TTUVA; Hemingway, *Our War Was Different*, 177; and Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 572. These numbers include navy corpsmen assigned to the program. As an indication of progress, the first CAPs to be deployed in the Phú Bài base area in 1965 were still in the same villages four years later as the PF had not reached a level to provide local security on their own. See Allnutt, *Marine Combined Action Capabilities*, 62.

76 Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era*, 258. In comparing the army and marine approaches, Birtle argues that "neither service was any more successful than the other in promoting village security": *US Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine*, 401.

77 Sharp and Westmoreland, *Report on the War in Vietnam*, 121; L. W. Walt, interview by Paige E. Mulhollan, January 24, 1969, Oral History Collection, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, Texas, 4; Walt to Westmoreland, November 19, 1965, 2, MHI. Cosmas finds that Krulak's description of marine strategy "was actually a balance of pacification and offensive action": *MACV*, 404. Even Sir Robert Thompson, the British counter-insurgency "expert" who felt CAPs worked "superbly," acknowledged that offensive operations "into contested and enemy held areas" were still necessary: *No Exit from Vietnam* (New York, 1969), 198.

that he "simply had not enough numbers to put a squad of Americans in every village and hamlet." Although Krepinevich later countered that "it was not necessary to place army squads in *every* village simultaneously" if one followed the "oil spot" principle of steady expansion, at least some veterans had doubts. One CAP member disputed that "we could ever have found enough Marines with the intelligence and sensitivity to make it work on a large scale, nor could we have provided the language and cultural training."[78] Critics of America's lost war, however, concluded that "if only" Westmoreland had followed the marines' approach, the war "might have" turned out differently.

Conclusions: The Perils of Mythmaking

Proponents of the CAP alternative have long relied on counterfactual arguments that, under closer scrutiny, call into question whether Westmoreland missed a grand opportunity to win the war. In truth, US Army units experimented with pacification just as the Marine Corps did – oftentimes, with similarly mixed results. In the 1st Infantry Division, operations such as Rolling Stone sought to balance the interrelated fields of civic action, psychological warfare, and combat operations. By providing long-term security to the population in Bình Dương province, the division hoped to achieve its primary objective of opening the area to "RVN economic and military influence."[79] Similar goals guided the 25th Infantry Division. In May 1966, Westmoreland directed commanders to work more closely with their ARVN counterparts "in order to improve their morale, efficiency and effectiveness." Soon afterwards, the 25th instituted the Combined Lightning Initial Project (CLIP), modeled on the marines' Combined Action Program, to help achieve the division's pacification goals. Soldiers not only trained local PFs, but also conducted clear and hold missions to "help expand the security 'oil spot'" around the division's Củ Chi base camp. In the 4th Infantry Division, operating along Cambodia's border, the "Good Neighbor" program equally sought to balance local security with the threat posed by PAVN main-force units.[80]

78 CAP member Palm in Hemingway, *Our War Was Different*, 39; Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 202. On Krepinevich's counterarguments, see *The Army and Vietnam*, 175–6.

79 Operational Report – Lessons Learned, January 1–April 30, 1966, 1st Infantry Division, 5, MHI. See also Combat Operations Report, 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, March 28, 1966, Folder 58, Box 01, William E. LeGro Collection, TTUVA.

80 Westmoreland quoted in Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 184; for CLIP, see Boyd T. Bashore, "Revolutionary Development Support in the Republic of Vietnam: Tropic Lightning Helping Hand and 'The Other War,'" January 19, 1968, 19–20, Student Essay, US Army War College, MHI. For the Good Neighbor Program, see "CI" File Folder, Box 1, Richard M. Lee Papers, MHI. On problems with the 25th Infantry approach,

The experiences of these US Army divisions directly challenge popular "lost war" narratives. Army commanders weighed offensive operations against pacification efforts just like their marine brethren. The failure of both services says more about the inability of Americans to resolve underlying problems within the South Vietnamese political community than it does about US military strategy. CAPs simply could not achieve the "credible permanence" so necessary for gaining the population's true support.[81] Especially after the 1968 Tet Offensive and the de-Americanization of the war, villagers were unconvinced the marines would not abandon them. Lacking a long-term commitment to their security, many rural peasants deemed it too risky to support the Saigon government over the NLF. Thus, Americans remained little more than an occupation force. In the process, persistent questions over the legitimacy of the government of South Vietnam made any gains against the National Liberation Front fragile at best.[82] True, the NLF's influence waned in the years following Tet, but it seems doubtful though that any expansion of the CAP program would have been enough to break the communists' will. In short, there were some political issues that military force simply could not resolve.[83]

Perhaps this uncomfortable truth helps explain why the false alternative of the marines' Combined Action Program remains so congenial. In the aftermath of Vietnam, Americans wanted to believe there was a better way, that

see Richard A. Hunt, "Strategies at War: Pacification and Attrition in Vietnam," in Richard A. Hunt and Richard H. Shultz, Jr. (eds.), *Lessons from an Unconventional War: Reassessing US Strategies for Future Conflicts* (New York, 1982), 35–6.

81 For "credible permanence," see Truong, "RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination," 158. See also Birtle, *US Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine*, 399. As an example of problematic narratives, Seaton argues the CAPs "sought to relegitimize traditional Vietnamese lines of authority at the lowest levels." Left unstated is how such a goal was possible for outside military forces to achieve: Seaton, "A Political-Warrior Model," 556.

82 On strategy being inextricable from politics, see Jeffrey Clarke, "On Strategy and the Vietnam War," in Lloyd J. Matthews and Dale E. Brown (eds.), *Assessing the Vietnam War: A Collection from the Journal of the US Army War College* (Washington, DC, 1987), 75. For an example of lack of cooperation with the local community, see Hemingway, *Our War Was Different*, 156; for replacing infrastructures, see Campbell, *Analysis of the Marine Pacification System*, 34; for the occupation force assessment, see Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons*, 88.

83 Even Corson admitted the "failure of the RF [Regional Forces] to carry their share of the load": *The Betrayal*, 85. See also Bernard Weinraub, "US Attempt to Use Vietnamese in GI Units Is Partly Successful," *New York Times*, August 13, 1967. On the question of III MAF programs increasing the effectiveness of the government of South Vietnam, see Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 572. On the larger problems of trying to achieve "moral attrition" against one's enemy, see J. Boone Bartholomees, Jr., "The Issues of Attrition," *Parameters* 40, 1 (Spring 2010), 13–14.

victory lay within their grasp. The alternative, though, was a myth. At its peak in 1969, there were only 114 CAPs for an I Corps population of roughly 2.5 million people. Evidence also indicated that in the "'softer' areas of civic action, psychological operations, and general institution- and nation-building" CAPs never performed all that well.[84]

Yet, long before the war's end, the marines already had judged their program a success. In May 1968, Krulak called on his colleagues to "stand up to their Army critics and extol the 'proud' record of the Marine Corps in Vietnam." In Krulak's view, his officers would have to defend the Corps' "right to fight by reciting its record of 'achievement' in Vietnam" since "our postwar survival may well turn on our ability to articulate our contribution." Suppressing the limits of the CAP program thus not only helped to honor the sacrifices of young marines but, perhaps more importantly, to solidify the Corps' reputation in a war already being condemned by critics as a failure. Krulak, in a large sense, was setting the foundations for a key myth of the Vietnam War: Westmoreland's strategy of attrition had flopped while the Marine Corps' strategy of population security had measured up.[85]

Though such narratives have found receptive audiences over the past five decades, especially those hoping to salvage one military branch's reputation after the American loss in Vietnam, the reality proves much more complicated. Westmoreland never made exclusive choices between attrition and counterinsurgency. The Combined Action Program thus ranked as one among many tools used by American military officers to help sustain a tenuous South Vietnam government under assault from both political and military agents. There existed no "magic solution" to the dual threat of external

84 For "softer" areas, see Allnutt, *Marine Combined Action Capabilities*, 69. Figures are from The Vietnamese Village 1970, Handbook for Advisors, Folder 02, Box 01, Ronald Tausch Collection, TTUVA; W. D. Sharpe, Population of Vietnam, November 1, 1966, Folder 24, Box 15, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 06-Democratic Republic of Vietnam, TTUVA; and Fraser Fowler, "The USMC's Combined Action Platoons: A Counterinsurgency Success in Vietnam and Why It Failed to Derail US Military Strategy," *Canadian Army Journal* 12, 1 (Spring 2009), 98. According to West, there were roughly 400 villages in I Corps: *The Pragmatists*, 1. A 1962 province study calculated the number at 569 villages in the 5 northernmost provinces: Provinces of Viet Nam, 20 August 1962, Folder 04, Box 05, John Donnell Collection, TTUVA. MACV estimated there were between 2,100 and 2,552 villages and between 10,000 and 12,000 hamlets in all of South Vietnam.

85 John W. Finney, "Gen. Krulak Urges Marines to Resist Detractors in Army," *New York Times*, May 13, 1968. The authors of *The Pentagon Papers* argued that "the Marine strategy was judged successful, at least by the Marines, long before it had even had a real test": *The Pentagon Papers* (Senator Gravel ed.), vol. II, 535. On the ultimately irreconcilable problems with the marine approach, see also Buzzanco, *Masters of War*, 253; and Asprey, *War in the Shadows*, 1182.

invasion and internal subversion.[86] Hence, the CAP "alternative" should be viewed as historical myth built by proud marine officers and uncritical military historians. Certainly, studying the merits of the marine approach offers valuable historical perspectives. But myths based on "if only" arguments do little to further our understanding of the Vietnam War. By judging that war only through stories we find congenial, through narratives in which victory always is possible, history loses its functionality for deeper understanding. In the end, counterfactuals based on false alternatives take us only so far.

86 No "magic solution" is from USMACV Command History, 1966, 65, NARA. For a critique of the myths surrounding counterinsurgency and the utility of force, see Gian Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency* (New York, 2013), 139–40.