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The client gets a vote: counterinsurgency warfare and the U.S. military advisory mission in South Vietnam, 1954-1965

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ABSTRACT

The belief that U.S. military advisors in South Vietnam did not know how to conduct a counterinsurgency campaign underpins belief that reforms are necessary for counterinsurgency success. However, contemporaneous U.S. documents show that military officers in the advisory period, 1954–1965, believed in the need for reforms and pressed their South Vietnamese counterparts to implement them. If advisors urged their partners to liberalize and democratize, yet the state remained autocratic, repressive, and corrupt, what explains the South Vietnamese failure to reform? I identify the client state's ability and will to resist reforms as an important overlooked element of counterinsurgency campaigns.

KEYWORDS Counterinsurgency; Vietnam; military intervention; patron-client relations; great power military intervention

Introduction

Much that U.S. policymakers, practitioners, and scholars understand about counterinsurgency rests on the belief that U.S. military advisors in South Vietnam did not know what comprises an effective counterinsurgency campaign. If the advisors had known what to do, the argument goes, the South Vietnamese government would have reformed itself at U.S. urging and survived the insurgent and Northern challenge. This belief relies on Andrew Krepinevich Jr.'s landmark 1986 book on the Vietnam war, which suggests counterfactually that had the U.S. Army understood counterinsurgency, South Vietnam could have survived.¹

Contemporaneous U.S. documents show, however, that military officers in the advisory period, 1954–1965, pressed their South Vietnamese counterparts to make liberalizing, professionalizing reforms throughout

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These views are mine alone

¹Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1986), e.g., 131.

the government and military. Their advice strikingly resembles Krepinevich's recommendations as well as contemporary prescriptions for defeating insurgents with good governance reforms. If U.S. military advisors were in fact urging their partners to democratize, yet the South Vietnamese state remained autocratic, brutal, repressive, corrupt, and extractive, then Krepinevich's explanation for the U.S. failure to attain reforms in South Vietnam loses explanatory power.

The Army in Vietnam is a towering work. After more than 30 years it remains a core reading on the Vietnam war in U.S. colleges and universities. Policymakers and military officers rely on Krepinevich in arguing that client state reforms are necessary in counterinsurgency because the U.S. Army failed to attain them in South Vietnam and the United States went on to fail to defeat the insurgency in South Vietnam. Krepinevich's argument that the U.S. military (specifically the Army) did not understand what successful counterinsurgency requires thus remains a touchstone for popular, scholarly, and public policy thinking on this important topic.

Yet the historical record shows that Krepinevich is empirically mistaken. This article provides archival evidence that many U.S. military advisors in the 1954–1965 period from headquarters down believed in the tenets of good governance counterinsurgency and struggled to gain their South Vietnamese counterparts' cooperation in trying to attain them. In internal documents as well as those sent to other agencies and Washington, the advisory mission underlined the importance of using force to attain specific political ends, including gaining the support of the people for the government. This new understanding of the facts of the case suggests the need to reconsider why the United States might have failed to attain the reforms it wanted.

This article provides one answer to the question of how the United States could have understood what successful counterinsurgency required and still failed to attain it. It is a problem that the advisory mission itself recognized and struggled with, namely, South Vietnamese officials' resistance to making good governance reforms. Implementing the reforms demanded by the United States would strip elite South Vietnamese civilian and military officials of the wealth and power they were fighting the insurgency to retain. The United States, meanwhile, lacked sufficient leverage to force reforms upon these elites.

While some journalistic accounts of the war and an increasing number of scholarly sources on South Vietnam note the client government's resistance to reforms, work on counterinsurgency is largely silent on the likelihood of the counterinsurgent government resisting reforms intended to defeat the

insurgency.² The unstated assumption is that the client needs only patron assistance to implement reforms creating a democratic modern state. But if elites in the counterinsurgent state resist reforms because they see sharing wealth and power as a higher cost and a more immediate danger than either the more distant potential loss of its patron or defeat by insurgents, it is unlikely to implement costly reforms, though it may gesture toward liberalization to pacify its patron.

In this article, I argue that U.S. military advisors in South Vietnam did understand successful counterinsurgency as a process of using reform as a weapon to defeat the armed, organized, persistent internal political challenge, and did try to achieve client reforms, but failed because South Vietnamese national-level civilian and military elites saw reforms as regime suicide. I then lay out the logic of why client elites might resist making liberalizing, democratizing reforms. Finally, I identify theoretical and policy implications of my identification of the role of client resistance to reforms in a great power's failure to coerce a client to implement its political demands.

This analysis does not consider what causes success in counterinsurgency campaigns overall, or what caused U.S. failure to defeat the insurgency in Vietnam specifically. It also does not provide a campaign analysis of the U.S. advisory period in South Vietnam because examination of U.S. and South Vietnamese allocation of resources is beyond the scope of this investigation. This piece does address U.S. military advisor beliefs about counterinsurgency in South Vietnam and the likelihood of any client implementing reforms that its patron believes necessary to defeat the insurgency.

²Journalists such as David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan recognized and reported on the differing goals of South Vietnamese and Americans. See, e.g., David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House 1972) and Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie* (New York: Random House 1988). They do not, and cannot be expected to, provide a theoretical or even systematic explanation of the phenomenon. Scholars discussing Vietnam specifically, counterinsurgency and military intervention generally, patron-client tensions, and the perils of state building include Douglas Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era* (New York: Free Press 1977), Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: New Press 1994), Jessica Elkind, *Aid Under Fire: Nation Building and the Vietnam War* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky 2016), Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2015), Daniel Byman, 'Friends Like These: Counterinsurgency and the War on Terrorism,' *International Security* Vol. 31, No. 2 (Fall 2006), 79–115, Douglas J. Macdonald, *Adventures in Chaos: American Intervention for Reform in the Third World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP 1992), Walter Ladwig, *The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relations in Counterinsurgency* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2017), and David Lake, *The Statebuilder's Dilemma: On the Limits of Foreign Intervention* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2016), all provide valuable insights. None focuses on the questions I ask in this article about the U.S. advisory mission in Vietnam and its failure to achieve South Vietnamese government reforms. Andrew J. Gawthorpe identifies and discusses a number of these interrelated problems in 'Agency and Structure in the Study of Nation-Building during the Vietnam War,' *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 8/4 (2014), 387–394.

Why counterinsurgency succeeds and fails

Influential work on Western efforts to back a counterinsurgency and on the Vietnam war emphasizes the importance of political and military reforms in defeating insurgents. The strategic logic is clear: The great power provides its client with money, training, equipment, and other support to implement liberalizing, democratizing, institutionalizing reforms to improve governance and thus reduce the grievances fueling the insurgency; the strengthened client's good governance swings popular support to the state and away from the insurgency, marginalizing the insurgency politically, and the state destroys the weakened insurgency militarily.³

These literatures focus on reforms but pay scant attention to the interests of the client. The assumption that the client wants and implements the demanded reforms permeates this work. A leading Cold War theorist and practitioner, Sir Robert Thompson, wrote, 'It is essential that the administrative structure should provide for a strong central government, which can prepare and implement national policies throughout the country.'⁴ The first item on a to-do list drawn up by leading counterinsurgency practitioners in the Vietnam era was, 'Identify and redress the political, economic, military, and other issues fueling the insurgency.' More recently, Ian Beckett wrote that success requires 'reform to address the grievances that led to support for the insurgency in the first place.'⁵ The outcome of improved governance is popular support: 'The focus must remain on gaining and maintaining the support of the population. With their support, victory is assured; without it, COIN [counterinsurgency] efforts cannot succeed.'⁶ Counterinsurgency authors pay more attention to increasing intervener leverage than to the client's ability to resist.⁷ Authors urging governance reforms are usually silent on the likelihood of client resistance.

A leading authority's lacunae

In his book on the Vietnam war, Krepinevich argues that from the earliest U.S. presence in South Vietnam, the U.S. military focused inappropriately on

³E.g., John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2002 2005); U.S. Department of the Army, *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual: U.S. Army Field Manual No. 3-24: Marine Corps Warfighting Publication No. 3-33.5* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2000), hereafter *FM 3-24*.

⁴Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Chatto and Windus 1966), 161; *FM 3-24*, 39.

⁵Stephen T. Hosmer, Sibylle O. Crane, 'Counterinsurgency, a Symposium,' April 16–20, 1962 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND 1962), iv; *FM 3-24*, 295; Ian F.W. Beckett, 'Insurgency in Iraq: An Historical Perspective,' (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute 2005.)

⁶*FM 3-24*, 303.

⁷Macdonald focuses on what the patron can do to increase the likelihood of client compliance, as Ladwig does more recently.

building conventional South Vietnamese forces to meet the threat of a conventional invasion from the North when the threat was in fact insurgency, a primarily political struggle.⁸ He argues that the mission should have supported good governance efforts in order to defeat the insurgency. Krepinevich's argument remains a tenet of popular, scholarly, and public policy thinking on this important topic despite the welcome proliferation of new work as archives open up in Vietnam.

For Krepinevich, an insurgency's center of gravity is the people. Defeating it requires forming ground-mobile forces trained in counterinsurgency tactics and working in small units. These forces physically separate the populace from the insurgency, then establish security, work with police and paramilitaries to weed out insurgents, and help win popular support by expanding political participation and providing public goods trumping the insurgent cause and any of its goods provisions. Popular support is based on evidence that the government has the capability and will to defeat the insurgency. Success requires unity of effort and command as well as privileging political above military goals. The insurgent will fight to regain control of the populace and be destroyed, or retreat and be weakened by his isolation from the populace, then destroyed.⁹

Krepinevich makes powerful points about the U.S. conduct of the Vietnam war, noting repeatedly, for example, the damage that the heavy use of firepower did to civilian interests and attitudes. He criticizes the U.S. military, rightly, for not reviewing assumptions, expectations, and measures of progress and acting to correct bad choices.¹⁰

However, Krepinevich ignores the political realities of the war, including the constrained role of the U.S. military in making and implementing U.S. policy, limited U.S. leverage over its client, and the agency of the South Vietnamese elites expected to implement U.S. policies.¹¹ He criticizes the U.S. military leadership in Saigon for pressing Washington to approve aid for the South Vietnamese government without also pressing South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem for reforms. But he does not address whether other elements of the U.S. government were pressing Diem and does not provide reason to believe that further pressure from anywhere would have produced the desired reforms.¹² Similarly, Krepinevich justly claims that the strategic hamlets program was badly conceived and executed. He blames this in part on the U.S. Military Advisory and Assistance Group (MAAG) failure to press the South Vietnamese government sufficiently for it to make the reforms considered necessary for success, including land reform, a crackdown on corruption, and

⁸Krepinevich, e.g., 131.

⁹Krepinevich, on insurgency, 7–10; on unity of effort, 10–14; on outcomes, 11.

¹⁰Krepinevich, e.g., on firepower, 65, 81; on lack of reevaluation, 88.

¹¹On leverage, see, e.g., Robert Keohane, 'The Big Influence of Small Allies,' *Foreign Policy* No. 2 (Spring 1971) 161–182.

¹²Krepinevich, 58–59.

a unified counterinsurgency command.¹³ Yet he does not demonstrate reason to believe that the government or Diem would have enacted these long-demanded reforms if further pressed.

The Army and Vietnam's blind spot regarding the interests and choices of South Vietnamese elites also mars Krepinevich's critique of U.S. decisions on force structure. While he accurately notes that South Vietnamese efforts to build regional and local forces met little success because of structural client problems such as corruption, he does not explain why direct U.S. efforts to build these forces would have been more successful without changes in these conditions, changes that required buy-in from South Vietnamese civilian and military elites.¹⁴

Krepinevich occasionally notes the lack of U.S. leverage over South Vietnamese elites, but condemns U.S. choices without considering their role. He quotes President John F. Kennedy's advisor, John Kenneth Galbraith, on the need for good governance in South Vietnam without mentioning Galbraith's warning that Diem could not make the demanded reforms and still retain power and thus was unlikely to make the reforms. Krepinevich criticizes the U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV, MAAG's successor) decision to turn the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG) program over to less competent South Vietnamese control without noting that if the South Vietnamese could not build forces to execute a counterinsurgency campaign themselves, then nothing the Americans did was likely to be sustainable, or that a United States determined to build a strong, sovereign South Vietnam would have political and practical difficulty in refusing that state control over its own armed forces. He blames poor Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) behavior on the U.S. Army Concept, ignoring structural factors such as corruption and infiltration and thus ignoring Vietnamese agency and elite choices.¹⁵

Krepinevich identifies the South Vietnamese government's lack of capacity and will to fight and reform without acknowledging the implications for his argument that more U.S. military focus on governance would have been more likely to defeat the insurgency. The understandable South Vietnamese elites' unwillingness to reform the political and economic system to its own detriment means that a campaign waged on Krepinevich's terms was politically impossible for the client to execute.

¹³Krepinevich, 66 on reforms, 66–68 on Operation Sunrise.

¹⁴Krepinevich, e.g., 21–25.

¹⁵Krepinevich, e.g., 68 on leverage; Krepinevich, 63, on Galbraith; Galbraith on Diem in D. Michael Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms: The Failure Of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP 1988), 269, fn 108; Krepinevich, 72, on CIDG, and 131 on the Army Concept.

These flaws also appear in later work on U.S. choices regarding ARVN and pacification.¹⁶ Some authors do touch on important points that Krepinevich neglected.¹⁷ Few identify missing factors such as Vietnamese elite agency while also identifying the U.S. military's belief in the tenets and tactics of good governance counterinsurgency.¹⁸ Some present a nuanced picture of U.S. attention to pacification and the shaping of ARVN but rarely focus on Vietnamese agency or the clash between U.S. and client elites' interests.¹⁹ Fredrik Logevall chronicles multiple examples of the United States flinching at Diem's refusal to enact reforms because of its lack of leverage over him, and notes how elite interests clashed with U.S. reform goals, but does not develop this disjunction as a causal factor in the U.S. failure to attain its political objectives.²⁰ There is important work on the South Vietnamese role in the war, but relatively little focus on elite interests or U.S. leverage in the context of the advisory mission. Richard A. Hunt's work on pacification simplifies the U.S. approach to ARVN and overlooks the limits of U.S. leverage and the ways in which South Vietnamese elite interests diverged from

¹⁶James Lawton Collins, Jr., *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950–1972* (Washington DC: Department of the Army 1975), gives more attention to planning and intentions than execution. He is discreet about client weakness and silent on any misalignment of interests. Ronald H. Spector's *Advice and Support: The Early Years 1941–1960* (Washington DC: Center of Military History 1983) identifies flaws in the South Vietnamese execution of pacification without noting the lack of alignment of interests.

¹⁷On peasant interests, e.g., Michael E. Latham, 'Redirecting the Revolution? The USA and the Failure of Nation-Building in Vietnam,' *Third World Quarterly* 27/1 (2006), 27–41, and Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 2010, revised edition).

¹⁸E.g., Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House 2012), chronicles multiple examples of U.S. retreats at Diem's refusal to implement reforms; Richard C. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press 1995), e.g. 13, 18–21, 25–30, simplifies the U.S. approach to ARVN and overlooks the limits of U.S. leverage and the clash of patron-client interests; Shafer notes the differences among elite and popular Vietnamese interests and U.S. interests; Macdonald identifies the U.S. leverage problem; James M. Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954–1968* (New York: Cambridge UP 2008), chronicles the state-building effort; Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP 2013), focuses on personality; Andrew Wiest, 'The "Other" Vietnam War,' in Wiest, Mary Kathryn Barbier, Glenn Robins (eds.), *America and the Vietnam War: Re-examining the Culture and History of a Generation* (New York: Routledge 2010), examines the often-ignored South Vietnamese military perspective; Lewis Sorley, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2011), 78–79, fails to note that Westmoreland intended U.S. forces to use their conventional capabilities as a security screen so ARVN and local and regional forces could focus on the political objective of pacification with the language and cultural skills considered invaluable for counterinsurgent success.

¹⁹E.g., George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975* (New York: McGraw-Hill 2002, fourth edition), e.g., on ARVN's double mission of internal and external security, 70–72, 74, on reforms and pacification, 57, 103, 107–108, 133; Dale Andrade, 'Westmoreland Was Right: Learning the Wrong Lessons From the Vietnam War,' *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 19/2 (2008), 145–181; and Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford UP 2014), 9, 149, 233, 45, 48, 59, considers Westmoreland's assessment of the character of the war as well as that of his predecessors.

²⁰Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*, e.g., 670–672 on ARVN, 695–697 on reforms.

those of the United States.²¹ D. Michael Shafer addresses elite and popular interests and their clash with U.S. goals but focuses more closely on the assumptions behind U.S. foreign policy choices.²² Douglas J. Macdonald identifies the U.S. leverage problem and the ways in which U.S. reform efforts threatened client interests, but pays less attention to U.S. military beliefs about counterinsurgency success.²³ James M. Carter chronicles the failed U.S. state-building effort in South Vietnam and the ways in which its implementation undercut its goals but does not focus on the U.S. military.²⁴ Edward Miller's interest is in personalities, particularly that of Diem, rather than interests.²⁵ Andrew Wiest's work attends to the often-ignored South Vietnamese military perspective, but he does not reference changing U.S. force structure decisions about South Vietnamese security forces made in the face of the rising South Vietnamese conventional insurgent threat that was gobbling up ARVN units on the battlefield by 1963.²⁶ Lewis Sorley focuses on the combat era in criticizing MACV commander Gen. William Westmoreland for ignoring the all-important political element of pacification. He does so without noting that Westmoreland intended U.S. forces to use their conventional capabilities to provide a security screen so ARVN and local and regional forces could focus on the critical political objective of pacification with the language and cultural skills Krepinevich and others consider invaluable for counterinsurgency success.²⁷

Other works present a more nuanced picture of U.S. attention to pacification and the shaping of ARVN. However, these works do not focus on the South Vietnamese role in implementation or the clash between U.S. and local elite interests.²⁸ George Herring, in his magisterial work on the United States in Vietnam, succinctly notes the double mission of internal security and preventing or deterring a North Vietnamese invasion, which he says the Americans were prudent to fear. He also identifies the profound, lasting U.S. interest in reforms and pacification as necessary to defeat the insurgency

²¹Richard C. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds*, e.g. 13, 18–21, 25–30.

²²Shafer, op cit.

²³Douglas J. Macdonald, *Adventures in Chaos: American Intervention for Reform in the Third World*.

²⁴James M. Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954–1968*.

²⁵Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam*.

²⁶Andrew Wiest, 'The "Other" Vietnam War,'. Regarding conventional insurgent capabilities, see, e.g., Carter, pp. 150–151. Regarding development of local and regional security forces, Samuel Popkin notes the challenge that such efforts posed to ARVN officers, who typically served as district and provincial chiefs, just as development of local and national civilian administrative capabilities through pacification threatened military power and influence. Samuel L. Popkin, 'Pacification: Politics and the Village,' *Asian Survey* 10:18 (August 1970), pp. 662–671.

²⁷Lewis Sorley, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam*.

²⁸Birtle recognizes the client management problem. In "'Triumph Forsaken" as Military History," in Andrew Wiest and Michael J. Doidge, *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War* (New York: Routledge 2010), he notes the difficulties of implementation but not local elites' resistance to changes threatening their interests, 125.

along with difficulties in implementation.²⁹ Andrew Birtle's important article on Westmoreland and the PROVN study focuses primarily on the combat era, but while accurately cataloging the many problems associated with the war effort, he is nearly alone in arguing that the U.S. military in Vietnam had been focused on pacification since 1955.³⁰ Birtle does not explore in detail the difficulties of implementing pacification or the South Vietnamese role. Birtle also makes the point that conventional forces are able to wage successful counterinsurgency campaigns and have been doing so for some time. Previous to Vietnam, conventional forces defeated insurgencies in Malaya, the Philippines, and Greece, for example.³¹ Dale Andrade makes a similarly important argument regarding the changing character of the military threat facing South Vietnam. He argues that in the advisory era, the adversary forced the United States to increasingly focus on the conventional threat. By December 1965, there were 160 Communist main-force battalions in South Vietnam and in the border area, only 55 of them from the North. The U.S. focus on providing the South with conventional forces saved South Vietnam from immediately falling to the insurgency and hurt the insurgents badly, particularly in terms of logistics and preserving their base areas.³² Gregory A. Daddis too primarily focuses on the combat era but includes consideration of Westmoreland's campaign in 1964–1965 and briefly assesses the approaches of his predecessors, including their understanding of the political nature and character of the war.³³

Elite resistance to reforms

In this argument, I identify the cause of the counterinsurgent government's lack of implementation of reforms as elite resistance. It has two facets. The first is client agency: client elites identify their own interests differently from their patron and can act upon these interests. The second is patron leverage.³⁴ A great power that commits itself to client survival yields significant leverage to the client. The client knows its patron fears paying high reputational and security costs if it walks away from its client and thus abandonment is unlikely. Both resistance to reforms and limited patron leverage are likely to appear relatively often in intervention counterinsurgency campaigns. This article lays the

²⁹George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, e.g., on ARVN, 70–72, 74; on reforms and pacification, 57, 103, 107–108, 133.

³⁰Andrew J. Birtle, 'PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal,' *The Journal of Military History* 72 (October 2008), 1213–1247.

³¹Birtle, "Triumph Forsaken" as Military History," 121.

³²Dale Andrade, 'Westmoreland Was Right: Learning the Wrong Lessons From the Vietnam War,' 145–181.

³³Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam*.

³⁴See Macdonald and Shafer.

groundwork for advancing our empirical understanding of the Vietnam advisory period and our theoretical understanding of client interests. It does not attempt a rigorous analysis of the lack of alignment of interests, focusing on the different question of whether U.S. advisors understood that successful counterinsurgency requires liberalizing reforms, as Krepinevich argues.

Research design

The topic of this article is military intervention by liberal great powers seeking to increase their own security by supporting a client threatened by insurgency. It identifies a reason for the failure of great power interveners to attain good governance reforms in a client state: client resistance to reforms. It finds that this reason plays out as theorized in a prototypical case.³⁵

This analysis thus identifies and challenges a key assumption in the leading approach to counterinsurgent success. This approach prescribes reforms to defeat insurgency. Its logic rests on the belief that the patron will enable reforms and the client will implement them, thus gaining popular support, weakening the insurgency politically and destroying it militarily. If this approach has empirical explanatory power, we should see congruence between theory and practice. The intervener enables reforms and the client implements them in a process that defeats the insurgency. If the intervener enables reforms and the client declines to implement them, we must question the power of the approach. Client failure to implement reforms paired with client failure to defeat insurgency does not imply, however, that reforms defeat insurgency. It does suggest that the prescriptive liberal model of counterinsurgent success is based on a flawed assumption and may thus be difficult to implement.

In this analysis, I identify a new explanation for South Vietnamese failure to reform and follow its role in the case of U.S. military intervention in the advisory period, 1954–1965. Case selection means these findings should be considered in other cases as well. Four criteria led to selection of this case. First, Vietnam is data rich. Second, its background conditions resemble current policy problems and other intervention counterinsurgency cases, providing external validity. The similarities are five-fold: Vietnam was an internal conflict that a great power decided challenged its interests sufficiently to send increasing numbers of advisory civilians and troops and increasing quantities of financial

³⁵Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 1997 reprint), 12. Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2005), 137.

and other aid; the great power was unwilling to commit its own combat forces; the client state faced a complex political, social, and military internal challenge; the conflict took place in a messy regional environment within the context of great power rivalry; and the great power's decision to provide its client with aid while pressing for reforms believed to defeat insurgency is typical of liberal great power efforts during the Cold War and today. Third, these prototypical conditions enable future controlled comparisons. Fourth, Vietnam is an intrinsically important case.³⁶ The United States in Vietnam is a touchstone for what not to do in counterinsurgency. Analysts, pundits, and policymakers extrapolate from Vietnam to argue that reforms are imperative for counterinsurgent success because they did not take place in South Vietnam and in South Vietnam the insurgents defeated the government.

The phenomenon of interest is the advisory mission's understanding of what was necessary to defeat the insurgency and its attempt to implement that understanding through client elites. I ask whether advisors understood the tactics and tenets of the prescriptive approach of good governance insurgency and attempted to persuade their partners to implement them. I do not argue that the South Vietnamese should have taken U.S. advice. I do not argue that South Vietnam would have won had it taken U.S. advice. Finally, I do not consider any disjunction between U.S. goals and South Vietnamese popular goals.

I compare evidence regarding advisors' beliefs about counterinsurgent success and their efforts to attain it to Krepinevich's prescription, which reflects widespread Western beliefs about successful counterinsurgency. This includes the tenets of recognizing that the center of gravity is the populace and that the purpose of military force is to reach political goals. The primary political goal is increasing popular support for the state to enable defeat of the insurgency. Popular support is achieved through military and political counterinsurgency tactics. The military effort requires relatively light ground-mobile forces executing small-unit operations separating the populace from the insurgents, establishing security for the populace, working with police and paramilitaries to root out subversives, increasing popular political participation, and providing public goods.

If advisors believed that South Vietnam would win the war through conventional military operations with heavy forces like those of the U.S. Army, and ignored, downplayed, or dismissed the larger political goals of the U.S. effort, these findings would support the widely held understanding of why the U.S. advisory effort failed to attain reforms. If thick analysis finds, however, that advisors believed that counterinsurgency success

³⁶Van Evera, 55–78.

was primarily a political process and acted on this belief, then their supposed lack of understanding did not exist and could not have caused U.S. failure.³⁷

Contemporaneous documents show that the U.S. military advisory mission did understand the logic of and attempt to implement the tenets and tactics of good governance counterinsurgency. These internal documents reveal advisor beliefs about counterinsurgency and efforts toward client execution of the U.S. counterinsurgency campaign within their bailiwick, pacification. I identify what advisors tried to achieve and what they considered major hindrances. Congruence testing shows that the intervening state did what the leading approach to counterinsurgent success prescribes – enable reforms – yet did not achieve the expected goal of client-implemented reforms because of client resistance.³⁸

While it is likely that at least some advisors blamed the Vietnamese for their own failings, there is powerful evidence that U.S. and South Vietnamese elites' goals did not converge on the need for a modern, bureaucratized, democratic state. Authoritative secondary sources also identify South Vietnamese elites' interests as different from those of the United States and as an active hindrance to the U.S. goal of pacification. They specify what elite interests were threatened by U.S. goals and why the client resisted reforms, as I discuss in the following pages.

U.S. military counterinsurgency beliefs and goals

Many researchers criticize the U.S. military advisory mission in Vietnam for not understanding the crucial role of good governance reforms, the popular support they are expected to gain, and the role both are expected to play in counterinsurgency success. The United States certainly made bad choices in Vietnam. It failed to achieve its goals regarding its client. However, the developing threat to the new state was more complicated, dealing with the South Vietnamese client was more difficult, and U.S. military choices were more informed than existing work suggests.

U.S. goals for South Vietnam were ambitious. President Dwight D. Eisenhower wrote Diem that U.S. aid was intended to create a strong, viable state, 'enlightened in purpose and effective in performance,' and the United

³⁷On thick analysis, see David Collier, Henry E. Brady, and Jason Seawright, 'Sources of Leverage in Causal Inference: Toward an Alternative View of Methodology,' in Brady and Collier (eds.), *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield 2010), 180–181; Van Evera on doubly decisive tests, 31–32. David Collier, in 'Understanding Process Tracing,' *PS: Political Science and Politics* 44/4 (2011), 823–830. David Collier, Henry E. Brady, and Jason Seawright, 'Causal Inference: Old Dilemmas, New Tools.'

³⁸Van Evera, 63, 66.

States expected 'needed reforms' in return.³⁹ Liberalizing reforms included reduced corruption, a broader base of political power, a stronger civilian bureaucracy, and demonstrations of concern for the people.⁴⁰ Kennedy's liberalizing program included 'actions of a political, military, economic, psychological, and covert character, designed to create ... a viable and increasingly democratic society and to keep Vietnam free.'⁴¹ Kennedy pressed Diem to bring opposition leaders into the cabinet, give more power to the National Assembly, implement land reform, institute merit promotions in the military, and create a more responsive government.⁴² President Lyndon B. Johnson insisted on replacement of incompetent military leaders and civic action to show the populace that the government wanted to help.⁴³ Civic action was for 'gaining and maintaining the support of the people through socio-economic improvement in order to remedy one of the underlying causes of the insurgency.' Specifics included teaching sanitation and first aid; improving waste disposal; outpatient medical care; basic education; bridge and road construction; and building community facilities like markets, schools, dispensaries, pagodas, and wells.⁴⁴

From the highest level in Saigon to advisors in the field, members of the U.S. military advisory mission identified reforms as the key to counterinsurgency success. They saw their role as the foundation for reforms because the client had to fight off the insurgency and protect the populace in order to establish security and meet popular interests.

The U.S. label for this process was, though most of the period, pacification. Pacification included military and political tactics to separate the insurgency from the populace and gain popular support. 'Pacification includes all civilian, military, and police action to eliminate organized VC military activity, detect and eliminate the overt and covert VC political apparatus and nurture economic, political and social development of a viable economy.' The term that replaced pacification, rural reconstruction, was similarly expansive: 'Activities, principally of a social-economic-political nature identified as "nation building," taking place in an area that has been declared secure. The purpose is to strengthen and improve the effectiveness

³⁹University of California, Santa Barbara, The American Presidency Project, President Dwight D. Eisenhower to Ngo Dinh Diem, 23 Oct., 1954 (Department of State Bulletin, 15 November 1954). <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/vietnam/showdoc.php?docid=1>. Also e.g., Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, Volume I, Vietnam, Document 183, Memorandum From the Special Representative in Vietnam (Collins) to the Ambassador-Designate to Vietnam (Reinhardt), Saigon, 10 May, 1955. Miller analyzes how U.S. views on modernization clashed with Diem's.

⁴⁰Ambassador Maxwell Taylor in 1964, Secretary of State Dean Rusk in July 1965, White House advisor Roger Hilsman in 1961, and the 'action program for Vietnam' in 1962, Shafer, 248.

⁴¹Shafer, 249.

⁴²Hunt, 14.

⁴³Hunt, 29.

⁴⁴Carlisle, PA, U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center, MACV Command Historian's Collection, Series VIII, document: 'U.S. Army Support Command Vietnam Debriefing Report,' Maj. Gen. Delk M. Oden.

of the local government thus to solidify the support of the people for that government and to demonstrate visibly to other non-secure areas the benefits that accrue in a peaceful area operating under the rule of law.⁴⁵ U.S. military and civilian agencies worked with the South Vietnamese to implement these tactics at the grassroots and in the capital. U.S. pressure for reforms at top levels came from high-ranking officials in Saigon and Washington.

U.S. advisors' beliefs about defeating the insurgency were similar to the tenets laid out by Krepinevich and others, including recognizing that the center of gravity is the populace and placing political goals above military goals, with the primary political goal of popular support to be achieved through counterinsurgency tactics.

Advisors lacked the ability to compel their South Vietnamese counterparts to implement reforms, but they knew what these best practices were and understood their strategic logic. Reports are filled with attention to small-unit action, raising and training paramilitaries, protecting the populace from the insurgents, and the need for popular support. Military officers pressed ahead with training and advising responsibilities while noting that success was constrained by the realities of client governance and elite attitudes.

The political goals of the U.S. military advisory effort: the tenets of counterinsurgency

The U.S. military's focus on reforms reflected views in Washington and today, though there were important disagreements over how much military reforms alone could achieve.⁴⁶ Gen. Matthew Ridgway, Army chief of staff, argued that a military training mission would be futile without 'a reasonably strong, stable civil government.'⁴⁷ Policymakers overruled the Joint Chiefs but the military's concern about the missing ingredient of effective governance remained evident.

While advising their client to adopt appropriate military actions and forces to achieve U.S. political goals, advisors kept their eye on the imperative of civilian reforms. Pacification as a political plan to gain popular support was central from the beginning, as were larger reforms.⁴⁸ 'Unless

⁴⁵MACV, Series VIII, Oden debriefing; Carlisle, PA, U.S. Army War College Library, memorandum, U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam. The concept of rural reconstruction and certain definitions and procedures. 2 March 1965, signed MG Richard G. Stilwell, chief of staff, for commander.

⁴⁶Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation 1962-1967* (Washington DC: Center of Military History 2006); Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era* (New York: Cambridge UP 1996).

⁴⁷Spector, 224.

⁴⁸On pacification, e.g., MAAG Vietnam, Minutes of Conference at MAAG, 29 November 1954, reports that MAAG chief Gen. John O'Daniel and South Vietnamese Gen. Nguyen Vy agreed on the U.S. pacification plan. On larger reforms, see, e.g., MAAG Vietnam, Narrative Study, 24 August 1958, a memo to the Pentagon saying 'Next to national security, economic development is the most urgent requirement for the future stability and progress of Vietnam.'

these efforts to improve the life of the peasant and win him over to the GVN [government of South Vietnam] are successful, the use of military force will never be conclusive,' MACV commander Gen. Paul Harkins, widely considered the most conventionally minded commander in Vietnam, wrote in 1963.⁴⁹

Defeating the insurgency required an integrated military, political, economic, sociological, and psychological effort, advisors believed. The last MAAG chief, Major General Charles J. Timmes, showed no doubt that the use of force would enable positive political change. 'Clear and hold (pacification) operations are the dominant theme in the overall orchestration of counterinsurgency,' Timmes said. This meant separating the populace from the insurgents militarily (clearing), providing security, and rooting out the insurgent infrastructure while building the economy short and long term (holding).⁵⁰ A top aide to Gen. William Westmoreland, Gen. Richard G. Stilwell, specified that developing a government infrastructure to protect the populace, win popular support, strengthen the economy, and stabilize the government was critical.⁵¹

Advisors at headquarters and far from Saigon held these views. MACV's goal was to 'seek to gain popular support through positive social and economic projects while providing the necessary security to insure project completion.' The advisory command's concept was a two-pronged effort targeting the enemy and the people. After clearing areas, the South Vietnamese would execute 'activities, principally of a social-economic-political nature identified as "nation building." ... The purpose is to strengthen and improve the effectiveness of the local government thus to solidify the support of the people for that government and to demonstrate visibly to other non-secure areas the benefits that accrue in a peaceful area operating under the rule of law.'⁵² Senior advisors noted that clear-and-hold military and civic

⁴⁹MAAG Vietnam, file folder: US Committee on Province Rehabilitation, Vietnam. Miscellaneous documents and official correspondence with Government of Vietnam, July 1962-April 1963; document, Clear and hold operations, 1 February 1963, to chief MAAG, Senior Advisor I-IV Corps. Also see, e.g., Wilbur Wilson Papers, Box 2 of 6, U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group III Corps Saigon, Vietnam 7 October 1963, Memorandum for: General Dinh Commanding General III Corps, Subject: Estimate of the situation (3rd Quarter 1963) (U) From Col. Wilbur Wilson.

⁵⁰Donald D. Blackburn Papers 1916-1983, Oral History Transcript Volumes I and II (unbound)], file folder: Donald D. Blackburn Oral History Transcript, Vol. 1 1983 1 of 2, document: debriefing report, 10 June 1964, Major General Charles J. Timmes. Also see, e.g., William C. Westmoreland Collection, Series I official correspondence, COMUSMACV Back Channel Messages Outgoing for Jan. 1964 to June 1965, 1 January 1964-30 June 1965, Box 17, file folder: Backchannel messages sent Feb. 1-31 December 1964; memo from Sharp CINCPAC and Westmoreland to Wheeler and Goodpaster, Oct. 1964.

⁵¹Westmoreland, Series II official papers, COMUSMACV history backup files, 1-3 for Mar. 62-Apr. 64, Box 34, file folder: Official papers [etc] history backup file #3 17 Feb.-30 April 1964; memo: Headquarters United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 10 March 1964 Counterinsurgency Vitalization, staff study signed by Major General Richard G. Stilwell.

⁵²Library, memo to advisors on the concept of rural reconstruction and certain definitions and procedures, 2 March 1965, signed by Stilwell, chief of staff, for commander.

efforts would enable 'a sound social-economic-political structure.'⁵³ A clear-and-hold operational plan identified its goals as gaining popular support and creating effective governance down to the hamlet level.⁵⁴

Advisors recognized the importance of South Vietnamese authorities' buy-in. A summary of lessons learned emphasized advisors' responsibility to keep South Vietnamese forces focused on political goals: 'The war in Vietnam is as much a battle for men's minds as it is a purely military battle.'⁵⁵ Advisors repeated: 'The present conflict is primarily political and a fight to win over the minds and support of the people.'⁵⁶

The tenets of counterinsurgency: building the military for a changing threat

The U.S. military's mission included internal defense from the start. The United States set up MAAG in Vietnam in 1950, during the French colonial era, to help build military capacity.⁵⁷ Its mission after creation of South Vietnam in 1954 was to help the state establish and maintain internal security and provide 'limited initial resistance to external aggression.'⁵⁸ Anti-guerrilla, anti-subversion, law and order, and pacification efforts were added to MAAG's responsibilities in 1958.⁵⁹ The mission in 1962 was to advise and assist South Vietnamese forces in preparation and execution of successful operations against internal insurgency and to help develop paramilitaries to address internal security.⁶⁰

The U.S. position on what force structure best served its client shifted with the perceived threat. When the mission saw a conventional invasion from North Vietnam as the most significant threat early in its tenure, shortly after the shock of the 1950 North Korean invasion of the South, it suggested a force structure focused on this conventional threat, but with an eye to the

⁵³Blackburn, document: USMAAGV, Briefing Notes, senior advisors conference, 4 May 1962, 'Clearing and holding operations.' 11 May 1962.

⁵⁴Wilson, Box 2 of 6, file folder: Memoranda to Gen. Dinh, CG II Corps 1 August 1962; document: III Corps Clear and Hold Operation Plan Kien Hoa, 27 December 1963.

⁵⁵MAAG Vietnam, file folder: U.S. Committee on Province Rehabilitation, Vietnam. Miscellaneous documents and official correspondence with Government of Vietnam, July 1962-April 1963; document: Lessons learned #16, 19 June 1962.

⁵⁶MACV, Series VIII, file folder: USMAAGV, Miscellaneous memoranda, June 1962 – May 1963; document: PSYWAR/CA Branch Organization and Training Division, U.S. Army Section, Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam, Saigon, Vietnam, Memorandum for Record, Subject: Trip Report – Inspection of Psywar/CA and Information Activities Operation Hai Yen II, Phu Yen Province, 10 July 1962, from Maj. Harold F. Bentz, Jr.

⁵⁷Collins, 2.

⁵⁸MACV, Series VIII, Intel Bulletins, document: Narrative Study of Vietnam, 24 August 1958.

⁵⁹MAAG Vietnam, file folder: 'Memorandum MAAG J.D. Gallagher LTC adjutant general to Assistant Secretary of Defense ISA 24 August 1958.'

⁶⁰MAAG Vietnam, file folder, U.S. Committee on Province Rehabilitation, Vietnam. Miscellaneous documents and official correspondence with Government of Vietnam, July 1962-April 1963; document: Concept of Employment, mission of advisor teams, 12 May 1962.

need for relatively light forces able to operate in Vietnam's rugged terrain. Insurgent violence against government officials began rising in 1958, with a shift from hit-and-run attacks to full-scale military operations against state-controlled villages and military units in 1959, and force structure generally responded.⁶¹

Starting in 1954, the United States built ARVN for counter-guerrilla and limited conventional operations in its mountainous, jungled, swampy territory. The army included four conventional field divisions and six light divisions designed for internal security. The field divisions had one artillery battalion instead of the four standard in a U.S. infantry division, few trucks, and no artillery heavier than 81 mm mortars.⁶² Lightness was important for chasing guerrillas across rough terrain. In 1955, before the Communist-nationalist insurgency became violent, concern about invasion remained but MAAG chief Lt. Gen. Samuel T. Williams advocated good governance counterinsurgency. Williams told Diem that 'political, psychological, economic, administrative and military action is necessary for success.' Battalions were consolidated into light divisions and territorial regiments in 1956. Most units were doing pacification in the countryside and repressing the domestic political entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs of violence threatening Diem's rule, the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen.⁶³ Territorial regiments were considered more useful than regular troops for pacification because of their local knowledge.⁶⁴ In 1957, Williams had all U.S. Army guerrilla and counter-guerrilla manuals and other guidance translated into Vietnamese.⁶⁵ The fear of invasion remained as North Vietnamese forces grew. In 1958, Williams reorganized the army into seven standard divisions, divisions bigger than the original field divisions and with two artillery battalions each but still lighter than U.S. divisions.⁶⁶

With the rise of the insurgency as guerrilla and then main force units, MAAG continued focusing South Vietnam's forces on the tactics of good governance counterinsurgency. In 1960, MAAG produced a counterinsurgency handbook focused on progressive area clearance, political factors, humane treatment of civilians, popular grievances, and above all, the need to gain popular support. MAAG chief Lt. Gen. Lionel C. McGarr emphasized assigning infantry units to remain in place to gain local knowledge, and the use of small patrols.⁶⁷ The mission directed training toward anti-guerrilla

⁶¹Herring, 82–83.

⁶²Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1942–1976* (Washington DC: U.S. Center for Military History 2006), 309.

⁶³See Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 2013) on challengers to Diem's rule and his consolidation of power.

⁶⁴MACV Command Historian's Collection Series VIII, Intel Bulletins, document, Brief Summary of MAAG-TERM Activities, Nov. 1955–Nov. 1956, dated 18 November 1956.

⁶⁵Birtle, *Counterinsurgency*, 309–210.

⁶⁶Birtle, *Counterinsurgency*, 309.

⁶⁷Birtle, *Counterinsurgency*, 314.

operations and incorporated paramilitaries. McGarr tried to strengthen the South Vietnamese chain of command for counterinsurgency at a time when ARVN was going on the offensive to meet Viet Cong formations of at least battalion size.⁶⁸ By 1962, with insurgent attacks increasing, the primary U.S. mission was advising the armed forces for preparation and execution of successful operations against insurgents, and supporting paramilitaries.⁶⁹ ARVN training focused on counter-guerrilla warfare, including small-unit infantry tactics, ambush and counter-ambush drills, patrolling, raiding, village searches, encirclement tactics, airmobile warfare, and night operations, as well as the need to gain popular trust and support and avoid foraging, looting, and indiscriminate shooting.⁷⁰

Forming local and paramilitary forces for counterinsurgency

In line with accepted beliefs about successful counterinsurgency then and now, U.S. advisors emphasized the political goals to be gained through tactical military action. They urged the South Vietnamese to form and employ paramilitaries for regional and local defense.

The United States advised security forces including the provincial level Civil Guard, the village Self Defense Corps, the national police, its special branch, the combat police, and the regular police. There was a Central Intelligence Office and provincial Intelligence Coordination Committees.⁷¹ The Civil Guard and the Self Defense Forces were later renamed the Regional Forces and the Popular Forces (RF-PF's). U.S. Special Forces trained the CIDG to enlist the Montagnard hill tribes against the insurgency.⁷² By 1965, there were 27 types of pacification cadres and 15 armed forces.⁷³

Advisors in the field stressed the importance of paramilitaries. They advised using them for community self defense, to free ARVN for offensive action, and to draw the people and government closer together.⁷⁴

⁶⁸MAAG Vietnam, file folder: U.S. Committee on Province Rehabilitation, Vietnam. Miscellaneous documents and official correspondence with Government of Vietnam, July 1962-April 1963; document: Memorandum LG Lionel C. McGarr, Subject: First 12-month report of Chief MAAG, Vietnam, 1 September 1961.

⁶⁹MAAG Vietnam, mission of advisor teams, 12 May 1962.

⁷⁰Birtle, *Counterinsurgency*, 316–317.

⁷¹Hunt, 13, 24–25.

⁷²Birtle, *Counterinsurgency*, 315.

⁷³Birtle, *Counterinsurgency*, 320.

⁷⁴E.g., Wilson, Box 1 of 6, memorandum, USMAAGV, II VN Corps Detachment Pleiku, Vietnam 7 January 1962, Subject: Analysis of Viet Cong Activity in II Corps Tactical Zone; Wilson, Box 3 of 6, file folder: Memorandums for COMUSMACV; document: Progress Report OPLAN TAY NINH for the period 1 March to 31 May 1963, 1 July 1963; Wilson, Box 3 of 6, file folder: Memorandums for COMUSMACV; document, Progress report OPLAN Binh Duong for the period 1 March to 31 May 1963, 1 July 1963; Wilson, Box 3 of 6, file folder: Suggestions on how to win the war in Vietnam, document: memo to Col. Wilson, 4 February 1964, from Lt. Edward L. Schmidt.

Westmoreland himself noted the importance of paramilitaries for these purposes.⁷⁵

The tactics of counterinsurgency

Advisors' beliefs reflected orthodox Western counterinsurgency practices. Political tactics enabled by military force were to gain support for the state by meeting peasant interests.⁷⁶ Advisors prescribed night operations and ambushes against guerrillas plus civic action and psychological warfare, including living with the people long term, providing medical aid, assisting with the harvest, supporting community projects, and helping dig wells.⁷⁷

Advisors considered the populace the center of gravity. Civic action was crucial for success, including provision of food, clothing, medication, livestock, and roads.⁷⁸ Finding qualified individuals to govern at the district level was critical.⁷⁹ The need to impress 'on all military personnel the necessity for fair treatment of the populace' appears repeatedly.⁸⁰ One advisor praised ARVN for its tremendously improved behavior, including paying a fair price for food 'as opposed to the old practice of taking what they needed with only token payment or none at all.'⁸¹ Westmoreland's instructions to senior advisors in 1964 emphasized the importance of the people's attitude toward the government and the need for proper treatment of civilians and prompt, public, adequate compensation for needless civilian damage or injury.⁸²

⁷⁵Westmoreland, Series I Official Correspondence, COMUSMACV back channel messages, outgoing, for Jan. 1964 to June 1965, Box 17; file folder: Backchannel messages sent February 1-31 December 1964; document: memorandum from Westmoreland to Wheeler CJCS Nov. 1964, assessment of military situation presented to Ambassador Taylor.

⁷⁶MACV, Series VIII, file folder: US Committee on Provincial Reconstruction, Vietnam misc documents and official correspondence with GVN 7/62-4/63; documents: Headquarters 9th Infantry Division Advisory Detachment, U.S. Army Military Assistance Advisory Group, Qui Nhon, Vietnam, 24 December 1962, Subject: After Action Report on Psywar/CA in Operation Hai-Yen, Phu-Yen Province (27 June-6 October 1962), signed, Capt. Howard C. Walters, Jr.

⁷⁷E.g., Blackburn, document: Debriefing report on insurgency in the Mekong River Delta of Vietnam by Colonel John P. Connor, US Army Senior Advisor to IV Vietnamese Corps 1 February 1963 to 1 February 1964.

⁷⁸Wilson, Box 1 of 6, document: memo, USMAAGV, II VN Corps Detachment Pleiku, Vietnam 10 April 1962, Subject: Civic Action Program, II CTZ, To: Chief MAAG, Vietnam, From Col. Wilbur Wilson.

⁷⁹Wilson, Box 3 of 6, file folder: Memorandums for COMUSMACV; document: memorandum, 1 July 1963, Subject: Progress Report OPLAN TAY NINH for the period 1 March to 31 May 1963.

⁸⁰E.g., Wilson, Box 3 of 6; file folder: Suggestions on how to win the war in Vietnam, Col. Wilson, 4 February 1964; document: memo from Schmidt; Wilson, Box 3 of 6, file folder: Memorandums for COMUSMACV; document: 1 July 1963 Subject: Progress report OPLAN Binh Duong for the period 1 March to 31 May 1963.

⁸¹MAAG Vietnam, file folder: Brief summary of major activities and accomplishments February 62-June 64: The Harkins fact book; document, Special Report, 15 June 1964.

⁸²Westmoreland, Series I Official Correspondence, COMUSMACV Back Channel Messages, outgoing, for January 1964 to June 1965, Box 17; file folder: Backchannel messages sent February 1-31 December 1964; document: memorandum from Westmoreland to Brig. Gen. E.C. Dunn, Ft. Hood, repeating instructions issued to all junior advisors, Dec. 1964.

Advisors trained and urged ARVN to use standard Western counter-insurgency tactics.⁸³ The South Vietnamese generally did so, clearing to support pacification, search-and-destroy missions to target insurgents, and patrols, raids, and ambushes.⁸⁴ Westmoreland believed in the efficacy of these tactics, saying the state needed more and better trained police for population and resources controls, as well as mobile action cadres and Regional Forces, and stressed the need for effective psychological warfare and civic action.⁸⁵ A memo from the MACV chief of staff defining important terms involved in rural reconstruction included standard counterinsurgency tactics such as small-unit action, night action, ambush, establishing local security, and resources and population controls.⁸⁶ An advisor to the III Corps Zone commanding general urged night operations, population and resources controls, psychological operations, and economic development.⁸⁷

Good governance clashes with South Vietnamese elites' interests

U.S. policymakers and diplomats pressed the state to improve governance.⁸⁸ Advisors too believed in reforms. 'One enemy is the Viet Cong,' said a MAAG memo, 'and the other enemy includes all of those things which make communism look attractive – poverty, ignorance, and lack of the basic freedoms.'⁸⁹

⁸³E.g., MAAG Vietnam, Lessons learned #16; Wilson, Box 1 of 6, document: USMAAGV, II VN Corps Detachment Pleiku, Vietnam 7 January 1962, Memorandum, Subject: Analysis of Viet Cong Activity in II Corps Tactical Zone; Wilson, Box 3 of 6, file folder, Memorandums for COMUSMACV; document: 1 July 1963 Subject: Progress Report OPLAN TAY NINH for the period 1 March to 31 May 1963; Wilson, Box 3 of 6, file folder: Memorandums for COMUSMACV, memorandum 1 July 1963, Subject: Progress report OPLAN Binh Duong for the period 1 March to 31 May 1963.

⁸⁴MACV, Oden debriefing.

⁸⁵Westmoreland, Series II official papers, COMUSMACV History Backup Files 8–11 for 1 Sept. to 31 December 1964, 27 Aug.-30 December 1964, Box 36; file folder, Official Papers – Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV) – History Backup File #9, 9 Oct.-13 Nov. 1964 [Part 4 of 4]; document: Memorandum for: Ambassador Taylor, Subject: 3rd Quarter Review of IV Corps, from Westmoreland, 11 November 1964. On training, e.g., Wilson, Box 1 of 6, memorandum from MAAG, Vietnam II VN Corps Detachment Pleiku, Vietnam, 9 September 1962, to MAAG Saigon commanders, Subject: Analysis of Viet Cong Activity in II Corps Tactical Zone, Aug. 1962.

⁸⁶MAAG Vietnam, file folder: U.S. Military Assistance Command VN; document: Memorandum, Subject: The concept of rural reconstruction and certain definitions and procedures, Serial #0577, 23 April 1965, To: Advisors, signed Major General Richard G. Stilwell, chief of staff, for commander.

⁸⁷Wilson, Box 4 of 6, file folder: III Corps Estimate of Situation 1st Quarter, 1964, Col. Wilson; document: Memorandum for General Tam, 10 April 1964, Estimate of the situation in III Corps (1st Quarter 1964), from Col. Wilbur Wilson. On population and resources controls, e.g., Wilson, Box 3 of 6, file folder: Suggestions on how to win the war in Vietnam, Col. Wilson, 4 February 1964; memo from Major Casilear Middleton.

⁸⁸E.g., Logevall, 5; Carter, 8; John Prados, *Vietnam: History of an Unwinnable War, 1945–1975* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas 2009), 68; Birtle, *Counterinsurgency*, 318.

⁸⁹Blackburn, U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam Briefing Notes, senior advisors conference, 4 May 1962, 'Clearing and holding operations,' 11 May 1962.

But reforms challenged the status quo that South Vietnamese elites were fighting to retain. The system functioned as it did because it served elites' interests.⁹⁰ The corruption that incensed Americans was a skein of patronage networks integral to the political process. In a political system without structural protections, the sensible choice was to seek profit and look after self, family, and connections. In addition, decades of warfare had created lucrative informal networks of power and profit.

What the Americans condemned as dishonest, client elites survived by.⁹¹ Officials bought and sold their positions as investments.⁹² Corrupt, abusive officials were transferred to other areas, not punished.⁹³ Officials took money and commodities intended for the populace, arrested and tortured for personal advantage, and conspired to steal elections.⁹⁴ Few cared about meeting popular needs.⁹⁵ The urban, educated classes and the military saw no need to better the lot of the peasants or improve governance.⁹⁶ Non-Communist elites interested in reforms wielded little power and few survived Diem's rule.⁹⁷

Increasing the size of the military and boosting its capabilities was a more straightforward task than civilian reforms, though neither was accomplished to U.S. satisfaction.⁹⁸ The United States devoted significant resources to training, arming, building, and professionalizing the state's security arm.⁹⁹ But it had greater success in building numbers and material capabilities than in professionalizing forces, encouraging them to serve the populace, and improving their fighting ability.

Military professionalization and implementation of U.S. pacification plans was limited. Elites were glad to accept U.S. military aid that bolstered the status quo, but professionalization would have denied elites lucrative positions and opportunities to build and maintain power.¹⁰⁰ The military leadership was overwhelmingly from the elites.¹⁰¹ The military was designed for preferment and regime survival, not warfighting or pacification.¹⁰² Elites

⁹⁰E.g., Thomas Carothers, 'The "Sequencing" Fallacy,' *Journal of Democracy* 18/1 (Jan. 2007), 12–27. Also, e.g., Prados, 68, 73; Race, 204; Carter, 10, 131; Logevall, 5; Birtle, *Counterinsurgency*, 319.

⁹¹Carter, 135; Race, 42.

⁹²Race, 41.

⁹³Race, 47–48.

⁹⁴Race, 72.

⁹⁵E.g., Birtle, *Counterinsurgency*, 305; Carter, 55.

⁹⁶Race, 42; Birtle, *Counterinsurgency*, 305.

⁹⁷E.g., Herring, 83.

⁹⁸E.g., Prados, 75, 117.

⁹⁹Between U.S. FY 1955 and 1964, total economic aid totaled \$230.6 million and military assistance totaled \$190.9 million. Carter, 147; Prados, 58. On the gamut of efforts, from economic development to infrastructure to administration, see Carter, e.g., 13, 49, 79.

¹⁰⁰E.g., Prados, 64, 59, 75; Race, 224.

¹⁰¹Prados, 59.

¹⁰²E.g., Prados, 60, 75.

used officer assignments as reward and punishment.¹⁰³ Power was currency. Personal security was paramount. Diem structured and deployed the military to reduce chances of a coup.¹⁰⁴ The military provided a sense of entitlement as well as the means to exercise it. 'The soldiers were "heaven and earth." If you had a gun, you could call anyone a Viet Cong you felt like.'¹⁰⁵

Advisors condemned elite resistance to pacification. One said it was difficult to propagandize for the state when corruption and abuse of civilians cut so deeply against what he identified as the government's real interests.¹⁰⁶ Advisors condemned officials for using U.S. efforts to serve their own ends.¹⁰⁷ Said one blistering memo, 'nothing much can be done to stop the ever present behind the scenes political maneuvering that cause incompetents to be placed and retained in critical posts in order to maintain positions of power for their sponsors.'¹⁰⁸ Police at checkpoints could not follow security procedures because many officials refused to cooperate.¹⁰⁹ Elites' sense of privilege and their need to visibly uphold it trumped U.S. insistence on implementation of counter-insurgency tactics. Advisors' plans for ARVN include civic action, but instructions were deleted from versions in Vietnamese. Officers thought it a civilian responsibility.¹¹⁰ 'There seemed to be an attitude in Vietnam that when one joined the military service he set himself apart from and above the ordinary citizenry,' one advisor noted.¹¹¹ Advisors were distressed by treatment of civilians. One urged the United States to make soldiers help the wounded.¹¹² Advisors struggled to train troops to be

¹⁰³Prados, 75.

¹⁰⁴Birtle, *Counterinsurgency*, 311; Prados, 64; Alexander B. Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (New York: Houghton Mifflin 1976), 303.

¹⁰⁵Race, 72.

¹⁰⁶MACV, Series VIII, file folder: US Committee on Provincial Reconstruction, Vietnam misc documents and official correspondence with GVN 7/62-4/63; document: Bien Hoa Province, Republic of Vietnam, 1 December 1962, Headquarters U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff - J2.

¹⁰⁷E.g., MAAG Vietnam, file folder: U.S. Committee on Province Rehabilitation, Vietnam. Miscellaneous documents and official correspondence with Government of Vietnam, July 1962-April 1963 DS 557.4. U56 1962 c. 1; document: Memorandum of Conversation, meeting 8 January 1963, Subject: Resources control and rural internal security, participants Nguyen Van Hay, deputy director National Police; Glenn Dodge, USOM Public Safety Advisor; Bui Xuan Toan, USOM program assistant; E.H. Adkins, Jr., USOM public safety advisor.

¹⁰⁸Wilson, Box 4 of 6, file folder: III Col Wilson Dec 1963; document: memorandum, 10 April 1964, Subject: Status G-5 program (31 March 1964).

¹⁰⁹Westmoreland, Series II official papers, COMUSMACV, History backup files, 4-7 for 15 Feb.-31 August 1964, Box 36; file folder: Official papers - commander United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV) - history backup file #9, 9 Oct. - 13 November 1964 [part 2 of 4]; document: 24 October 1964 Memorandum for Ambassador Taylor, Subject Hop Tac Evaluation, from Lieutenant General J.L. Throckmorton, deputy commander.

¹¹⁰Wilson, Box 4 of 6, file folder: Memorandums for General Dinh; document: Memorandum, 13 January 1964, Subject: Status G-5 programs (31 December 1963).

¹¹¹Blackburn, Debriefing report: 10 June 1964, Major General Charles J. Timmes.

¹¹²Wilson, Box 3 of 6, file folder: Suggestions on how to win the war in Vietnam Col. Wilson, Feb. 1964; document Schmidt memo.

less 'arbitrary and overbearing' with civilians.¹¹³ An advisor complained that 'The majority of military personnel don't care about the peasant and the concept of helping them, or even of being considerate, is alien to their thinking.'¹¹⁴ Officials had no sense of responsibility to the communities they served¹¹⁵ and put more resources into destroying insurgent units than the more important goal of helping the population.¹¹⁶

Bad governance was the advisors' *bête noire*. 'The insignificant guidance furnished by the national government was not of sufficient quality or strength to bring order out of chaos,' one complained. He pointed out that village and hamlet administrators were unqualified and poorly instructed, supervised, supported, and motivated. An exasperated advisor said 'pacification has been impeded by ... downright inefficiency.'¹¹⁷ Wrote another, 'too many people have little or no conception of government policies and goals.'¹¹⁸ The army's 'indefinite, cumbersome and conflicting' management procedures and the lack of accountability slowed pacification.¹¹⁹ MAAG chief McGarr blamed lack of success implementing reforms on the lack of planning and control from the national government on down.¹²⁰ The shortage of troops and civil government personnel and presence of incompetent individuals hobbled the Hop Tac pacification plan outside Saigon.¹²¹ One after-action report noted that politically, the province chief and many district chiefs were corrupt and unpopular.¹²²

U.S. military advisors also recognized that their lack of leverage hindered U.S. goals.¹²³ U.S. efforts had not produced an effective military by 1959, in

¹¹³MACV, Series VIII, document: Memorandum, Bien Hoa Province, Republic of Vietnam, 1 December 1962, Headquarters U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff – J2.

¹¹⁴Wilson, Box 4 of 6, file folder: III Corps Briefing for chief MAAG and chief army section, 13 April 1964, Col. Wilson; document: Memorandum, 10 April 1964, for Chief, U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam, Saigon, Subject: Status G-5 program (31 March 1964).

¹¹⁵Wilson, Box 4 of 6, file folder: Memorandums for General Dinh; document: 13 January 1964 Memorandum, .

¹¹⁶MACV, Series VIII, Walters. Also, e.g., Wilson, Box 1 of 6, document: Memorandum, United States Army Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam, III Zone Corps Detachment, Pleiku, Vietnam, 31 August 1962, subject: Discussion, Analysis, and Lessons Learned, Operation Hai Yen II, Phase I.

¹¹⁷MACV, Series VIII, file folder: Brief summary of major activities and accomplishments Feb. 62-June 64: The Harkins fact book; document: Memorandum to Harkins, 11 June 1964, Advisory Team #91, Binh Duong, from LTC Frank B. Simons.

¹¹⁸Wilson, Box 3 of 6, file folder: Suggestions on how to win the war in Vietnam, Col. Wilson; document: Memorandum from Colonel Joel W. Lawson.

¹¹⁹MAAG Vietnam, document: Memorandum, MAAG adjutant general Lieutenant Colonel J.D. Gallagher to Assistant Secretary of Defense ISA. 24 August 1958.

¹²⁰Library, McGarr.

¹²¹Westmoreland, Throckmorton to Taylor.

¹²²MACV, Walters.

¹²³E.g., Herring, 84, 93, 100–101, and 108 for examples of U.S. officials, including Kennedy, pressing Diem for reforms such as increased civil liberties, governmental reorganization for greater efficiency, and broadening the circle of Diem's Vietnamese advisors, and Diem's often successful resistance. On Diem's awareness that democratizing reforms would weaken rather than strengthen him, 112.

part because of the lack of leverage.¹²⁴ Advisors recognized their limited influence over the commanders they were supposed to mentor but whose interest in patronage and profits bewildered them.¹²⁵ Westmoreland identified the crux of the problem: 'The Vietnamese officialdom are convinced that the U.S. is irrevocably committed, for political and strategic reasons, to a policy of assisting the GVN; and that, consequently, massive aid will continue to be forthcoming without quid pro quo. As a result, the GVN takes U.S. assistance and U.S. representatives for granted.'¹²⁶

Advisors saw at the time, as scholars did later, that the U.S. interest in governance reforms clashed with the elites' interest in the status quo. Contemporaneous accounts show the frustrations inherent in operationalizing good governance counterinsurgency through an unwilling client.

Conclusion

This research finds that in the advisory period of the Vietnam war the U.S. military tried to reform client military and civilian governance structures and methods along the lines prescribed by leading counterinsurgency theorists. It challenges the dominant view based on Krepinevich's important work, which argues that the U.S. Army did not understand what successful counterinsurgency required. Contemporaneous U.S. documents show that belief in the power of reforms to defeat insurgency permeated the mission. But the U.S. effort failed because client elites were more interested in protecting their interests than in compromising them, even under threat by a rising insurgency.

U.S. advisors tried to bend South Vietnamese military and civilian action toward reforming the state to defeat the insurgency. The core elements of pacification were the need for the state to gain popular support through reforms and to develop and use security forces appropriate for the adversary. Advisors generally believed that defeating the insurgency required profound political reforms to serve popular needs along with light forces, small-unit operations, and military delivery of aid to the populace in order to gain popular allegiance. Advisors saw their role as conveying these tenets and tactics of Western counterinsurgency to their South Vietnamese partners for implementation.

¹²⁴Prados, 65.

¹²⁵Senior Officer Oral History, Lieut. Gen. Henry E. Emerson, interviewed by Jonathan Jackson, 2004, edited by Col. John R. Dabrowski.

¹²⁶Westmoreland, Series II official papers, COMUSMACV, History backup files, 4–7 for 15 Feb.-31 August 1964, Box 36; file folder Official papers – commander United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV) – history backup file #9, 9 Oct. – 13 November 1964 [3 of 4]; document: Memorandum, 31 October 1964, to Ambassador Taylor, Subject U.S. Posture Toward the Emerging GVN, from Westmoreland.

Yet advisors themselves identified contradictions between their prescriptions and the interests of elites they were trying to influence. Liberalizing, democratizing, institutionalizing reforms would have changed the distribution of power and resources in ways unacceptable to those holding power. Elites wanted to defeat the insurgency at low cost. U.S. sponsorship provided the opportunity, enabling elites to adopt changes that served their interests, such as building a bigger military, and rejecting those that did not, such as military professionalization, routine delivery of public goods, and land reform. It is not even possible to identify defeat of the insurgency as a shared interest because client elites profited from the gravy train of patron support.

This research advances the historiography on Vietnam by identifying the U.S. military's focus on the political character of the war. This finding broadens discussion of Vietnam and counterinsurgency beyond matters of tactics and firepower to consider questions of political interests bypassed in much of the existing literature. It also broadens analysis of the U.S. experience in Vietnam to place it within the larger context of military intervention rather than considering it in isolation.

This article also identifies a reason for liberal intervention counterinsurgents' failure to achieve reforms: client elite resistance to yielding wealth and power to the people. It finds that in the prototypical case of South Vietnam, elite resistance was an important cause of the U.S. inability to achieve its governance goals. Identification of the role of client elite agency increases understanding of the processes involved in great power intervention to support threatened clients.

A critical assumption in the strategic logic of good governance counterinsurgency is that the client wants reforms and is able to implement them. In its stronger form, the assumption is that the client wants to implement reforms with patron help. In its weaker form, it is that the patron can and will compel the client to reform. If reforms do not occur for reasons likely to exist in other cases as well, then the explanatory and prescriptive power of any approach based on this flawed assumption is considerably weakened. This study finds that the assumption is not ratified empirically. Instead of falling into line, the client accepted support that helped it retain power and wealth and resisted reforms that meant sharing wealth and power. In Vietnam, the client refused to enact reforms and the patron failed to coerce it.

The external validity of these findings in a data rich, prototypical, intrinsically important case of intervention counterinsurgency challenges the strength of the leading liberal approach to counterinsurgency success, provides material for further theorizing intervention counterinsurgency processes and outcomes, and helps explain client choices. This mechanism is also relevant to related research areas involving great power intervention to

build a liberal order in smaller states, including state building, political and economic development, and poverty amelioration. There is also a need to investigate compellence in partner relationships and for further research into South Vietnamese elites to better understand South Vietnamese agency and the patron-client relationship in South Vietnam. Finally, both degree of intervener leverage and client agency are important factors to consider in gauging prospects for success in future interventions; a shared desire for defeat of the insurgency is insufficient if the patron's preferred approach involves reforms and the client's does not.

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