



## **PKSOI Book Review**

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Review of The Army and Vietnam  
by Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr.

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Review by Major Thomas Kinton

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### **Introduction**

Andrew Krepinevich (USA LTC Ret.) heads the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment (CSBA). As a US Army Major working at OSD he authored a book called The Army in Vietnam, which critically assessed the approach used by DA to the ongoing insurgency in South Vietnam. The book is well researched and provides an exhaustive set of references.

### **Review**

Organized chronologically, Krepinevich takes the reader from the advisory years of 1954-65 through withdrawal in the mid-70s. Although easily dismissible as yet another failure narrative on an unpopular war, it provides a clear-eyed assessment of the systemic disconnects between DA, DoD and NCA and the mid-level officers, NCOs and civilians on the ground in Vietnam. Krepinevich does not gripe but cites examples of grounded solutions which, had they been adopted into practice, could have influenced both the tactical and strategic outcomes of the war. He ends the book with a ringing indictment of the strategy of attrition and explores the two competing strategies offered by DA/DoD at the time, the **El Paso plan** and the **Enclave or oil-spot approach**.

### **El Paso**

Discussed in detail in COL Harry Summers book On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context, the plan called for

...a joint U.S.-ARVN-ROK push across the Laotian panhandle from the DMZ to Savannakhet on the Thai-Laotian border. Once in place, the plan held, such a force could have blocked North Vietnamese access to South Vietnam...allowing the RVNAF<sup>i</sup> to destroy insurgents in the South, a job in which, Summers contends, the Army should not have become involved. Indeed, Summers states that the Army's fatal mistake was becoming *overly involved* in combating the insurgents, thereby missing the real threat-the North Vietnamese (Krepinevich 262).

## **Enclave**

Proposed by Ambassador Taylor in 1965, Enclave accepted the idea of the stalemate where U.S. forces could neither win the war for the RVNAF nor be driven out of Vietnam through military action (Krepinevich 264-265). Further,

...the strategy called for the military to recognize the war had been won by the South Vietnamese and that the most effective role for American troops would be to aid the RVNAF by controlling the densely populated coasts areas (Ibid).

## **CORDS**

Headed by Robert Komer (President Johnson's special assistant for pacification), Civil Operations and Revolutionary Support (CORDS) capitalized on and enjoyed the early and continued support of the CIA, a key player in Vietnam from the beginning. The CIA's assessment that the majority of supplies for the enemy originated inside Vietnam was controversial<sup>ii</sup>, and was the study which gave life to CORDS. At its height, over 6,000 officers and men of MACV worked with civilians on the project, with the intent of pacifying the Vietnamese countryside by

...pulling together...State Department, the AID, the USIA (information agency) and the CIA" with the military. CORDS teams occupied 250 districts in the 44 provinces of Vietnam. The duty description of a typical CORDS advising commander was "to advise the province chief in

military operations, pacification efforts and civil affairs (Hemingway)

## **CAPS and GOLDEN FLEECE**

A Marine Corps initiative, Combined Action Platoons (CAP's) looked internally to their Small Wars manual<sup>iii</sup>. With the aim of social, political and economic development, and 'tolerance, sympathy and kindness' (Krepinevich 172) at the heart of their relationship with the populace, CAP's depended on "ruff puffs" (Ruffs=regional forces; Puff's=popular forces) that lived locally.

Marginalized by GEN Kinnard, Commander, 1<sup>st</sup> AIRCAV Division and GEN Westmoreland, MACV (Military Assistance Command-Vietnam) the CAP's living and working inside villages were part of the Marine Corps Golden Fleece operation. Kinnard and Westmoreland amplified the mischaracterization that CAP's were sitting in fortified positions, avoiding the fight. Kinnard was "absolutely disgusted" (Rector) with the Marines. Golden Fleece called for

'saturating the coastal farming areas with Marine guards and patrols during the harvest season so the farmers could harvest, store and eventually sell their crop... (Krepinevich)

In contrast, Sir Robert G.K Thompson<sup>iv</sup> noted that "the use of CAP's is quite the best idea I have seen in Vietnam, and it worked superbly".

## **So What?**

Krepinevich's work was prescient. On its own a textbook analysis of the strategic failures of DA and DoD in Vietnam, The Army and Vietnam offers timely counsel for our efforts in current counterinsurgency operation in Afghanistan and Iraq. Understanding how CORDS and the Marine Corps CAP program contributed to stabilization can illuminate the future of the PRT program's potential impacts. Some lessons:

- Senior army leadership denigrated the success of the Marine Corps CAP and Golden Fleece operations.

- Lesson: support success stories even when they don't fit doctrine.

- The CORDS program never exceeded 10% of 'foxhole' U.S. strength and represented only 1% of total uniformed military personnel at the height of the effort. In a theatre where the effort to effect ratio was 1000 artillery rounds to 1 dead enemy, CORDS was cheap at twice the price.
  - Lesson: Civil Military Operations are cost-effective.
- Efforts in South Vietnam were concentrated against two main entities: the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the Viet Cong (insurgents). Between the two, they were basically everywhere. Lethal operations (see above: 1,000 artillery rounds to 1 dead enemy) created more problems than they solved.

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i Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces

ii Westmoreland and MACV continued to practice a 'big-army' attrition campaign in search of the elusive 'crossover point', the point where enemy losses would become unsupportable. This is the genus of the kill-ratio and body count sound bites that had such resonance with a U.S. electorate tired of the war in Vietnam.

iii The United States Marine Corps, Small Wars Manual (Washington:

Government Printing Office, 1987), originally printed in 1940, is an excellent source of information for the student of stability operations.

iv Experts like Thompson, a noted British expert on insurgency warfare, Roger Hilsman, Director of Intelligence and Research at DoS and Air Force Brig. Gen. Edward Landsdale were eventually marginalized by GEN Maxwell Taylor, Chief of Staff, DA, in favor of the Army Concept, which focused on what we have come to know in some form as the Powell Doctrine. One example of the lack of efficacy of the Concept is the ratio of VC kills to rounds of artillery: in operations Thayer II and Pershing, 1,757 enemy were killed, after expending 136,000 rounds of artillery, 5,000 rounds of naval gunfire, 171 B-52 sorties and 500,000 pounds of napalm (pp. 224).

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### **Authors Biography**

MAJ Tom Kinton is the senior instructor at the United States Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command (Airborne) Civil Affairs Course. As an additional duty MAJ Kinton works with the United States Army John F. Kennedy's Special Warfare Center and School Training Development group. He served two tours as a civil affairs practitioner in Iraq.