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INTRODUCTION BY GREGORY A. DADDIS, CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY

There is an aspirational quality to American impulses that have led to U.S. nation-building efforts abroad in the post-World War II era. In the aftermath of a destructive global war, with many European and Asian countries laid prostrate in unprecedented ruin, Americans tended to see the revitalization of Germany and Japan as proof not only of their benevolence but also of their power to create a new, liberal world order. In late 1947, President Harry S. Truman hailed the European Recovery Program, popularly known as the Marshall Plan, as the mechanism that would help “free nations of Europe to recover from the devastation of the war.” And while the costs, economic and otherwise, might be great in helping these countries live without “fear of selfish totalitarian aggression,” such a price tag, according to Truman, was “well within our capacity to undertake.”¹

Advocates of America playing a leading role overseas in the postwar world were no less enthusiastic about the supposed good fortunes of the Japanese, thanks in part to munificent postwar occupiers like General Douglas MacArthur. While the general’s memoirs were nothing if not self-serving, they still placed Americans at the center of Japan’s “great resurgence” of “self-respect and self-confidence.” Thus, readers could share in the Emperor, “with tears in his eyes,” expressing appreciation for MacArthur’s “attitude and interest in the reconstruction of Japan.”² The Americans might destroy Japanese cities with their napalm and atomic bombs, but they also could build a new Asian nation that was far better than the last one.

Alongside these aspirations, if not undergirding them, was a sense of unstated hubris. Nowhere was this conceitedness better seen than in those social scientists and U.S. policymakers who espoused the benefits of modernization theory. According to these interventionists, Americans possessed the awesome power to quite literally transform ‘traditional societies’ into modern political communities that not only would resist the evils of Communism, but would become enlightened global partners of the United States. In the process, Americans could demonstrate both their virtue and their superiority to the rest of the world.³

Of course, there were plenty of assumptions underlying this exceptionalism. And far too many unexamined questions. How would the United States’ largesse equate to foreign political loyalties? Would all nations in the Global South aspire to the American ideals of democratic capitalism? How would local leaders react to coercive tactics when they failed to willingly accept direction from U.S. advisors? And what would happen when expectations overreached capabilities? True, there were skeptics. As the *New York Times*’ Paris bureau chief argued in early 1949, the Marshall Plan might be able to “rebuild the Continent, but it cannot be expected to produce a United States of Europe.”⁴ Such voices, however, never gained credence in a world where nation-building efforts were so intimately tied to the larger goals of containing communism at home and abroad.

Andrew Gawthorpe’s *To Build as Well As Destroy* demonstrates, in fine fashion, how little the American approach to nation building had changed by the 1960s. In this tightly constructed monograph, Gawthorpe shows how the ‘notion’ of nation building continued to rest on the faith that “the United States could radically reshape the domestic politics, society, and economy of a foreign country as part of a military intervention” (9). Faith, however, seldom incorporates critical inquiry.

¹ Harry S. Truman, “Special Message to the Congress on the Marshall Plan,” 19 December 1947, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/special-message-the-congress-the-marshall-plan>.

² Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 316.

³ On this topic, see Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Scientists and ‘Nation Building’ in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

⁴ Harold Callender, “We Expect Too Much From the Marshall Plan,” *New York Times*, 23 January 1949.

Thus, this work serves as a superb example of the central paradoxes of nation building in a time of war. Plans of building while destroying promise much, yet never seem to deliver in full.

Indeed, Gawthorpe's analysis suggests that the 'lost victory' thesis of the American involvement in Vietnam should merit little confidence. Recent scholarship like that on display in *To Build as Well As Destroy* sheds light on the lie of the 'better war' fallacy, the misguided claim that the American mission in South Vietnam had turned the war around in the aftermath of the 1968 Tet offensive. Such assertions, based on slim evidence, have been refuted by Martin Clemis, Kevin Boylan, and now Gawthorpe.⁵

The reviewers in this roundtable clearly are persuaded by Gawthorpe's central arguments. Jessica Elkind finds the notion that a commitment to nonmilitary programs, under the direction of the U.S. Office of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), predated the American military change of command in mid-1968 to be compelling. The problem, however, remained one of translating allied military power into South Vietnamese political advancements, enough at least to successfully convince the bulk of South Vietnam's rural population that Saigon was *the* legitimate government below the seventeenth parallel.

Elkind also is impressed by Gawthorpe's research, which sheds light on how American officials like CORDS director William Colby studied the political agendas of the Viet Minh and the National Liberation Front as they attempted to craft a viable response. While she is correct in noting that more research needs to be done on the implementation of these programs, *To Build as Well As Destroy* clearly has established a solid foundation from which future scholars can continue this important line of work.

Ron Milam brings the perspective of a veteran-scholar to his review—he served as a U.S. advisor to South Vietnamese forces—and contends that American leaders, at least early on, were less perceptive about the needs for what became known as 'pacification.' As Milam intimates, precise terminology bedeviled American efforts throughout the war. How, for example, could one best define 'security' in a largely unconventional conflict? Milam takes discerning readers one step further, noting that even today we too often substitute the term 'nation building' for more inauspicious policies that might more accurately be called 'occupation.'

Both Milam and Gawthorpe also seem to be asking their readers to consider a central question in how senior policymakers and military leaders conceive of viable strategies in times of war. How does one reconcile means to ends and determine what is possible when setting wartime objectives? *To Build as Well As Destroy* indicates that the policy elite in Washington oversold their case. The central goal of helping build a sustainable, independent, non-Communist South Vietnam remained outside the grasp of those Americans on the ground who were attempting to fulfill this wildly optimistic political aim. The reasons for this crucial shortcoming no doubt will continue to be debated for years to come, but Gawthorpe surely has given us much to consider.

Douglas Porch's review places *To Build as Well As Destroy* in a much broader historical context, suggesting that the problems associated with nation building are not unique to those wearing American uniforms. As does Milam, Porch highlights the frequent conflation of crucial terms when it comes to conflict in the post-World War II era—'pacification,' 'counterinsurgency,' 'guerrilla war,' and 'nation building' all became imprecise substitutes for one another, further complicating, even today, how we define and evaluate conflict in the Cold War years. Such inarticulation beset French commanders as much as American military leaders.

⁵ See Martin G. Clemis, *The Control War: The Struggle for South Vietnam, 1968-1975* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018) and Kevin M. Boylan, *Losing Binh Dinh: The Failure of Pacification and Vietnamization, 1969-1971* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016).

However, the “accumulation of counterinsurgency theory and practice,” as Porch calls it, never seemed transmittable to the political struggle being waged inside South Vietnam. Once more, the reasons for this will remain controversial, but Porch appears persuaded by Gawthorpe’s arguments for “bureaucratic dysfunction.” Whether a more efficient bureaucracy would have resulted in a different outcome might be an appealing counterfactual for some, yet Porch reminds us that context matters. The successes of CORDS, which have been hailed by revisionist historians, were not as lasting as proponents may have hoped.⁶ Nor did the creation of ‘legitimate’ political entities in South Vietnam fashion anything that Washington policymakers were confident in leaving behind after U.S. troop withdrawals began in earnest. Fleeting successes did not bode well for the long-term viability of the Saigon government.

Finally, Robert Thompson returns us to a consideration of what exactly we mean when we use the term ‘nation building.’ Is the transformation of society at the heart of this process? Surely, wars have the capacity to disrupt, if not alter, foundational relationships within a society, yet Thompson seems to be asking whether it is wise to believe military leaders who profess that they can harness these changes and steer them in desired directions. The fact that pacification efforts in Vietnam were far from peaceful clearly indicates that the destructive capacity of war too often undermines these goals.

Thompson also hits upon a key theme of the more recent scholarship on nation-building efforts in South Vietnam, one which *To Build as Well As Destroy* tackles head on. As James Carter highlighted more than a decade ago, attempts to help build a wartime nation while simultaneously trying to destroy a committed enemy are phenomenally difficult to balance.⁷ Too often, those engaged in the process find themselves working at cross purposes, with the enemy’s destruction fanning out to encompass the political community that military leaders are endeavoring to build.

In South Vietnam, at least, American political and military leaders never could resolve such critical paradoxes. If there was a ‘better war’ after the midpoint of 1968, Andrew Gawthorpe never quite finds it.

One final note. Gawthorpe’s book recently was made available in open access via the Knowledge Unlatched initiative, which aims to make academic books available to a wide audience, particularly those who may not be able to afford them or whose libraries do not carry them. Thus, *To Build as Well As Destroy* can be found at <http://www.cornellopen.org/9781501712807/to-build-as-well-as-destroy/>.

Participants:

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⁶ For a generally favorable overview of the allied pacification campaign, see Michael G. Kort, *The Vietnam War Reexamined* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 178-182.

⁷ James M. Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1964-1968* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Jessica Elkind is associate professor of history at San Francisco State University, where she teaches courses on the United States in the World, the Cold War, and Southeast Asia. She is the author of *Aid Under Fire: Nation Building and the Vietnam War* (University Press of Kentucky, 2016), which examines the role of American aid workers in implementing nation-building programs and development efforts in South Vietnam between 1955 and 1965. Elkind is currently working on a book project that explores U.S. aid and intervention in Cambodia during the 1970s.

Ron Milam is an Associate Professor of Military History at Texas Tech University where he specializes in the Vietnam War. He is also the Executive Director of the Institute for Peace and Conflict, which includes the world renowned Vietnam Center & Archive. After a long career in the Oil & Gas Industry, he earned a Ph.D. at the University of Houston and is the author of *Not a Gentleman's War: An Inside View of Junior Officers in the Vietnam War*, and editor of *The Vietnam War in Popular Culture*. As a Fulbright Scholar, he taught the History of U.S. Foreign Policy in Vietnam and teaches Study Abroad in Southeast Asia most summers. He is one of 8 American scholars writing the history of America's wars for the new Education Center at "The Wall" in Washington D.C. and in 2015 was recognized for his teaching of military history by being inducted into the Officer Candidate School Hall of Fame at the Infantry Museum in Fort Benning, Georgia.

Douglas Porch is Distinguished Professor Emeritus and former Chair of the Department of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. A Ph.D. from Corpus Christi College, Cambridge University, his books include *The French Secret Services. From the Dreyfus Affair to Desert Storm* (1995), *The French Foreign Legion. A Complete History of the Legendary Fighting Force* (1991) which won prizes both in the United States and in France, *The Conquest of the Sahara, The Conquest of Morocco, The March to the Marne. The French Army 1871-1914, The Portuguese Armed Forces and the Revolution*, and *Army and Revolution. France 1815-1844. Wars of Empire*, part of the Cassell History of Warfare series, appeared in October 2000 and in paperback in 2001. *The Path to Victory. The Mediterranean Theater in World War II*, a selection of the Military History Book Club, the History Book Club, and the Book of the Month Club, was published by Farrar, Straus, Giroux and Macmillan in the UK in May 2004 as *Hitler's Mediterranean Gamble*. It received the Award for Excellence in U.S. Army Historical Writing from The Army Historical Foundation. His latest book, *Counterinsurgency. The origins, Development and Myths of the New Way of War*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2013 and has been placed on the Army Chief of Staff's reading list for all officers. He spent 2014-2015 as Academic Visitor at St Antony's College, Oxford and Visiting Fellow at Oxford University's Changing Character of War Programme. At present, he is researching a book on French combatants in World War II.

Robert J. Thompson is a historian at Army University Press. He has written about pacification during the Vietnam War for *The New York Times* and for *The Strategy Bridge*. More recently, he contributed to *Daily Life of U.S. Soldiers: From the American Revolution to the Afghanistan War* (ABC-CLIO, 2019). He is currently completing his manuscript on Phu Yen Province.

REVIEW BY JESSICA ELKIND, SAN FRANCISCO STATE UNIVERSITY

Since the end of the Vietnam War, scholars and observers have debated the reasons for the stunning American defeat. Andrew Gawthorpe's *To Build as Well as Destroy* tackles complicated questions about how and why the world's most powerful country lost its struggle against significantly weaker opponents in Vietnam and offers a compelling, if relatively straightforward, explanation. According to Gawthorpe, the United States suffered military defeat in Vietnam precisely because American and South Vietnamese officials failed to create a viable, independent state south of the seventeenth parallel. In his impressively-researched and elegantly-written book, Gawthorpe effectively shows how military strategy and political aims were inextricably linked in Vietnam. The book examines U.S. nation-building efforts between 1965 and 1973, especially those that targeted South Vietnam's rural population. Gawthorpe argues that those wartime efforts produced only ephemeral results that did not sufficiently strengthen government institutions or build a base of popular support. As he writes in the introduction, "Given that the governance of South Vietnam was the central issue in the conflict, viewing U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War as an exercise in nation building greatly aids our understanding of the war" (3).

To Build as Well as Destroy follows the trajectory of nation-building programs at the height of American involvement in Vietnam. Gawthorpe draws on a wide range of sources, including government records from American and British archives. He is also the first scholar to utilize an extensive collection of oral debriefings with American and South Vietnamese who were involved in nation-building efforts. These interviews, which are housed in the Allan E. Goodman Papers in the Hoover Institution Archives, provide a detailed, and often more personal, glimpse into how nation building unfolded in practice. Gawthorpe begins the book with an overview of the period before 1965, including a discussion of the legacy of French colonialism, the successful rural strategy of the Vietnamese Communists, and the first decade of the U.S. and South Vietnamese partnership. Although it relies heavily on existing scholarship and does not offer radically new interpretations of early U.S. intervention, this introductory material provides a solid foundation for understanding the conditions in Vietnam as well as the decentralized nature of previous nation-building initiatives. The remainder of the book alternates between discussions of high-level policy making in Washington, D.C. and an analysis of how nation-building projects were implemented on the ground in Vietnam after American troops arrived.

The creation and efforts of the U.S. Office of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) lie at the center of this story. Founded in 1967, CORDS was technically part of the U.S. military mission. However, the organization also incorporated civilian staff from multiple agencies, including the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the U.S. Agency for International Development. CORDS personnel worked closely with their South Vietnamese counterparts and operated at all levels of Vietnamese society, from the presidential palace to thousands of rural villages and hamlets. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, CORDS coordinated the myriad nation-building programs supported by the U.S. and cooperated with the Government of Vietnam (GVN) to implement them. As Gawthorpe explains, CORDS was unparalleled in its reach and size, and the organization assumed "responsibility for the war in the villages in all its civil and military components" (76).

Gawthorpe contends that Presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon initially favored either large-scale development programs or pacification efforts designed to extend the GVN's physical control over the countryside. However, both administrations ultimately accepted the vision of American officials in Saigon, who advocated for a bottom-up approach to nation building. In particular, Robert Komer, the first director of CORDS, and his successor, William Colby, devised and implemented a program based on the belief that the war would be won or lost in the rural villages of South Vietnam. Komer and Colby took advantage of increased stability within the GVN as well as significant Communist losses in the wake of the 1968 Tet Offensive to launch the most ambitious phase of American nation building yet. As Gawthorpe writes, during the final years of U.S. involvement in the war, Colby and other CORDS leaders sought to "translate temporary security gains into a genuine long-term strengthening of the GVN" in the countryside (130). Doing so was a prerequisite not only for the survival of the Saigon regime but also for an American withdrawal.

The final chapters of the book focus on the CORDS ‘village system,’ which served as the primary U.S. strategy for rural development from 1969 to 1972. These chapters form the crux of Gawthorpe's argument and are the most compelling and original in the book. Gawthorpe describes the primary goals of the village system, which were to promote self-government, self-defense, and self-development among rural communities. He also shows how the village system functioned in practice, and he explains why American and South Vietnamese could not realize their nation-building goals. CORDS advisors encountered numerous challenges, which included difficulty communicating with their South Vietnamese counterparts and community members, unfamiliarity with the local environment and political landscape, corrupt or uncooperative local officials, and widespread nationalist sentiment. They also suffered from overconfidence in their ability to affect change, even as they routinely met resistance from Vietnamese officials and communities. Ultimately, CORDS advisors and their local counterparts failed to translate their political messages into bonds of mutual obligation between the GVN and Vietnamese citizens at the village level.

To Build as Well as Destroy makes several important historiographical contributions. The book fills a significant gap in the growing body of scholarship on nation-building in Vietnam. As Gawthorpe points out, most of the existing studies focus on nation-building efforts before the introduction of American ground troops to the war, or at least before the 1968 Tet Offensive.¹ But nation building did not cease once American forces arrived. In fact, Gawthorpe contends that the “largest and most consequential” nation-building effort coincided with the military escalation (4). Furthermore, despite CORDS’ size and influence, Gawthorpe is the first scholar to produce a comprehensive study of the agency, as well as its accomplishments and shortcomings.

Gawthorpe also provides more evidence than have previous scholars of the ways in which American policy makers intentionally modeled their nation-building programs on the successful mobilization campaigns and organization of the Vietnamese Communist movement. Officials like Colby, who ran CORDS after 1968, studied closely how the Viet Minh and later the National Liberation Front had addressed the concrete political and economic grievances of Vietnamese peasants. In doing so, they created an environment in which Communist rule was a “participatory experience for the villagers” (132). As Gawthorpe explains, “Rather than staffing its political and military apparatus with outsiders who then attempted to impose their authority on the village, the Communist movement built its structures of authority from the village upward” (27). Under Colby’s direction, American nation builders tried to emulate this model, especially through the village system. But, as this study reveals, they “never managed to replicate the true keys to success of the Communist movement” (186).

Perhaps Gawthorpe’s most significant intervention arises from his firm rejection of the so-called ‘better war’ scholarship.² Scholars who subscribe to this view claim that U.S. nation-building efforts succeeded in the later years of the war. They argue that the GVN would have survived had the American military not abandoned it. However, as Gawthorpe convincingly demonstrates, even though the period following the Tet Offensive was characterized by relative calm in the countryside, there is little evidence that the GVN had built a base of popular support or could survive without continued American assistance. Despite the massive mobilization of resources and personnel involved in wartime nation building, by

¹ See for example Philip Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure: Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2003); James Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954-1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Jessica Elkind, *Aid Under Fire: Nation Building and the Vietnam War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016); Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); and Geoffrey Stewart, *Vietnam’s Lost Revolution: Ngo Dinh Diem’s Failure to Build an Independent Nation, 1955-1963* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

² See in particular, Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt, 1999) and Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

the mid-1970s the South Vietnamese government was, as Gawthorpe writes, “no closer to overcoming the legacies of ineffectiveness and illegitimacy that dated back to 1954” (188).

Although Gawthorpe offers a detailed analysis of the theoretical underpinnings of the village system and the CORDS leadership, he says relatively little about the thousands of Americans who actually carried out these programs. Further discussion of their motivations, experiences, and activities as well as the responses of local communities would illuminate how relationships among low-level American and Vietnamese nation builders shaped the outcome of their efforts. In particular, Gawthorpe might have devoted more attention to the practical problems associated with assigning the difficult task of improving local governance to U.S. military personnel. Gawthorpe also might have said more about the contributions of non-governmental organizations in wartime nation building. CORDS was certainly the largest and most influential American group involved in efforts to strengthen the GVN, but there were various other non-state actors who also contributed to that endeavor, including religious groups and voluntary organizations. But these are minor critiques of an otherwise excellent study.

To Build as Well as Destroy succeeds in shedding new light on an under-studied aspect of American policy in Vietnam, especially during the war years. The book debunks revisionist myths about the nature of the Saigon regime and the possibility for its long-term existence. It also offers a cautionary tale for American policy makers as they consider or embark upon similar nation-building endeavors in other parts of the world, including Iraq and Afghanistan. Gawthorpe's book is eminently readable, his arguments and evidence are convincing, and his analysis is precise and cogent. *To Build as Well as Destroy* should be essential reading for anyone interested in U.S. involvement in Vietnam or nation building elsewhere.

REVIEW BY RON MILAM, TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY

Andrew Gawthorpe quotes an aide to President Lyndon Johnson in his title, saying that the president viewed the Vietnam War as getting in the way of his domestic agenda, and that nation-building was a much more positive and constructive use of American power. “To build as well as destroy” thus became the accepted phrase for pacification in the villages and hamlets of the Republic of Vietnam (49).

American leaders had trouble understanding the need to ‘pacify’ the rural areas of Vietnam, which is ironic in that previous wars fought in the fields of France, the Philippines, Germany, Okinawa, and Korea should have been a platform for the understanding of rural people’s needs. ‘Hearts and Minds’ was not a phrase that Johnson embraced, partly because it was a phrase attributable to President John Kennedy’s Special Forces—the ‘Green Berets.’ He frequently referred to such military efforts as ‘do-gooders’ and when he assumed office, he was not a supporter of Kennedy’s efforts in the villages of South Vietnam. However, it was his administration that eventually had to adopt a ‘village system’ to pay closer attention to the needs of rural people or ‘peasants.’

Gawthorpe has written an important book on America’s efforts to nation build, a term that is frequently used in support of occupation after invasion. The author provides us with a valuable history of United States’ involvement in Vietnam through an analysis of the Ngo Dinh Diem period and the struggles of the Republic of Vietnam’s first leader to deal with the National Liberation Front’s (NLF) insurgency against the first government’s rural policies. Gawthorpe asserts that during the colonial period the French had put in place a system that centralized all authority and essentially ignored the need for local governance. Thus when the government of the Republic of Vietnam was created (GVN), there was no ‘playbook’ on how to deal with villages and hamlets (21). In his analysis of the Diem government, he correctly endorses the new scholarship of authors such as Edward Miller, Philip Catton and Jessica Chapman, who have written of Ngo Dinh Diem’s nationalistic, yet anti-Communist behavior.¹ The important failure of Diem, however, was his reluctance to allow local governments to flourish at the village level, which would have been preferable to centralism, even if he had not had to deal with the NLF insurgency.

Many authors who have written on the failure of nation-building in Vietnam have focused on micro histories of particular provinces.² Such an approach is reasonable since there were great differences between the environmental factors associated with the Mekong Delta, and the Central Highlands. Also, enemy forces were inconsistent in their targeting of districts within provinces, thus the micro-history approach is not always reliable in drawing macro conclusions.

While Gawthorpe’s approach in looking at ‘top-down’ decision making about ‘bottom-level’ problems could be challenging, he has successfully accomplished this task by using primary sources such as the oral histories of Robert Komer, William Colby, Rufus Phillips and Edward Lansdale.³ Since all of these important advisors to the GVN have also published articles or

¹ See Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, The United States and the Fate of South Vietnam*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), Philip E. Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure: Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam*, (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 2003) and Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States and the 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

² See Eric Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993); Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); and Kevin Boylan, *Losing Binh Dinh: The Failure of Pacification and Vietnamization 1969-1971*, (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 2016).

³ See Robert W. Komer, *Bureaucracy At War: U.S. Performance In the Vietnam Conflict* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985); William Colby and James McCargar, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America’s Sixteen Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989); Rufus Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters: An Eyewitness Account of Lessons Not Learned* (Annapolis: Naval

books, the supplemental information has provided details which help to explain the doubts that decision-makers had about the likelihood of the Republic of Vietnam ever being a viable nation state. Gawthorpe can be added to the list of authors such as James Carter, Richard Hunt, Jessica Elkind, and Martin Clemis, who have identified nation-building as a GVN problem that never succeeded.⁴

President Johnson assumed office right after the assassinations of Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, and his advisors that he inherited from Kennedy began to push for military involvement in very traditional ways: air power, advisory efforts to the Armed Forces of Vietnam (ARVN) at the battalion level, and sort of a ‘watch and see’ attitude toward the involvement of American ground troop. With the 1964 election looming, even air power was restrained after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, in which naval forces of the Communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) attacked American naval ships. No attention was given during this time to the hamlets and villages while plans were being made to develop ground operations if the GVN was not able to handle the NLF insurgency in the South.

But there were some who saw the rural areas as where the GVN was most vulnerable. Even during the Diem regime, the International Voluntary Services (IVS) had lived and worked in the villages, and had recognized the need for humanitarian efforts, notwithstanding that there was a Communist presence that would have required attention (43). One of the earliest proponents of village attention was Colby, who pressed for Central Intelligence Agency participation (CIA) early in the Johnson administration. Gawthorpe identifies Colby and a few others as planting the seeds for what would become the Office of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS).

For purposes of full disclosure, this reviewer was directly involved in CORDS at the lowest level of participation through Mobile Advisory Teams. Thus the Gawthorpe book ‘hits home’ with me. I find his strong indictment of the failure of the organization to contribute positively to the development of a properly functioning GVN to be correct. When, at the Guam Conference in April, 1967 in meetings with Nguyen Kaua Ky and Nguyen Van Thieu, President Johnson endorsed the idea of creating an ‘umbrella’ organization that would be responsible for village defense, village health, economic welfare, and governance, America and its GVN allies at least recognized the problem. Gawthorpe’s thesis is that even with the ‘village system’ in place with CORDS, there was another major obstacle to nation-building success: the reluctance of the GVN to completely accept the CORDS approach to rural pacification.

President Johnson assigned Robert Komer, an administrator in the National Security Council with CIA background as the first director of CORDS. Known as ‘the Blowtorch’ to both friend and foe, Komer was challenged to figure out a way to work under General William Westmoreland’s command, even though he was not a uniformed leader. Thus every district and province in Vietnam would have both civilian and military leadership, coexisting, with separate but somewhat equal responsibilities for the well-being of their village inhabitants. In provinces with heavy security issues, a military person would be assigned as Province Senior Advisor (PSA) whereas in districts where security was less problematic but where rice production or health issues were more prevalent, a Foreign Service Officer (FSO) of the State Department might be assigned as PSA. In most cases, there were always two advisors with two different skill sets.

Gawthorpe addresses the likelihood of success of CORDS by describing the Marine Corps Combined Action Platoons (CAP). He states that this was the Marines’ attempt at nation building (75). These groups of only enlisted men who lived in the villages and worked with local residents to provide security were never embraced by General Westmoreland because they

Institute Press, 2017 reprint); and Edward Geary Lansdale, *In The Midst of Wars: An American’s Mission to Southeast Asia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

⁴ See Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam’s Hearts and Minds* (New York: Perseus Books, 1998); James Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: the United States and State Building* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Jessica Elkind, *Aid Under Fire: Nation Building and the Vietnam War*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016); and Martin Clemis, *The Control War: The Struggle for South Vietnam, 1968-1975* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018).

were often likely to not be able to withstand a large offensive operation by either NLF or People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) troops, thus requiring Marine units to have reserves available to supplement the small unit needs. While CAPS may not have been capable of nation building, they did allow certain villages to stave off Communist attacks, thus allowing them to be more likely to successfully farm and improve their living standards.⁵ The Army eventually created Mobile Advisory Teams (MAT) which worked in villages but usually were garrisoned in district headquarters, and who performed similar missions as CAPS. The MAT teams were organizationally part of CORDS.

The challenge of nation-building was much greater than what CORDS was capable of accomplishing, according to Gawthorpe. He argues that the GVN's reluctance to even consider the villages to be critical to the war effort meant that the villages never 'bought in' to the GVN, no matter who was in charge of the central government. But there was another major issue that caused villages to not accept any role that GVN might play: the creation of free-fire zones by American units in order to deny village sanctuary to Communist forces. NLF and PAVN troops took advantage of America's Harassment and Interdiction Fire (H&I) directed toward villages where American troops had ordered the removal of villagers to prove their point that the GVN and its American allies had no interest in their well-being.

In *To Build as Well as Destroy*, Gawthorpe provides evidence that the GVN never fully considered the importance of focusing on rural development, thus rejecting what CORDS was trying to do. Perhaps some villagers survived the war with help and support from American advisors, but without GVN support, there was virtually no chance of villages supporting the government. Thus it was only a matter of time before Communist forces would control most of the villages, thus leading ultimately to a Communist victory.

⁵ John Southard, *Defend and Befriend: The U.S. Marine Corps and Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014).

REVIEW BY DOUGLAS PORCH, NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL, EMERITUS

America's chapter in the Indochina War formed a spectacular denouement to a global conflict whose curtain raiser occurred on 8 May 1945 with an uprising in Sétif, Algeria and whose *Götterdämmerung* ensued with the 1975 fall of Saigon. At the time, Sétif was definitely back-page news – the French government, clearly anxious not to agonize friable French public opinion at the end of a long war and occupation, was in clear denial about seething discontent in the French imperium. As French historian Elie Tenenbaum argues in his perceptive and comprehensive *Partisans et centurions. Une histoire de la guerre irrégulière au XX^e siècle*, this new Thirty Years' War also proved a very cosmopolitan affair, one that impacted a generation.¹ Men who had fought in World War II as operatives for Special Operations Executive (SOE), Office of Strategic Services (OSS), and the Gaullist *Bureau central du renseignements de d'action* (BCRA), who had served in the French resistance or as members of Jedburgh teams who coached and coordinated them, in Burma as *Chindits* or Merrill's Marauders. These special operations alumni networked to establish and swell a tightly knit community, expand the theoretical and applied principles of their craft, while successfully lobbying to defend special operations forces (SOF or specops) as a stand-alone operational arm that was distinct from and independent of conventional warfare. Post-World War II, they served on advisory and information missions, attended each other's jungle warfare schools and command and staff colleges, served as attachés and visiting lecturers, and spun off books and articles. Their conferences and symposia combined old boys' reunion with religious revival, strategy session and aggressive lobbying. By the time John Kennedy assumed the presidency of the United States in January 1961, a concerted promotion across three countries by these veterans had morphed World War II "resistance" into Cold War "counterinsurgency" (COIN), hailed as the hottest, most dynamic, and seemingly most relevant weapon in the West's defense arsenal.

Irregular, guerrilla, or asymmetric warfare mobilized to support 'nation-building' also became part of the intellectual history of the era. Eugene Burdick and William Lederer's best-selling 1958 novel *The Ugly American*² offered an update and expansion to Southeast Asia of John Hershey's 1944 *A Bell for Adano*,³ a novel about American civil affairs in World War II Sicily which had won a Pulitzer Prize. Both flattered a particularly American conceit by heroizing modest and benevolent men who dedicated themselves to protecting and improving the existence of simple villagers who had been bypassed by modernization. *The Ugly American* so impressed then Senator John F. Kennedy that it allegedly inspired the founding of the Peace Corps. Counterinsurgency offered Prominent historians like Peter Paret and John Shy, China specialist Chalmers Johnson, and thoughtful observers like former French resistor and Indochina expert Bernard Fall, whose work with the Special Warfare School at Fort Bragg led to the 1961 publication of his classic *Street Without Joy*,⁴ contributed to move COIN from the periphery to the pivot of the defense debate. By the time of Kennedy's assassination, 16,000 officers had passed through the six-week special warfare course at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. In April 1962, RAND sponsored a seminal conference organized by Edward Landsdale, an advisor to Philippine President Ramon Magsaysay, and frequent visitor to Ngô Đình Diệm's presidential palace, that assembled a multinational constellation of the principal theorists and practitioners of the irregular warfare art. In the tradition and spirit of journalist Lowell Thomas' Great War-era promotion of T.E. Lawrence as the defender of Western interests in the Middle East through the Sharif of Mecca's son Faisal, Landsdale became the initiator of the 'great leader' theory of COIN victory.

Counterinsurgency offered France an entrée to the Western Alliance in the 1950s, to redeem that army's ignominious 1940 collapse, and counterpoise the "special relationship" between Washington and London that had emerged from World War

¹ Elie Tenenbaum, *Partisans et centurions. Une histoire de la guerre irrégulière au XX^e siècle* (Paris: Perrin, 2018).

² Eugend Burdick and William Lederer, *The Ugly American* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1958).

³ John Hershey, *A Bell for Adano* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1944).

⁴ Bernard Fall, *Street without Joy: Insurgency in Indochina, 1946-63*, (Mechanicsville, PA: Stackpole, 1963).

II. The Second World War had left France with two contradictory and competing myths: that of the centrality of the French Resistance to France's liberation, which embodied the irresistible power of a clandestine *levée en masse*. The second was the importance of Empire, and in particular of France's imperial army, to France's status as a global power. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny had invaded southern France at the head of the *armée d'Afrique* in August 1944. "The army of liberation was therefore, an imperial army," declares French historian Claire Miot, and left in its wake the idea of France's redemption through the mobilization and militarization of empire as prelude to national liberation by France's "colonial saviors." In this way, the *levée en masse* intersected with martial race theory, while Algeria supplanted Alsace-Lorraine as the irredentist symbol of *La Patrie*. These two myths which fused into counterinsurgency in support of empire, had offered Paris a tenuous tether to the Western Alliance in the 1950s. However, by the time that he returned to power in 1958, Charles de Gaulle had concluded that the theory of "*la guerre révolutionnaire*," combined with futile and expensive colonial wars, had not only poisoned French civil-military relations. But also, they circumscribed French foreign policy options, and undermined French economic recovery, while postponing French military modernization in that central venue of French interests—Europe.⁵

The RAND Corporation, however, was slow to detect Paris' disaffection with '*contreinsurrection*,' and instead disseminated the lessons of their study and experience with reports on Algeria written by Constantin Melnik and David Galula. As Gawthorpe demonstrates, the French concept of 'pacification,' which evolved in Indochina and Algeria, supplied a foundational building block of U.S. 'nation-building' in Vietnam. That no one seemed particularly interested in the role played by "pacification" in France's two major colonial defeats is all the more surprising. The disastrous consequences of French counterinsurgency theory for civil-military relations were dismissed as a Gallic cultural aberration, which in some respects it certainly was. The French lose wars. Anyone who had to deal with them in World War II was bound to conclude that they were a temperamental nation. *Plus ça change*. This did not prevent Galula from reaching out to both Henry Kissinger and Thomas Schelling during his 1962-1963 year at Harvard. Roger Trinquier's *La guerre moderne*⁶ was translated into English in 1964 with a preface by Bernard Fall. Published by staunch anti-Communist Austrian immigrant Fred Praeger as one title among his significant list of military and defense topics, it became required reading for American advisors headed to South Vietnam.

In November 1961, Sir Robert Thompson had proposed his 'Delta Plan' vision for 'self-defense military-economic communities,' a combination of Israeli kibbutz and population resettlement imposed in Malaya, as a basis for the pacification of Vietnam's Mekong Delta. This set him up to become an enthusiastic backer of what was to become the disastrous 1962 'Strategic Hamlet' initiative spearheaded by Diem's younger brother and political advisor Ngô Đình Nhu. Despite that bad call, Thompson's 1966 *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences in Malaya and Vietnam*⁷ was widely read as a pacification blueprint, to the point that Prime Minister Harold MacMillan named Thompson to head the British Advisory Mission to South Vietnam (BRIAM), which offered official Washington entrée. In this way, the Anglo-American 'special relationship' that had been forged in World War II was expanded to embrace COIN and Southeast Asia. Frank Kitson, also an invitee at the 1962 RAND conference, carved out a reputation for his writing on Kenya's so-called Mau Mau uprising, a name selected to infantilize and Africanize an insurgency triggered in the main by a British colonial land grab in Kenya which dispossessed and impoverished tens of thousands of Kenyans. Even American universities got into the game -- for instance, in 1956, American University created the Special Operations Research Office that published a report on

⁵ Claire Miot, "Sortir l'armée des ombres. Soldats de l'Empire, combattants de la Libération, armée de la Nation : la Première armée française, du débarquement en Provence à la capitulation allemande (1944-1945)," Thèse du doctorat, Université Paris-Saclay, 2016, 21-23, 88, 741.

⁶ Roger Trinquier, *La Guerre moderne* (Paris: La Table ronde, 1961). Translated as *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964).

⁷ Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences in Malaya and Vietnam (Study in International Security)* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966).

Algeria in 1963, and that was only one of several. The Michigan State University Department of Public Policy provided Diem with the blueprint for civil service reform.

Unsurprisingly, this defense sector ferment soon contaminated the U.S. government. Walt Rostow, an OSS alumni who as head of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff and subsequently Kennedy's National Security Advisor, applied theories of modernization both to explain the reasons for insurgency and to concoct a formula for appeasing popular dissidence through economic modernization. In 1961, with Lansdale's assistance, Rostow had helped to define a 'materialist' U.S. COIN school whose principles were pulled together into a strategic vision, *Elements of US strategy to Deal with Wars of National Liberation*,⁸ and whose impact was most prominent in Kennedy's 'Alliance for Progress' program. In this way, by the early 1960s, the elements of counterinsurgency success had been clearly identified as a mix of military action with socio/economic reform, strong political leadership, and integrated political/military action on the local level. To put them into practice, Kennedy's National Security Memorandum 124 (NSM 124) of January 1962 created a "Special Group [Counterinsurgency]"⁹ under General Maxwell Taylor that included representatives from the Departments of State, Defense, and Justice, as well as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), among others government bureaus. Their task was to promote awareness of counterinsurgency theory and practice in government agencies, and to draw up a list of critical countries under threat of subversion. In this process, Special Group borrowed and expanded the 1954 "Overseas Internal Defense Policy" (OIDP), which had originally focused on creating police forces, but was now mobilized in the service of Rostow's modernizing social engineering approach to achieve the goal of nation building.

Given this accumulation of counterinsurgency theory and practice that was available from the early 1960s, why did the Kennedy Administration's preparatory steps toward America's COIN vanity project in Vietnam terminate in a national haunting? "Why the hell didn't we learn?" Tragically, this question was only asked in 1970 by Harvard graduate, World War II veteran, CIA analyst, and interim director of the National Security Council, who, in 1967, was named to head the newly created Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program in Vietnam, Robert "Blowtorch Bob" Komer. "...Why didn't we learn from the French? Why didn't we learn from the period 1959-1965 before we intervened? We had enough people out there as advisors, etc. Why did we learn that Vietnam was different?"¹⁰

But what, exactly, did Komer believe differentiated Vietnam from all those other COIN conflicts in the Philippines, Palestine, Cyprus, Malaya, Kenya, Algeria, or Latin America? Was "one size fits all" counterinsurgency theory simply not relevant in Vietnam? Or was the problem that the Americans did not, or could not apply it properly? Certainly, in retrospect Washington had overvalued the strategic importance of Vietnam, and applied an ideologized Cold-War logic to a post-colonial war, which was really about an intense drive for Vietnamese unity and independence. Being on the wrong side of history hardly improves one's chances of victory. But most if not all of the Anglo-French post-colonial wars went against the historical trend without necessarily condemning them to failure. And catastrophe in places like Indochina and Algeria could not invariably be ascribed to a lack of military innovation or an absence of COIN theory, but to bad luck (the 1949

⁸ Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), *Elements of US Strategy to Deal with "Wars of National Liberation,"* Report Prepared by Counter-Guerrilla Warfare Task Force," 8 December 1961, Approved for Release 2002/05/23, CIA-RDP83-00036R001100160001-1, CREST, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp83-00036r001100160001-1>, accessed 11 February 2020.

⁹ The White House, National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 124, 18 January 1962, in Federation of American Scientists, Intelligence Resource Program, <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsam-jfk/nsam124.htm>, accessed 11 February 2020.

¹⁰ R.W. Komer, "Organization and Management of the New Pacification Program, 1966-1969" (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1970), 4.

Chinese Communist victory), bad strategic decisions (Dien Bien Phu), or in the case of Algeria, the inherently politicizing effect of COIN doctrine on volatile French soldiers on which Peter Paret had written.¹¹

So, where did the problem lie in Vietnam? Kennedy's November 1963 assassination certainly delivered a body blow to the early 1960s COIN awakening that some were to argue flung open the door to a conventional warfare comeback in Vietnam. But one should not overemphasize the 'conventionality' of military operations in Vietnam. For instance, American commander William Westmoreland's 'search and destroy' missions became a staple of U.S. tactics between 1965 and 1968. Executed most often by battalions, they sometimes upscaled to combined arms, multi-division jungle thumps like *Cedar Falls* and *Junction City*. And while critics saw them as symptomatic of the U.S. Army's conventional war/firepower-heavy mindset, the 'search and destroy' model was simply lifted from the Wehrmacht's counter-partisan playbook in Greece, the Balkans, and behind the Eastern Front in World War II, transcribed in the U.S. Army's first 1961 COIN field manual, FM 31-15 *Operations against Irregular Forces*.¹² Furthermore, 'search and destroy' replicated in its essentials the *quadrillage*, *bouclage*, *ratissage* tactics deployed by French counterinsurgents in Algeria. Its 1963 successor, FM 31-22 *US Army Counterinsurgency Forces*¹³ incorporated more 'population-centric' and 'hearts and minds' concepts introduced by Gerald Templer in Malaya. But how influential manuals actually are in providing guiding concepts for operations is anyone's guess.

One problem faced by Westmoreland was that, because U.S. forces had little contact with local Vietnamese population, 'search and destroy' became mostly destroy and little search because it proved difficult to pinpoint Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army (VC/NVA) forces, a lacuna of local knowledge for which long-range reconnaissance patrols and other specops tactical or technical inventions failed to compensate. In practice, 'search and destroy' often abbreviated into 'free-fire zones.' But even this was not particularly counter-COIN, as 'free fire' technique had been deployed in Kenya and Algeria where there were simply not enough troops to cover a vast African terrain. Furthermore, the Americans resorted to firepower to compensate for imprecise intelligence because they had the capability, because they sought to spare the lives of their soldiers, but above all because their indigenous foe, especially NVA, were not inexperienced, lightly armed *maquisards*, or "Mau Mau" with sticks and machetes, but tactically savvy, up-gunned, and combat-harden veterans of wars against Japanese, French, and now U.S. invaders.

The inventory of explanations of why the United States 'lost' the Second Indochina War are by now familiar. One popular answer to Komer's question might be that the scale and intensity of the Second Indochina War had simply overwhelmed small war theory and practice. In terms of combat intensity, Vietnam more resembled the conventional/insurgent mix that characterized latter stages of the Chinese Civil War, or a distilled version of World War II, with regular forces facing off on main fronts while a 'resistance' congregated in rear areas to mobilize the population, gather intelligence, sabotage communications, assassinate officials, and generally bushwhack. Hawks groused that Washington proved unwilling to apply its power and invade the North. Small wars protagonists blamed defeat on a combination of factors, chief among them anti-war protesters at home, combined with the quest by conventional soldiers for a military showdown with VC and NVA forces, that engulfed and submarined the 'forgotten successes' of CORDS, USAID and the CIA. A less 'Made in America' explanation for defeat credits Lê Duẩn, General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party from 1960, with devising an

¹¹ Peter Paret, *French Irregular Warfare from Indochina to Algeria: An Analysis of a Political and Military Doctrine* (New York: Praeger, 1964).

¹² U.S. War Office, Department of the Army, Headquarters, "Operations Against Irregular Forces," Department of the Army Field Manual FM 31-15 (Washington, D.C.: May 1961), via <https://www.bits.de/NRANEU/others/amd-us-archive/FM31-15%2862%29.pdf>, accessed 11 February 2020.

¹³ U.S. War Office, Department of the Army, Headquarters, "U.S. Army Counterinsurgency Forces," Department of the Army Field Manual FM 31-22 (Washington, D.C.: November 1963), via https://cichub.info/ref/FM/31-22_1963.pdf, accessed 11 February 2020.

aggressive but patient strategy that, despite miscalculations and setbacks, drew Washington to the negotiating table in the wake of the 1968 Tet offensive, and by 1973 had pried the United States out of South Vietnam.

However, it is Komer's explanation for defeat that Andrew Gawthorpe focuses on in his crisp, insightful, and well documented *To Build as well as Destroy*—bureaucratic dysfunction that sabotaged a coherent strategic vision for the war, and the fact that 'pacification' was placed in the hands of, in Komer's words, "the lowest grade Vietnamese assets."

"I think you'll find it very hard to identify the strategic directions going from Washington to Saigon," Komer complained in his 1970 debrief. "That's why I'm saying, look out for McNamara's trip reports to the President. They were not sent to Westmoreland, or to the Ambassador. You'll find great discontinuity between them and what came out from the President and from (Earl) Wheeler (CJCS). Look out for the documents, even the most sensitive ones, even with the imprimatur of people on them who played a major role. I illustrate with my own experience. We wrote some brilliant analyses, plenty of mistakes in them but in general high quality, which stand up in hindsight. I adopted the McNamara technique and wrote a memo to the President each time I came back from Vietnam. Though there was a lot of nonsense in them, by and large they look pretty good, even with the wisdom of hindsight. But don't think that Komer told the President and the President then turned around and issued an order to do this, this, and this. It didn't happen that way."¹⁴

Gawthorpe's ambition is a bold one: "This book has aimed to deprive revisionists of the space in which to make claims about the successes of U.S. nation-building in the later years of the war." (188) Gawthorpe challenges the 'lost victory' claims of 'COIN revisionists,' chief among them William Colby, the former OSS operative and Saigon CIA station chief who succeeded Komer as head of CORDS, and who insisted that by 1972, U.S.-sponsored pacification had sucked the oxygen out of the VC insurgency.¹⁵

In the shadow of this massive deployment of U.S. firepower by MACV, a cast of civilian 'do-gooders' led by Komer and Colby indefatigably promoted a program of 'pacification' whose ultimate goal was 'nation building'—that is, to create bonds of loyalty and legitimacy between Vietnamese peasants who made up half of the population of South Vietnam, and the Saigon government. 'Pacification' combined 'civil operations' and 'rural development' that included land redistribution as the bedrock of a 'hearts and minds' and 'nation building' campaign. President Lyndon Johnson promoted pacification and nation building precisely because in his mind conceptually they seemed to replicate Franklin Roosevelt's highly successful 1930s New Deal. This was bookended by the Phoenix Program which sought to break the grip of VC operatives on Vietnamese villages.

Rather than pronounce CORDS a failure of bureaucratic concept as did Komer in 1970, Gawthorpe allows Komer passing marks as a bureaucratic manager. Starting in 1967 with neither doctrine nor trained personnel, he actually managed to transform CORDS into a functioning bureaucracy that combined a workforce of thousands under a unified command around a sophisticated operational concept based on an understanding of enemy goals and methods, and the requirement for close cooperation with the host government.

Unfortunately, it was neither the organization nor the concept that was faulty, but rather the context. CORDS' 'forgotten successes' proved ephemeral precisely because the goals were unrealistic and the accomplishments—such as they were—unsustainable. And this despite the decimation of VC ranks in the 1968 Tet Offensive that left CORDS great latitude to work its nation building alchemy along the banks of the Mekong until withdrawal began in 1971. The problem was that while the Americans tried to replicate Communist 'communalism' that formed the foundation of the VC 'village system,'

¹⁴ Paret, *French Irregular Warfare from Indochina to Algeria*, 4-5.

¹⁵ Lewis Sorley, "Courage and Blood. South Vietnam's Repulse of the 1972 Easter Invasion," *Parameters* (Summer 1999), 38-56. <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/parameters/articles/99summer/sorley.htm>.

the ‘organic roots’ of the Communist approach were absent. Outsiders could never impose meaningful social, political, and economic change in South Vietnam.

Gawthorpe agrees to a point with Komer that the U.S. effort in Vietnam was never on the same page. U.S. nation-building strategy emerged out of a process of civil-military collusion, bureaucratic compromise, and adjustment to ground truths. While nation-building formed Washington’s core objective in Vietnam, Americans in neither Washington nor Saigon could agree on how, exactly, the term was to be defined. As Gawthorpe points out, nation-building through a Washington lens was basically a Cold-War concept that indicated a process through which the United States attempted to shape the society and economy of a foreign country through military intervention and manipulation of domestic politics (91). At its most basic, ‘nation building’ meant ‘the creation of a political community’ through the erection of ‘legitimate’ institutions. Alas, South Vietnam was not even an ‘imagined community,’ but a ramshackle diplomatic compromise concocted by the 1954 Geneva Convention.

In fact, the Vietnamese already had a strong sense of nation. But it was the Communists in the North who had captured it through years of nationalist agitation, and the successful prosecution of the war against the French. The impossible job of Komer’s CORDS was to establish links of loyalty between a Vietnamese peasantry and the Government of (South) Vietnam (GVN), who everyone acknowledged ruled through intimidation, oppression, and thievery. Notwithstanding this, loyalty to the GVN was to be achieved by a catalogue of activities, education programs, forcible resettlement, and the creation of regional and local militias.

The U.S. nation-building process was confided to a phalanx of culture-shocked ‘BA generalists’ in CORDS and USAID who, after being parachuted into alien and unfamiliar territory, took up the ‘hearts and minds’ challenge with a ‘can-do’ determination that owed more to Boy Scout founder Lord Robert Baden-Powell than to a realistic strategy anchored in a sound net assessment. Given this unpromising framework, even with a less ‘laughable’ understanding of Vietnamese language, culture, and history than that acquired at a brief CORDS initiation course, CORDS’ troupe of twenty-something evangelicals discovered that “the typical CORDS advisory tour was confusing, confounding, and short” (155-156).

While the author insists that the operating assumptions behind CORDS owed more to Soviet founder Vladimir Lenin and the VC than to Rostow, local knowledge was devalued precisely because the whole pitch of modernization theory was that COIN techniques, tactics, and procedures are transferrable across time, geography and culture. The CORDS faceoff in the Mekong Delta that pitted the well-meaning Major Victor Joppolo and tinkerer Homer Atkins against the National Liberation Front should—at least in American minds—have been a no contest. Unfortunately, the conceptual nonsense of this approach was made clear in what turned out to be an important 5 June 1964 Paris meeting, during which French President Charles de Gaulle lectured George Ball, then Undersecretary of State for Economic and Agricultural affairs, that the Vietnamese would never accept American tutelage, and the idea that Washington could win Vietnamese loyalty with a tactical artifice like COIN or ‘psyops’ was quite simply ‘hairbrained.’ And as the man most responsible for France’s ultimately disastrous 1945 return to Indochina, who had witnessed first-hand the bankruptcy of ‘pacification’ in the War for Algerian Independence (1954-1962), and who had subsequently quelled the insurrections of a COIN-besotted French military jilted by their own doctrine, de Gaulle was well placed to know. Indeed, Tenenbaum believes that Washington’s rejection of de Gaulle’s advice on Vietnam instigated an unravelling of Franco-American relations that culminated in France’s partial break with NATO in 1966.¹⁶

The problems that CORDS mobilized to remedy in Vietnam had deep roots, going back to the mid-nineteenth century when the colonizing French had substituted *Ecole coloniale*-trained French functionaries for the traditional Mandarin ‘scholar-gentry.’ However, the French administration had evaporated in the course of the Japanese occupation (1940-1945) and the Indochina War (1946-1954), a vacuum of authority filled by the Viet Minh. After 1954, the new Government of

¹⁶ Elie Tenenbaum, *Une odyssée subversive. La circulation des savoirs stratégiques irréguliers en occident (France, Grande-Bretagne, Etats-Unis) de 1944 à 1972*, Doctorat en Histoire, Paris: Ecole de science politique, 10 June 2015, 625-626.

(South) Vietnam rewarded its Red River valley Catholic carpetbagger loyalists, with large tracts of land in the Mekong Delta. This reversed Viet Minh land reforms and reduced many peasants to tenant farmer status. Saigon increasingly outsourced 'pacification' to landlords and GVN officials, most of whom were urban apparatchiks and ARVN officers who viewed the peasantry as beneath contempt. The paradox was that any success of American-sponsored peasant empowerment threatened the kleptocracy that Saigon had become, and hence GVN support among a governing elite for whom the concept of 'self-help' had translated into 'help yourself' (92, 186-187). Powerless against a 'culture of corruption,' American advisors rationalized the diversion of funds as compensation for criminally low official salaries in a country where the presence of a half-a-million over-paid and over-sexed GIs, an infusion of lavishly funded 'nation-building' projects, and the statutory bribes larded onto every transaction had driven prices through the roof.

Gawthorpe concludes that this Washington-guided and financed 'nation-building' only succeeded in combining hollow reforms with the further delegitimization of the Saigon government. This was brought home resoundingly by the shock of the 1968 Tet offensive, which exposed the GVN as a decayed carcass characterized by the 'incompetence and corruption' of its administration, and feuding leadership. In these conditions, 'nation-building' became, not a strategy, but a policy metaphor devoid of realism, and bloated with vacuous content. This pantomime of pointless bustle was expressed through a monthly production of throwaway statistics led by body counts and the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES) which allowed CORDS to become Saigon's 'eyes and ears.' (113) But by this time, the new U.S. president, Richard Nixon, his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and his Defense Secretary Melvin Laird had rightly concluded that rescuing the GVN through 'nation-building' had become a doomed quest. They maneuvered to achieve a none-to-graceful exit behind a dual-track strategy of 'negotiation' and 'Vietnamization,' that culminated in the 1973 Paris peace accords.

In these shifting conditions, CORDS concentrated on rectifying 'grievances.' The problem as Gawthorpe sees it was that by 1970, the 'other war' had become focused on assuring 'physical control' of the population in order to strengthen Kissinger's hand at the peace table, rather than winning loyalty through 'nation-building' and creating bonds of community between the GVN and the peasantry. An Accelerated Pacification Program (APP) was launched to reinsert the ARVN back into the countryside. APP enjoyed some superficial success, as Thompson cheered from the sidelines and Colby trumpeted that the 'guerrilla war' had been 'largely won.' But the 'progress' of pacification was deceptive, Gawthorpe insists. 'Physical control' of the population usually featured, "marauding bands of security forces controlled either by the province chief or local ARVN division commander..." (157). 'Impact projects' under the Village Self-Development Program (VSDP) seemed selected to impact the bank accounts of provincial and district chiefs and ARVN commanders. APP thus did little to foster 'community spirit' or improve the economic conditions of the villagers. Gawthorpe believes that the Communist reaction to Saigon's tottering control was muted precisely because Hanoi wanted to offer no aggressive challenge to the APP that might retard a U.S. war exit.

The low Communist profile post-Tet allowed the government to implement land redistribution, which Gawthorpe believes offered the most promising of the reforms. While the 'Land to the Tiller' (LTTT) program under which families were allocated three hectares (7.4 acres) was not administered by CORDS, the fate of the two programs interconnected. However, various obstacles combined to sabotage or mitigate its effects, beginning with the fact that village chiefs were often landlords themselves, and so failed to implement reform. Or peasants might refuse land because they feared retaliation from landlords. But even the beneficiaries seemed to feel that they owed their land not to GVN generosity, but to National Liberation Front (NLF) pressure. As such, land redistribution under LTTT became a case of too little too late. Furthermore, unlike 1950s Viet Minh land redistribution following the First Indochina War, peasants were suddenly presented with huge tax bills because the land giveaway had punched a hole in the national budget that undermined GVN fiscal sustainability. This forced village chiefs to squeeze their fellow citizens for cash, which further undermined the 'bonds of community' between Saigon and its Mekong peasant constituents. Inflated estimates of the amount of land redistributed also comprised one of the 'soft statistics' of which Komer complained. In the end, the political benefits of VSDP and LTTT proved elusive, and much of it was reversed when the Communists pushed the GVN out of many areas in 1972. Despite CORDS efforts, little had changed by 1975. U.S. sponsored 'nation building' had failed to take root because Vietnamese national identity had already congealed by the time of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, if not before. And, as de Gaulle had warned, no 'tactic' was going to reverse that. The same corrupt officials were still in place, while 'pacification' had failed to establish ties of loyalty and legitimacy between the GVN and the rural population. In this way, Gawthorpe argues convincingly, the

GVN became simply another reiteration of colonial occupation. In 1975, when Hanoi launched its final offensive, GVN control of the Mekong Delta was “an inch deep and a mile wide” Gawthorpe concludes (180-184).

“By providing an analysis of how these (counterinsurgency) ideas played out in practice, this book has presented the most detailed account yet of the failure of U.S. nation-building in the latter years of the war,” concludes Gawthorpe.

“It has moved beyond orthodox accounts of U.S. nation-building in Vietnam that focus on structural reasons for its failure while neglecting the evolution of U.S. nation-building policy or the agency of the actors involved...this book has aimed to deprive revisionists of the space in which to make claims about the successes of U.S. nation-building in the later years of the war. This book has shown that there is little evidence the GVN had built a base among its own people that would have justified continued U.S. support in 1974-1975 and afterward. The eerie peace that settled over much of South Vietnam in the early 1970s might have been testament to successful pacification but it certainly did not amount to nation-building. It also took place in a security environment that was permissive largely because of a change in Hanoi’s strategy. Had the U.S. militarily intervened to defend South Vietnam in 1975 when Hanoi again took the offensive, the GVN may have stumbled on for several more years. But it would have been no closer to overcoming the legacies of ineffectiveness and illegitimacy that dated back to 1954. Nation building in South Vietnam had produced a regime highly dependent on American support and unable to survive without it.” (188-189).

Another counterfactual, revisionist, ‘lost victory’ myth bites the dust.

REVIEW BY ROBERT J. THOMPSON, ARMY UNIVERSITY PRESS

With *To Build As Well As Destroy: American Nation Building in South Vietnam*, Andrew J. Gawthorpe provides a thought-provoking look into the Vietnam War. Championing the term ‘nation-building,’ Gawthorpe argues that a small group of influential Americans and South Vietnamese attempted to counter Communist influence in the Republic of Vietnam’s villages through self-development. For him, ‘nation-building’ encapsulates the United States’ vision of the transformation of the Government of Vietnam (GVN) into a functional and popular administrative apparatus. His nation-building argument offers a fresh take yet seen in the current historiography of the war.

Gawthorpe provides a superb explanation of the problems facing, if not outright confounding, American advisors in South Vietnam. Challenging the allure of Communism with an alternative in Saigon proved exceedingly difficult, and ultimately fleeting, as the GVN constantly failed in its efforts to extend its legitimacy into contested villages. The author’s coverage of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), especially the village system, under the tutelage the William Colby is highly informative.

How the South Vietnamese and their American backers attempted to more peacefully transform the countryside into a loyal and viable part of the state is the central theme of Gawthorpe’s study. That contention, however, relies on readers accepting that Vietnam War-era pacification was both well-defined and fundamentally different from nation building. As noted by the author, nation building was a malleable, poorly-defined term during the Vietnam War. Yet, it should be noted that pacification, too, lacked a clear definition throughout the war. Pacification’s meaning went unresolved for the duration of the war, a point which is evident in the Pentagon Papers. Gawthorpe presents pacification as a foil, choosing instead to use nation-building as the term to describe the efforts the individuals who he argues “to actively build ties of mutual obligation between the GVN and the regime” (13). Oddly enough, pacification served the same purpose. The nation-building metaphor, therefore, becomes unnecessary.

As Gawthorpe explained in his introduction, America’s nineteenth century history with pacification displayed the concept as predicated on destruction. The same held true in practice for Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). Yet that does not mean that constructive traits remained unattached to pacification, nor did the American entities in the Republic of Vietnam ignore them. In 1965, MACV, the United States Operations Mission, and the United States Information Service offered a complex definition of pacification: “pacification encompasses all civilian, military and police actions to eliminate organized [Viet Cong]VC military activity, detect and eliminate the overt and covert VC political apparatus and nurture economic, political and social development of a viable economy.”¹ What matters here is that early on, Americans envisioned pacification transitioning from destruction to development.

Gawthorpe essentially uses a top-down approach. Although the author addresses nation-building in the villages, he does so from the corps level or higher. An examination of the author’s endnotes reveals a well-researched study. Yet the majority of his primary sources are from individuals and entities at the various CORDS headquarters, and not from the province Advisory Teams. Reports furnished by Advisory Teams better reflected the conditions of individual hamlets, as well as villages. Security in particular mattered as it remained paramount to pacification’s success throughout the duration of the Republic of Vietnam’s existence. Security remained figuratively and literally at the forefront of reports authored by CORDS district and province advisors. An assessment of security conditions often transpired in the overview that opened each report, which was immediately followed with further details in the security section. Ironically, the absence of such sources in *To Build As Well As Destroy* mirrors the wartime disconnect between CORDS in Saigon and CORDS in any province capital.

¹ United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, “The Concept of Pacification and Certain Definitions and Procedures,” 2 March 1965, 1, Military History Institute.

Pacification included both destructive and constructive phases. The nature of the war itself made ending the destruction phase all but impossible as Saigon and its allies could never truly eradicate the enemy from every province. Security issues remained unresolved in key provinces like Binh Dinh and Phu Yen among others. U.S. diplomat Richard Holbrooke once stated during the early stages of the war that “To destroy without building up would mean useless labor. To build without first destroying would be an illusion.”² Despite the best efforts of CORDS under Colby’s directorship, the Vietnam War ultimately remained stuck in the destruction phase. That the nation-building alternative to pacification “won out” downplays the superficiality of the village-level approach towards pacification. Gawthorpe himself concludes that the village system failed because it never produced the long-term results desired by CORDS.

The nation-building metaphor aside, *To Build As Well As Destroy* is a worthwhile addition to Vietnam War discourse. The conversations generated by the book alone make it a necessary acquisition by scholars. Those unfamiliar with the war will appreciate Gawthorpe’s efforts, yet they will not come away with sufficient context with which to appreciate pacification.

² Richard Holbrooke to POL, Untitled, Undated, p.1, Folder: Cadres and Pacification (miscellaneous papers) 1965-1966, Box 34, Charles T. R. Bohannon Papers, Hoover Institution and Archives (HIA).

 RESPONSE BY ANDREW GAWTHORPE, LEIDEN UNIVERSITY

I would like to thank the reviewers for taking the time to read my book and to provide such gracious and illuminating comments. I have learned a great deal from each of the reviewers and know I will continue to do so in the future. I was particularly gratified to read that Ron Milam, who served in the U.S. Office of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), found my arguments to be persuasive and in keeping with his own experiences in South Vietnam. I was also very happy to read that both Jessica Elkind and Douglas Porch found value in the book's debunking of revisionist myths about the latter stages of the war. The myth of successful nation building in the latter stages of the Vietnam War still lives—and insofar as it becomes a justification for pursuing other doomed nation-building efforts, it still kills. Disarming this myth was not my initial goal when I embarked on the research for this project, because I was unsure about what I would find. But what I did find pointed me inexorably in this direction.

Robert Thompson has offered a few criticisms to which I would like to respond. The first is about my reasons for using the term 'nation building' and its relationship to the concept of pacification, which is more familiar to scholars of the Vietnam War.

Those writing about 'the other war' in Vietnam must contend with the fact that so many different terms were (and are) used to describe it. The problem is compounded by the fact that two people using the same term might mean something completely different by it. In my book I quote Richard Holbrooke, then a CORDS advisor, making this point when he complained that you could "visit ten provinces and you will get as many concepts and methods for pacification; not field expedients being tested but just different concepts about what the program is about" (60). On the other hand, the historiography has tended to talk about 'pacification' as if it were a unified concept whose content was relatively unchanging across the war.¹ One contribution I hoped to make in my study was to demonstrate that there had been various nebulous and overlapping—yet broadly separable—schools of thought on how to approach 'the other war' over the course of the conflict. I also wanted to show how approaches to it changed as the war progressed.

In particular, I highlight a shift from local expedients that were designed merely to pacify *local* communities towards grander, country-wide plans to create a functioning *national* community. I use the term 'pacification' to describe the former and 'nation building' to describe the latter. The difference between the two is a matter of both scale and content. 'Pacification,' in my understanding, aimed mainly at the establishment of physical control over a locality. While it might involve other types of intervention as well—socio-economic, political, or medical, for instance—these were secondary. Furthermore, these secondary interventions had a very limited impact because they were typically not accompanied by the reform of higher levels of government than the village or hamlet. It is little surprise then that one American critic of what I call pacification described it as "like throwing a giant rock into the ocean. Big splash, then nothing" (13). It is equally unsurprising that William Corson, head of the Combined Action Platoons, was on one occasion reduced to punching a corrupt district chief in the face—hardly a model of sustainable reform (75).

The approach which I label 'nation building' was based on an explicit criticism of the failures of the approach I label pacification. The shift occurred with the advent of CORDS, and particularly with the 'village system' under its chief William Colby. The name of the 'village system' was in a way misleading, because its focus on the village was only incidental—its higher purpose was to stitch villages into a national fabric which would allow the Saigon regime to mobilize the resources needed to continue the war effort in a time of American withdrawal. CORDS was a genuine novelty not only because it changed the content of 'the other war,' but also because of its scale. It offered for the first time the hope—nevertheless unrealized—of a comprehensive reform of all levels of the Saigon regime. There was no other way to make local

¹ For instance, see Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), and Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1988). The tendency is even more pronounced in books that do not focus specifically on 'the other war.'

gains sustainable and to prevent the higher levels of the Saigon bureaucracy from undermining programs that were intended to increase the allegiance of villagers to the GVN.

Pacification is hence not so much my ‘foil’ as it was the foil of the Americans and Vietnamese who led this shift. And while my approach may appear to downplay the central role of security in the lives of CORDS’ provincial and district advisory teams, the reason for this is that I deliberately focused on the parts of their activity which contributed to nation-building efforts. Poor security was like a disease afflicting the South Vietnamese body politic, and CORDS advisors spent much of their time working to help fight the disease. But one day the advisors were going to leave. What would matter then would be not so much what the course of the disease had been while the advisors were present, but whether the patient’s immune system was equipped to handle the disease on its own. Nation building aimed to strengthen the ability of the Saigon regime to survive after America had left, and was hence completely fundamental to American goals in South Vietnam. Because the story of CORDS’ attempts to equip the Saigon regime for long-term survival had not had as central a place in the history of the ‘other war’ as I thought it deserved, I felt justified in making it central to my own study.

I chose to approach this topic in a ‘top-down’ fashion for several reasons. There have been many single-province studies of the Vietnam War, including some which have excellent coverage of the war in the villages.² While such an approach allows for a very granular understanding of the war at the lowest levels, there is also a risk that this methodology causes us to lose sight of the forest for the trees. In order for changes in the governance of South Vietnam—including the provision of local security—to have been durable, they had to be grounded in more than just strictly local conditions. Ultimately, provincial problems had to have national solutions. As I argue in the book, it was not a viable strategy to simply hope that effective and uncorrupted leaders would spontaneously emerge in all 44 provinces, or that American advisors working at the province level or below had it in their power to mold such leaders into being. The Saigon regime ultimately needed to implement mechanisms to produce, develop and support efficient and legitimate local governance in a centralized, predictable, sustainable way. It also needed to be committed and trusting enough to decentralize power. The top-down approach is the only way for us to explore why the Saigon regime ultimately failed at these tasks, which is synonymous with discovering why it failed at nation building. It is this larger, national story which I aimed to tell, even while I learned a great deal from province studies along the way.

The top-down approach is also the only way to fully capture the extent of the American failure at nation building in South Vietnam. Proponents of counterinsurgency and nation building often put their faith in technocracy to solve what are fundamentally political problems. We are told that with just a bit more ‘unity of command’ or coordination between different government agencies, success can be assured. But CORDS was the most well-resourced, well-staffed and unified nation-building agency in U.S. history. It exercised influence at all levels of the Saigon regime, from the Presidential Palace down to the most remote village. Yet it still failed. Only by looking at U.S. nation building in South Vietnam in its totality—which means what happened not just in the provinces but also in the center—are we able to fully grasp this failure, and its significance for future attempts at nation building.

Jessica Elkind points out some topics and issues on which I could have said more, and she is right. The topic of the motivations and backgrounds of the thousands of American nation-builders who went to work for CORDS is particularly interesting. The historiography has given a great deal of attention to legendary figures such as the CORDS advisor John Paul Vann, but far more important for the outcome of U.S. nation building in South Vietnam were the thousands of Americans who toiled in relative obscurity.³ Nation building is an industrial-scale endeavor requiring a commensurate quantity of personnel. Finding and training such personnel at short notice—effectively attempting to create area experts overnight—is

² Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Eric M. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993).

³ The classic work on Vann is Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage, 1988).

incredibly challenging. During my research, I caught glimpses of a fascinating social history associated with CORDS' recruitment drives. I would encourage researchers interested in the topic to consult the Hoover Institution Archives, or to contact me for other suggested leads.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the reviewers again for their engagement with my work. It is an honor to have had my book be the subject of an H-Diplo roundtable.