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Vietnam 1954-April 1965

A Perspective on the Operational Level

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Text, Lt. Gen. Cushman, March 7, 1996

In October 1964, with Vietnam in deep crisis, Under Secretary of State George Ball wrote a long paper for Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara, and MacGeorge Bundy, on Vietnam. President Johnson did not see that paper until January, after the 1964 elections. Mr. Ball laid out these options...

George Ball's Options

In Mr. Ball's paper were his three "end-conditions" for what might pass for "success" in Vietnam. Note the phrase "thru international arrangements" - meaning negotiations. In May 1961 President Kennedy had addressed the nation using these charts.

Laos March 1961

Laos May 1961

After that address President Kennedy put the Laos problem on the "negotiating track." The result was the July 1962 Geneva Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos.

Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos

So much for negotiations, when power is absent. When President Johnson's "Working Group" on Vietnam presented its options to him in December 1964, the idea of "negotiations" to achieve a halt in infiltration did not appear.

Working Group's Options

In mid-1965 President Johnson committed US ground forces into Vietnam's countryside and at the same time ordered an escalation of air effort against the North. I believe that at no time during the period from October 1964 to mid-1965 did anyone seriously present to the President the "missing" option shown in this chart. This next chart portrays what would have been a "winning strategy" at that time and after.

A Winning Strategy

The problem of Vietnam has two basic dimensions:

The Essential Problem of Vietnam

One is the internal -- effective pacification of the countryside. The other is the external, denial of outside support. In August 1964 I entered the National War College, where by March 1965 I had written this Individual Research Paper.

IRP Cover Sheet

Note its title: "External Support of the Viet Cong; An Analysis and a Proposal." In this paper I analyzed 14 "counterinsurgencies" from post-World War II to 1962.

Table 2 & Figure 1

Seven were "successful" and seven "unsuccessful." For each I rated on a vertical scale from zero to ten the effectiveness of the counterinsurgency's internal measures, and on a horizontal scale the degree to which the insurgents did not receive outside

support. The rationale for each rating is in my paper. Note that successful counterinsurgencies are clustered at the top right. I offered this principle:

A Fundamental Principle

In April 1964 I had returned from a year in Vietnam where I had been senior advisor to the Vietnamese commander of the 21st Infantry Division. He was responsible for this area in the southernmost Vietnam Delta.

21st Division Area

In his area was occurring a deadly struggle between two governments competing for the loyalties of one people. One government was the Republic of Vietnam; the other was the Viet Cong. Each had its armed forces from hamlet level up, its province chiefs, its tax collectors, schools, and propaganda teams, and its own distinctive organization, doctrine, and concept of operations. The division commander and our advisory team developed our own home-grown concepts for waging this struggle. They are described in a March 1966 article in Army magazine.

Degrees of Control, and Criteria

Our ideas on degree of control are shown here; we had only these two simple criteria for "GVN control" and we colored our maps accordingly. These lines tell how we would measure success. And the primary responsibility for achieving success lay with the ARVN division tactical area commander, through his province (military sector) and division chains of command. He directed an integrated civil-military operation at the cutting edge of which was this organization, under the district chief.

District Organization

Developing these concepts was a team effort by our US advisory teams at division and province and the Vietnamese division commander with his two chains of command. In April 1964 these integrated concepts of civil/military organization and operations, known as the expanding oil spot, were being put into place by the Vietnamese themselves. When my tour ended I came home to tell all who would listen that pacification must be done the way we had been doing it, and that it should be the task of the ARVN division commanders. With U.S. assistance the Vietnamese should execute the integrated effort; they could learn, and it was their country. But that was not to be. My war college paper described the situation at end-1964:

Figure 3

Repeat - A Winning Strategy

Conclusions

Not since 1861-63 has a President been so poorly served by his military chiefs.

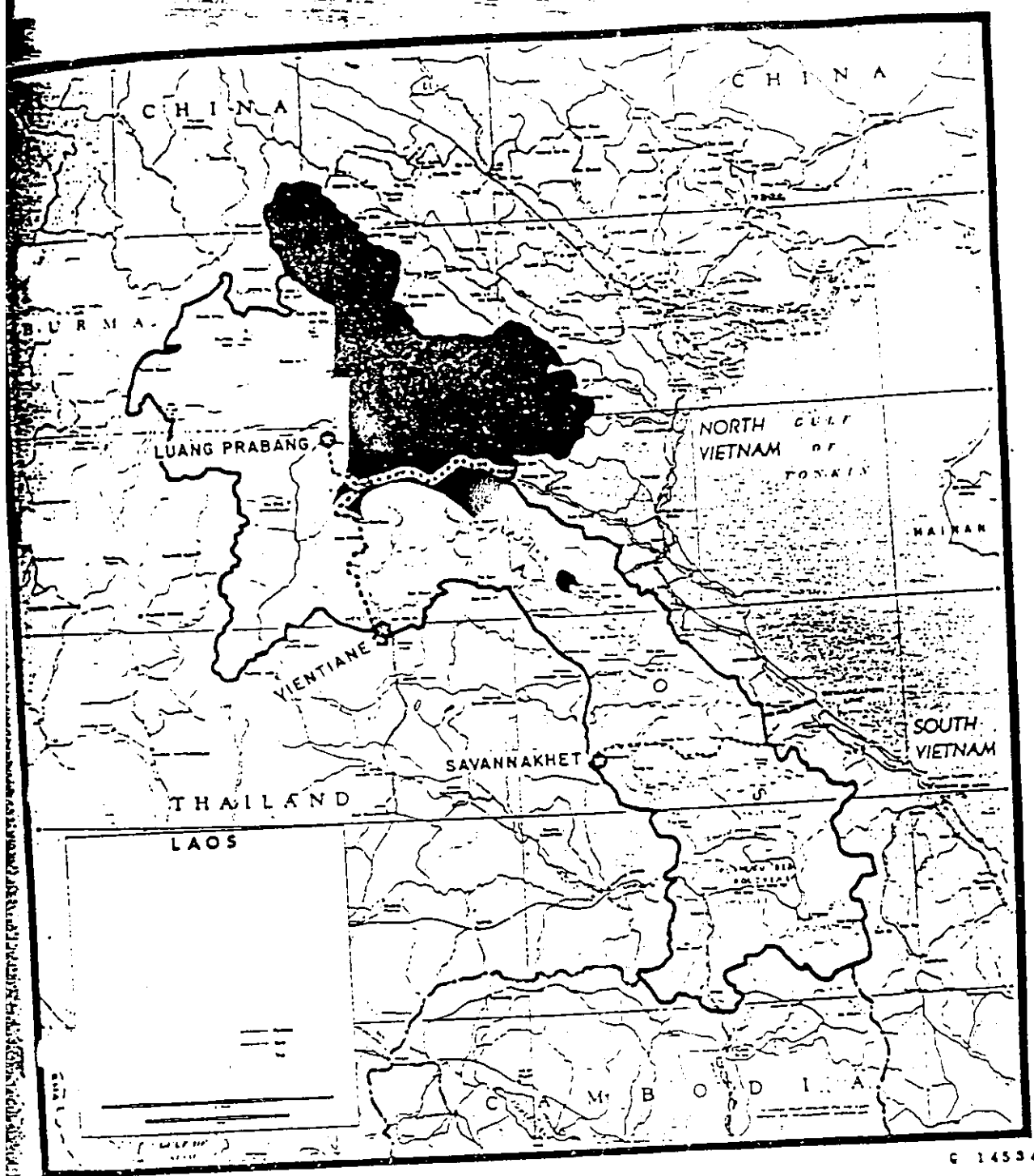
George Ball's Options, October 1964^{*}

1. "Continue the present course of action."
2. "[Inject] substantial ground forces [into the countryside]."
3. "Mount an air offensive against the north."
4. "[Negotiate] a political solution at a minimum cost to U.S. interests."

"Three [necessary] conditions [for success]"...

- o An effective government in Saigon
- o The Viet Cong insurgency reduced to a tolerable level.
- o Infiltration of supplies and materiel halted [thru "international arrangements"].

^{*} Robert Manning, "A Light That Failed; Top Secret: The Prophecy the President Rejected," The Atlantic, July 1972, pp 36-49



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⑥ COMMUNIST REBEL AREAS

22 MARCH 1961



⑦ COMMUNIST REBEL AREAS

3 MAY 1961

Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos (Geneva, July 23, 1962)*

Each of the signatory nations "Solemnly declare that...

...they will recognize and will respect and observe in every way the sovereignty, independence, neutrality, unity and territorial integrity of the Kingdom of Laos...

...they will refrain from all direct or indirect interference in the internal affairs of the Kingdom of Laos...

...they will not introduce into the Kingdom of Laos foreign troops or military personnel in any form whatsoever...

...they will not establish nor will they facilitate or connive at the establishment in the Kingdom of Laos of any... foreign military installation of any kind...

...they will not use the territory of the Kingdom of Laos for interference in the internal affairs of other countries."

*** Signed by Ung Van Khiem for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and twelve others.**

December 1964: President Johnson's "Working Group" presented these options...

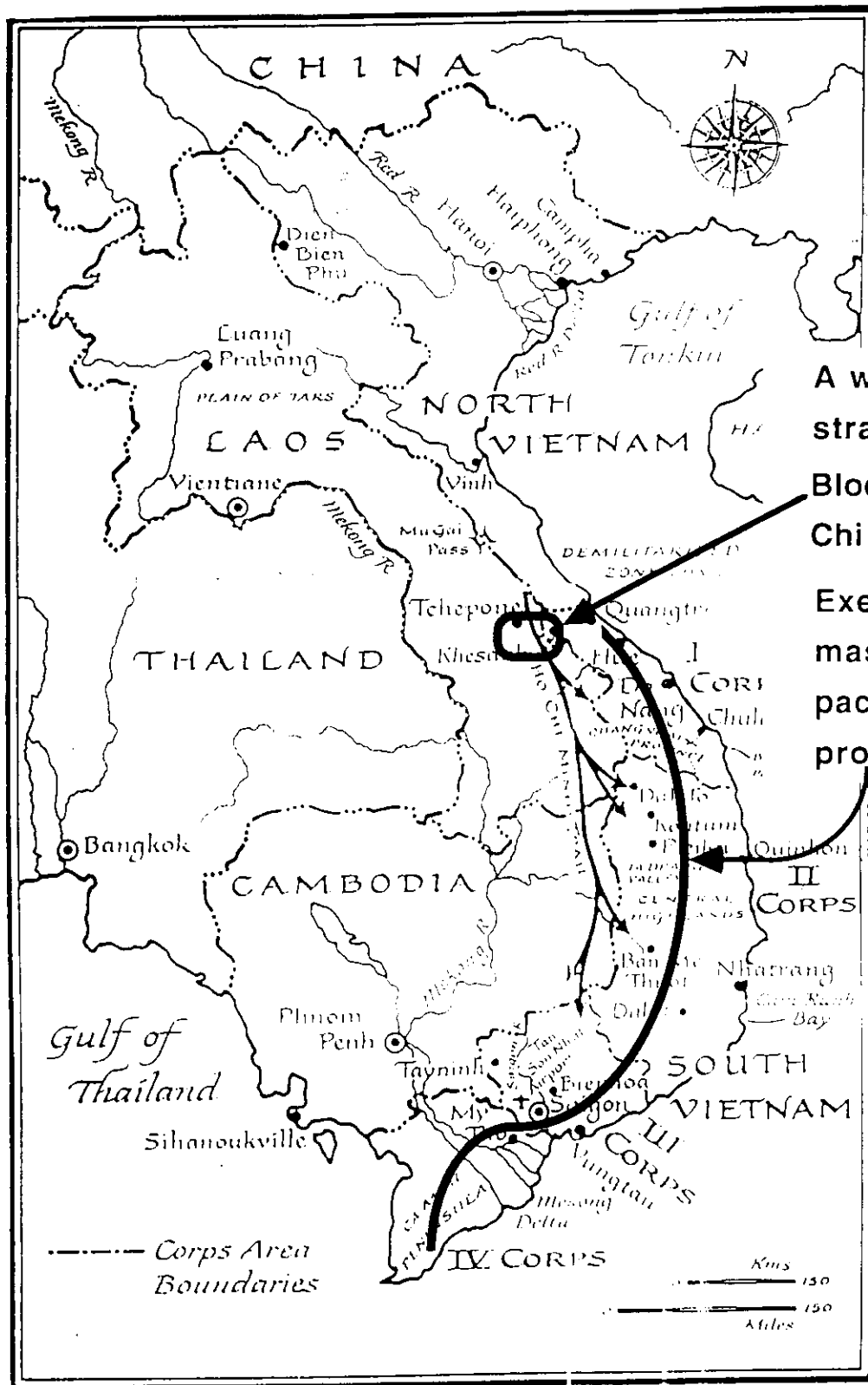
- A. Continue present course indefinitely with little hope of avoiding defeat.**
- B. Undertake a "sharp, intensive bombing campaign" to force Hanoi "to stop supporting the Viet Cong and/or enter negotiations."**
- C. Undertake that bombing campaign "in a graduated manner with the same objectives but at lesser risk of a larger war."**

**July 1965 decision: Commit US Army and Marine forces into Vietnam's countryside.
Expand the US. armed forces to the level required, without a reserve callup.**

*** * * * ***

An available option that was offered by neither George Ball, nor the Working Group, nor the Pentagon:

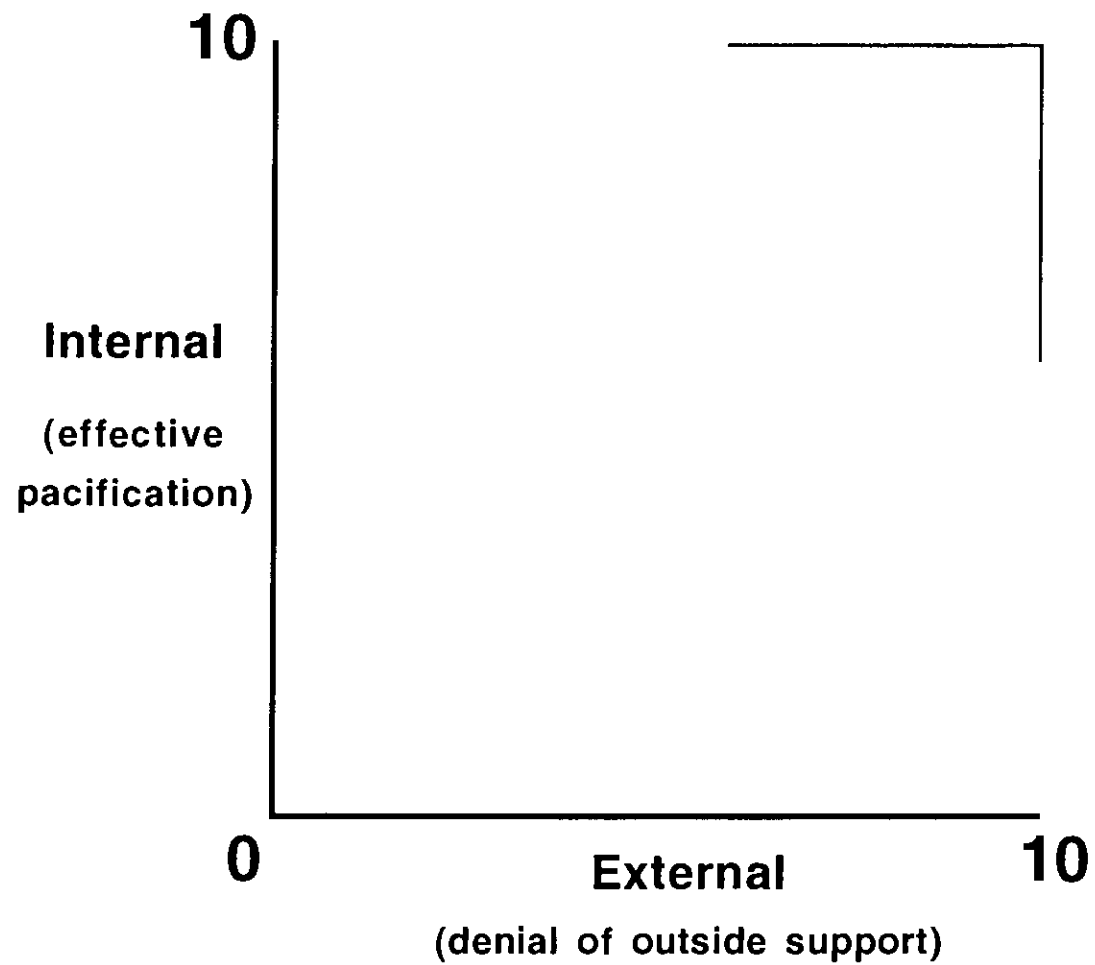
- 1. Organize and mount an effective US-supported Vietnamese pacification effort, and...***
- 2. Cut the Ho Chi Minh trail with US (and allied) air/land forces.***



A winning strategy...

Block the Ho Chi Minh trail

Execute a massive pacification program



The Essential Problem of Vietnam

~~Copy 2 of 2 copies~~
INDIVIDUAL RESEARCH PAPER

by NWC
Mar '86
UNCLASSIFIED

15 March 1965

Parts of the
original paper
were not declassified

EXTERNAL SUPPORT OF THE VIET CONG:

AN ANALYSIS AND A PROPOSAL

J. H. Cushman
June '86

by

John H. Cushman
Lieutenant Colonel, USA

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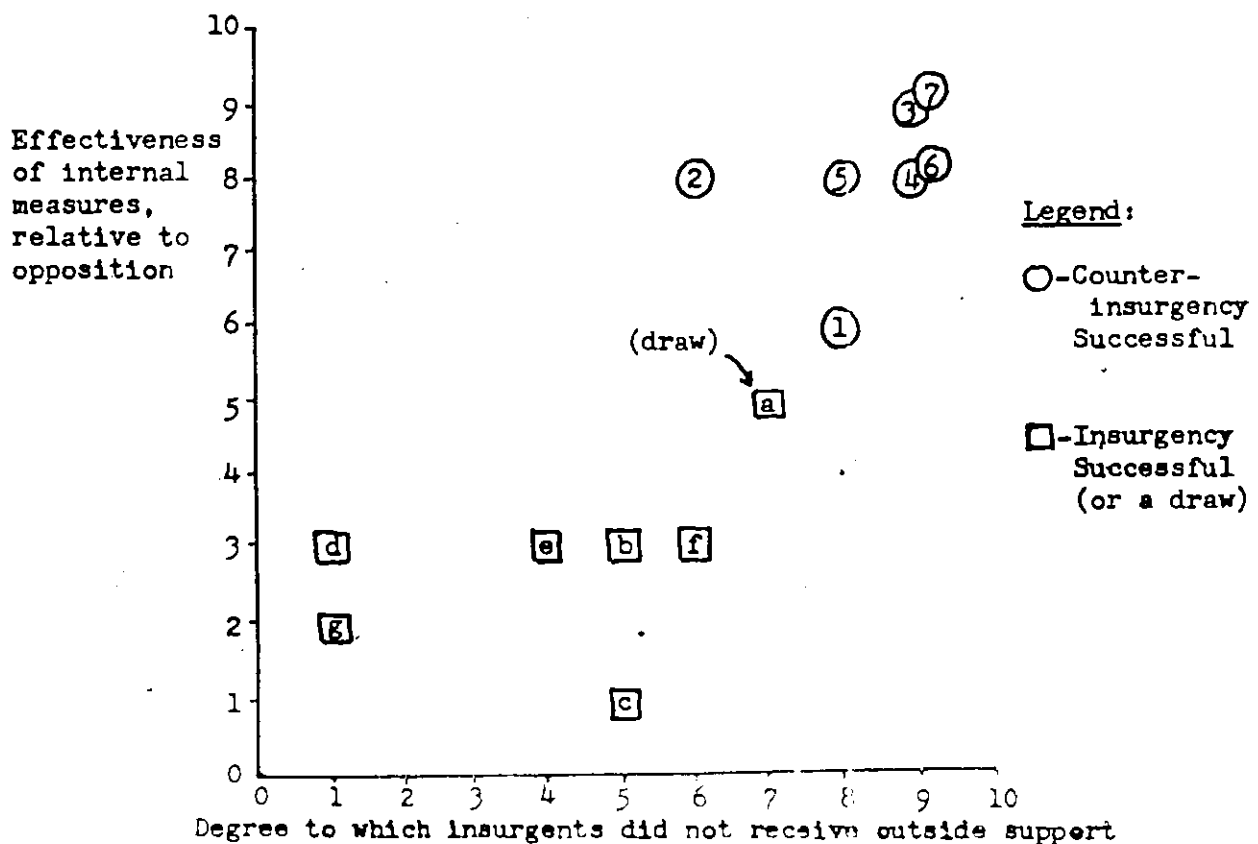
The National War College
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Table 2

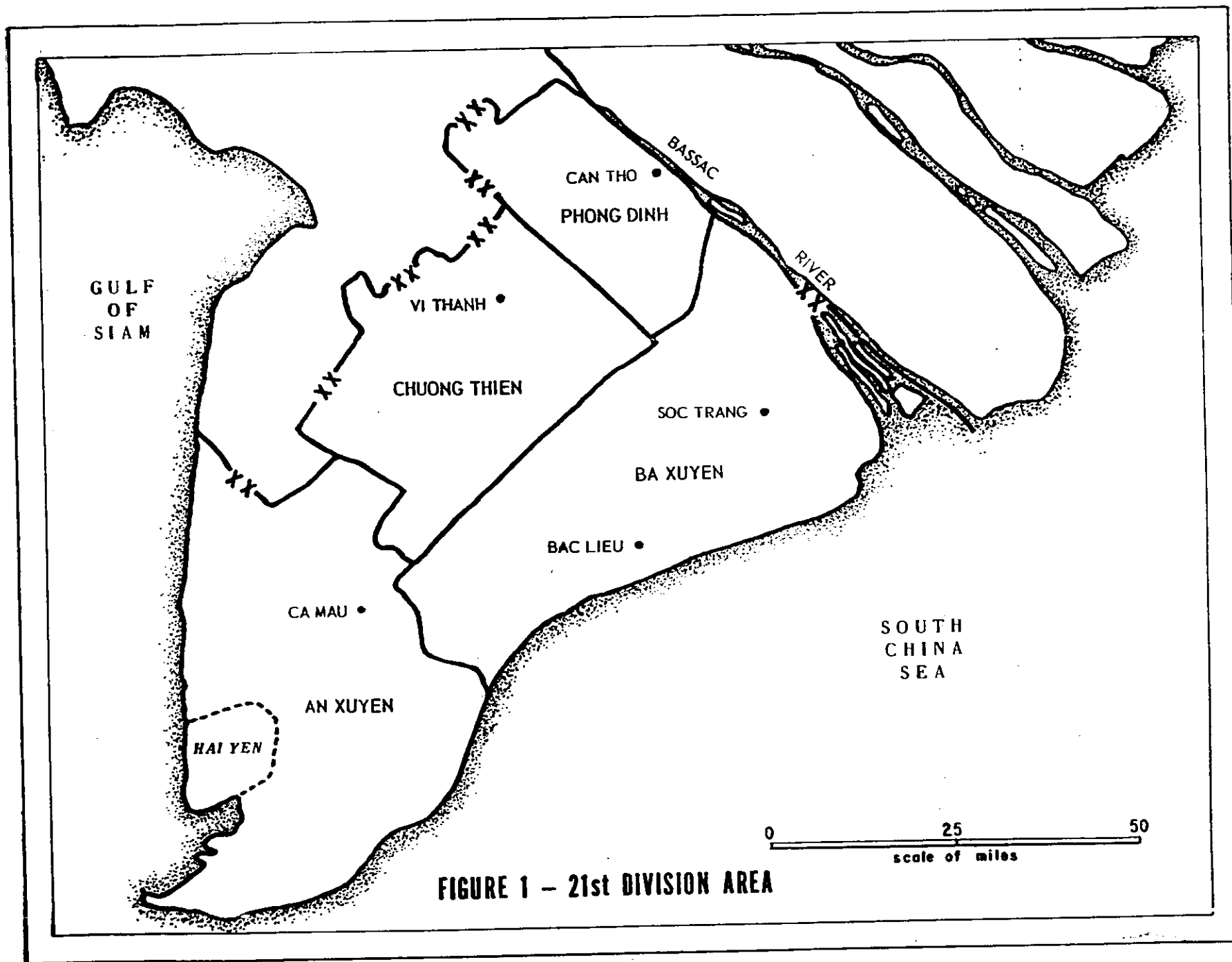
<u>Insurgency</u>	<u>Counterinsurgency Successful</u> <u>Rating</u>		<u>Insurgency</u>	<u>Insurgency Successful (or draw)</u> <u>Rating</u>	
	<u>External</u>	<u>Internal</u>		<u>External</u>	<u>Internal</u>
1. Burma	8	6	a. Algeria	7	5
2. Greece	6	8	b. China	5	3
3. Hungary	9	9	c. Cuba	5	1
4. Korea	9	8	d. Indochina	1	3
5. Malaya	8	8	e. Indonesia	4	3
6. Philippines	9	8	f. Israel	6	3
7. Tibet	9	9	g. Laos	1	2

Figure 1



A Fundamental Principle

In order for a counterinsurgency to succeed, there must be an internal effort substantially superior to that of the insurgents, and an effective restriction of (or an absence of) external support to the insurgents. Neither action alone is sufficient. Both are necessary.



Degrees of Control, and Criteria

Blue (GVN control):

The village chief and other officials can move about without escort.

The VC do not openly collect taxes in the area.

Red (VC control):

No symbols whatever of government authority exist in the area.

Yellow (Contested):

All other areas.

* * * * *

Basic Measures of Success

Population (and territory) converted from Yellow to Blue.

Population (and territory) converted from Red to Yellow.

* * * * *

The primary responsibility lies with the ARVN division tactical area commander, through his sector (province) and division chains of command.

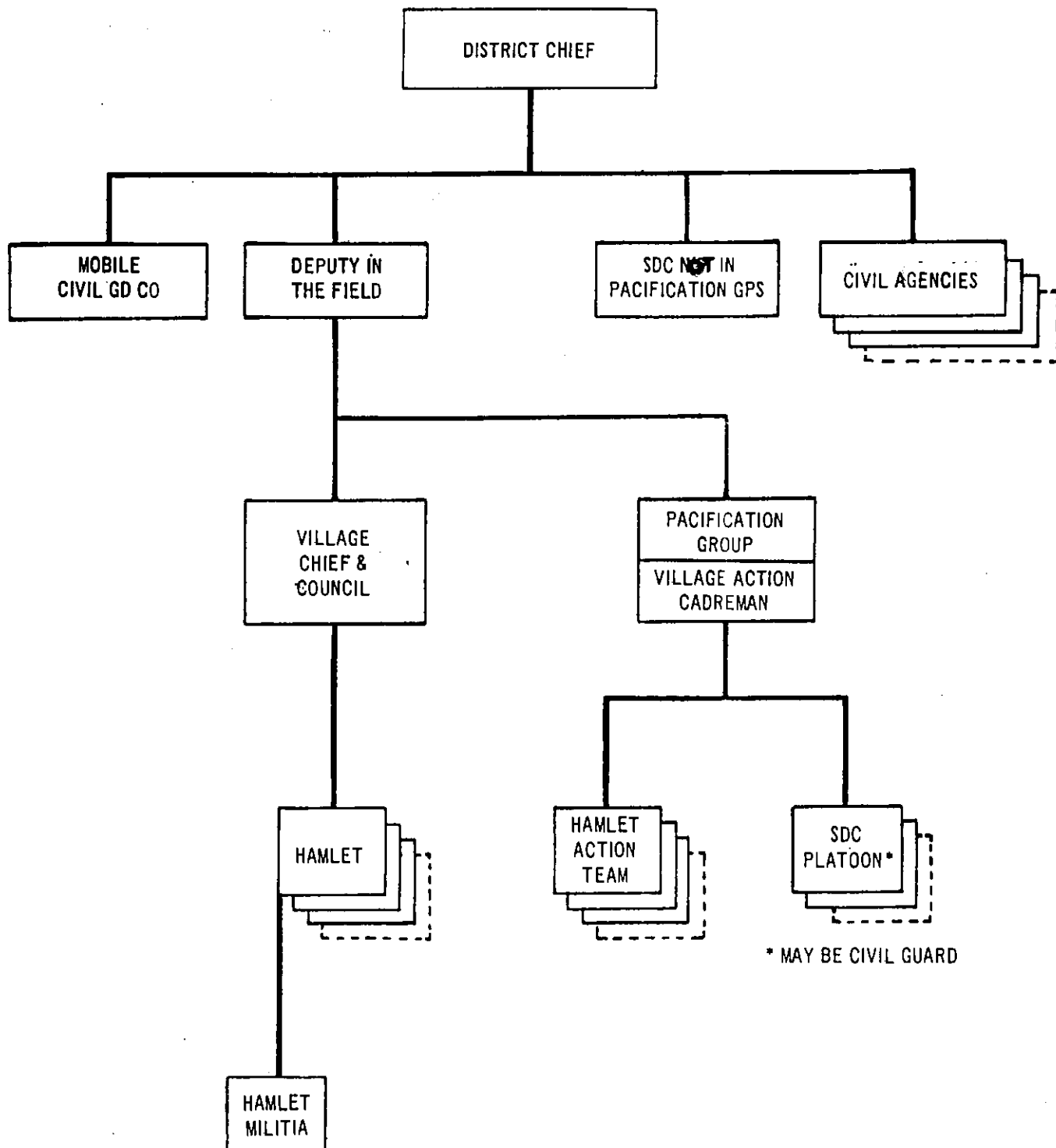


FIGURE 2 – TYPICAL DISTRICT ORGANIZATION FOR PACIFICATION

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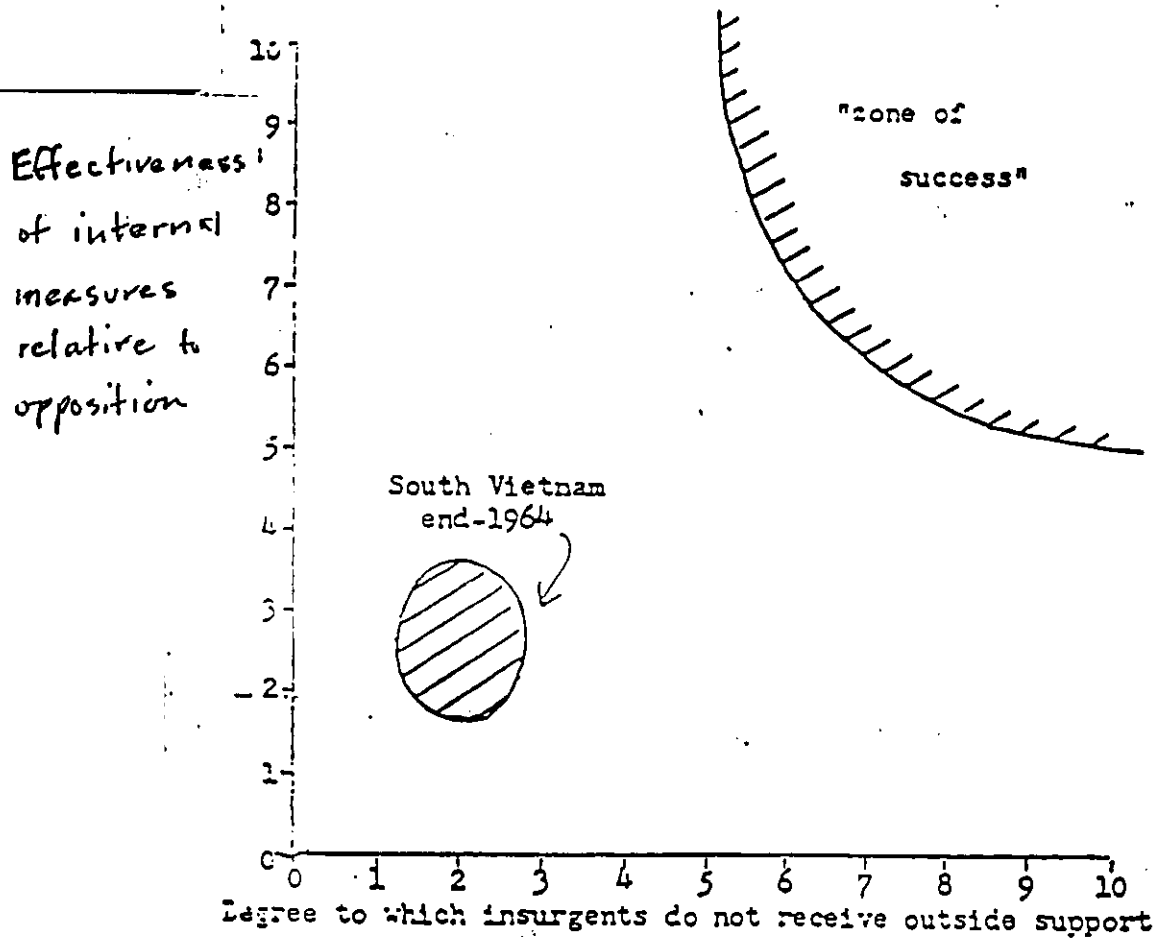
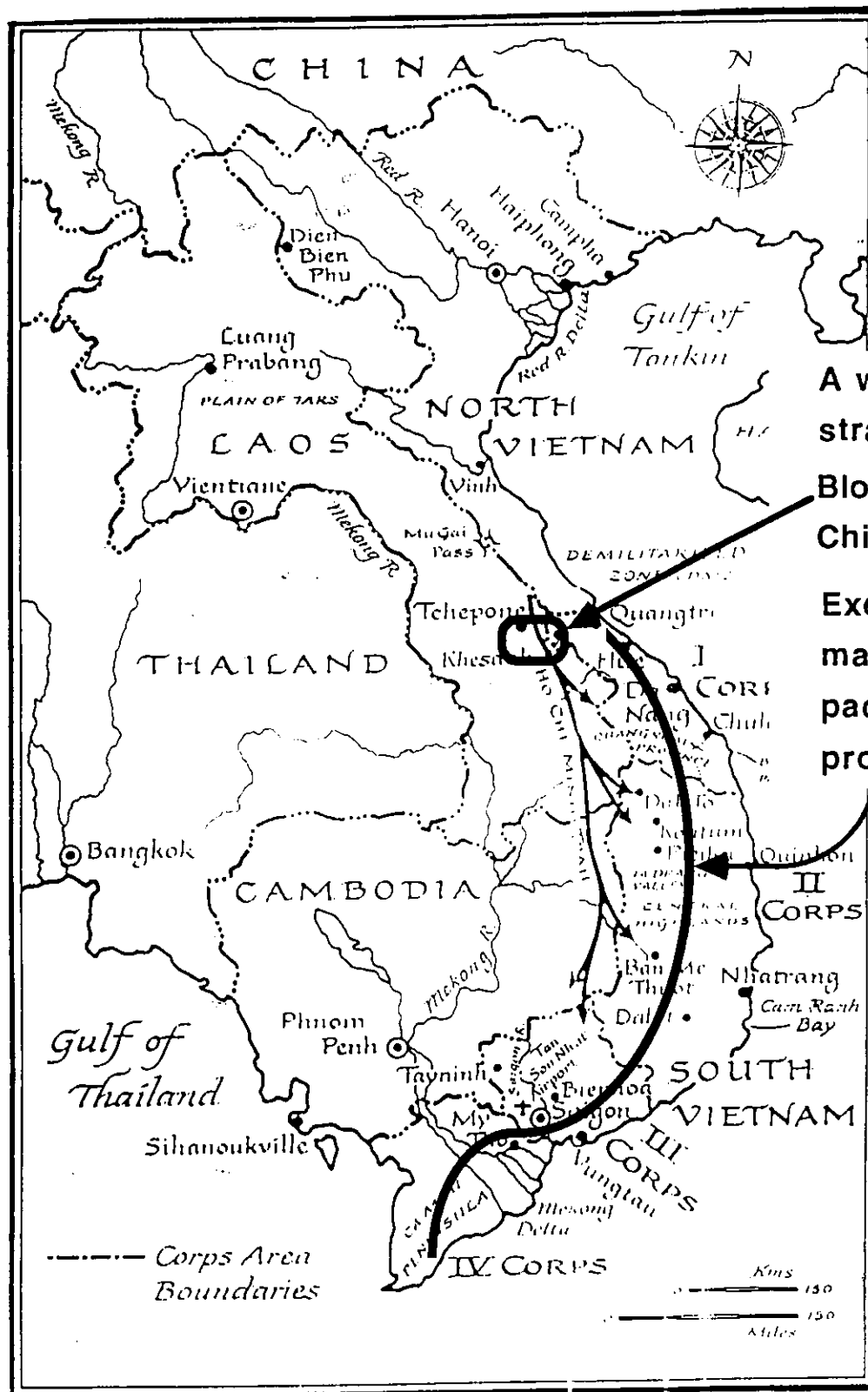


Figure 3

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A winning strategy...
Block the Ho Chi Minh trail
Execute a massive pacification program

Conclusions

- 1. In 1961-1965, none of JFK's and LBJ's "best and the brightest" understood the true situation in Vietnam, nor did McNamara's military advisors.**
- 2. Although a strategy that could produce decisive war termination under reasonable terms was available, in 1965 they entered into what became a fruitless strategy of attrition.**
- 3. When, in 1966 and 1967, they began to understand how to cope with the internal situation in Vietnam, they went along with airpower as the way to deal with the problem of infiltration. It failed.**
- 4. When, after Tet 1968 and into 1972, pacification began to work inside the country notwithstanding continued massive infiltration, the cost of an attrition strategy eventually became too much for the American people to bear. By early 1973 the U.S. withdrew its forces. Two years later the Congress denied further U.S. support to Vietnam, and it fell.**
- 5. The responsibility for failure in Vietnam clearly falls on Presidents Kennedy and Johnson and their civilian advisors, but it very much also falls on the U.S. military -- and especially on those officers of the United States Army in key positions whose insight into an essentially land warfare situation was inadequate.**