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From:
Reply to: Southeast Asia Discussion List

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To: Multiple recipients of list SEASIA-L

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Subject: habib and unconventional warfare

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In Jim Craven's otherwise intelligent and excellent response to Larry Engelman's whitewash of Philip Habib, Craven made the following comment that I think is a bit off the mark.

> " From the very beginning, U.S. planners not only tried to fight
> unconventional warfare
> with conventional weapons and tactics, they also tried to define and achieve
> "victories" in
> conventional terms. The U.S. tried to introduce conventional warfare concepts
> and criteria of
> efficiency and victory into a totally inappropriate context."<

I guess it really depends on when you place the "beginning" of the war. If you put it in 1964-65 when Johnson was preparing to send in conventional troops and undertake airstrikes, then you're correct. On the other hand, it is clear that US involvement in the war, in some fashion or other, dates back to a much earlier period. From 1950, we provided heavy support for the French in their war against the Vietminh even to the point of offering them our two nuclear weapons to alleviate the siege of Dien Bien Phu. While this was a "conventional" response, on the whole US military thinking at the time was very critical of the overall French effort. In the aftermath of the French defeat, US military planners, particularly those involved in the development of the Special Forces battalions, had adopted the counter-insurgency theories that had come out of the war against the Huks in the Philippines. These ideas were reinforced by the "lessons" of the British war against the Malayan Communist Party guerrillas in Malaya.

Eisenhower, who had been elected on the platform that he would get us out of Korea, was fully cognizant of the difficulties of getting involved in a land war in Asia, therefore he never supported any greater involvement beyond clandestine material military aid and a certain level of political "advice" such as that given by people like Edward Lansdale to Ngo Dinh Diem. There was thus, a general aversion by the US to any sort of overt military intervention in Vietnam prior to 1960. Eisenhower contented himself with the setting up of a MAAG, a military aid and assistance group, which provided aid, training and advice, but very few US

military personnel were sent to Vietnam. By the end of the Eisenhower administration, Diem's position had so deteriorated due to advances by the National Liberation Front and by the rejection of his policies by the Buddhist hierarchy as well as many other sectors of the South Vietnamese population, that he appeared in danger of being overthrown.

In 1961 and 1962 Kennedy was shocked by both the debacle at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba and by the further collapse of the Diem government's position. He and his "best and brightest" were really drawn to the "can do" promises of the counter-insurgency lobby that had begun to develop in the military. Kennedy was convinced by their assurances that the French had gotten it all wrong, trying to fight a guerrilla army with conventional, imperial forces and that it was necessary to develop a strong "nationalist" anti-communist force inside the country. The US could participate in this by the employment of specialized troops who were trained as counter-insurgency warriors and who would assist the otherwise "uncommitted" peasants to both defend themselves and to educate themselves against the dangers of a communist takeover. Thus, during the Kennedy years, we developed a very different military doctrine regarding the Vietnam conflict that was fundamentally critical of the conventional strategy and seemed to promise a cheap and "painless" solution. Painless, in terms of US military involvement. In the long run, of course, it was a total failure. The Special Forces teams had little success with South Vietnamese peasants because many of them had already been won over by the NLF or were being worked over by the Diem government, or both. Program such as the Strategic Hamlets (borrowed from the New Villages of Malaya) resulted in a whole range of disastrous relocations and landgrabs. The Special Forces found that their only successes were with Montagnard groups who generally hated all Vietnamese, North and South, communist and anti-. They also had some "success" in Laos where they were able to mobilize groups like the Hmoung under Gen. Vang Pao.

By the time of Diem's overthrow and murder, and JFK's assassination; the counter-insurgency theorists and the Green Berets had been pretty thoroughly discredited and, as we all know, the situation in South Vietnam had deteriorated even further. It was at this point that the "conventional" military planners in the Pentagon were able to gain the ear of LBJ's defense advisors and push for their own solution to the now-festering sore of our nasty little war in Vietnam. In the process of ditching the unsuccessful unconventional warfare approach, US military planners also neglected the very appropriate arguments against the use of

conventional forces in a guerrilla was which had prompted the counter-insurgency approach in the first place. What they could never bring themselves to admit was that neither approach would work because the "war" had been unwinnable from the beginning - in this case the beginning being 1945, when the French first tried to oust Ho Chi Minh.

It was this deep-seated refusal to accept the inevitable victory of the communists in Vietnam that drove the US military and diplomatic establishment throughout this period from one failed policy to another, which forced them to first deceive themselves and then to deceive the American public about the true status of our involvement in the conflict. No good came from this trail of stupidity, lies and arrogance. Nor did any good come from the prolongation of the conflict while US military planners and presidents and secretaries of state worked their way through their rationalizations and blind alleys.

It is for this reason that one really has to take issue with Larry Engelman's self-serving lionization of Philip Habib. I have a very different memory of Habib's role in the Paris negotiations. It is a rather specious argument to call him a "peacemaker" when his role might well be seen as one which did little more than prolong an already pointless exercise. The Paris talks were, to my mind, nothing more than an excruciating exercise in attempting to save American face, so that it would not look like we lost the war, and so that Kissinger and Nixon and the whole crowd of fools could go to the American public and say we had achieved "peace with honor". Let us remember that the "peace" that Philip Habib bought with his three years of tedious carping about the shape of the table and the meaningless formulas of the treaty was paid for with about 30,000 American lives that were lost between 1969 and 1973. On top of that were probably close to a million Vietnamese lives lost and untold billions of dollars in treasure and property wasted through the carpet bombing of Laos and Cambodia. I see little to commend in any of this. If Phil Habib had never existed, and if Nixon and Kissinger had had the good sense to simply withdraw without an agreement in 1969, peace without honor, would have saved the US and the Vietnamese and the Laotians and the Cambodians so much pain and suffering and death and destruction that I don't think we can ever count the full amount. We're all still paying for it. If we're going to bury Phil Habib, let's do it with a full accounting of the cost of his contribution.

Carl Trocki