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PAUL D HARKINS, 1904-

A World War II protégé of General George S Patton, General Paul D Harkins brought great experience to his 1962 appointment as head of the US Military Assistance Command in Saigon, which was still called an 'advisory mission.' Escalating US involvement, President Kennedy directed Harkins to initiate large-scale counterinsurgency operations. However, Harkins, who had been trained in conventional warfare and thought in those terms, proved ill-prepared to deal with the realities of guerrilla warfare.

Harkins pressed on the Diem regime the concept of fortified 'strategic hamlets'; the program, promoted with a vengeance, succeeded only in alienating many of the peasants it forcibly relocated. As this and other troubles mounted, Harkins maintained high optimism in his reports, and demanded the same from his officers.

This enforced optimism soon caught up with Harkins, but efforts to secure more accurate military assessments met with adamant resistance. Harkins was a strong supporter of the Diem regime, while Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge supported the generals who eventually deposed and killed Diem. The coup did nothing to improve relations between Harkins and Lodge. In 1964 Harkins was relieved by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who had become disillusioned with the reliability of Harkin's reports and with his progress. Awarded a distinguished service medal by President Johnson, Harkins retired from service in 1964.