

Notes on:

The Betrayal

by William R. Corson
New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1968

1. ***The Betrayal* is a critical examination of US pacification efforts in Vietnam.** In April 1968, Lieutenant Colonel William R. Corson, USMC, who had led the Marine Corps Combined Action Program in Vietnam, wrote *The Betrayal* to argue that flawed US policies were hurting the Vietnamese people and their communities – the true target of the insurgency.
2. **Corson made three basic arguments:**
 - That the “Big War,” the US military’s conventional fight against North Vietnamese main force units, was irrelevant,
 - That the “Other War,” the pacification effort to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people, was being lost due to neglect and mismanagement, and
 - That the corrupt Government of Vietnam (GVN) was not worthy of being saved.

Corson’s book is especially interesting given its date of publication. *Seven years* before the fall of Saigon, Corson predicted a US defeat and a GVN collapse. He directly criticized US policies and leaders. His analysis was immediate and credible, without the benefit of post-war hindsight.

Corson believed in 1968 that the US was farther away from victory than ever, and that the US goal of an independent, self-sufficient Vietnam was impossible. He justified his position by describing the debilitating effects of the totalitarian Saigon government, the ineptness of US military and civilian leaders, and the inconsistency of US government policies.

3. **The Big War trumped the Other War.** The 1965 escalation of the war superseded all pacification efforts. The US sent its military to solve an essentially social-economic problem.

Escalation harmed the people, the villages, and the social structure of Vietnam. Widespread destruction, resulting from US combat actions, produced civilian casualties, refugees, and abandoned rice fields. The US took no responsibility for these “non-military” problems, and the GVN were indifferent to their people. These social upheavals weakened the GVN and helped the enemy.

From the onset of the Big War in 1965, the quality of US military advisors went downhill. Outstanding officers opted into combat units where their careers would be enhanced. Escalation pushed the Vietnamese military onto the sidelines.

The air war was the true catastrophe of the escalation strategy. Fought against an enemy without an air force, it was irrelevant to military success in South Vietnam, yet caused international alienation and discontent at home. The air war was championed by the services – USAF, USMC, and USN – who used the air war to enhance their own budgets and equipment.

4. **The Other War was never a US priority.** From 1955, US efforts to introduce economic, social, and political reforms, while simultaneously providing security, were stymied by US jurisdictional strife. The State Department, the U.S. Army, the CIA, and other government agencies could not work effectively as a pacification team. Between 1960 and 1965, civilian staffers in Vietnam expanded from 2,000 to 30,000 personnel, sometimes working at cross-purposes, making a shambles of the entire pacification process. Without a viable social structure on which to build a government, the US would be saddled with an endless drain of money and manpower.

In 1966, the US military refused to use US troops for pacification. A year later, General Westmoreland, commander of all US forces in Vietnam, was given responsibility for the Other War. His civilian deputy, Robert Komer, was appointed director of Civil Operations Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS). CORDS' efforts to track civil improvements suffered from qualified manpower shortages. The Hamlet Evaluation System expected civilian advisors with little knowledge of the Vietnamese language or developmental economics to evaluate hundreds of hamlets a month that were visited for only thirty to sixty minutes, if at all.

5. **The GVN was corrupt, cowardly, and incompetent.** The GVN did not want social reform. Their indifference to the population, their anti-communist reprisals, and their insatiable greed for drove their own people into popular revolt. The key difference between the north and the south was honesty. GVN officials *sold* American food to refugees. Million of dollars of US aid went into the pockets of GVN officials. US acquiescence helped the GVN exploit their own people.

Corson noted the irony that "helping the people" was equated with acceptance of the GVN, even though it was universally recognized that the GVN cared little for the welfare of its own people.

6. **The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) refused to fight.** It was poorly trained and organized and its leadership was infected with nepotism, incompetence, and corruption.

In February 1955, the United States Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) started training the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). The arrival of US forces in 1965 capped a ten-year failure to build the ARVN. The ineffectiveness of the ARVN was due to the inability of our own military establishment to respond to a war of national liberation.

The ARVN was cast as a mirror-image of the US Army. It was unwieldy, poorly trained, improperly equipped, and unable to meet the challenges of a guerrilla war. Large, road-bound units with cumbersome staffs strangled small-unit leader development and were incapable of the decentralized tactics needed to fight a guerilla war.

ARVN officers succeeded through family ties and political allegiances, not merit or competence. The US had no oversight. ARVN officers refrained from fighting. Between 1965 and 1968, the ARVN suffered twenty deaths among field grade officers. In this same period, Marines in Vietnam, at one-seventh the size, lost *seven times* that number of field grade officers killed.

The ARVN stole from the people and exploited their positions for loot and power, a colossal mistake in a counterinsurgency. Vietnamese peasants, indifferent to ideologies, did not believe that the GVN was on their side because they suffered more violence from the ARVN than from the enemy. The US never linked performance with assistance. We continued to support the ARVN despite their unwillingness to fight or behave properly toward their own people.

Combined operations, where US commanders held authority over Vietnamese troops, were prohibited by Westmoreland. By contrast, in 1950, Korean forces, as full partners under a combined headquarters, fought side-by-side with Americans.

7. **The Marine's Hamlet War.** Marine Lieutenant General Victor Krulak, the unsung hero of the Other War, believed that search and destroy missions caused more problems than they solved, and contributed little to the goal of pacification. "The Vietnamese people are the prize."

In August 1965, Lieutenant Paul Eck integrated Vietnamese soldiers into his Marine platoon just as Marines had done with indigenous forces between the World Wars. This "Combined Action" plan was encouraged by Marine Corps senior leaders. When Lieutenant Colonel Corson took command of the Combined Action Program in February 1967, there were forty-nine companies.

Corson split the companies into platoons and assigned each to a specific hamlet. A hamlet's "Combined Action Platoon" (CAP) was a thirteen-man squad integrated with a Vietnamese platoon. Each Marine was a combined leader. Marine riflemen were team leaders, Marine fire team leaders were squad leaders. The Marine squad leader commanded the CAP in combat. Westmoreland's order prohibiting US leaders from commanding Vietnamese troops was ignored.

CAP Marines lived in their hamlet full-time in order to protect the people, maintain public order, collect intelligence, and participate in civic action projects. CAP Marines denied supplies to the enemy. They prevented the Vietcong from terrorizing the people, and engaged in direct combat when necessary. The CAP served as propaganda against the Vietcong by its daily actions.

CAP Marines were not outsiders, but members of the community who shared the people's hopes, fears, and aspirations. They knew the people and realized the importance of their mission. Corson strongly believed that Combined Action Program was the best method to defeat an insurgency.

8. **Corson concludes *The Betrayal* with six policy recommendations:**

- Stop all aerial bombing of North Vietnam.
- Eliminate all illegal land rents and agricultural taxes. These fund GVN corruption and feed Vietcong propaganda.
- Educate eligible Vietnamese children at US universities as was done during the pacification campaign in the Philippines at the turn of the century.
- Accept responsibility for refugees and civilian casualties. Funds refugee assistance programs.
- Take control of American aid money. Stop payments to GVN ministers, province chiefs, and generals. General Stilwell paid his Chinese *armies* with a paymaster force of fifty officers.
- Reduce force levels and air bases. Integrate ARVN and US battalions. Put Regional and Popular Forces under US command, with 60,000 US troops, as a Combined Action Program.

These ideas all contradicted Westmoreland's strategy as well as GVN plans. The GVN sought to avoid a withdrawal of US forces, since their power depended on US presence. The GVN did not share US goals, and sometimes frustrated US efforts in Vietnam as much as the enemy.

9. **Notes on Afghanistan 2006.** Corson's comments on corruption, officer selection, mirror imaging, and combined operations all apply to Afghanistan today. Corrupt leadership infects and destabilizes entire institutions. This is especially relevant to the Afghan National Army (ANA). We cannot condone corruption. We need a controlling interest in officer selection and assignment. The tendency toward mirror-imaging – with US equipment, tactics, training, and procedures – needs to be balanced with local capabilities and requirements, especially for the embryonic ANA. The multiple coalition organizations in Afghanistan may be *more* in need of a strong combined headquarters than was needed in Vietnam in 1968.

Corson was a critic whose career suffered because he spoke out. His sometimes strident voice reflected his frustration with US self-delusion on the effectiveness of our chosen strategy. On American hubris and refusal to accept unwelcome facts, Corson wrote, "When one assumes infallibility, it is impossible to change a course of action."

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