

Notes on:

Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941 – 1960

The U.S. Army in Vietnam Series

by Ronald H. Spector

Washington, DC: Center for Military History, United States Army, 1985

Advice and Support: The Early Years is a detailed history of the U.S. effort to build a Vietnamese Army during the period 1941 and 1960. A second volume, *Advice and Support: The Final Years*, addresses 1965 to 1973. The lesson of the book is that building an army is a complex task – as Churchill said – “too important to be left to the generals.” A reflection of its parent society, an army is built by layers of strategic, political, economic, and social decisions. Who should lead the Army? Who should serve? What responsibilities, what authorities, what types of organization, what types of equipment? These questions require *national* decisions.

Because U.S. policy was unclear, and the U.S. government had no strong organization – no integrated, inter-agency capability – to address the counterinsurgency in Vietnam, the U.S. Army stepped into a vacuum. Tasked with building a Vietnamese National Army, the U.S. Army viewed all issues as military problems. *Advice and Support* examines how numerous U.S. leaders, both military and civilian, warned against ignoring the social and political challenges affecting Vietnam. The fact that a new army would never be the solution in Vietnam did not prevent the U.S. from focusing most of its resources toward that goal.

Part One: The American Discovery of Vietnam

1. *Chapter 1 – Conquest and Revolt.* Few Americans appreciated Vietnam’s nine centuries of resistance to foreigners. France, who had occupied Vietnam since 1850, suppressed nationalistic uprisings during the 1920s and again in 1940 with extreme brutality. In 1941, the Japanese occupied South Vietnam.
2. *Chapter 2 – From Pearl Harbor to the Japanese Coup.* During WWII, the U.S. supported French forces, but was suspicious of their efforts to regain their prewar empire. The U.S. never had a policy on post-war Vietnamese independence, although FDR believed Vietnam should *not* be returned to the French.
3. *Chapter 3 – From the Japanese Coup to V-J Day.* Ho Chi Minh formed the *Viet Minh* in 1941 to fight both the French and the Japanese. U.S. advisors, part of Office of Strategic Services (OSS), trained and equipped Viet Minh soldiers to fight the Japanese. The Viet Minh, in exchange, provided intel to the U.S.
4. *Chapter 4 – The Chinese Occupation of North Vietnam, August – October, 1945.* BrigGen P.E. Gallagher, senior U.S. advisor to the Chinese army occupying northern Vietnam, ignored Chinese drug trade and corruption, and made no attempt to clarify the French, Chinese, Viet Minh, or U.S. political positions.

Part Two: The Franco – Viet Minh War

5. *Chapter 5 – “Heading Into a Very Bad Mess”: Origins of Military Aid.* When the Chinese withdrew in 1946, France re-occupied Vietnam. Because France was needed in NATO, Truman ignored Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh, recognized French sovereignty over Vietnam, and provided France with military aid.
6. *Chapter 6 – Establishing a Military Assistance Program.* The U.S. knew the French would not create an independent Vietnam. Against French wishes, a U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) arrived in 1950. BrigGen F.G Brink had some officers who spoke French, but none Vietnamese.
7. *Chapter 7 – Defeats in Tonkin, Deliberations in Washington.* In 1950, the French suffered a series of military disasters. The JCS concluded that “military victory... would be temporary. The...solution... [is] political and economic concessions by France.” The U.S. urged the French to build a Vietnamese Army.

8. *Chapter 8 – The de Lattre Interlude, 1950 – 1951.* In 1950, the French made a feeble attempt to build a Vietnamese Army, but were undercut by a string of successful Viet Minh offensives.
9. *Chapter 9 – Looking for a Way Out, January 1952 – February 1953.* The JCS suggested that the U.S. advisory group should train the Vietnamese Army in order to increase government stability. BrigGen Brink, who disagreed, was replaced by BrigGen T.J.H. Trapnell.
10. *Chapter 10 – The Road to Diem Bein Phu.* In 1953, the French promised Eisenhower a 120,000-man Vietnamese Army in exchange for \$400 million. BrigGen Trapnell found the French were not interested in producing an army, had no advisory group, and did not want the U.S. to train the Vietnamese Army.
11. *Chapter 11 – The Question of Intervention.* In May 1954, Diem Bien Phu was overrun by the Viet Minh. This marked the failure of U.S. policy to bankroll the French. The U.S. demanded an independent Vietnamese government. LtGen J.W. O’Daniel took command of the MAAG.

Part Three: Going It Alone

12. *Chapter 12 – “Political Considerations Are Overriding”: The Decision on Training.* In 1954, the French asked the U.S. to train the Vietnamese Army. The JCS set four conditions, including “a stable government.” Secretary of State Dulles overruled the JCS: “The most efficient means of enabling the Vietnamese Government is to...train the National Army.” This set the precedent for a military-first focus.
13. *Chapter 13 – The Collins Mission.* In 1954, Eisenhower selected General J.L. Collins to “direct all agencies of the U.S. government [in] Vietnam.” The agencies never obeyed.
 - Collins built a Vietnamese Army of 88,000 men, and trained them for conventional war against a Viet Minh (now called *Viet Cong*) invasion, much like Korea.
 - Language was a problem. U.S. advisors could not prevent the Vietnamese Army from robbing the population. They rejected the brotherly behavior that Mao and Giap had taught their northern troops.
 - The political and social conditions which generated support for the Viet Cong were never addressed. Collins argued that Diem could not unify South Vietnam, but Dulles would not discuss replacements.
14. *Chapter 14 – Picking Up the Pieces, 1955 – 1956.* When the French withdrew in 1956, they left behind \$1.2B of U.S. military equipment, but no inventories or maintenance records. Diem kept units scattered throughout the country for political reasons. The U.S. Army believed guerrillas could best be fought by well-trained conventional forces. Counterinsurgency was little studied. MAAG commander LtGen S.T. Williams believed that a counterinsurgency focus would divert the Army from conventional training.
15. *Chapter 15 – Building a Vietnamese Army, 1956 – 1959.* No single authority directed U.S. efforts in Vietnam. Although Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow worked to control five agencies: State, Defense, CIA, U.S. Information Agency, and U.S. Operations Mission, they all snubbed him and worked separately.
 - The Vietnamese Army had few officers qualified for high command. Political reliability was more important than military expertise. Geographic dispersal and multiple chains of command paralyzed units. The secret Catholic Can Lao political party controlled some units of the Army.
 - Many Vietnamese officers had fought for the French. No generals had resisted French colonialism. Orders were disobeyed and officers with connections were rarely punished. Officers trained little, embezzled funds and robbed the population. Promotion was based on political party and religion.
 - Williams, unaware of the social conditions underlying most of the Vietnamese Army’s problems, simplistically believed that U.S. training institutions alone could build an Army.
 - The language barrier was huge. Thousands of Vietnamese took English, but less than a dozen American advisors studied Vietnamese. Advisors knew little culture, history, or politics. General Cao Van Vien, chief of Vietnamese General Staff, could recall no instance, “in which a U.S. advisor...discussed professional matters with his counterpart in Vietnamese.”

- By 1958, the Vietnamese Army was still incapable of supporting itself, but optimistic U.S. reports by inexperienced advisors ignored critical problems.
16. *Chapter 16 – Roots of a New War, 1957 – 1959.* The U.S. paid for 84% of the Vietnamese Army, but little money went to land reform, road-building, agriculture, health, or housing. Diem had multiple security forces and six intel agencies, all of which underestimated the insurgency and wasted resources.
17. *Chapter 17 – Things Fall Apart, July 1959 – June 1960.* In 1959, the first U.S. advisors were killed: Major Dale R. Buis and Master Sergeant Chester M. Ovnand. That year, the Viet Cong initiated a campaign that reached 100 ambushes a month, irrefutable proof of the weaknesses of the Vietnamese Army. Arrogant, dishonest, and ill-disciplined Vietnamese Army actions increased anti-government sentiment and Viet Cong recruitment. In contrast, the Viet Cong leadership embraced the population with the “three togethers”: eat together, live together, and work together. Viet Cong officers presented a striking contrast. They had few privileges, much responsibility, and shared their soldiers’ hardships.
18. *Chapter 18 – “Something Extra and Special”* In 1958, Admiral Felt, CINCPAC, wrote LtGen Williams: “equal attention must be given to economic, political and social aspects of the problem.” A DARPA study found the Vietnamese Army, like the U.S. Army, incapable of counterinsurgency operations.
- The weaknesses of the Vietnamese Army – corruption, incompetence, low morale, and poor leadership – could not be solved by training. Diem was unable to address social unrest.
 - U.S. officers, less concerned with the political and social aspects of combating insurgency, focused on weapons and training. But no other elements of the U.S. government addressed the underlying social and economic conditions that fueled the insurgency.
 - In 1960, LtGen L.C. McGarr, who viewed counterinsurgency as a distinct form of warfare, took command of the MAAG. President Kennedy approved McGarr’s plan to increase the size of the Vietnamese Army. Again, American leaders focused solely on military solutions.
19. *Chapter 19 – Assessment.* The early advisory period, from 1955 to 1960, suffered from a lack of clear U.S. goals. Military thinking in the 1950s had little to say about counterinsurgency. Training of the police and civil-defense forces was done by other U.S. agencies. The Vietnamese Army’s poor performance after years of U.S. effort can be attributed to two factors:
- The weakness of the Vietnamese Army institution – its politicization, incompetence, and lack of national spirit. The Army was penetrated by Viet Cong agents. With divided authority, insubordination, and overlapping responsibility, no amount of U.S. training was relevant.
 - U.S. advisors were incapable of addressing institutional problems. Short tours, limited preparation, wide gaps in customs and culture, and an inability to speak Vietnamese all hindered advisors. Advisors evaluated the combat readiness of their own units, guaranteeing optimistic reports.

The MAAG did organize the Vietnamese Army and establish a solid school system. The subsequent failure of the Vietnamese Army justifies the warning that the JCS gave to Secretary of State Dulles in 1954: **A strong government and society builds a strong army.** An army does *not* build a government.

20. *Advice and Support* catalogs the difficult lessons the U.S. learned in building a Vietnamese Army:
- Avoid mirror-imaging. Their army must be built on top of their culture, not ours.
 - Know where their army has come from. Know its history. Know its power structure. You cannot guide an army into the future without understanding its past. Build capability slowly.
 - Build an army that reflects the economy. Do not create an organization too expensive to maintain.
 - Control key functions: promotion, pay, assignments. Do not waste time training the wrong people.
 - Enforce equipment accountability. Less is more. Too much military aid generates theft and corruption which weakens the army. Punish corruption.

- Evaluate units accurately. Honest training appraisals strengthen the army in the long run.
- Support other U.S. agencies. Build an army in concert with other national institutions. Understand how the army reflects the society and the nation.
- Learn the language. Develop a rapport. Understand the culture. Eat together, live together, work together, and fight together.
- Select advisors with tact, curiosity, and patience. Train advisors. Assign advisors to repetitive tours.

These lessons are especially relevant today. Many of the challenges described in *Advice and Support* directly parallel the experiences of today's advisors – half a century after Vietnam.

Prepared by: LtCol Brendan B. McBreen, USMC, 843-228-2467, brendan.mcbreen@usmc.mil