

Vietnam Declassified: CIA and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam

Thomas L. Ahern, Jr. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 480 pp., index.

Hayden Peake

In his preface to *Vietnam Declassified*, Thomas Ahern writes that when he left Vietnam in 1965, “I knew we were losing, but I had no idea why the Saigon government was in retreat in the countryside, and the VC ascendant.”⁽¹²⁾ In this book, originally published internally in 2001 as a classified history entitled *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam*, Ahern provides many answers, formed with the benefit of hindsight, deep research into classified documents, candid and revealing interviews, and his own experience as a clandestine service officer¹

Vietnam Declassified is narrowly focused on operations related to “the struggle to suppress the Viet Cong and win the loyalty of the peasantry”⁽⁹⁾, although major military and political events are mentioned for context. The story is told from the perspective of the CIA officers involved—many of whom are named—the insurgents they battled, and the peasants they labored to empower. The narrative covers six chronological periods. In the first, from 1954 to 1956, the Agency, as a temporary expedient to get things going, dismissed orthodoxy and operated with two distinct stations. One, labeled the *Saigon Military Mission* (SMM), was headed by Col. Edward Lansdale, who reported to Allen Dulles. Its mission was to establish military and civic action programs in the countryside where none existed. The conventional station, subordinate to the Far East Division of the Directorate of Plans (since renamed the Directorate of Operations and then the National Clandestine Service), focused on rural political mobilization. While the two stations cooperated on some projects, for the most part they operated in parallel, often with the reluctant toleration of the Diem government, which was struggling to consolidate power on its terms. By the end of 1956 the SMM, having laid some groundwork with the Diem government, left Vietnam, while the conventional station continued the work in the provinces.

¹ Ahern was an operations officer in the CIA for 35 years. He served five tours in Asia, including three in Indochina. Since retirement, he has served as a CIA contract historian. A slightly redacted version of *Rural Pacification* was released in 2006. Five other Ahern histories of CIA efforts in the region were declassified with varying degrees of redaction in 2009. All six can be found at <http://today.ttu.edu/2009/03/cia-releases-documents-of-vietnam-war-era-intelligence/>. Published in-house by the CIA History Staff of the Center for the Study of Intelligence between 2001 and 2006, Ahern’s works have been widely used in the Intelligence Community for education and training purposes. The last of the series, *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos, 1961–1973*, is the most frequently accessed history book CSI has produced.

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Agency activity diminished during the second period (1956–61) as Diem attempted to destroy communist elements in the countryside, alienating peasants in the process. The station reasserted itself in the third period (1961–63) by “launching a series of programs designed either to stimulate village self-defense or attack the insurgent organization at the village level.”(17) Internal Vietnamese conflicts persisted and Diem was overthrown in November 1963.

During the fourth period (1963–65) the Vietnamese generals competed for power while station officers worked at the provincial level trying to find a successful pacification formula. The fifth period (1966–69) was characterized by an expansion of the pacification effort and the massive military buildup of US troops, which eventually led to the unification of intelligence and countryside action programs under the Military Assistance Command (Vietnam) or MACV.

The final period (1969–75) brought the Nixon policy of Vietnamization, which sought to turn over CIA-sponsored programs to the Vietnamese. A major element of this period was the Phoenix program—called *Phung Hoang* by the Vietnamese. Its objective was to integrate “all government of Vietnam activities against the VC” aimed at penetration of the VC and the collection of intelligence.(295) The CIA provided advisory support. Ahern devotes considerable space to the bureaucratic machinations from which this program evolved, its operations in the field, and details of CIA support.

In the end, of course, CIA efforts to help the South Vietnamese in the countryside failed. The reasons are evident in the pages of *Vietnam Declassified*. Ahern quotes exchanges with Headquarters, cites conflicts with MACV, and documents the complex political terrain. From the CIA standpoint, it battled for success with two constituencies, one American, the other Vietnamese, and yet it never conducted a comprehensive analysis of the insurgencies political dynamics. The Americans, under MACV’s rigid bureaucracy, first resisted involvement in and then demanded control of all intelligence and counterinsurgency operations, often with methods the CIA station considered counterproductive. The Vietnamese insisted on the final say on all programs—it was, after all, their country. But they could never control their own bureaucracies, whose competing equities led them to interfere with agreed-upon CIA operations that were seen as challenges to power.

The story is not one of unremitting failure, however. The success of the People’s Action Teams (PATs), described in chapter 10, is an example of what could be achieved. Informants were recruited to identify communist cadres and a civic action program trained security teams and strengthened provincial administration. Roads were repaired, haircuts given, security provided, and the villagers responded by informing on VC forces. For a while it appeared that a workable formula had been found for replacing the VC infrastructure and expanding “the government’s popular base in the countryside.”(169) But attempts to sustain and expand the program and others like it—the Rural Development (RD) operations conducted by the Marines, for example—failed in battles of competing bureaucracies.

Ahern identifies many reasons for the collapse of the pacification efforts. Some South Vietnamese recognized them as well. One general noted that commanders in the Army of South Vietnam (ARVN) were actively “sabotaging pacification,” charging the government itself with “preferring to let the US bear the burden of the

war.”(313) Others cited “indifference and lack of empathy at all levels among Vietnamese officials”(328), and there was corruption like the phantom platoons that existed only on payrolls. It wasn’t until after the Tet Offensive of 1968 that national mobilization was decreed, but it was never vigorously enforced. Despite all the programs designed to disrupt VC infrastructure, it remained virtually intact. One complicating factor was the decision of the Vietnamese government to treat captured VC as criminals, not prisoners of war, with the result that after short sentences they were free to return to the fight. (339) The Provincial Interrogation Centers posed additional difficulties. Cases of brutality resulted when old traditions among the Vietnamese prevailed, a problem aggravated by the lack of trained interrogators. The CIA regarded the practices “as not only inhumane but counterproductive.”(367) In the end, Ahern concludes, “Whatever the theoretical merits of democracy, the GVN version could not compete with the communists’ discipline and cohesiveness, which the democratic forces lack.” (337)

Experiments conducted under flawed assumptions are likely to provide unsatisfactory outcomes. In the final chapter Ahern discusses what he believes to have been the fatally flawed assumptions of the war in Southeast Asia, for example, conflict in Vietnam was between communism and democracy rather than a battle for national liberation—this prejudiced policy and operations. Likewise, the tenacity of the North Vietnamese was consistently misjudged, and operations based on the assumption that resistance could be overcome by winning “hearts and minds” had little chance of success, especially absent government efforts to “mobilize the countryside.”(426) The assumption that the peasants abhorred VC-style communism and longed for democracy also proved unjustified.

In this edition, Ahern includes a preface that reflects on the Vietnam precedents and the lessons they suggest for battling insurgencies. The circumstances are not identical, but the similarities are significant, though complicated by the magnitude and complexities of an insurgency incorporating fanatical religious beliefs. Still, the United States again faces the problems of foreign forces trying to protect populations that do not fully participate in their own defense and the alienation brought on by the destruction inherent in counterinsurgency and counterterrorist operations. Ahern does not provide answers for today’s dilemmas, but he makes vividly clear what did not work when one nation tried to fight another nation’s war. He also provides the foundation for a greater understanding of the CIA’s potential roles in counterinsurgencies.

