Vietnam Intervention

SYSTEMATIC DISTORTION IN POLICY-MAKING

JEFFREY RACE
Institute of Current World Affairs
New York City

Although the Vietnam war may be past, it leaves dozens of intellectual puzzles which will occupy scholars in the decades ahead. One such puzzle, to the unravelling of which this paper offers a clue, is why American policies of counterrevolutionary intervention were so ill-conceived, given the size of the budget, the extent of top-level interest, and the impressively large number of intelligent people who worked on Vietnam.

This is not the same question as why the United States intervened so actively in Vietnam, a subject which has been debated by Schlesinger, Gelb, Ellsberg, and Halperin, and which, no doubt, will be considered by others in the years to come. Rather, the question is, why were U.S. bureaucracies unable to produce *effective* intervention policies? That is, given that continued intervention was dictated by whatever process, what ensured that this intervention would not manipulate the correct variables within Vietnamese society to achieve its goals, thus leading, after continued failure at higher levels of commitment, to the American political crises of the late 1960s and early 1970s?

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *While serving in 1971 as a consultant on a Vietnam project for the U.S. Department of Defense, I had an unusual opportunity to conduct a limited test of some of the hypotheses implicit in this paper (originally written in slightly different form in 1969). Space does not permit reproducing the report of the test here, but I shall be happy to send a copy to any interested reader.* [**Addendum November 2003: reproduced following page 396 infra.**]

What we are essentially asking is, was U.S. intervention in Vietnam characteristically biased against some approaches in favor of others? And, if so, what accounted for this bias? Of the large array of potential approaches to intervention offered by military strategists, scholars of various disciplines, politicians, and government advisors, what determined which were actually converted into operational doctrines, and what justified what new bureaucracies were created for carrying them into effect? I would like to suggest that some approaches were systematically deselected, since even thinking about them entailed conflicts with fairly rigid personal values and organizational norms. Given the existence of such conflict, it is a simple step to see how these approaches were deselected at the personal level by psychological processes predicted by cognitive dissonance theory, and at the organizational level by well-understood processes through which organizations minimize conflict, by self-selection in and out, and by "the domestication of dissenters".

The following pages employ an analytic paradigm developed in an earlier study of Vietnam to account for the collapse, by 1965, of the Saigon government presence in the rural areas.[1] One of the major elements of this paradigm was called the "blank areas of consciousness" phenomenon, by which was meant that policy-makers and executors were insensitive to critical variables in the revolutionary process, while focusing their attention and resources on other variables marginally or negatively affecting their goals. These conceptual or analytical inadequacies of American doctrine and policy are here assumed as demonstrated, although the points made in the cited study obviously contradict official American doctrines of "counterinsurgency".

THE DOCTRINE GAP

Despite the importance of "counterinsurgency" in contemporary American activity abroad, and despite the tremendous amounts of money and effort that have been devoted since around 1960 to finding methods to prevent or suppress violent revolution throughout the world, we are nevertheless confronted today with a major anomaly in American doctrines of counterrevolutionary intervention. We are confronted with two competing and inconsistent approaches to the problem, embodied in competing and inconsistent bureaucracies within the American government—neither of which has proved effective in cases where their effectiveness has been most desired by policy-makers. An article titled

"The Style and Success of Counterinsurgent Foreign Aid: Some Determinants"[2] aptly summarizes the competing doctrines and the approaches they take: the literature on counterinsurgency reveals two major schools of thought. When considered separately, their lines of reasoning and the conclusions drawn seem logical and reasonable but, when placed side by side, they are seen to be in direct contradiction.

> One school argues that the most appropriate and effective approach to counterinsurgency is the welfare approach; it assumes that the rural peasant's loyalty can be won by making economic improvements in the countryside. The implication for foreign aid is that, if enough of it is pumped into a besieged country, insurgency can be eliminated. Proponents of this approach admit that military force must also be used, but they suggest that, although military power is necessary, it is not sufficient for victory.

> The other school of thought argues that welfare measures which are designed to capture popular loyalties are useless and furthermore inappropriate. "The main concern of counterinsurgency efforts should be to influence the behavior and action of the populace rather than their loyalties and attitudes" [citing Charles Wolf, Jr., "Insurgency and Counterinsurgency: New Myths and Old Realities"[3]]. Under the assumptions of this approach, nonmilitary foreign aid of the welfare variety would in no case be needed. In fact, it could logically be argued that to increase wealth in the countryside would actually serve to encourage insurgents to collect taxes from the people. All foreign aid under this approach would therefore take the form of military aid.[4]

The developmental approach finds its bureaucratic home in the Agency for International Development and other permanent agencies of the American government working in the fields of economic and technical assistance, as well as in *ad hoc* organizations such as the succession of organizations responsible for the pacification program in Vietnam. The suppressive approach finds its bureaucratic home in the military establishment, in the Central Intelligence Agency, and formerly in the "Public Safety Division" of various AID missions throughout the world. These conflicts between the approaches' doctrines and organization have made themselves apparent in congressional hearings over the proper "mix" of economic and military assistance, in completing claims on the president for support of one bureaucracy or another, and in the field at the day-to-day operational level.

The problem is more than simply a multiplicity of bureaucracies competing for scarce resources of money or power: it is that neither of

these two approaches alone, nor both in combination, represents a solution to the policy-maker's problem of revolutionary social movements displacing pro-American elites from power.

The developmental approach suffers from a number of flaws which bar it from being an appropriate counterrevolutionary strategy. First, economic development necessarily entails the destruction of existing patterns of social organization through the expansion of the money economy, urbanization and industrialization; this in turn loosens the bonds of social control existing in the traditional society and thus works against the policy-maker's goal of political stability. Second, increasing incomes may have the perverse effect of making additional resources available to a revolutionary movement. Third, economic development, through creating a class of conspicuous consumers, or through the presence of numerous foreign advisors or technicians, may via the "demonstration effect" create increasing wants—the "revolution of rising expectations"—which outrun the capacity of the economic system to satisfy. Fourth, since developmental resources will necessarily be limited in relation to demands, they may have to be concentrated in a limited number of areas, possibly creating more opponents among those neglected than friends among those "developed". This is particularly an issue where development is concentrated into "model communities" rather than into infrastructure uses of general benefit. Fifth, and perhaps most damaging to the developmental approach, is that there is little evidence to support the view that poverty is an antecedent to revolution; indeed, counterinstances abound.

If the partisans of a suppressive approach level these criticisms against development, the partisans of development have an equally devastating array of arguments with which to attack the suppression school. First, it is argued that, while development may lead to new social groups who are not bound by traditional social controls, suppression may just as well turn into repression for the benefit of a small minority, creating many opposition groups where formerly there were few and aggravating the very instability that it was intended to overcome. Second, while economic development may expand income above subsistence levels and so increase resources available to opposition movements, so may assistance to military or police organizations directly aid the opposition by government troops or officials. Third, it is argued that there is little point in giving out guns to an army that is unwilling to fight; motivation does not come from the gun itself, but from a better way of life.

Thus at times, the debate between the major approaches to counterrevolutionary intervention has assumed an unreal aspect, each side hav-

ing demolished the other's rationale for existence, while the programs and organizations of both go their merry way giving out aid and guns for lack of any apparent alternatives.

The Resolution of the Doctrine Gap

In the study of Long An province of Vietnam cited earlier, a number of crucial differences were uncovered between the Saigon government and the revolutionary movement that accounted for the collapse of the former in almost all areas of the province by 1965.[5] These involve a number of themes, of which four will serve as the "key concepts" for the use of our psychological analysis. We will attempt to show how the use of these key concepts by American analysis was avoided, though such concepts were necessary to a realistic analysis of events in Vietnam.

Social Groups In Conflict

Revolutionary analysts explicitly viewed Vietnamese society as composed of distinct groups in conflict over the distribution of values. According to communist doctrine, for example, rural society was divided into five classes. These class distinctions were the basis for decisions concerning land redistribution, promotions, the composition of leadership organs, and so on. In contrast, government officials had a one-dimensional view of society, speaking principally of "the people", without an explicit criterion for allocative decisions.

In their dialectical analysis of society, revolutionary strategists explicitly viewed society in terms of social forces motivated by class interest. Growing out of this theme of social forces was the concept of "balance of forces": the lineup of opposing social forces for, against, or indifferent to a social revolution, based upon the particular distribution of values enforced by the existing regime. In the stage of violent revolution, this balance of social forces is translated into an analogous balance of military forces. For government strategists, however, "force" was exclusively a military idea, depending only on such factors as technology, weaponry, and communications.

Redistribution

What shifted social groups from one side of the balance of force equation to the other was programs redistributing such values as wealth, income, power, and status. The revolutionary movement was careful to structure its policies such that individuals enjoyed the benefits only to the extent that they contributed to the revolutionary cause. The conservative effort did not understand the possible significance of redistributive programs, limiting its "good works" to "development" programs.

It is important to note, in contrast to the revolutionary program, that "development" did not motivate individuals to cooperate with the government. Economic development would proceed, regardless of the political victors, and as such simply was not an issue in the struggle. Moreover, such development programs as existed brought benefits to members of rural communities regardless of their behavior. Government programs were focused largely on providing a general increment of wealth or income, whereas what attracted people to the revolutionary movement was that it represented a new society in which there would be an individual resdistribution of values, including power and status, as well as material possessions.

Assimilation of Forces

Revolutionary military forces were structured differently from government forces in relation to the rural communities in whose vicinities they operated. This was true in four respects:

- the forces were of local origin;

- the forces operationalized the redistributive measures noted above;

- the incentives which motivated the forces were to some extent regulated by the local community;

- the forces were locally supplied in terms of pay, food, labor, intelligence, and so on.

Forces so structured ideally had a sympathetic popular environment in which they could move in secret while being well supplied for combat. The kind of force created or supported by U.S. military assistance, however, aggravated existing conflicts by being an unassimilable "outside force" in their area of operation, responsive to distant elites for the enforcement of the existing, highly unequal, distributive arrangements.

*The Necessary Conflict Between Native Elites
and a Successful Strategy of Counterrevolution*

In clear contrast to the actual strategy practiced in Vietnam by the American government, a successful "counterinsurgency strategy" in Vietnam would have implied:

- reallocation of wealth and income among various groups;

- restructuring of political organizations to place power in the hands of new social groups;

- restructuring of police and military organizations into more assimilated forces.

A ruling elite so inflexible in its opposition to the sharing of social values that generalized insurrection develops throughout its entire territory can hardly be expected to carry out such measures voluntarily, since its members would lose, as individuals, in every one of the changes. If this analysis is correct, then a successful strategy of counterrevolutionary intervention would necessarily have dictated an irreconcilable conflict between the United States and the Saigon government.

The Reason for the Doctrine Gap

The exact nature of the gap was a failure to introduce into official doctrines of counterrevolutionary intervention critical analytic categories and distinctions–categories and distinctions which would necessarily imply conflict between the American government and "friendly" governments, the restructuring of well-established organizations, and personal conflict as well. Millions of dollars and thousands of man years have been expended on "counterinsurgency research"; the doctrines have been changed and refined over a number of years. Has no one suggested the alternatives? It will be suggested here that there is a "method to our madness", that there are consistent pressures operating within the U.S. government for the systematic deselection of certain types of doctrines and analytic approaches. These pressures may be viewed as operating on two levels, the personal and the organizational.

One of the most intriguing theories of cognitive psychology–and the one employed here to account, in part, for this consistency in suppressing certain approaches—is the so-called "theory of cognitive dissonance". At present, the "theory" is not well integrated conceptually, but is rather a

series of hypotheses growing out of certain common-sense ideas which give consistency to a considerable variety of otherwise not obviously accountable experimental results.[6] Dissonance theory is based on the long-standing psychological observation that the human mind is intolerant of ambiguity or ambivalence.

Leon Festinger stated two "basic hypotheses" which underlie a number of later, more complex, hypotheses:[7]

(1) The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce dissonance and achieve consonance.
(2) When dissonance is present, in addition to trying to reduce it, the person will actively avoid situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance.

Dissonance reduction may proceed in a variety of ways, but its general form is pressure either to increase the number of consonant cognitions or to reduce the number of dissonant cognitions. A study by Brehm and Cohen listed the following five modes of dissonance reduction:[8]

(1) attitude change;
(2) [selective] exposure to information;
(3) [selective] recall of information;
(4) perceptual distortion;
(5) behavioral change.

A large body of experimental data has confirmed the major predictions of dissonance theory, though a number of propositions have been modified since the theory was first proposed by Festinger in 1957. One of these predictions regards the second mode listed above—the selective exposure to information. A 1964 study by Festinger presented new experimental data which indicated that the self-confidence of the subject in his or her ability to counter-argue against the dissonant information is a critical variable: self-confident individuals will actually seek out dissonant information, defeat (misperceive) its content, and thus increase consonance.[9] As we shall see, this added empirical insight coincides with a remarkable episode in American bureaucratic politics.

It is this tendency to resist the incorporation of dissonant information into one's cognitive structure which can be used to explain some of the anomalies of American intervention in Vietnam. What are the cognitive elements common to Americans in high-level bureaucratic positions which

led to this consistent suppression of important analytic categories of thinking and discussion? We can identify such a set of cognitive elements for each of the four areas outlined above.

Social Groups in Conflict

Part of the distinctive cast of American politics is the commonly shared self-image of the United States as the "new world", a world which has abandoned the whole concept of "class" by which the "old world" made invidious distinctions between men. Americans, according to the myth, judge individuals without reference to their rank in the social scale. Thus, the existing cognitive element—Americans do not judge others in class terms—is patently dissonant with the potential cognition that societies consist of more advantaged and less advantaged groups in conflict over the allocation of social values.

The potential for dissonance is enhanced by the additional fact that Marxists are the principal exponents of an analytic method relying explicitly on social groups in conflict. If one assumes (as American policy-makers presumably do), that "Marxists are evil people", then the cognition "Marxists analyze society into conflicting social groups" is clearly dissonant with the potential cognition, "I analyze society into conflicting social groups".

As a consequence of this suppression of the analytic category "social groups in conflict", American doctrinal materials characteristically refer to the populations of target countries as an undifferentiated mass. Although perfunctory reference is often made (typically in introductory or prefatory sections) to "class or ethnic systems" or "gaping rifts in the population stemming from class, ethnic, religious, or linguistic differences", the operational doctrines themselves do not include such concepts.[10]

Redistribution

Redistributive policies rely on an analysis of society into groups— for redistribution is from one social group to another. But, independent of the dissonance arising from the use of class analysis, we can also identify a set of cognitive elements pertaining to the key concept of redistribution which would be likely to lead to dissonance for American policy-makers.

For Americans, the virtue of "self-reliance", and "rewards for initiative and hard work", and the "sanctity of private property" have consistently

worked to attach a stigma to economic redistributive ideas within American society. A derogatory connotation still attaches even today to the word "socialism" in the United States.

Similarly repugnant to widely shared American values are thoughts of preferential criteria for positions of political power based on social characteristics, or thoughts that the state might order the restructuring of "non-political" status groups to permit entry to newcomers. The idea that one might establish formal statutory requirements for power positions based on status origin is contradictory to the American belief that people are judged as individuals, without reference to social background.

Official American "counterinsurgency" materials do speak of "rigid class or caste sytems which deny attainment of social position based on merit", and of a "grossly inequitable distribution of wealth and income", but, again, in a purely rhetorical manner. Nowhere are these ideas converted into operational doctrines in the way in which, for example, there are explicit and detailed doctrines for the establishment of propaganda, police, and intelligence organizations, resource control programs, and so on.[11]

Assimilation of Forces

The key concept here is that of a correspondence between force structures (military, police, administrative) and social structure. Implicit in such a correspondence is the idea that the largest tactical unit would probably be on the order of a platoon (corresponding to a rural village), that there would be no need for high mobility (since the forces would fight only in the vicinity of their own community), and that a centralized logistic and command structure would be highly inappropriate (to prevent the aggravation of social conflicts through the intrusion of nonresponsive external forces). But the foundation of conventional war organization is precisely the separability of force structure from social structure, owing to the mission of conventional forces to fight along or outside their nation's borders. This implies large tactical units, high mobility, and centralized logistic and command structures.

It is reasonable to believe that for an officer trained in a conventional military environment it would be profoundly disquieting to think that there are totally different ways to structure a military force, ways which imply not only the uselessness, but even the counterproductiveness, of much of his training and outlook. More specifically, we may conclude that

it would be highly dissonance-producing for an American colonel on a planning staff to speculate on a force structure that did not need, indeed was less effective with, large tactical units, high mobility, centralized logistic and command structures–and colonels.

As a consequence, American doctrine calls for the creation (or introduction) of conventional forces in countries threatened with revolution, resulting in low effectiveness, high force levels, and the counterproductive outcomes associated with the application of conventional forces to a revolutionary war situation.

The Necessary Conflict Between Native Elites And a Successful Strategy of Counterrevolution

The dissonant relation under this heading is obvious. The United States does not apply coercion to friendly governments. Because the etiquette of international diplomacy is relatively fixed, we may expect pressures to suppress doctrines which articulate the necessary coercion of friendly governments as a matter of state policy. It is ironic, as will be pointed out below, that this refusal to articulate such doctrines has led to the very situations in which the United States has been obliged to overthrow friendly governments in overt and highly embarassing ways.

At the organizational level there are counterpart processes to suppress the articulation of disaffection in formalized doctrines. The logic of this is apparent, since, just as the human mind must have a "consistency" principle (dissonance reduction), in order to function as an integrated whole and to adhere to decisions once made, so organizations to survive and be effective must find ways to achieve consistency and integration. This characteristic extends not only to matters of policy, but also to personal relations, and has been written of so extensively that it will be touched on only briefly here. The following remarks refer to the State Department, but they apply *a fortiori* to the military establishment.

We may identify three organizational processes relevant to our problems. First is the tendency to suppress, screen out, gloss over, water down, or "waffle" issues which would produce conflict or "psychological pain" within an organization. Smith Simpson, a retired Foreign Service officer, refers to this as the "yes-man" character of subordinate-superior relations within the Department of State, and he identifies its causes as conscious efforts at bureaucratic survival because of career policies of "up or out", efficiency reports, and periodic rotation of duties.[12]

A study by Chris Argyris notes the same phenomenon but attributes it more to the psychological imperatives of an environment of necessarily close and constant contact with others and of unpredictable policy changes and turns of events. After describing the interaction of various Foreign Service norms and values with interpersonal behavior, Argyris concludes:

> We have a powerful circular loop, a process within the Foreign Service   culture, that tends to reinforce the participants to minimize risk-taking, being open and being forthright, as well as minimizing their feelings of responsibility, and their willingness to confront conflict openly. This, in turn, tends to reinforce those who have decided to withdraw, play it safe, not make waves, and to do so both in their behavior and in their writing. Under these conditions people soon learn the survival quotient of "checking with everyone", of developing policies that upset no one, of establishing policies in such a way that the superior takes responsibility for them.[13]

A second organizational process is self-selection in and out: the failure to be recruited and the voluntary resignation of those who find it difficult to exist in an environment where one is expected not to "make waves". As Argyris notes:

> All human beings hold certain values about what are and are not effective human relationships. These values are internalized commands which tend to have a strong coercive effect on the way individuals choose to behave. Values are usually learned early in life. The interrelationship between values and system norms tends to be very high because individuals tend to choose consciously (and unconsciously) those professions and those systems whose norms are congruent with their values.

To put this another way, the values wich Argyris describes were held by the Foreign Service officer long before he entered the Foreign Service; indeed, he probably entered the service partly because its norms and his values tended to be highly consonant.[14]

The third, and perhaps the most intriguing, organizational process has been described by James Thomson[15] in his article "How could Vietnam Happen?" as "the domestication of dissenters". This conscious cultivation of dissenters is intriguing because it appears to contradict the view taken here: that there is a series of processes by which the most effective (but most dissonance-producing) doctrines of counterrevolutionary intervention are systematically suppressed. But in fact the "domestication of dissenters" corresponds precisely to the "perceptual distortion" mode of

dissonance reduction, in which the self-confident individual experiencing dissonance purposely seeks out dissonance-producing information in order to counterargue and hence to reduce dissonance. Thus, the result is not to incorporate the dissenter's views into policy in the organizational case, just as the dissonance-producing information is not incorporated into the individual's cognitive structure in the individual case. This is just the point made by Thomson:

> Despite the banishment of experts, internal doubters and dissenters did appear and persist. Yet as I watched the process, such men were effectively neutralized by a subtle dynamic: the domestication of dissenters. Such "domestication" arose out of a two-fold clubbish need: on the one hand, the dissenter's desire to stay aboard; and on the other hand, the nondissenter's conscience. Simply stated, dissent, when recognized, was made to feel at home. In the lowest scale of importance, I must confess my own considerable sense of dignity and acceptance (both vital) when my senior White House employer would refer to me as his "favorite dove". Far more significant was the case of the former Undersecretary of State, George Ball. Once Mr. Ball began to express doubts, he was warmly institutionalized: he was encouraged to become the in-house devil's advocate on Vietnam. The upshot was inevitable: the process of escalation allowed for periodic requests to Mr. Ball to speak his piece; Ball felt good, I assume (he had fought for righteousness); the others felt good (they had given a full hearing to the dovish option); and there was minimal unpleasantness.[16]

The Outcome of the Doctrine Gap

We have examined how a series of individual and organizational processes may have led to the systematic suppression among Americans of certain ways of thinking about counterrevolution. But what is left? Once the question is posed, we can see the logic of the existence of the two major approaches to "counterinsurgency" in American policy. While the two "schools" contradict each other on fundamental points, they share the common characteristic that they avoid articulating into doctrine the dissonance-producing concepts outlined above.

We might look, for example, at how the "economic development" school handles this problem. The underlying assumption of the developmental approach is that what is at stake in averting instability is an absolutely expanding real income, not a shift in position between social groups. Thus the dissonance problem is resolved by simply ignoring the importance of the redistribution of social values and asserting (or more generally assuming) the sufficiency of incremental policies. Similar

remarks apply to the suppressive school of counterrevolutionary intervention. This school avoids the articulation of dissonance-producing concepts through its assumption that suppression represents a practical alternative to redistribution.

For Vietnam, American politico-military doctrines were made to avoid concepts and approaches which could produce disillusion and disaffection. Apologists for American policies pointed to U.S. support for creation of "democratic" political structures, but when one looks at specific instances (Vietnam, Laos), one sees that the military, police, and administrative structures remained under the control of the same groups as before, so that "democracy" was largely formal. Another consequence of this dissonance-producing process was the large body of quasi-scholarly "counterinsurgency" literature accounting for communist successes by an organizational explanation.[17] Attributing communist successes to some mystical organizational superiority neatly avoided the unpleasant fact that what permits such organizations to be so effective is the high incentive offered to participants through redistributive social policies.

CONSEQUENCES

These subliminal constraints operating in the formulation of American policy lead to the potential for a vicious circle of policy failure. It may be useful to examine two cases where this chain of events has come to pass.

Wishful Thinking

"Wishful thinking" in the conduct of policy is a manifestation of perceptual distortion: an unconscious alteration in the estimate of the probabilities of various outcomes of a situation, and it is thus analogous to the distortion of the analytic process in the formation of policy described in previous sections. We can see in the history of American involvement in Laos and Vietnam how this combination of distortion of analysis and distortion of probabilities initiates the vicious circle of policy failure.

In the case of Laos, in the late 1950s, we can see the combination at work in the decision not to bring about a substantive restructuring of political, military, policy, and administrative organization—in order to remove them from the grip of traditional elites—but rather to support a buildup of the existing military and police apparatus. This was of course

against the background of the failure of such a strategy in China in the 1945-1949 period. The same pattern prevailed in Vietnam, with an additional critical factor in the American failure to push hard for anything more than a superficial land-reform program. What makes the perceptual distortion even clearer in the case of Vietnam is that a series of officially sponsored studies conducted by Michigan State University between 1955 and 1962 had warned of troubles if there were a continuation of the then-current regressive tax system, severe land-holding inequalities, political overcentralization, and plans to create a large conventional military force rather than a village-based rural constabulary.

Negative Results

In Laos, the striking Pathet Lao gains in the supplementary elections of May, 1958, despite extensive American economic and military assistance, set in motion a conflict within the Laotian government which led to the determinedly neutralist government of Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma in 1960. Similarly, in Vietnam in the context of heavy American economic and military assistance, governmental authority had virtually ceased to exist in large parts of the countryside by 1963.

The Crisis

Perhaps the most perverse consequence of the suppression of effective policies of counterrevolutionary intervention is that it may entail precisely those unacceptable actions which the suppression meant to avert from consciousness in the first place. The failure to incorporate into doctrine the need to coerce ruling elites (presumably discreetly) into executing redistributive policies ultimately may lead to a crisis situation in which the only alternatives are a humiliating withdrawal or an overt, embarrassing, and possibly bloody intervention, much more damaging to American interests and prestige than discreet and limited coercive actions would have been in an earlier phase.

In Laos "the crisis" arrived with the accession of Souvanna Phouma to the office of prime minister in August, 1960, implying, American leaders feared, the "defection" of Laos to neutralism or perhaps even communist "conquest by negotiation". The American government decided upon the elimination of the Souvanna Phouma government,[18] and this was accomplished by agents of the CIA and the "Programs Evaluation Office"

(a camouflaged military advisory group commanded by an active duty American general in civilian clothes) through logistic and planning support to right-wing General Phoumi Nosavan operating out of bases south of Vientiane.

In the case of Vietnam, "the crisis"–collapse of the government presence in large areas of the country, combined with dissension in the regime and a bitter conflict between the regime and the Buddhist Church–was also resolved (so American policy makers thought at the time) by the decision to remove the man at the top, Ngo Dinh Diem. As in Laos indigenous plotters, in close coordination with American officials, effected the removal, but it failed to halt the decline in the government's position, thus bringing on the direct intervention of American combat forces two years later.

**Projection of Responsibility fo
Failure onto the Wrong Factors**

One very interesting and well-documented area of research in dissonance theory deals with reactions to a massive disconfirmation of strongly held beliefs. The outcome predicted by dissonance theory is not rejection but a rigidifying of the beliefs, accompanied by attempts to rationalize the disconfirming evidence in terms consistent with the original beliefs.

For example, one case reported by Festinger concerned a California group called the Seekers, who predicted the arrival of flying saucers on a certain date to remove them from the earth in advance of the earth's destruction. Failure of the flying saucers to arrive on the predicted date led to initial bewilderment, but shortly thereafter to more fervent belief, greater group solidarity, explanations why the flying saucers had not arrived, and new predictions of flying saucer arrivals. Even after several successive total disconfirmations, belief did not fail for some members of the movement.[19]

The parallel process in Vietnam is apparent: it was not that advisors were ineffective, but that there were not enough advisors; it was not that bombing was ineffective, but that there was not enough bombing; it was not that development was ineffective, but that there was not enough development, and so on. Note, for example, the following newspaper report of testimony by General Westmoreland before the House Appropriations Committee on October 8, 1969:[20]

Rep.George Andrews (D., Ala.) asked the former U.S. commander in Vietnam:

"Do you think we could achieve a military victory in South Vietnam?"

"Absolutely," Westmoreland replied, "if it were the policy of this country to seek one, and if we were given the resources. The resources could be substantial and it would require some mobilization of manpower. However, I don't propose at this time that we do so."

Westmoreland told the committee that in his opinion, "if we had continued to bomb, the war would be over at this time—or would be nearly over. The enemy would have fully realized that he had nothing to gain by continuing the struggle."

The rigidification of thinking following disconfirmation may serve to freeze out potentially fruitful alternatives which were at least considered in the predisconfirmation phase, leaving only the ineffective measures which permitted the crisis to develop in the first place and completing the circle back to the "wishful thinking" phase.[21]

CONCLUSION

This paper has offered one explanation to account for a series of anomalies in American intervention in Vietnam–an explanation hypothesizing the operation of certain "subliminal" constraints. These constraints operated, if this hypothesis is correct, to suppress what would have been the most effective type of intervention. By default, what was emphasized was a variety of costly and often counterproductive forms of intervention, leading to a vicious circle of policy failure. The consequence of this process of distortion is thus a high cost to the United States: ineffective interventions, ascendance of hostile regimes, loss of international prestige and, as in Vietnam, heavy costs in human life and in American moral values as well.

Moving from the realm of diagnosis to the realm of prescription, what treatment is indicated? Are policy makers destined to stumble from misconceived intervention to misconceived intervention because of the perceptual distortions imposed by the need for dissonance reduction? The subliminal constraints discussed above are analogous to neurosis in an individual: we may thus speculate that they would be amenable to the same kind of "treatment". The method of psychoanalysis is to raise the factors in the individual personality that produce neurotic behavior to the level of consciousness. In the same way, it might be possible, by a process

of intensive study of the subliminal factors operating in policy formation, to raise them to the level of organizational consciousness, so that policy makers would be aware of the processes of systematic distortion operating within their bureaucracies. Such an attempt would by no means be assured of success. As with the neurotic individual, the first problem is to convince the subject to consult an analyst. Beyond this, such an attempt would be certain to encounter enormous resistance, ranging from indifference to hostility, just as occurs in the attempt to probe the psychic bases of individual neurotic behavior. Argyris, in a private communication to this writer, has indicated that he encountered such problems during and after his study of the State Department.

Such an effort would not be an unworthy one, nevertheless. One possible outcome of more rigorous and more comprehensive thought about intervention might be more effective intervention. Another possibility, however, is that enhanced perception of the complexities of the real world would lead to a greater appreciation of the practical limits on U.S. power.

NOTES

1. Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

2. Peter A. McGrath, "The Style and Success of Counterinsurgent Foreign Aid: Some Determinants", *Public Policy* 17 (1968): 307-308.

3. Charles Wolf, Jr., "Insurgency and Counterinsurgency: New Myths and Old Realities", Paper No. P-3132-1. Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation.

4. McGrath, "The Style and Success...."

5. Race, *War Comes to Long An*, ch. 4.

6. The major works on the subject are: Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Evanston, Ill. and White Plains, Ill.: Row Peterson, 1957), which was the first comprehensive exposition of the theory; J.W. Brehm and A.A. Cohen, *Explorations in Cognitive Dissonance* (New York: Wiley, 1962); and Leon Festinger et al., *Conflict, Decision and Dissonance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964).

7. Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, p. 3.

8. Brehm and Cohen, *Explorations in Cognitive Dissonance*, pp. 306-308.

9. Festinger et al., *Conflict, Decision and Dissonance*, p. 96. This is, of course, an overstatement, for people do change their minds. Festinger's amplified theory establishes hypotheses to predict when and with what force dissonance reduction will occur, based on such variables as the importance of the cognitions, their relative number, reality constraints, and the like.

10. See U.S. Army Special Warfare School, *Internal Defense and Internal Development Planning Guide* (December 1967) ch. 1, "Background".

11. It would do violence to history to assert that the United States has never sponsored certain kinds of redistributive measures abroad, the most salient cases being the land redistributions in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. The subject is a complex one, and it would be beyond the scope of this paper to examine the specific circumstances that brought land reform into action in these three cases. Nevertheless, I believe that they represent the exceptions that illustrate the rule. First, these programs were all related in one way or another to the settlement of World War II. Second, the destabilizing effects of a high concentration of land ownership have been spoken of so often and with such persuasiveness that it would be surprising if land reform did not occupy some place in operational doctrine. Third, the general American predisposition against redistributive social measures might be offset on this one issue by the coordinate American ideal of the "family farm". Since 1960 the United States has displayed little interest in land reform throughout the world, and this was particularly clear in Vietnam, where the United States brought heavy pressures to bear to secure the adoption of a number of measures (e.g. national assembly elections, imposition of new taxes, adherence to the bombing halt) but not to secure the adoption of land-reform legislation. The sweeping "Land to the Tiller" law, enacted in 1970, was, it must be emphasized, not an initiative of the American government, but of President Thieu. See Elizabeth Pond, "Viet Land Reform Gathers Speed", *Christian Science Monito*r (June 16, 1969).

12. Smith Simpson, *Anatomy of the State Department* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), chs. 1 and 3, and *passim*.

13. Chris Argyris, *Some Causes of Organizational Ineffectiveness within the Department of State*, Department of State Center for International Systems Research, Occasional Paper No. 2, p. 33.

14. Ibid., p. 10.

15. James C. Thomson, Jr., "How Could Vietnam Happen?" *Atlantic* (April 1968).

16. Ibid., p. 49.

17. For example, Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1966) and Charles A. Joiner, "The Organizational Theory of Revolutionary Warfare", *Vietnam Prespectives* 2, 3 (February 1967).

18. Hugh Toye, Laos: *Buffer State or Battleground* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p.153 (citing Schlesinger).

19. This is reported in Leon Festinger, Henry W. Rieckin, and Stanley Schacter, *When Prophecy Fails* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956).

20. "Resor, Westy See Vietnam Progress," *Army Times* (December 17, 1969).

21. This process is illustrated by the history of American support for land reform in Vietnam. In the words of Professor Roy Prosterman, land-law consultant to the Stanford Research Institute (an AID contractor which carried out a study of land tenure in Vietnam in 1967-1968): "Starting with clear marching orders from President Eisenhower and those at the top in 1954 that made support for land reform a matter of high priority, the working level officials allowed themselves to be backed off step by step from a workable program by the clear signs of hostility emanating from major

segments of the ruling elite. During 1960-1965, the U.S. Mission obligingly failed to have present in Vietnam even one full-time official dealing with the land-reform problem, and a plethora of rationalizations sprang up about the need to rely on the landlord class for political stability—which failed to give way even while the house of cards collapsed in the early 1960s, and the pre-eminent role of the peasants in supporting the rebellion became clear." ("Land Reform in Vietnam", *Current History* 57, 34 [December 1969]: 330-331). Commenting on a later plan put forth by the executive branch in response to congressional criticism, Prosterman said in a privately circulated paper: "The proposed land-reform plan is unworkable….I find [the proposals] so clearly repetitive of past errors that it is incomprehensible how they can be put forth at this late date….AID is about to repeat all of the basic errors of the Diem land-reform program of the late 1950s."

JEFFREY RACE is presently a Fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs, New York City, studying institutional change in Southeast Asia. He did extensive field work in Vietnam from 1965 to 1968 and has served as a consultant to the U.S. Department of Defense.

.

Addendum November 2003: The following epilogue was not published with the original article due to space limitations.

Epilogue: The Proof of the Pudding is in the Eating

In September of 1971 I was fortunate to be able to conduct a limited test of two hypotheses implicit in this paper, originally written in 1969. Stated formally these hypotheses are:

> 1. inputs employing the key concepts specified above (e.g. research models and policy proposals) will not be transmitted as action items through official American bureaucracies;

> 2. inputs concerning systematic distortions in the American policy-making process (e.g. proposals to investigate them) will not be transmitted as action items through official American bureaucracies.

The occasion for this test was a seminar on "lessons learned in pacification" held by a research organization under contract to the Advanced Research Projects Agency of the U.S. Department of Defense. In late August Dr. A telephoned me from Washington to request my participation in the seminar, explaining what a later letter confirmed in writing: "The participants should keep in mind that the basic thrust of the study is the search for major lessons of pacification in Vietnam that may have applicability in some other area at some future time." I explained to Dr. A the conclusion of my research: that it was impossible for ARPA to learn the "major lessons...that may have applicability in some other area at some future time", and that my participation in the seminar (in fact the seminar itself) was pointless: to the extent the seminar could learn from Vietnam, its findings would be ignored by ARPA.

Dr. A agreed that the bureaucracy had experienced learning difficulties, but he was optimistic in this case and encouraged my attendance. I agreed provided that two items be circulated in advance to other participants (from the Department of State, AID, the Army, and the CIA): a chapter of theoretical conclusions from my study of Long An province titled "Lessons from Long An", and a paper suggesting why the bureaucracy had such difficulty learning these lessons, titled "American Intervention Abroad: Systematic Distortions in the Policy-Making Process". Dr. A. agreed to distribute these papers to the other participants prior to the meeting.

A short time later an agenda arrive stating:

The purpose of the _____ seminars on Long An and Quang Nam Provinces is to focus on the pacification experience of U.S. advisory personnel at the local level. Accordingly, the basic format of each seminar will be to examine the U.S.-GVN [Government of Viet Nam] pacification programs in the fields of security (military, paramilitary, police, and intelligence) and development (political, economic and social) together with the role of the U.S. advisor in facilitating the achievement of pacification goals. As you will note, seminar sessions are planned around these general fields. Certain basic issues are listed under each of the main topics. They are not considered rigid agenda items, but as an indication of some discussion topics.

It concluded (my italics):

Seminar members are encouraged to bring up any additional points which they consider important.

On my arrival in Washington, General B, assisting Dr. A in this project, informed me that after reading the two papers, he and Dr. A had decided not to circulate them to the other participants because this would divert the meeting from the points they wanted to cover.

The first day's discussion concerned the relationship between development and security, and was conducted in accord with the conventional wisdom recounted at the beginning of this paper. At several times during the day I introduced evidence from my research in Vietnam indicating that each specific program under discussion (territorial security forces, police and intelligence organs, economic assistance) would be evaluated in a very different way if events in Vietnam were viewed as part of a process of social revolution over the distribution of values. No such suggestion on my part to include variables other that those dictated by the conventional wisdom was pursued by other participants. The usual response was to continue the dialogue as if I had not spoken, or to shift to a different topic.

The second day's discussion began with the subject of corruption by Vietnamese officials, and the kinds of "leverage" American officials could use to reduce it, e.g. threatening a low pacification rating if corrupt   practices continued. I suggested that this problem should be viewed in sociopolitical terms: that corruption was a consequence of political organs structured without accountability to major social groups; that the solution to corruption was a restructuring of political organs; that the approach to corruption considered thus far was, in systems analysis terms, a suboptimization; and that this had been characteristic of the entire discussion theretofore. Other examples of this preoccupation with suboptimization had been:

1. asking how Vietnamese territorial forces might best be used, with the unstated assumption of their low motivation (rather than the optimizing question: What aspects of Vietnamese society maintained by the Saigon government condemned Saigon forces to low motivation compared to their opponents?);

2. asking how best to set up local administration, with the unstated assumption of a highly centralized and nonresponsive political structure (rather than the optimizing question: How to restructure the political system to reduce popular alienation from it?);

3. asking how American advisors might best be used, given the centralized logistic and intelligence systems which made their use necessary (rather than the optimizing question: How to restructure military organs so that they could operate without advisors?).

In short, the distributive issues of political justice could not be avoided; the fact that the Saigon government was corrupt and perpetuated an oppressive social system was not an inconvenient handicap but the heart of the problem.

Finally, I suggested that the most important "lesson of pacification" in Vietnam was to learn to recognize an impossible (overdetermined) situation. If (as some participants had expressed to me privately) certain important variables could not be manipulated by the United States, and yet manipulation of these variables was essential to avoiding military disaster, then intervention made no sense, and likewise there was no sense in discussing specific programs.[32] Continued preoccupation with trivial problems (suboptimizations) could not cope with the possibility of an overdetermined situation: it is theoretically possible to optimize every subsystem, yet the resulting total system would be far from optimizing desired values. Indeed the past unwillingness to conceptualize in terms of the total system had led to disaster in Vietnam; and if the meeting was, as proclaimed, concerned with "the search for major lessons of pacification in Vietnam that may have applicability in some other area at some future time" then it was logically impossible to ignore the relationship between specific programs and the social system.

This proposal to enlarge the agenda to consider new variables in evaluating existing programs drew an immediate and heated response from Dr. A. His points were three:

1. their "charter" from ARPA did not (for reasons unspecified) permit consideration of the "lessons" I had urged be considered;[33]

2. their sole concern was with more effective implementation of existing programs, even though these were part of an ill-conceived strategy and a disastrous policy;

3. he would not permit the meeting to be diverted by "theoretical" considerations; the programs were only to be evaluated "pragmatically".[34]

Dr. A. concluded with a vehement statement that the meeting would return at *that* moment to a "pragmatic" evaluation of programs, not permitting me to speak further on these subjects.

At this point General B briefly interjected that he could summarize in two pages all the errors of American strategy and policy in Vietnam, but ARPA would not pay to be told such a thing, and so they could not permit such subjects to be discussed.

Four behaviors in this set of events are consistent with the hypotheses noted above.

1. Before seeing the two papers I submitted, Dr. A. agreed to distribute them, but after reading them he and General B decided against distribution.

2. My muted suggestions during the first day to evaluate specific programs by the criteria described in earlier pages were not pursued by other participants.

3. My explicit proposals on the second day were barred from the agenda, although they clearly fell within the written guidelines.

4. After returning to Cambridge I sent two letters, to Dr. A and to General B, outlining in more formal language the problem of subopimization in policy-making and the logical impossibility of a "pragmatic" program evaluation, avoiding "theoretical" considerations. Neither Dr. A nor General B replied.

These pages have proposed one possible scientific interpretation of American bureaucratic behavior. The literary imagination, however, seems to express the same points more pungently. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* George Orwell described with incandescent clarity these same phenomena:

Crimestop means the faculty of stopping short, as though by instinct, at the threshold of any dangerous thought. It includes the power of not grasping analogies, of failing to perceive logical errors, of misunderstanding the simplest arguments . . . and of being bored and repelled by any train of thought which is capable of leading in a heretical direction. Crimestop, in short, means protective stupidity.

Footnotes to Epilogue

32. Assuming, of course, that the paramount policy goal is to avoid disaster. An alternative explanation of the behaviors recounted here is that the bureaucratic concern was to devise certain policies and organizations for future American interventions, with the full (though unstated) awareness that it could or would lead to disaster—a matter not of concern to the organizations involved.

33. Despite the statement of the written agenda that "Seminar members are encouraged to bring up any additional points which they consider important."

34. The italicized words I distinctly recall; the rest of this epilogue is reconstructed from memory after the meeting. A written request to Dr. A for the part of the transcript containing this exchange received no reply.

————————————————