The United States committed to South Vietnam to prevent further Communist expansion into mainland Southeast Asia. Success hinged on unifying two distinct goals: the creation of legitimate political authority, state institutions, and economic stability in South Vietnam, and the destruction of internal and external military threats. To reconcile the two, the U.S. and South Vietnam turned to expert counterinsurgency: Sir Robert Thompson, a British military officer. U.S. Air Force officer and Central Intelligence Agency operative Edward Lansdale, and U.S. Army officer Tom Wilson. They, as Wilson put it, the war in South Vietnam was “in political nature as… military.” Yet though the U.S., South Vietnam, and its allies were in agreement on the end goal, their approach to state-building and defeating South Vietnam’s enemies were often divided and disconnected.

By contrast, the Communists were far more cooperative in aim and execution. North Vietnam sought to undermine U.S. and South Vietnamese forces as they traveled through Laos and Cambodia. Excepting clandestine naval aviation bombed facilities in North Vietnam, and North Vietnamese forces they traveled through Laos and Cambodia. Excepting clandestine operations across the borders, and intensive bombing campaigns carried out by the U.S. and Navy, the bulk of U.S. ground operations centered on state-building efforts and defeating the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong from within South Vietnam’s borders.

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, NVA and VC successes forced the U.S. to steadily increase its aid to South Vietnam until, finally, in 1965, the U.S. deployed its military to assume the bulk of fighting and save off collapses. U.S. political and military support helped stabilize in South Vietnam impossible so long as infiltration and insurgent continued unabated. Fused with an externally supported insurgency, the U.S. South Vietnam, and its allies simultaneously fought to eliminate the NVA and VC threats while developing South Vietnam into a stable non-Communist nation-state. Counterinsurgency’s purpose in Vietnam was to bring these goals together into a single cohesive strategy. The strategy was the paradox of destroying an enemy threat while creating a viable state. It fell to the U.S.; South Vietnam, and its allies to resolve this contradiction.

Barring a few densely populated cities, South Vietnam’s population was spread far too thin for government forces to be present everywhere at once. Most of the South’s population lived in small communities and worked in agriculture. In the south, they were found in the tet islands, further north, they lived among high mountains that rested under a tremendous jungle canopy. Much of the arable land was flooded to grow rice and tlm, which made traveling by foot treacherous and slow; South Vietnam’s extreme heat, humidity, and frequent rains made exiting messable further still. Though similar in total square miles to Oklahoma, South Vietnam’s land mass was compressed into a long and narrow state whose western border ran for more than 1800 miles.

On the other side of that border, the North Vietnamese Army and civil laborers developed the Ho Chi Minh Trail through the states of Laos and Cambodia. From this trail, they traveled west to multiple entry points in South Vietnam beyond the reach of U.S. and South Vietnamese ground forces. Their many points of entry pulled military forces away from South Vietnam’s population, forced the U.S. and South Vietnam, and its allies to defend the entirety of the nation, and spread South Vietnam’s defenders thin.

The U.S.’s geopolitical concerns limited its willingness to carry the fight beyond South Vietnam’s borders. Fearful of provoking Chinese or Soviet intervention, the U.S. deliberately restricted its ground units to South Vietnam for most of the war. To isolate the South from the North, the U.S. deployed its Navy to patrol South Vietnam’s waterways and block the North’s entry to the South through the Gulf of Tonkin and the South China Sea. Later in the war, the U.S. mined Hanoi harbor in North Vietnam. To slow North Vietnam’s access to the South on land, the U.S. Air Force and naval aviation bombed facilities in North Vietnam, and North Vietnamese forces they traveled through Laos and Cambodia. Excepting clandestine operations across the borders, and intensive bombing campaigns carried out by the U.S. Air Force and Navy, the bulk of U.S. ground operations centered on state-building efforts and defeating the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong from within South Vietnam’s borders.

A U.S. Soldier takes cover to detect enemy movement while on a long range patrol armed with his M-16 rifle. These patrols often traveled silently over great distances to ambush Viet Cong or North Vietnamese Army units. Once the battle began, U.S. forces called in fire support from helicopters, artillery, and aircraft. (Courtesy of the National Archives)

MULTIPLE OVERLAPPING EFFORTS

U.S. aims to build a stable South Vietnamese state and defeat the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong were intricately linked. At stake was far more than countering the Viet Cong insurgency. They were merely one barrier to success, yet the U.S. and South Vietnam, and its allies frequently disagreed on where the central focus in Vietnam ought to rest. Regardless of disagreement, successful counterinsurgency in Vietnam needed to remove the North Vietnamese Army threat, never taxes between North Vietnam and the Viet Cong, root out the Viet Cong, establish governance, and bind locals to a growing South Vietnamese state.

U.S. experts hoped that ousting South Vietnamese with financial logistical, and military advisory support in the mid-1950s would be enough to see the state flourish without the intervention of large U.S. military units. U.S. engagement in South Vietnam began with state-building and the war against the Viet Cong.
From 1954 to 1964, the U.S. sought to invigorate South Vietnam and extend its government’s reach throughout the countryside by providing massive financial and logistical investments backed by military advisory support. If South Vietnam was able to pacify the countryside, then the U.S. reasoned the fledgling state would transform into a viable, free, and democratic nation. Backed by growing U.S. investments, South Vietnam worked with U.S. advisors to spread government power and influence throughout the country, expand its economy and state infrastructure, and root out the Viet Cong.

**STRATEGIC HAMLET PROGRAM**

South Vietnam’s Strategic Hamlet Program was one of the most ambitious efforts to pacify the countryside and neutralize the Viet Cong insurgents. Inaugurated in 1961, its goal was to move rural populations to protected hamlets under government control. The strategic hamlets would physically and politically isolate the Viet Cong from the people.

In concept, the program would place villagers in hamlets attached to a “cordon sanitaire” network from which they would assume local defense and quick reaction forces in case of emergency. In directly tying their protection to the South Vietnamese government, the program would bind the people and politically isolate the Viet Cong from the people.

In the early war, the Territorial Forces were limited in their effectiveness. Neither the U.S. nor South Vietnam placed emphasis on training or equipping them. In fact, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam regulars, now in their own right, conditioned U.S. officials to believe the war was turning against them. In response, the South Vietnamese generals quietly notified U.S. officials they were planning a coup. In November of 1963, the U.S. government stood aside as several generals disposed President Ngô Đình Diệm. Events quickly unfolded from there and hardliners executed President Diệm and his brother, Ngô Dình Nhu.

The war in Vietnam required a firm and steady hand, and the coup failed to bring one about. From November of 1963 to June of 1965, South Vietnam experienced seven regime changes and with them, further political and military deterioration. The situation spiraled so significantly that Senator Mike Mansfield remarked in the summer of 1965, “We are no longer dealing with anyone [in Saigon] who represents anybody in a political sense. We are simply acting to prevent a collapse of the Vietnamese military forces which we have been paying for and supplying.” By this time, Army of Vietnam General Nguyễn Văn Thụ assumed leadership in 1965, South Vietnam’s dire situation necessitated direct U.S. military intervention.

**TERRITORIAL FORCES**

Territorial Forces made up about one-half of South Vietnam’s military strength during the war, and were further supplemented by Republic of Vietnam National Police. These Territorial Forces were referred to as the Regional and Popular Forces. U.S. service members called them “Ruffy Boys” for short. Territorial Forces were static in organization and specifically tasked with protecting South Vietnam’s diffuse population. At their height, Regional Forces possessed 312,000 personnel while Popular Forces possessed 230,000. The Regional Forces acted as a National Guard and protected South Vietnam’s government infrastructure and installations, while the Popular Forces served as the local militia. Popular Force teams lived and worked among the villages they defended. Theoretically, working as a part of the Strategic Hamlet programs, a Popular Force unit could call upon the Regional Forces for rapid response in the event of attack. The Territorial Forces were to be South Vietnam’s own pacification force.

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**U.S. MILITARY UNITS ARRIVE**

The South Vietnamese government’s inefficiency and corruption in the face of the Viet Cong insurgency pushed the South’s political and military leadership to a critical juncture by November of 1963. Rising instability in the South led a few South Vietnamese generals and certain U.S. military and political officials to believe the war was turning against them. In response, the South Vietnamese generals quietly notified U.S. officials they were planning a coup. In November of 1963, the U.S. government stood aside as several generals disposed President Ngô Đình Diệm. Events quickly unfolded from there and hardliners executed President Diệm and his brother, Ngô Dình Nhu.

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There is another type of warfare—new in its intensity, ancient in its origin—war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, and assassins—war by ambush instead of combat, by infiltration instead of aggression—seeking victory by evading and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him.

—President John F. Kennedy
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COUNTERINSURGENCY IN THE VIETNAM WAR

PART 3 OF 4

It was not enough merely to contain the big units. They had to be pounded with artillery and bombs and eventually brought to battle on the ground if they were not forever to remain a threat.

— General Westmoreland

When writing after the war, "Westmoreland often used analogies. He likened the Viet Cong to "termite" who were "eating away" at the "structure of the South Vietnamese government. Some distance away," he said, "hid the main forces, or big units. These were the "bully boys" who were "armed with crocodile and waiting for the propitious moment to move in and destroy the weakest." South Vietnamese state. To Westmoreland, the Viet Cong were a threat; the North Vietnamese Army were the bigger threat. He eagerly welcomed the opportunity to destroy the North Vietnamese Army's larger military units. The U.S. military fought against them.

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We often say how impressive power is. But I do not find it impressive at all. The guns and the bombs, the rockets and the warships, are all symbols of human failure. They are necessary symbols. They protect what we cherish. But they are witness to human folly. A dam built across a great river is impressive. Electrification of the countryside ... A rich harvest in a hungry land is impressive. The sight of healthy children in a classroom is impressive. These—not mighty armies—are the achievements which the American Nation believes to be impressive. And, if we are steadfast, the time may come when all other nations will also find it so.

— President Lyndon Johnson

The insurgents’ substantial presence was put on worldwide display during the Tet holiday in 1968 when the North Vietnamese commanded the Viet Cong to rise up and engage in conventional combat across South Vietnam. In a few short weeks, U.S., South Vietnam, and allied forces inflicted more than 50,000 casualties, effectively ending the Viet Cong as a fighting force. The insurgents’ substantial presence was put on worldwide display during the Tet holiday in 1968 when the North Vietnamese commanded the Viet Cong to rise up and engage in conventional combat across South Vietnam. In a few short weeks, U.S., South Vietnam, and allied forces inflicted more than 50,000 casualties, effectively ending the Viet Cong as a fighting force.

STATE-BUILDING IN SOUTH VIETNAM

South Vietnam failed to transform into a viable state. This was not for lack of resources. Between 1954 and 1960, the U.S. poured $1.5 billion dollars to pay for state-building in Vietnam—that number would equal more than $13 billion. Historian James Carter noted these efforts “consisted of installing a president, building a civil service and training bureaucrats around him, creating a domestic economy, currency, and an industrial base; building ports and airfields, hospitals, and schools, dredging canals and Goa Minh Trail and the Navy enacted a ship blockade along South Vietnam’s coast.

Yet none of these efforts isolated South Vietnam from the North, and did it bleed South Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong quick enough to neutralize their threat. The North Vietnamese Army and insurgent forces reconstituted themselves as quickly as they were destroyed, infiltration into South Vietnam continued unabated (and even increased as the war wound out), and North Vietnam maintained few war-making industrial facilities worth targeting—most of its weaponry was acquired from the Soviet Union and China.

THE WAR AGAINST THE VIET CONG

The U.S., South Vietnam, and its allies failed to destroy the Viet Cong fast enough to eliminate their threat. The Communist insurgent’s lived among the people and frequently engaged and disengaged from combat at will; their familiarity with the terrain and their grip over the local population allowed them to control their bases. For its part, South Vietnam failed to extend its political and military control over the population to root out the Viet Cong.

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The U.S., South Vietnam, and its allies failed to destroy the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong quickly enough to neutralize their threat. The North Vietnamese Army and insurgent forces reconstituted themselves as quickly as they were destroyed, infiltration into South Vietnam continued unabated (and even increased as the war wound out), and North Vietnam maintained few war-making industrial facilities worth targeting—most of its weaponry was acquired from the Soviet Union and China.

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THE LEGACIES OF VIETNAM’S PARADOX

U.S. history is rife with insurgent and counterinsurgent warfare. The nation was founded on a successful war of exhaustion to destroy Great Britain’s power over the colonies. In the 19th century, the U.S. sought to pacify Indian tribes and expand U.S. sovereignty to the West Coast. Once U.S. influence moved beyond its continental borders, the nation waged a counterinsurgent war in the Philippines, where U.S. commercial interests led the military to conduct pacification missions against the First Philippine Republic. Yet, for all of the U.S. government’s efforts to root out insurgents, they were unable to do so.

Vietnamization was the process of transferring the burden of fighting to the Vietnamese people and military. The United States withdrew its military forces, leaving the Vietnamese people and military to fight the war against the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong. The United States worked to build up the Vietnamese military, providing them with equipment and training, and eventually, the Vietnamese people and military took over the war effort.

The Vietnamese government ultimately succeeded in the war against the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong, but the cost was high. More than 50,000 American soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese died in the conflict. The war had a profound impact on both the United States and Vietnam, and its legacy continues to shape the politics and culture of both nations.

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

THE VIETNAM WAR

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