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Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U. S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam

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SUMMARY

In analyzing the long and costly U.S. entanglement in Vietnam, with its many tragic consequences, it is important to look at performance as well as policy. Whatever the wisdom of U.S. intervention on the side of South Vietnam, the resulting immense disparity in strength and resources between the two sides would have suggested a different outcome -- as indeed it did to successive U.S. administrations. Yet why has a cumulatively enormous U.S. contribution -- on top of South Vietnam's own great effort -- had such limited impact for so long? Why, almost regardless of the ultimate outcome, has U.S. intervention entailed such disproportionate costs and tragic side effects?

The reasons are many, complex, and interrelated. They include the unique and unfamiliar -- at least in U.S. experience -- conflict environment in which we became enmeshed. Particularly constraining was the sharp contrast between the adversary we faced and the ally we were supporting -- a highly motivated and ideologically disciplined regime in Hanoi and revolutionary Viet Cong apparatus versus a weak, half-formed, traditionalist regime in Saigon. We repeatedly misjudged the enemy, especially his ability to frustrate our aims by his tactics and to counterescalate at every stage -- right up to 1972. Another constraint was implicit in the incremental nature of our response, doing only what we believed minimally necessary at each stage.

But even these reasons are insufficient to explain why we did so poorly for so long. The *Pentagon Papers* show that, to a greater extent than is often realized, we recognized the nature of the operational problems we confronted in Vietnam, and that our policy was designed to overcome them. And whatever the gradualism of our response, we ended up making a cumulatively massive investment of U.S. blood and treasure in the attempt to achieve a satisfactory outcome. Yet the U.S. grossly misjudged what it could actually accomplish with the huge effort it eventually made, and thus became more and more wound up in a war it couldn't "win" the way it fought it. In this sense at least, the U.S. did stumble into a "quagmire" in Vietnam.

What must be added is how another set of real-life constraints -- largely inherent in the typical behavior patterns of the GVN and U.S. institutions involved in the conflict -- made it difficult for them to cope with an unfamiliar conflict environment and greatly influenced what they could and could not, or would and would not, do. Though by no means the whole answer, these institutional constraints helped render the U.S./GVN response to an atypical insurgency conflict unduly conventional, expensive, and slow to adapt. This added perspective -- so often missing from critical analyses of our Vietnam experience -- is essential to an understanding of why we fought the war the way we did in Vietnam. It is what is primarily addressed in this study.

The GVN's performance was even more constrained by its built-in limitations than that of the U.S. In the last analysis, perhaps the most important single reason why the U.S. achieved so little for so long in Vietnam was that it could not sufficiently revamp, or adequately substitute for, a South Vietnamese leadership, administration, and armed forces inadequate to the task. The sheer incapacity of the regimes we backed, which largely frittered away the enormous resources we gave them, may well have been the greatest single constraint on our ability to achieve the aims we set ourselves at acceptable cost.

But to a great extent the GVN's failure was a U.S. failure too. Even in hindsight it is difficult to evaluate how much our inability to move the GVN was owing to the intractable nature of the problem and how much to the way we went about it. The record shows that U.S. officials tried harder than is often realized to get Diem and his successors to deal more effectively with the threat they faced. But for many reasons we did not use vigorously the leverage over the Vietnamese leaders that our contributions gave us. We became their prisoners rather than they ours; the GVN used its weakness far more effectively as leverage on us than we used our strength to lever it.

Equally striking is the sharp discontinuity between the mixed counterinsurgency strategy which U.S. and GVN policy called for from the outset, and the overwhelmingly conventional and militarized nature of our actual response. The impact of institutional constraints is nowhere more evident than in the GVN and U.S. approach to Vietnam's

military aspects, both before and after 1965. From the outset the preponderant weight of the U.S. and GVN military in the Vietnam picture tended to dictate an overly militarized response. The institutional background of U.S. and GVN military leaders helped shape the nature of that response. Molding conventional Vietnamese armed forces in the "mirror image" of the U.S. forces which were supplying them was a natural institutional reaction. We organized, equipped, and trained the RVNAF to fight American style, the only way we knew how.

Then, when the GVN and ARVN buckled, the U.S. in effect took over the "anti-main-force war" and sought to do directly what the South Vietnamese had failed to do. In the process, as might be expected, it further Americanized the war -- on an even grander scale. Trained, equipped, and organized primarily to fight the Russians in Central Europe, U.S. forces played out this military repertoire. Instead of adapting our response to the unique circumstances of Vietnam, we fought the enemy our way -- at horrendous cost and with tragic side effects -- because we lacked the incentive and much existing capability to do otherwise.

Our costly "search-and-destroy" (or attrition) strategy -- ground and air -- was also an outgrowth of these factors. It was a natural response of American commanders deploying forces hugely superior in mobility and firepower against an elusive enemy who could not be brought to decisive battle. But his ability to control his own losses by such means as evading contact and using sanctuaries frustrated our aims, as did his ability to replace much of his losses by further recruitment and, increasingly, by infiltration from the North.

The 1965-1968 U.S. air campaign against North Vietnam, though the outgrowth of many factors, also reflects the way in which an institution will tend to play out its preferred repertoire. Airmen were eager to demonstrate that strategic bombing and interdiction would work even in a war of the Vietnam type. It was also a classic case of the availability of a capability driving us to use it -- even though we soon recognized this use as having less than optimum effect.

The critical intelligence inadequacies which have plagued the GVN/U.S. effort despite the huge resources invested in overcoming them

are another product largely of institutional factors. The massive U.S. and ARVN military intelligence empires focused mostly on that with which they were most familiar, the size and location of enemy main-force units, to the neglect of such other vital targets as the opponent's politico-military control structure. We tended to see the enemy in our own image, one reason why we repeatedly thought we were doing better than we actually were.

On the civilian side the same tendency existed for the chief U.S. agencies involved to focus primarily on that with which they were most familiar. The State Department did not often deviate from its concept of normal diplomatic dealings with a sovereign allied government, not even when that government was falling apart. Similarly, State clung to a traditionalist view of civil-military relationships, and made little effort to assert control over our military effort on political grounds -- except with respect to limits on out-of-country military operations. State's concept of institution-building in Vietnam turned largely on encouragement of American democratic forms, a kind of mirror-imaging which proved hard to apply to the conditions of Vietnam. As for the Agency for International Development, though its operations were for the most part also quite conventional, the bulk of its resources went properly into a largely successful effort to prevent the inflationary consequences of the conflict from getting out of hand.

If it is understandable why our initial Vietnam responses were ill-suited to the atypical problems we confronted, why have they changed so little over years of bitter experience? Again it seems that institutional factors play a major role. Especially significant has been institutional inertia -- the built-in reluctance of organizations to change preferred ways of functioning except slowly and incrementally. Another such factor has been the shocking lack of institutional memory, largely because of short tours for U.S. personnel. Skewed incentive patterns also increased the pressures for conformity and tended to penalize adaptive response. And there was a notable dearth of systematic analysis of performance, again mainly because of the inherent reluctance of organizations to indulge in self-examination.

In sum, in an atypical situation that cried out for innovation and adaptation, a series of institutional constraints militated against them. For the most part, as Herman Kahn has aptly put it, Vietnam has reflected a "business as usual" approach. Bureaucratic inertia and other factors powerfully inhibited the learning process. In true bureaucratic fashion, each U.S. and GVN agency preferred doing more of what it was already used to doing, rather than change accepted patterns of organization or operation. All this contributed to the failure of the huge U.S. support and advisory effort to generate an adequate GVN and RVNAF response to the challenges faced. It also helps explain why the enormous direct U.S. contribution to the war -- almost 550,000 troops at peak, thousands of aircraft, and over \$150 billion -- had such limited impact for so long.

Nor was there any integrated conflict management to pull together all the disparate aspects of the GVN/U.S. effort. By and large, the U.S. and the GVN each ran their share of the war with essentially a peacetime management structure -- in largely separate bureaucratic compartments. This had a significantly adverse impact on the prosecution of the war. Lack of any overall management structure contributed to its overmilitarization by facilitating the predominance of the GVN and U.S. military. It also contributed to the proliferation of overlapping GVN and U.S. programs -- to the point where they competed excessively for scarce resources and even got in each other's way. Meanwhile, counterinsurgency -- or pacification -- fell between stools; it was everybody's business and nobody's. Though many correctly analyzed the need for it, and it was from the outset a major component of GVN/U.S. declaratory strategy, the absence of a single agency or directing body charged with it contributed greatly to the prolonged failure to carry it out on any commensurate scale.

Last but not least, the lack of any combined command or management machinery seriously limited the ability of the Americans to exact better performance from the South Vietnamese. It deprived the U.S. of an institutional framework for exerting influence toward the solution of problems which it recognized as critical from the outset. In retrospect, the diffusion of authority and fragmentation of command that characterized

the efforts of both the GVN and the U.S. (and their interrelationship) provide yet other major reasons why it proved so hard to translate policy into practice or to convert our overwhelming superiority in men and resources into the results we sought.

Why did the U.S. and GVN settle for such conventional, diffuse, and fragmented management structures -- in strong contrast to an enemy who exerted centralized control over every facet of his activities? Institutional constraints again bulk large, including bureaucratic inertia, agency reluctance to violate the conventional dividing lines between their responsibilities, and hesitation to change the traditional relationship of civilian to military leadership. Whenever combined command was considered, the chief argument against it was essentially political -- that it would smack of colonialism. But also at issue was the natural preference of any institution to operate as an autonomous, homogeneous unit.

While U.S. performance in Vietnam is most notable for its sheer conventionality, some adaptive solutions tailored to specific problems were attempted -- and proved their utility more often than not. Unsurprisingly, such military adaptation as occurred tended to be either technological or in tactical means of utilizing new technology, e.g., helicopters or the sensors for the so-called "McNamara barrier." Perhaps the chief example of large-scale institutional innovation has been the major GVN pacification program begun belatedly in 1967. To back it, the U.S. created an integrated civil-military advisory and support organization, almost unique in the Vietnam war. The gradual expansion of the overall U.S. advisory effort was another attempt at adaptive response. Compared to any previous such U.S. effort, that in Vietnam has been unprecedented in duration, extent, and comprehensiveness.

In assessing U.S. performance in Vietnam, it is also useful to pose the question of whether there was, within the political constraints imposed by the decisionmakers, a viable alternative approach to what we actually did. One such alternative approach -- which might be termed primary emphasis on a counterinsurgency strategy -- was repeatedly advocated, and indeed was given prominence in our Vietnam policy as early as 1955. Moreover, every program that might logically be regarded

as part of a counterinsurgency-oriented strategy was experimented with at one time or another.

But there was an immense gap between this policy emphasis and what was actually done in Vietnam. Counterinsurgency (or pacification) did not fail in Vietnam. Whatever policy called for, it simply was never tried on any major scale until 1967-1971. Before 1967 the U.S. and GVN devoted very little effort and resources to pacification-type programs; these were always dwarfed by the conventional military effort. For example, the U.S. input to the highly publicized Strategic Hamlet Program was farcically small. Even after 1967, pacification remained a small tail to the very large conventional military dog.

It was never tried on a large enough scale mainly because it was not part of the institutional repertoire of the major GVN and U.S. agencies involved in Vietnam. In effect, the GVN and U.S. lacked an institutional capability to carry it out. Having no major vested interest speaking for them, pacification-type programs were overshadowed from the outset by more conventional approaches. Another constraint was the lack, for too long, of any GVN or U.S. management structure to pull together the many facets of counterinsurgency and give them proper stress.

A predominantly counterinsurgency-oriented effort would have had its best chance for success before 1964-1965, when the insurgency escalated into quasiconventional war. Paradoxically, however, a reasonably effective pacification effort did not get under way until 1967-1968, when it belatedly became a modest complement to the raging big-unit war. Indeed, it is on the role which pacification played in the Vietnam turnaround of 1969-1971 that the case for a counterinsurgency-oriented strategy must chiefly rest. Even allowing for many other contributory factors, it demonstrates that vigorous emphasis on pacification was feasible and might have led to a more satisfactory outcome -- especially if undertaken much earlier. At the least, it is hard to see how it would have worked less well, cost nearly as much, or had such tragic side effects. But in the last analysis this must remain a historical "if."

If the preceding analysis of how institutional constraints impeded adaptive response is broadly valid, then many useful lessons can be drawn from it. Among the most important is that atypical problems demand specially tailored solutions, not just the playing out of existing institutional repertoires. The policymaker must take fully into account the ability of the institutions carrying out the policy to execute it as intended. Adequate follow-through machinery at all levels is also needed, to force adaptation if necessary. Where the U.S. is supporting an enfeebled ally, effective means of stimulating optimum indigenous performance are essential.

But our Vietnam experience also shows how difficult it is to translate such general -- and in hindsight obvious -- lessons into the requisite performance. This demands a consistent, deliberate effort to offset the inevitable tendency of bureaucracies to keep doing the familiar and to adapt only slowly and incrementally. In particular, such an effort requires: (1) specially selecting flexible and imaginative conflict managers at all levels; (2) revising training and incentive systems to place a higher premium on adaptiveness instead of the "school solution"; (3) setting up autonomous ad hoc organizations to manage specially tailored programs which are not in conventional organizational repertoires; (4) creating unified management at each level where multidimensional conflict situations dictate integrated multifaceted responses; (5) assigning adequate staffs to single managers; and (6) providing them with a capability for thorough evaluation and analysis.

Vietnam also suggests a series of practical guidelines if the U.S. is to get better performance from allies it is supporting than it managed to get in Vietnam. The United States must: (1) realize that such support, however massive, cannot be effectively utilized without viable indigenous institutions capable of carrying out the programs supported; (2) avoid "mirror-imaging" as a routine response; (3) where necessary, use the leverage provided by this support to ensure that it is optimally used; (4) specially tailor any U.S. advisory effort to the needs of the situation; (5) press the local government to create whatever special interagency machinery is required to manage multifaceted programs that

cut across normal agency lines; and (6) insist on some suitable form of combined management in the event -- unlikely under the Nixon Doctrine -- that the U.S. intervenes directly in a military conflict.

If these rather generalized lessons seem like restating the obvious, one need only recall how little we actually practiced them in Vietnam. Though by no means the whole answer, our failure to take adequately into account the many institutional constraints discussed in this study helps explain why, despite such a massive effort, the U.S. and GVN achieved so little for so long. Overcoming these constraints will be no easy matter, but perhaps our bitter Vietnam experience will lead us to face up to the potential costs of failing to make the effort entailed.