

Limiting the 30 year history of South Vietnam's Armed Forces to an hour's presentation continues the injustice that has been perpetrated on those who served, but I hope the other speakers here this weekend will expand far beyond what we do here. I don't pretend any in depth knowledge of the subject on which I speak; I only want to paint the broad picture of what we discuss from a perspective that I hope will be of interest and use to all.

My original intention was to show how RVNAF has been seen, in its history, by the figures that populated that history, using as a source, the State Department Diplomatic History Foreign Relations of the United States (or FRUS), Not coincidentally, I am releasing an expanded CD version of the Indochina FRUS here today and that presentation would also demonstrate the instant expertise of a researcher with a word search capability.

However that presentation ran considerably overtime, so I have made it available as one of the files that are up on the Texas Tech Vietnam Archive website. Also, to supplement your appetite for facts, some additional materials (not from the FRUS) will be available through that web site and I will confine my remarks here to the broad outline, mentioning those additional resources as appropriate.

*In discussing RVN Armed Forces, we should be considering not only the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), but also its sister services, Air Force, Navy and Marines, the Regional and Popular Forces, the CIDG and the military formations of the National Police. From 1949 to 1975 these organizations underwent a variety of transformations and I have not been able to fully document all the permutations. I would be happy to find others here who might follow up and fill in some of the holes that my presentation may leave.

RVNAF had a brief, but checkered history. On June 14, 1949 ceremony was held in Saigon marking the effective date of Franco-Vietnamese agreement of March 8 *of that* *year. After speeches, the Vietnamese flag was hoisted to a 21-gun salute, a formal address broadcast to nation by the Emperor Bao Dai in Vietnamese, presentation of colors to a Vietnam regiment and review of troops. Guard of honor was exclusively Vietnamese including elements Caodaists, Hoa Hao, Binh Xuyen and New Catholic local defense corps. [HST 1949-539]

A year and a half later, on December 8, 1950, a French-Vietnamese military convention was signed, establishing a Vietnamese national army by transferring of certain units from French to Vietnamese control. [HST 1951-800]

But it was not until the end of 1951 that a Vietnamese General Staff was formed, and the first decrees designating specific units don't seem to have appeared until late 1953. *[Slide] A power point presentation with a more complete set of these slides and a narrative history of the ARVN divisions will be found with the supplementary material on the TTU web-site. *Please excuse the Corps boundaries on the map which didn't assume this configuration until 1 November, 1963.* [JFK Volume IV 202]

During this four year gestation, a number of arguments arose that will sound familiar to us who were there twenty years later. These included:

1) The contention that only thing preventing pacification was continued presence foreign (French) troops.

2) There was a fundamental lack of qualified officers and NCO's and its corollary concern with corruption and political favoritism in the existing officers' corps.

3) a negative comparison between the Communist forces and the Government forces
4) a lack of inspirational troop leadership exhibited by the Chief of State
5) the non-specific accusation that Vietnamese have refused to accept what military responsibility has been offered them or having accepted it have made deals with enemy (Viet-Minh) to avoid fighting.

6) The Viets are good light infantry, but no logistical capabilities, no specialization.

During this time, the battle of Dien Bien Phu took place and the Geneva Accords were signed (1954). Diem became Prime Minister, fought battles with the sects and with his Chief of Staff (Hinh) and held a referendum which successfully deposed the Emperor Bao Dai. American support, which had been passed through the French, went directly to the Vietnamese Government and American trainers superseded the French in a somewhat strained interpretation of the Geneva Accords. There was hope for and a slightly accomplished troop level reduction after Geneva.

The Army was organized into ten (light and field) divisions (in 1956) These divisions almost immediately underwent name change(s)

Mission, Training and force structure were the core of the debate during this period, Maj Gen Sam Williams Chief of MAAG did all but come to blows with the Ambassador Eldridge Durbrow over these matters.

[*Williams' replacement, McGarr, echoing his predecessor, wrote to Durbrow*] South Viet-Nam is unique in that it is the only country in the world which is forced to defend itself against a communist internal subversion action, while at the same time being subject to the militarily supportable threat of a conventional external attack from communist North Viet-Nam.

*As the insurgency resumed, ARVN was reorganized into 7 "balanced" divisions.

*Diem increased the troop ceilings with innovative formations: Civil Guard (1955), later Regional Forces; Civil Defense Corps (1956) later Popular Forces, Commando Battalions, later Rangers (1960) and the Frontier Force Vietnam (1961) which was the blueprint for the later CIDG program.

*Two more divisions were added in 1962.

After one failed coup attempt in 1962, the next one was better organized. (*which may say something about the improvement in leadership among the ARVN Officer Corps or the utility of American advisors. I'm not sure which if either apply*)

Instead of the coup resolving the security problems, the Americans became more anxious about the perceived role of ARVN, increasing the troop ceiling beyond all fiscal constraints, *another division in 1965, and increasing the size of the airborne group to a Division and establishing two task forces within the Marine Brigade and finally, the arrival of American combat troops.

The crazy quilt pattern of ARVN and local forces further proliferated as pacification concepts evolved. Police Field Force companies and RD cadre teams were been added. . . . Confusion existed as to the proper roles and missions of each component of the pacification forces. There were also a number of hangovers from earlier programs, such as auto-defense forces and Combat Youth. [LBJ Vol IV 171]

When the crisis in Laos was reaching a crescendo, Kennedy was distressed by the RLG commanders and troops who "put on track shoes and have been ready to break and run at first indication of VM presence." . . . It is no surprise that the RLG force "has no

stomach and no real capability"² for engaging VM regulars who, as they well know, defeated the French [at Dien Bien Phu]. As a result, the Kennedy administration appears to have chosen Vietnam as the place from which to make a stand, but the myth of invincibility of the VM held even in SVN until 1968.

A Briefing in February 1965 covered [familiar complaints about] GVN capabilities, efforts to improve the ineffective conscription system, army desertions, improvements in RVNAF organization and performance, the harsh treatment of prisoners, press coverage of military operations, pacification at the province level, budget problems, the economic situation, and psychological warfare [LBJ Vol II 065]

From 1965 to 1968 the question of was: Why should ARVN do the work when the Americans, refreshed annually, were there to pick up the slack?

Westmoreland position was "It is a Vietnamese war," and "they are the only ones that can win it." [LBJ Vol III 028]

All this time, ARVN was reviled. By their own people as chicken thieves, by the enemy as "puppet troops", by the Americans as malingerers.

ARVN's reputation may have been acceptance of Communist propaganda more than fact. . . . a main element of Communist strength in North and South Vietnam has been their complete confidence in ultimate victory according to their strategic plan. VC morale in SVN depends in large measure upon things going as planned. Superiority of the VC over the RVNAF and sure victory is the backbone of troop indoctrination.

A Presidential advisor visiting Vietnam noted] Everyone I talked to rated the ARVN soldier as "good, if he is well led." Of course the problem is just that--honest and devoted leadership.

[He continued that he] heard many expressions of contempt for the Popular Forces and Regional Forces, the fellows who man the triangular French-style forts around the hamlets. But most of those expressions came from American military in Saigon. Our officers in the field, . . . admire these semi-trained men for staying in the forts at all, and to mark their successes in fights with the VC, rather than their failures. [LBJ Vol V-197]

Then Came Tet. [Davidson A] . . . psychological fuse was lit during Tet that might bring a delayed explosion. It deserves attention. Both Vietnamese and American combat forces fought the enemy right out in plain view of hundreds of thousands of articulate city dwellers, the "home folks," "the fence sitters" instead of far off in the remote countryside or jungle. [LBJ Vol VI 088]

[Westmoreland said] . . . for thirty days the enemy tried to effect a coup. His plans were based on the twin assumptions that the people would rise up and join his forces and that the fighting spirit of the RVNAF was low. The record of the past thirty days has proved that the people are sound, they will fight for their freedom. The armed forces have proved that they do have fighting spirit. There were no traitors; nearly all units fought well. The enemy was misled by his own propaganda. [LBJ Vol VI 101]

[Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker] One of the clear lessons of the past few weeks has been that the Communists have given all out support in terms of military equipment and supplies for the NVA/VC and they have been able to outgun those RVNAF forces that are still equipped with our older weapons. Our modernization program for RVNAF is just beginning to make progress [LBJ Vol VI 117]

² The quotes are taken from CHMAAG ML-OPT 494, January 25; see footnote 3, Document 280.

Thieu announced plans to increase the RVNAF by 135,000 men through an expanded draft, extensive recalls to active service, and other measures to rally and invigorate the Vietnamese people. [LBJ Vol VI 134]

[Gen Abrams, DEPCOMUSMACV.]

Some other commanders have been relieved. Some province chiefs have to go. I feel good about the way the thing is going. The morale of the ARVN is high. Some have won battles, with the best of the NVA. The ARVN are promoting from the ranks. . . . We need to give regional forces and popular forces better weapons. The regional forces and popular forces stuck and fought too. Desertion rates did not increase in the regional forces and popular forces. [LBJ Vol VI 239]

The major problem we face here is that of putting the ARVN and the other South Vietnamese forces in a position to take over more of the war. Despite all the talk over the years, they still are badly in need of better leadership, better training, additional equipment and an improvement of living conditions for themselves and their families. . . .

In the wake of the enemy's defeat at Tet and in May, and in the light of the unanimous view of both United States and ARVN commanders that they are ready and able to meet whatever the enemy can present in the way of attacks, the enemy might be failing to recognize the growing strength of the Vietnamese government. . . . they [the NVA] are in a position where they must seek political ends by military means. . . . [LBJ Vol VI 302]

* Westmoreland slide

FINAL ADVICE BY GENERAL WESTMORELAND, COMUSMACV

1. The most competent and honest officers should be installed as province and district chiefs. Your best fighters and disciplinarians should be placed in command of combat troops.
2. Insure that each commander takes a personal interest in the welfare of his troops and their dependents.
3. Continuously concentrate on timely intelligence and gear your organization to react immediately thereto, both with respect to enemy military elements and political infrastructure.
4. Take extraordinary steps to deny the enemy knowledge of your plans and operations.
5. Emphasize night operations to gain the initiative on the enemy and deny his freedom of movement.
6. Appreciate that the greatest gain that can be made with minimum resources is improvement in the performance and morale of the Regional and Popular Forces.
7. Give more emphasis to administrative and logistical support organizations that are essential to sustained combat operations.
8. Training must be a continuous process with more attention given to in-place classes and exercises when the tactical situation permits. Psy war and motivational training are essential parts of this program.
9. Pacification must be supported by all elements of the Government of Vietnam, of which the RVNAF is a major part. All soldiers must realize their important role and be required to assume always a proper, friendly and helpful attitude toward the people.
10. Maintain the offensive spirit! [LBJ Vol VI 250]

140. The President: What is the quality of ARVN?

General Abrams: Good.

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The President: How many superior?

General Abrams: 4; 1 unsatisfactory, 6 satisfactory. They keep improving.

The President: Do they all have M-16's?

General Abrams: Yes.

The President: Has that made a difference?

General Abrams: Yes. They have more confidence.

General Abrams: RF and PF have M-16's. It is quite a prestige item. It's membership in club. [LBJ Vol VII 140]

Adding up the plusses and minuses, I think we can say objectively that 1968 has been a year of very substantial progress. We have seen the development of a government that is more stable and effective than any since the early days of the Diem regime. The military situation has greatly improved, the RVNAF has made significant progress in leadership, morale, and performance. [LBJ Vol VII 285]

In the estimation of [French] General De Lattre the young Vietnamese make excellent soldiers. The General termed the youth of Vietnam as being as numerous as the rice shoots—as ready for plucking and as useful. He described the Vietnamese as being very flexible politically. The same man who has been made into a Grade A parachutist in the governmental forces would make a fanatical communist guerrilla if Ho Chi Minh had reached him first.

Bill Laurie will take the story from here