

ADVICE ★★★AND★★★ SUPPORT

THE EARLY
YEARS OF THE
U.S. ARMY
IN VIETNAM
1941-1960

RONALD H.
SPECTOR



Advice and Support:

**The Early Years of the
United States Army in Vietnam
1941-1960**

**by
Ronald H. Spector**



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. . . to Those Who Served

Foreword

With the publication of this volume the United States Army Center of Military History inaugurates the United States Army in Vietnam series. This comprehensive new collection of historical studies continues the Army's attempt to record its role in major conflicts, an effort begun in the earlier United States Army in World War II and United States Army in the Korean War series. *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941–1960* is the first of three volumes that will treat the Army's effort to advise the South Vietnamese. Other titles in the series will describe combat operations; the Army's role in pacification, logistics, communications, engineer operations, medical support, and training; relations with the media; and activities at the Department of the Army level.

The present volume describes the activities of the U.S. Army in Vietnam during World War II, military advice and assistance to the French government during the immediate postwar years, and the advisory program that developed after the Geneva Agreements of 1954. Its scope ranges from high-level policy decisions to low-echelon advisory operations in the field, presented against a background of relevant military and political developments. The author enjoyed access to the official records of the period and examined personal papers, interviews, other documentary sources, and miscellaneous published materials. Useful not only as a study of military assistance but as a view of the Army as an agent of national policy, this volume is a fitting introduction to the overall study of the conflict in Vietnam.

Washington, D.C.

JAMES L. COLLINS, JR.
Brigadier General, USA
Chief of Military History

The Author

Ronald H. Spector is a graduate of Johns Hopkins University and received his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from Yale University. He served as a field historian with the U.S. Marine Corps in Vietnam during 1968 and 1969 and is a major in the Marine Corps Reserve. He was assistant professor of history at Louisiana State University from 1969 until 1971, when he joined the U.S. Army Center of Military History. During 1977–78 he was a Fulbright senior lecturer in India. He is presently associate professor of history at the University of Alabama.

Dr. Spector is the author of *Eagle Against the Sun: The American War with Japan* (The Free Press, 1985), *Admiral of the New Empire: The Life and Career of George Dewey* and *Professors of War: The Naval War College and the Development of the Naval Profession*.

Preface to the Free Press Edition

The preliminary work for this book was begun in the fall of 1971, at a time when the My Lai incident was still being discussed in the media and the Vietnam War was good for a heated argument at any party or office rap session. At that time the possibility that the Army really wished to have a comprehensive, multi-volume history of the war, or that such a work would meet with any degree of interest or even credibility on the part of the public, seemed remote indeed. Fortunately, individuals more farsighted than I had already set the work in motion. Mr. Charles B. MacDonald, then Chief of the U.S. Army Center's Current History Branch, had established a close working relationship with Army Chief of Staff General William C. Westmoreland. General Westmoreland encouraged his former subordinate commanders to write short monographs on their professional experiences in the war and to deposit their official files with the Center of Military History. General Westmoreland's own extensive papers were deposited there. With the help of Mr. Vincent Demma and Mr. Charles V.P. von Luttichau, who had been with the Vietnam project since its inception, papers of other key figures, such as Lt. General Samuel T. Williams and Lt. General John W. O'Daniel, were acquired and a series of oral history interviews begun. Thomas Scoville, who had served with the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) organization during military service in Vietnam, joined the Center in 1969 and was instrumental in obtaining important records of former CORDS leaders.

Although the Center of Military History had established an enviable reputation for high quality, accuracy, and objectivity with its *U.S. Army in World War II* series, many historians believed that the Vietnam War was too complex and controversial, the Army's role too unusual, for the Center to be able to produce anything similar for the Vietnam period. Writing in 1972, Peter Paret declared that though the official histories of World War II had been a success, "it is questionable whether they provide satisfactory models for interpreting more recent war."¹ Actually, though the operations and records of the Vietnam War were considerably different from those of World War II, the techniques, standards, and procedures established by the Center through many years of compiling the World War II histories proved extremely valuable in preparing the Vietnam series.

Since the time that this book was begun, there have been significant changes in the public's attitude toward and interest in the Vietnam conflict and in the nature of research on the war. During the 1960s most of the research and writing

¹Peter Paret, "The History of War," in Felix Gilbert and Stephen R. Graubard, *Historical Studies Today* (New York: Norton 1972), p. 379.

concerning the war was done by opponents of American involvement in Southeast Asia. By the end of the 1970s, however, most serious research on the war was being carried out by former participants in the conflict, such as Douglas Blaufarb, Douglas Kinnard, Robert Komer, Herbert Schandler, and Harry Summers, or former journalists such as Peter Braestrup, Arnold Isaacs, and Don Oberdorfer. Many, although by no means all, of these authors tended to suggest that the war might have been won, or at least brought to a more satisfactory conclusion, if certain decisions or courses of action had been taken; if air power had been properly applied, if pacification had received more attention and support, if the press and the public had been better informed about the real nature of the war, if political and military leaders had better understood the type of war and enemy they were fighting.

While many of the writers on the war in the 1960s and early 70s believed that the Communists had, in effect, won the war by 1950 or certainly by 1960, many of the later writers tended to ignore the period prior to 1963, or treat it as irrelevant. They argued that whatever mistakes the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments may have made before 1965, whatever the degree of Communist success in the South, the massive application of American power and technology after that date fundamentally transformed the situation, and, in effect, cancelled out what had gone before. The idea that the appropriate use of American power will provide a satisfactory outcome to even the most intractable problem in the Third World is a far from novel one. It was succinctly, if inelegantly, expressed in the slogan which one saw everywhere in Vietnam, "Once we have them by the balls, their hearts and minds will follow." The work presented here suggests a fundamentally different conclusion, but one which was also embodied in an expression commonly heard in Vietnam, "You can't make somethin' out of nothin'."

From the beginning of its continuing involvement in Vietnam in 1950, until 1975 the United States was continually placed in the position of supporting regimes with no popular following and consequently little chance of remaining in power. As Jeffrey Race observed in the 1960s, "... the fact that the Saigon government which the U.S. supports is corrupt and perpetuates an oppressive social order is not an inconvenient handicap but the heart of the problem."²

In the first IndoChina War the French, with their puppet Vietnamese regimes, could hope to win only through granting genuine independence to Vietnam. Yet since the French were fighting in IndoChina primarily to perpetuate their rule, they could never hope to gain popular support. From the beginning, American leaders recognized the contradiction between their aim of keeping France in the war and pressing her to move closer to real independence for Vietnam. But the alternative of a Communist-dominated Vietnam was so unacceptable that Americans focused only upon the absolute necessity of saving the French from defeat.

The tendency to see the consequences of Communist victory in Vietnam as so dire as to justify any scheme to avoid it, no matter how costly or uncertain, was a common thread running through all American efforts in Vietnam. Indeed an echo may be heard today in the U.S. government's justifications of its programs

²Jeffrey Race, "Unlearned Lessons of Vietnam," *Yale Review* LXVI, Dec. 1976, p. 165.

in the Middle East and Latin America. These programs are usually discussed in terms of the urgent need to prevent the spread of Communist influence in those regions and the unfavorable consequences for the U.S. should the Communists succeed. The possible unfavorable consequences of the programs themselves and, more important, their chances of success, are seldom noted. On the one occasion when the costs and benefits of U.S. involvement in Vietnam were carefully weighed, thanks to the skillful advocacy of General Ridgway and his staff during the Dien Bien Phu crisis, the U.S. drew back from taking the plunge.

Following the defeat and gradual withdrawal of the French, the U.S. once again found itself backing a weak and unpopular anti-communist regime led by Ngo Dinh Diem. The Joint Chiefs of Staff recognized that the Diem regime lacked a competent leader and popular support. They doubted that such a government could build a viable military force to face the Communists. Secretary of State Dulles, however, in a neat inversion of the problem, bludgeoned the military into approving a military assistance program on the assumption that a strong army would somehow produce a strong government and society.

Dulles' idea that massive aid, technical assistance, money, and American determination would somehow produce a South Vietnam able to deal with the Communist threat was to become a continuing theme in the next two decades. As one former American advisor recalled, "The illusion was that somehow better management by the Americans would substitute for bad government by the South Vietnamese."³ Every evidence of failure, every breakdown, every shortcoming of the Vietnamese government was met with added infusions of American advisors, organization charts, money, and weapons.

Added to this propensity to try to make something out of nothing was an American ignorance of Vietnamese history and society so massive and all-encompassing that two decades of federally-funded fellowships, crash language programs, television specials, and campus teach-ins made hardly a dent. In chapter 1 of the present work I attempt to show how infrequent and tenuous were American contacts with Vietnam before 1945 and what little knowledge of IndoChina there was in the U.S. even among specialists. U.S. contacts with Japan and China, however distorted by mutual suspicion, ignorance and prejudice, were rich and varied in comparison to those with Southeast Asia. As late as 1960, fewer than a dozen of the hundreds of Americans in Vietnam could carry on a conversation in Vietnamese. (By contrast, hundreds of Vietnamese had been force-fed English.)

If there is any lesson to be drawn from the unhappy tale of American involvement in Vietnam in the 1940s and 50s, it is that before the United States sets out to make something out of nothing in some other corner of the globe, American leaders might consider the historical and social factors involved and the likelihood of winning, instead of simply pondering the awful consequences of losing.

October, 1984

³William F. Long, "Counter-Insurgency: Corrupting Concept," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, April 1979, p. 60.

Preface

This book traces the origins of the Army's long, and frequently unhappy, involvement in Indochina from World War II to the end of the Eisenhower administration. In order to place that involvement in context, I have frequently found it necessary to describe at some length the evolution of overall U.S. policy toward Indochina as well. The focus of the work, however, is American military involvement. Those readers seeking a comprehensive history of U.S.-Vietnam relations, the political development of North and South Vietnam, or the international and legal ramifications of the wars in Indochina may refer to the many excellent works on those subjects cited in the footnotes and the Bibliographical Note.

While this book does not cover all aspects of American policy toward Vietnam, I believe the reader will find that this examination of the activities of Americans on the scene sheds considerable light on that policy. He will also agree, I think, that frequently U.S. actions in Vietnam were shaped far more by the beliefs and decisions of Americans in Saigon than by those in Washington.

The Vietnam War has left a legacy of controversy concerning most major American actions and decisions as well as those of our enemies and allies. I have no expectation that the conclusions reached in this account will meet with universal agreement on the part of former participants in, and students of, the conflict. Nevertheless, I hope they will agree that the events and decisions have been described fairly, accurately, and without bias toward any particular organization or individual.

In the course of research and writing of this book I have received the generous support of a large number of people. Brig. Gen. James L. Collins, Jr., Chief of Military History, was a constant source of support throughout, as were Col. John E. Jessup, Jr., and Col. James W. Ransone, successively chiefs of the center's Histories Division. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Col. James W. Dunn, the present Histories Division chief, who overcame many obstacles in the process of preparing the book for publication. Charles V. P. von Luttichau and Vincent H. Demma began this project as a monograph in the early 1960s. Mr. Demma also generously shared with me many of the documents he has gathered in connection with research for the successor volume, now in preparation. Maj. Arthur Chapa, USAR, performed much of the basic research upon which Chapter 18 is based during his tour of active duty at the center in 1978. Charles B. MacDonald, former chief of the Current History Branch (now Southeast Asia Branch), guided the first draft to comple-

tion, while his successor, Stanley L. Falk, aided and supported me in the many tasks connected with readying the book for publication.

I have also benefited greatly from the advice of the official review panel, under the chairmanship of Maurice Matloff, then chief historian, which included Vincent Demma, William J. Duiker, Col. James Dunn, Maj. Gen. Edward G. Lansdale, Charles B. MacDonald, and Robert Ross Smith.

In addition to the panel members, many other individuals generously read and commented on the manuscript. They include Emily Brown, Edmund Gullion, Robert H. Ferrell, Gerald C. Hickey, Col. James I. Muir, Lt. Gen. Samuel L. Myers, Col. Ernest P. Lasche, Jeffrey Race, Anna Rubino Schneider, General Matthew B. Ridgway, Reginald Ungern, Lt. Gen. Samuel T. Williams, Lt. Gen. Robert C. Taber, Col. Nathaniel P. Ward, and Brig. Gen. Charles A. Symroski. Lt. Gen. James M. Gavin and Lt. Gen. Thomas J. H. Trapnell also read the manuscript and remained constant sources of information and encouragement throughout the period of the book's preparation.

Like all researchers in the voluminous yet elusive records of the Vietnam conflict, I have depended heavily on the knowledge and perseverance of many capable archivists, records managers, and fellow historians in the federal government. I am especially grateful to William H. Cunliffe, John Taylor, and Edward Reese of the Military Archives Division, National Archives and Records Service, Sandra Rangel, Cathy Nicastro, Pat Dowling, and Sally Marks of the Diplomatic Branch, and Mary M. Wolfskill of the Library of Congress. Dean C. Allard of the Naval Historical Center was as usual a source of ideas and information as well as a sure guide to Navy records. Benis M. Frank of the Marine Corps Historical Center facilitated my research in the Marine Corps oral history collection. Paul L. Taborn and John H. Hatcher of the Adjutant General's Office and Theresa Farrell of the State Department took time from their many other duties as records managers to aid me in my search for relevant material. My former colleagues Robert J. Watson and Willard J. Webb of the Historical Division of the Joint Chiefs of Staff helped greatly in my research in the records of that organization.

I am also grateful to George H. Curtis and Sue Jackson of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, George Chalou and Michael Miller of the Suitland Federal Records Center, and Nancy Bressler of the Princeton University Library and to General J. Lawton Collins for permission to review portions of his personal files relating to Vietnam. Ann P. Crumpler of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Library and Carol I. Anderson of the center's library patiently bore with my many requests for assistance and always found the sometimes arcane material I required. Special thanks are due to Edward L. Morse, former special assistant to the under secretary of state, for his timely assistance at a critical moment in the preparation of the volume.

Finally, I am grateful to fellow players in the Giant Vietnam Jigsaw Puzzle Game—Robert Blum, Lt. Col. John D. Bergen, Sam Adams, Richard A. Hunt, Jeffrey J. Clarke, Neal Petersen, Oscar P. Fitzgerald, Trumbull Higgins, Joel D. Meyerson, Gary R. Hess, Jack Shulimson, George L. MacGarrigle, and William M. Hammond—for advice and criticism. My editors, Catherine A. Heerin, Barbara H. Gilbert, and Joycelyn M. Bobo, ably led by John Elsberg, Editor in Chief, displayed remarkable fortitude in coping with the idiosyncra-

sies of the author. Arthur S. Hardyman, Chief, Graphic Arts Branch, and Howell C. Brewer, Jr., respectively, planned and prepared the artwork and attempted, with little success, to improve the author's knowledge of geography. Mr. Hardyman worked with me in selecting the illustrations.

This first volume in the U.S. Army's history of the Vietnam War is dedicated to all who served in that conflict. In this connection the author wishes to recall friends and members of his unit who died in Vietnam: Christopher Bell, Kurt C. Hussmann, Timothy John O'Keefe, Thomas Rainy, and Morton Singer.

The author alone is responsible for interpretations and conclusions, as well as for any errors that may appear.

Washington, D.C., 1983

RONALD H. SPECTOR

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