

A Distinction Without A Difference: Vietnam, Sir Robert Thompson, and the Policing Failures of Vietnam

Mark J. Rothermel

University of North Carolina-Wilmington

In November 1968, Captain Bill Haneke was an army infantry officer assigned as an advisor to the Regional Forces/Police Forces, or “Ruff Puffs” as the American Army nicknamed them in the Bin Thuan Province. He and twelve other advisors supervised several hundred Ruff Puffs whose mission was to provide protection for the South Vietnamese rural villages. The Americans had no idea that this undisciplined and poorly trained organization was once part of a disciplined French colonial police organization. The same type of organization had successfully kept French colonial possessions peaceful for many decades. Haneke was not a policeman nor did the United States have a colonial or constabulary-type police force. Instead of constabulary policing, Haneke taught infantry tactics he learned from Ranger school, including “field cooking” a chicken.¹ The camp was continually under observation from the Viet Cong, including one night in September where several Ruff Puff platoons defected to the enemy. In November, as the Americans attempted to set up defensive perimeters around their compound, Captain Haneke was in the process of moving a fifty-five gallon drum of aviation fuel with a phosphorus grenade the Americans had set up when a Viet Cong sniper detonated

¹ *U.S. Army Survival Manual FM 21-76*. US Department of the Army. June 1992.

the drum and sent Haneke flying eighty feet across the field into a barbed wire fence smashing his jaw and cutting his carotid artery.²

Captain Haneke miraculously survived the explosion despite losing an eye, half his leg, a foot, and having his skull crushed.³ While medical evacuation during the American Vietnam conflict was incredibly effective, much of the war's execution was not. Why was Haneke, an Army officer, serving as an advisor to a regional police force? Instead of policing and intelligence gathering in the rural areas like a constabulary police force, Haneke and his team were teaching them infantry and survival tactics. While Captain Haneke's Vietnam service was over, the American war continued for another seven years. Unfortunately, with the decades of neglect and mismanagement of South Vietnamese policing during the Vietnam war, many of these experiences were too common.

The history of the American experience in Vietnam has chronicled many experiences like Haneke's. With scores of young patriotic men injured or killed for few results, writers began to launch stinging critiques against Vietnam before the war had even ended. Just after Haneke's horrific wounds, David Halberstam wrote *The Best and the Brightest*, a stinging rebuke of the Vietnam war policies and strategy of President Lyndon Baines Johnson and his administration. Halberstam blames the disastrous war on LBJ's micromanagement, Secretary of State Robert McNamara's absurd metrics of "casualty

² Atkinson, Richard. *The Long Gray Line: The American Journey of West Point's Class of 1966*. (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1989): 333-334.

³ Komp, Catherine. Interview with Bill Haneke. *Vietnam: Virginia Remembers*. 28 September 2017.

<https://vpm.org/news/articles/2749/veterans-survival-in-vietnam-inspires-lifetime-of-healing-and-hope>

count,” and Military Assistance Command-Vietnam (MAC-V) Commanding General William Westmoreland’s inappropriate deployment of forces. Halberstam and his fellow “Orthodox” historians contend the Americans effort to defeat the North Vietnamese Communist Forces was inevitably doomed.⁴

While other Orthodox historians of the war identified compelling and strong warfighters, there was no change to their argument of the impossibility of American success. Neil Sheehan’s *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* tells the story of enigmatic heroes like John Paul Vann, and his successful fighting in Vietnam. Sheehan, like Halberstam, had been a Saigon reporter in the early 60s, and saw years of disastrous American defeat. Despite heroic Americans like Vann, poor American leadership and corrupt South Vietnamese governance ensured American involvement sealed America’s fate.⁵

Later historians began to differentiate the successful warfighting of President Richard Nixon’s administration from the Johnson failures. With new MAC-V commander, General Creighton Abrams, the American fight became more coordinated, and as a result accomplished many of its objectives. Lewis Sorley highlights Abrams’s successes in his 1999 *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*. Sorley’s

⁴ Halberstam, David. *The Best and the Brightest*. (New York: Random House, 1969).

Other Orthodox histories include:

Fitzgerald, Frances. *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam*. (New York: Little Brown & Company, 1972).

Prados, John. *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975*. (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2009).

⁵ Sheehan, Neil. *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*, (Vintage, 1989).

work falls squarely into a new group of Vietnam historians. Sorley and other “Revisionists” argue that if the Americans had conducted the war better like Abrams and his team did, then Vietnam could have been a winnable war.⁶

Another conflict that has been compared to Vietnam is the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), in which the British defeated a Communist insurgent population in the colony. Military historians have asked for many years why the collapsing British Empire could successfully defeat a Communist insurgency in the jungles of Southeast Asia, but the much larger American army could not. As the 21st century War on Terror continued, a new focus on counterinsurgency warfare began which caused scholars to analyze past conflicts like Vietnam and compare them to Malaya.

In this scholarship, a forgotten British officer has come to the forefront. Sir Robert Thompson (1917-1992) was a Royal Air Force officer in World War II, and also served as a senior Colonial officer in the Malayan Emergency. Thompson was credited with executing the successful British counterinsurgency strategy that defeated Chin Peng’s Communist Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA). Because of his success defeating Communists in Malaya, the British government sent Thompson to Vietnam in 1961 as part of the British Advisory Mission (BRIAM) to assist the Americans and

⁶ Sorley, Lewis. *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*, (New York: Harcourt, 1999).

Other Revisionist histories include:

Lewy, Guenter. *America in Vietnam*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

Summers, Harry. *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*. (New York: Presidio Press, 1982).

Moyar, Mark. *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War 1954-1965*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem. Thompson was sent to advise his government's counterinsurgency fight against the Communist forces that had already infiltrated South Vietnam as the insurgent Viet Cong. Thompson advised the South Vietnamese government until the November 1963 coup that killed Diem.⁷ Afterwards, Thompson wrote several books on his experience, most notably the trilogy on his doctrine for defeating Communist insurgencies. In *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam*, Thompson gives his explanation for the British and Malayan people's success in defeating Chin Peng's communists, and his assessment of the early American advisory experience he observed.⁸ Thompson's follow up book, *No Exit from Vietnam* gives his insights into what he considers American missteps in Vietnam, and offers his specific suggestions as to how to defeat the North Vietnamese insurgency.⁹ His third book, *Revolutionary War in World Strategy 1945-1969*¹⁰ takes a global look at all the battles against Communist insurgents, and potential future stratagems to defeat global Communism in the Cold War.

No Exit from Vietnam piqued the interest of President Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger. They invited Thompson to Washington DC to discuss the book, and then invited him to travel to Vietnam to give Nixon and the team his assessment of the current strategy and how to improve it.

⁷ Thompson, Robert. *Make for the Hills: Memories of Far Eastern Wars*. (London: Leo Cooper, 1989): 122.

⁸ Thompson, Robert. *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam*. (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966).

⁹ Thompson, Robert. *No Exit from Vietnam*. (New York: David McKay Company, 1970).

¹⁰ Thompson, Robert. *Revolutionary War in World Strategy, 1945-1969*. (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1970).

The scholarship around Thompson tends to identify how well the United States fared using Thompson's warfighting and political strategies. For instance, George M. Brooke III's two-volume doctoral dissertation, "A Matter of Will: Sir Robert Thompson, Malaya, and the Failure of American Strategy in Vietnam," examines the South Vietnamese and American's poor execution of Thompson's hamlet relocation strategy (which Thompson considered a key success in Malaya) and America lacking the Thompsonian "will" to continue the fight.¹¹

What the scholarship on Thompson continually misses, however, is what Thompson himself considered the key to defeating the insurgency. In *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, Thompson identifies the Malay colonial police as the key to defeating the Communists. The police far outnumbered the British and Malay army forces. Even at the height of the Emergency, the British only had twenty thousand soldiers fighting in Malaya. The vast majority of the patrolling and warfighting was conducted by the police.¹²

This type of police is quite different than an American concept, however. In empires like the British or French, the "police" had a constabulary paramilitary role. A constabulary police force's mission was to protect the local population and stop unrest or possibly insurrection. As colonial powers were outnumbered compared to a local population, the constabulary was comprised mostly of native constables with some colonial leadership. A constabulary unit would gather intelligence from the local population and would conduct patrols and even get into firefights. The most important weapon the constabulary had, however, was its power to arrest. Acting on

¹¹ Brooke, George. "A Matter of Will: Sir Robert Thompson, Malaya, and the Failure of American Strategy in Vietnam." PhD. diss. (Georgetown University, 2004).

¹² Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 47-48.

intelligence, a constabulary could conduct a raid, arrest insurrectionist supporters, and separate them from further influence on a village. These ideas and techniques are not civilian policing nor are they infantry tactics. This paramilitary style organization is unique to imperial policing.¹³

The continuing question for Vietnam historians is why were the Americans ultimately unsuccessful in defeating the North Vietnamese Communist insurgency? While the Orthodox, Revisionist, and Thompsonians have their theories, they fail to understand that the failure was not because of military strategies, but instead the American lack of understanding of what a constabulary police force was. Even though Vietnam was a former French colony, the drastic upheaval from World War II, and a rushed transition to independence from France destroyed the years of colonial policing knowledge. Afterwards, the ignorance of constabulary policing from the United States exacerbated the problems with Vietnam policing and misguided training. Finally, a critical misunderstanding between the Americans and Thompson himself made the Vietnam police force useless for its critical mission which ultimately doomed the American and South Vietnamese mission.

On the morning of the 9th of March 1945, the Vichy French Colonial forces, which prior to this moment had a relatively peaceful World War II experience, awakened to a nightmare. After France surrendered to Germany in 1940, the new Vichy government still administered its colonies. French Indochina, which the French controlled for almost a

¹³ Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 19, 85.

century, continued as it had prior to the war with one exception. Its new “ally,” the Empire of Japan, was able to garrison its forces there and use its ports. All of this changed as Germany went into full retreat in Europe. Japan, in an effort to keep the offensive against the allies, executed “Operation Bright Moon.” They immediately surrounded and captured all French administrators and military to take full control of Indochina. Fifteen-thousand French and Indochinese soldiers and *Gendarmerie* (France’s colonial police force) were captured. The Japanese tortured and beheaded almost a third of its prisoners. Without weapons or reinforcements from France, those who escaped had to traverse hundreds of miles of jungle and mountains to reach China. As French diplomat Jean Sainteny lamented years later in retrospect, “[The coup] wrecked a colonial enterprise that had been in existence for 80 years.”¹⁴

French Indochina

Prior to South Vietnam’s formation, the French gained control of Indochina in a series of battles that by 1893 gave them Annam, Tonkin, Cochinchina, Cambodia, and Laos. During this time France administrated these independent protectorates through local kings or emperors. After the March 1945 coup, however, the Japanese created the “independent” Empire of Vietnam (Annam, Tonkin, Cochinchina), Kingdom of Kampuchea (Cambodia), and the Kingdom of Luang Phrabang (Laos).¹⁵

With the coup, the Japanese destroyed all of the French colonial infrastructure, most notably the *Gendarmerie*. These forces, commanded by the French, but

¹⁴ Chandler, David. “Legacies of World War II in Indochina.” *Legacies of World War II in South and East Asia*. Edited by David Koh Wee Hock, (Institute of South East Asia Studies, 2007): 24.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 27.

mostly comprising local populations, provided protection for the local population through policing. Most importantly, as Sir Robert Thompson stressed, it acted as the first line of defense against native population insurrections.¹⁶ With these vital groups gone, Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969) and his Viet Minh independence movement took advantage of their previous American support from the Office of Strategic Services and the weak emperor of Vietnam, Bao Dai, to declare independence. With the Japanese defeat and retreat from Indochina, however, France was determined to reclaim its colony.

France did not return to their colony *status quo antebellum*, however. All of the administrative state and police forces had been murdered or forced to flee. Their defeat at the hands of the Japanese also created a perception of French weakness amongst the populace. As French academic, Paul Mus, who escaped from Hanoi at the launch of the coup remarked, “French Colonialism had been blown out of history.”¹⁷ No longer were the French seen as invincible. As the French attempted to put Bao Dai in charge of Vietnam again, Ho and the Viet Minh expanded their insurrection movement. The hastily rebuilt French colonial administration could not prevent Ho’s movement from growing in popularity amongst the population. With the Haiphong incident, war began between Ho’s forces and the French and South Vietnamese forces.¹⁸

As the French searched for a way to preserve their influence in Indochina, they quickly worked to gain favor with the loyal Vietnamese forces as well as mollify the Americans (who were financially supporting the French war effort) and their anti-colonial sentiment. France signed

¹⁶ Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 85.

¹⁷ Chandler, 26.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 35.

the Elysée Accords in 1949 with South Vietnam. This agreement gave increased autonomy to the Vietnamese for self-rule. While this limited autonomy was unpopular with the Vietnamese, the one overlooked but critical issue was that the former colonial police forces were disbanded and replaced by a South Vietnamese controlled Civil Guard.¹⁹

The difference between British and French actions in 1949 could not have been more disparate. In Malaya, Sir Robert Thompson and the British forces were investing training and energy in the Malayan colonial police preparing it to suppress the growing Communist threat. Meanwhile, in Indochina, the French completely dismantled its *Gendarmerie*. Perhaps from the weakened administrative state from the coup, France ignored its previous success in suppressing insurrections in its other colonies like Algeria. Regardless of the reason, the result was catastrophic. Vietnam being forced to police itself ultimately impaired its ability to govern. After a few years, it became clear South Vietnam needed a functioning police force, and it certainly seemed logical for the country that was funding the war to provide this training. In 1955, the U.S. Vietnam policing experience began.

U.S. Army Lieutenant General Samuel T. Williams, the commander of Military Assistance Advisory Group Vietnam (MAAG-V) was apoplectic. “Whoever sold Diem this idea is nuts!” he wrote to a colleague.²⁰ President Ngo Dinh Diem, South Vietnam’s President wanted the new Civil Guard to be comprised not only of 55,000 troops, but also tanks and helicopters for “subduing riots” or to

¹⁹ Spector, Ronald H. *The United States Army in Vietnam. Advice and Support: The Early Years 1941-1960*. (Washington DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1985): 94.

²⁰ Letter, Williams to Lansdale, 1 Mar 1958; Memo of Conversations, Williams, Barrows, President Diem, 3 Dec 1957, Williams Papers. Cited in Spector.

“disperse a mob.”²¹ When a Vietnamese general was tasked with drawing up the plan for this newly reorganized Civil Guard, he simply copied U.S. Army task organizations he found. This plan of Diem’s was completely different from the one State Department Vietnam mission leader Leland Barrows and his team had devised a few years earlier. General Williams and the rest of the MAAG group assumed Diem was attempting to create his own private army.²²

The U.S. Policing Effort

After the Elysée accords, the vestiges of the French colonial forces continued in little more than name. There were 54,000 men in the Civil Guard, which was the paramilitary colonial style police force, 7000 in the municipal police, and 3500 in what was called the “Vietnam Bureau of Investigation.” No one had any idea how many *Gendarmerie* there actually were or if they were part of the Civil Guard numbers. There was also a “Self Defense Corps” originally designed as a reserve police force that had 50,000 members.²³ What these units had in numbers, they completely lacked in training and equipment. Most of the Self Defense Corps was without weapons, and what weapons they had were antiquated French rifles with little ammunition.

While the lack of equipment was troubling, the incoherence of the organization was the most problematic.

²¹ Memo of Conversations, President Diem, Ambassador Durbrow, Barrows, Gen Williams, Chan, 5 Mar 1958, Williams Papers. Cited in Spector.

²² Spector, 324-325.

²³ *Ibid*, 320.

A seasoned officer with colonial experience, like Sir Robert Thompson, probably would have recognized the vestiges of an old colonial police force. At this time, unfortunately, Thompson was fighting Chin Peng and the Malay Communists. One negative of the American anticolonial ethos was that this constabulary-type structure made little sense to Americans. In 1955, after the French had signed the Geneva Accords and left Indochina, Lieutenant General Williams and his MAAGV team focused their advisory and financial support away from the French and directly towards the newly independent Republic of Vietnam's (South Vietnam) government and military affairs. Williams's priority was preparing the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) for what many feared was the impending attack across the 17th parallel by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). As the Korean War ended only three years earlier, the Americans were convinced that with the establishment of the divided Vietnams, any Communist attack would be a conventional attack south. With Williams and Diem focused on building up the conventional ARVN forces (building up to seven divisions), there was a debate regarding the police.²⁴ With Williams focused on building up the Army, the police building was left to the State Department's Leland Barrows and his Mission to Vietnam.²⁵

Leland Burrows was a career government official who had previously served the Truman administration. From 1949-1958, he led the U.S. Mission to Vietnam.²⁶ The Mission's role was to advise and build the infrastructure of Diem's new independent government. When it came to the police force, there was some debate as to who would rebuild the current forces. Barrows and the

²⁴ Spector, 19.

²⁵ Wilson, Theodore A. Interview with Leland Barrows. *Harry S Truman Library & Museum*, January 8, 1971.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

American team insisted that the police forces needed to be organized under the Ministry of the Interior, not the Ministry of Defense.²⁷ Most likely, American distaste for colonial rule and the current intense *Gendarmerie* fighting in French Algeria led the Americans to insist on a more civilian focused form of policing. In 1955, Barrows sent a police advisory group to South Vietnam from Michigan State University.

The Michigan State team established a national police training academy and basic structure to the new Civil Guard. From 1949 to 1958, Barrows led the U.S. Mission to Vietnam. Instead of Thompsonian paramilitary tactics and intelligence gathering like the kind deployed by the Malayan Colonial Police, the Civil Guard was trained to operate like “The Pennsylvania State Police.”²⁸ Williams was skeptical of Barrows’s strategy and described them as, “Police types who do not see the big picture.”²⁹ Diem was also critical of the new Civil Guard organization. Being a civilian style police force was the last thing a volatile new country like South Vietnam needed. He vehemently stated to the Americans that Vietnam was “not Michigan.”³⁰

If Diem or Williams had somehow wrestled police control from Barrows, there is little evidence that the Vietnamese police would have been dramatically transformed into a Thompsonian-style constabulary police force. While Diem and General Williams saw the natural complement of the Civil Guard to the Defense Ministry, they did not envision a true paramilitary force. Williams simply saw armed forces as military units. Barrows’s

²⁷ Spector, 322.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 321.

²⁹ Memo of Conversations, Williams with Diem, 3 Dec 1957, Williams Papers.

³⁰ Spector, 322.

Michigan team envisioned an American police force. Neither could comprehend the organization as a constabulary force. They simply did not understand the principles of constabulary fighting that Sir Robert Thompson stressed.

There is some revisionist discussion that U.S. Air Force Colonel Edward Lansdale advocated for a “counterinsurgency force” to defeat an insurrection in the South.³¹ Lansdale, who had worked in Vietnam as a French advisor and CIA operative, had made many claims criticizing the French bombings as well as the overall MAAG strategies. His charges are not consistent with the facts, however. Lansdale claimed that counterinsurgency was not known during this time (ignoring Thompson and the Malayan Emergency). Thompson made no mention of Lansdale’s work in Vietnam, nor are there any documents suggesting there was an alternate plan to the Michigan State team that was considered. As later historic scholarship determined, the Michigan State team was also comprised of CIA personnel. The lack of coordination of policing strategies with Lansdale seems unlikely.³²

As the insurgency inside South Vietnam intensified, American and South Vietnamese policy makers realized that an impending North Vietnamese assault across the 17th parallel was not likely. The Viet Cong Communist insurgency was the largest threat to the South Vietnamese government. After the Geneva Accords in 1954, most Catholics and other non-Communist supporters of Diem moved into South Vietnam. Ho’s Viet Minh supporters in the South, however, did not move North. The southern Communists formed the Viet Cong forces to conduct guerilla operations. With this new threat, Americans

³¹ Williams, Kenneth H. *The U.S. Air Force in Southeast Asia and the Vietnam War: A Narrative Chronology*. (Washington DC: Air Force History and Museums Program, 2019): 193.

³² Hinkle, Warren, Robert Scheer, and Sol Stern. “The University on the Make (or How MSU helped Madame Nhu).” *Ramparts*, April 1966.

repurposed the Civil Guard. The Barrows initiative of civilian policing was abandoned. This adjustment, however, proved just as ineffective.

To create a force to defeat the Viet Cong, the Civil Guard and the Civil Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) were combined into a large force in 1959. Diem's desire for a private army might have been unrealistic, but it was not without merit. During this Civil Guard transition, Diem was overthrown in 1963 and killed. After the coup, the new Civil Guard was turned into the Regional Forces. The ineffective and ill-equipped Self Defense Guard became the Popular Forces. These two groups were combined into one chain of command for the RFPF. Nicknamed "Ruff Puffs" by the Americans, their mission was to fight the Viet Cong in rural areas.

With the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident, the American effort in Vietnam escalated. MAAG became MAC-V, and its new commander General William Westmoreland led the effort in the fight against the North Vietnamese. Americans began to deploy the Ruff Puffs in insurgent campaigns against the Viet Cong. After the failed Barrows civilian plan, and having total ignorance of colonial police tactics, the Americans used the Ruff Puffs like any other infantry unit. Instead of constabulary experts like Thompson, Captain Haneke and other Infantry officers were assigned to train them. These units conducted infantry patrols and learned infantry tactics from the American advisors. With no experience in constabulary-type work, the Americans trained the Ruff Puffs in what they knew: infantry tactics. While the Ruff Puffs were still separate from the ARVN organization, the manner by which they differed in mission from the ARVN or the U.S. Army was a distinction without a difference.

Besides the Americans' inability to train paramilitary forces, there was another systemic issue with the Ruff Puffs. Because of Diem and General Williams's priority to defend South Vietnam from a Korean war-style attack across the DMZ, all of South Vietnam's best men joined the army.³³ The civilian ministries and police forces received the second-tier men, and units could not avoid Communist infiltration. After years of disappointing results and an inability to pacify the South's rural areas, the Ruff Puffs were combined into the ARVN organization in 1970.³⁴

Whether creating a Michigan police force, or a group of mediocre infantrymen, there was little chance of success for creating a true Thompsonian counterinsurgency force. Both the MAAG-V and State Department Mission had no comprehension of what the French colonial forces provided as the system had been dismantled years before. Diem's ideas of a more militaristic guard, ideas probably poorly translated from Thompson, were met with suspicion and lack of understanding. The binary decisions of civilian or military for the police forces provided no flexibility, which was essential in disrupting the counterinsurgency. The American anticolonial tradition and lack of constabulary forces simply did not allow the Americans a chance at success.

Sir Robert Thompson had been advising and observing American actions in Vietnam for several years. Thompson was fascinated by American strategies in South Vietnam and how they did not result in success. As he stressed the

³³ Thompson, *No Exit from Vietnam*, 111.

³⁴ Clarke, Jeffrey. *United States Army in Vietnam. Advice and Support: The Final Years 1965-1973*. (Washington DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1988): 37.

need for intelligence, one general remarked to him, “Let’s go out and kill some Viet Cong, and then we can worry about intelligence!”³⁵ The Americans were not afraid to try new things and spend money. Expenditures in Vietnam were over ten times what the British spent in Malaya. Yet the results were not leading to success. This reality finally led to Sir Robert Thompson’s infamous charge: “The trouble with you Americans is that whenever you double the effort you somehow manage to square the error.”³⁶

Sir Robert Thompson

Sir Robert Thompson began his career in the Royal Air Force at Cambridge and was commissioned as a Reserve officer in 1936. As he studied and prepared for the impending war with Germany, he chose a career in the Colonial Service which required an extra year of schooling at Oxford. The Colonial Service assigned young Robert Thompson to the British colony of Malaya. He was then sent to Macao, a Portuguese colony, to learn Cantonese. As the British began fighting Germany in 1940, Thompson and other Colonial Service students were to continue their Chinese studies in Hong Kong. As Japanese bombers began attacking Hong Kong on December 8th, Pearl Harbor was attacked simultaneously on the other side of the dateline. The British war now had a second front in the Pacific.³⁷ With some beginning Cantonese proficiency, and travel passes signed by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek, Thompson and other cadets were forced to evade and fight their way into mainland China. After connecting with

³⁵ Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 85.

³⁶ Thompson, *No Exit from Vietnam*. 89.

³⁷ Thompson, *Make for the Hills*, 1-2.

Chinese guerrilla and former Hong Kong police forces, Thompson was able to join the Chindit operations as a Royal Air Force officer serving under legendary British officer Orde Wingate. Thompson participated in Burma's irregular operations and was an instrumental part of the Chindit team that helped disrupt Japanese operations in Burma.³⁸

After World War II, Thompson resumed his Colonial Services career in Malaya. During the war, the Japanese occupied Malaya. The Chinese Malaysians, along with some British fighters, spent the war fighting the Japanese in the jungles. The Chinese formed the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) to defeat the Japanese, and after the war, the British reestablished their colonial rule over Malaya. Despite the disarming and disbanding of the MPAJA, many Chinese Malaysians, inspired by Mao Zedong's Communist movement were motivated to rebel against British rule. The MPAJA's wartime leader, Chin Peng, took control of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) and began violent attacks against Malays and British residents. In 1948, after the murders of several rubber plantation European managers, the British Malay government declared a State of Emergency, and the 12-year conflict known as The Malayan Emergency officially began.³⁹

The MCP successfully attacked key British targets, and even assassinated the Malayan High Commissioner Henry Gurney. Ultimately, the British were able to defeat the insurgency through the leadership of General Sir Gerald Templer. Thompson, who had worked implementing the counterinsurgency strategy, cataloged all of the successful key metrics the British achieved. By 1960, the MCP had

³⁸ Thompson, *Make for the Hills*, 19-41.

³⁹ Thompson, Robert. "Emergency in Malaya." *War in Peace: Conventional and Guerilla Warfare since 1945*. Edited by Sir Robert Thompson and John Keegan, (Orbis Publishing, 1981): 81.

surrendered, and the Malayan Emergency was an impressive victory in counterinsurgency for Great Britain.⁴⁰

Thompson detailed the important factors that led to the success of the British counterinsurgency, many of which were surprising to conventional military strategists. For instance, he argued that the guerilla fighters were not the important factor to defeat in a counterinsurgency. Instead, determining and interrupting the underground networks of the population was paramount.⁴¹ To achieve this goal, Thompson stressed gaining proper intelligence. He also determined that the key fighters in Malaya were the police force, not the military. When the Malay police would patrol an area and gather intelligence on potential MCP insurgents, the police could then arrest those individuals. While removing an insurgent from battle was effective, the more important achievement, Thompson argued, was keeping the local population safe from violence. With a minimal British troop deployment, they were able to determine when they wanted to engage the MCP and did not aimlessly meander through the jungle searching for the enemy. With their proper intelligence and patrols gathered from the Malay police, British patrols pushed the MCP away from the rural population eliminating opportunities for Communists to gain rural control.⁴²

Another important strategy Thompson noted, was the concentration of friendly forces. Rural villages away from police support were targets for the MCP. Thompson and the British created a strategy of moving entire villages into more protected areas. While this tactic seemed extreme, most villages were only moved around three miles

⁴⁰ Thompson, "Emergency in Malaya," 83.

⁴¹ Thompson *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 30.

⁴² *Ibid.* 16.

from their previous location, and the new areas were concentrated together for better police protection.⁴³ An additional strategy that Thompson considered important, was the targeting of key insurgent infrastructure by ambushing supply routes. For Thompson, preventing insurgent resupply missions was more important than winning any insurgent battle.⁴⁴

Arguably the most important point in counterinsurgency, Thompson stressed, was patience. The insurgents had to understand that the government forces were not going to leave quickly. In Malaya, Thompson noted that the British resolve brought Chin Peng to the negotiating table with the government. When Chin Peng realized the British, and after 1958, the independent Malay government, were not going to stop their counterinsurgency campaign, the Emergency ended with the MCP's defeat.⁴⁵ Because of Thompson's success in Malaya, British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan sent Thompson and the BRIAM team to South Vietnam as an advisor to President Diem and the Americans.⁴⁶ Thompson's counsel should have been a perfect complement to the fiercely anti-Communist Diem and the well-funded and equipped U.S. military.

When Thompson began to advise the South Vietnamese government, he attempted to implement the hamlet resettlement plan for Diem's government. Despite his advice, it was a disaster. Rather than concentrating villages and only slightly moving them, the Diem government moved hamlets far away from their previous locations and also spread them too far from each other.⁴⁷ By ignoring the key parts of the Thompson strategy (concentrating friendly hamlets, and keeping villages near

⁴³ Thompson *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 121-123.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 32.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 16.

⁴⁶ Thompson, *Make for the Hills*, 81.

⁴⁷ Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 130-132.

their original location), the South Vietnamese made the villagers less safe and impossible to patrol. Another unique issue to Vietnam compared to Malaya was Vietnam's lack of political stability. Despite the American financial and political support, Diem's regime grew less effective and ultimately was overthrown in 1963. The Americans took over responsibility of the Vietnam war in 1964, and the BRIAM team returned to England.⁴⁸

With the Americans in command of the war effort, Thompson's concern about "squaring the error" became reality. Hamlet resettlements were even more haphazard and spread out when done by the US Marines.⁴⁹ Instead of having a light footprint of foreign troops like the British in Malaya, Americans deployed over 200,000 Americans to fight the Vietnamese communists. Having no constabulary intelligence gathering like Thompson had stressed, the Americans instead implemented a "search and destroy" strategy which simply allowed the NVA to choose where and when to fight.⁵⁰ By 1968, the Americans were in an endless war of attrition on the ground supported in the air by a largely ineffective bombing campaign.

After General Creighton Abrams became commander of MAC-V in June 1968, the American strategy changed dramatically. As new ambassador to South Vietnam, Ellsworth Bunker noted that instead of discussing the "political war" or "air war," there became "one war." The Barrows/Stewart fights from the 1950s were over.⁵¹ The larger "search and destroy" missions were replaced with an emphasis on holding territory. Thompson, noting the changes from England, wrote his book *No Exit*

⁴⁸ Thompson *Make for the Hills*, 149.

⁴⁹ Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 138.

⁵⁰ Thompson, *No Exit from Vietnam*, 88.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 145.

from Vietnam celebrating the new Abrams strategy. This book attracted the attention of the new Nixon administration National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger. Kissinger, impressed with Thompson's success in Malaya defeating Communists, invited him to Washington to discuss the U.S. strategy.⁵² After the meeting, Thompson was invited to further meetings regarding Vietnam withdrawals. He was also invited to tour Vietnam and give his assessment on the ground.

Sir Robert Thompson assembled a team of advisors and travelled to Vietnam in February and March of 1971 to give his assessment of the American war effort. It is noteworthy that Thompson on his trip to Vietnam did not bring other British soldiers. Instead, he brought his colleagues from Malaya who administered the winning police force work. Sir Richard Catling, W. L. R. Carbonell, J. H. Hindmarsh, and D. S. Palmer were all experts and leaders in British Colonial policing who were part of the Malayan police force during the Emergency. After the trip, Thompson and his team produced a detailed report on what would be needed for the South Vietnamese to be successful in Vietnam. His focus was on reforming the National Police.⁵³

In Thompson's March 1971 *Report on the National Police Republic of Vietnam*, Thompson evaluated the state of the National Police and offered 157 specific suggestions for reforms. What Thompson and his team most identified was the National Police's intelligence gathering failure.⁵⁴ In Malaya, Thompson noted the police were the main intelligence gatherers. It was imperative that the police could identify insurgent supporters, arrest, and remove them from the population. Thompson proposed a regional

⁵² The President's Remarks to Sir Robert Thompson Concerning the Vietnam Situation, The White House, 17 October 1969.

⁵³ *Report on the National Police Republic of Vietnam*. Sir Robert Thompson and Advisory Team, March 1971.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 17.

police control reorganization to ensure they patrolled the rural areas properly to keep insurgents away from the hamlets. Interestingly, in the National Police history, Thompson ignored all of the Michigan State work, and only briefly discussed the original French organization.⁵⁵ He gave specific instructions for how the Police should assist the Armed Forces and gather “intelligence related to subversion and terrorism.”⁵⁶

For as much of an expert as Thompson was in counterinsurgency, it is noteworthy that he did not relate how much the former French Indochina colonial police force had strayed from its original mission. He only briefly mentioned the “administrative and training problems” that the force faced.⁵⁷ Perhaps it was an effort not to upset the Americans as he was only an invited guest. He worked hard to ingratiate himself to Abrams by dining and creating a personal relationship with him before offering his criticism, so he may have seen no need to discuss in detail the previous American folly.⁵⁸

The report was analyzed by the Americans. A month later (April 1971), Ellsworth Bunker and the State Department team provided a detailed response to Thompson’s report.⁵⁹ Bunker’s memo evaluated the report based on several priorities of timing and feasibility:

- A: Is and should be implemented
- B: Is and should be implemented in part
- C: Should be implemented
- D: Should be implemented, but infeasible
- E: Should not be implemented

⁵⁵ *Report on the National Police Republic of Vietnam*, 11.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 15.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 5.

⁵⁸ Thompson, *Make for the Hills*. 158-159.

⁵⁹ *Report on the National Police Republic of Vietnam*.

As well as four different categories for timing of implementation: 1) Currently, 2) Short Term (Within one year), 3) Mid Term (Over one year), and 4) Indeterminant.⁶⁰ Items 15-36 of Thompson's suggestions, which related directly to the police strategic recommendation for patrolling and intelligence gathering for the war effort, were grouped together, and rated with a very optimistic "B" and "Short Term." The comments, however, suggested a less optimistic tone:

"These organizational concepts reflect British Colonial influences. They do not adequately consider the background of Vietnamese concepts, the residue of French Colonial influence, and approximately 15 years of U.S. influence on police matters."⁶¹

In a few sentences of bureaucratic jargon, the American Vietnam War was perfectly encapsulated. An assembly line of errors had been created: First, the French abandoned Vietnam and left behind a dysfunctional colonial police force, then the Americans attempted to create something unnecessary and not adaptable to the country, followed by an advisor missing the fundamental problems. Thompson repeatedly touted the Malayan police as the key to defeating the MCP, yet years later he never mentioned the American and South Vietnamese failure in the police development.⁶²

Both the Orthodox and Revisionist schools have filled volumes in libraries criticizing American mistakes in Vietnam. Whether on policy or strategic level, finding errors in judgement or execution has never been difficult.

⁶⁰ *Report on the National Police Republic of Vietnam*, 2.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 3.

⁶² Thompson, Robert. "The War in Vietnam," Edward Rozek Cold War Lectures, 1975.

Sorley and the Revisionist school have emphasized the successes of the American war in Vietnam after 1968 and suggested that if the Abrams strategy had been pursued more consistently, they could have prevailed in the conflict. Attempting to understand which ignored plan or strategy might have produced better results, or which advisor or strategy should not have been ignored is a perpetual challenge. For every Sir Robert Thompson, who advised two governments and had successfully executed a counterinsurgency strategy, there are others like Colonel Edward Lansdale who claim they were the *vox clematis* despite having limited experience in counterinsurgency warfare. For any losing effort, there is no shortage of people who retrospectively had the solution.

Sir Robert Thompson is different, however. He had successfully defeated a Communist insurgency. He had tangible plans and results that winning governments could follow to defeat an enemy. His scholarship on counterinsurgency and five principles for success against an insurgency are still studied today.⁶³ British military historian Alexander Alderson recently evaluated the British strategies in Iraq using Thompsonian doctrine to measure efficacy.⁶⁴ Other Vietnam scholarship measures the efficacy of hamlet resettlement or political will. There is no question that the Thompsonian school will continue to flourish. Thompson was prolific in writing doctrine, was willing to share his ideas, and had no specific axes to grind. As a foreign advisor and not a member of the South Vietnamese or U.S. governments, his voice remains one of

⁶³ Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 50-62.

⁶⁴ Alderson, Alexander. "The Validity of British Army Counterinsurgency Doctrine After the War in Iraq 2003-2009" PhD. diss. (Cranfield University, 2009).

the most objective regarding evaluation of the Vietnam war effort.

Clearly, Thompson is not without fault regarding Vietnam strategy, however. His assessment of the contemporary state of the police force did not directly address the use of the police as infantry units which he specifically criticized in *Defeating Communist Insurgency*.⁶⁵ Thompson brought an entire team of colonial police experts to South Vietnam to evaluate the National Police, yet he chose not to address the American dismantling of a constabulary model directly. After attempting to create an American-style police force, the Regional Forces had been trained and converted into infantry units. Americans simply saw the forces as a binary: a unit is either a military force or a civilian police force. Even the leader of the Territorial Forces General in Vietnam, General Ngo Quang Truong, considered the force he commanded a military force. In his 1981 after action report, he discussed military battles, and his report rarely mentioned any sort of policing. It reflected the total conversion from the Barrows or the previous *gendarmerie* model into an infantry unit.⁶⁶

Increased scholarship today notes the constabulary skills deficit in modern American peacekeeping. National security expert, Robert Perito discusses in *Where is the Lone Ranger When We Need Him? America's Search for a Postconflict Stability Force*⁶⁷ America's need to create a Thompsonian-type constabulary force to ensure a previously hostile foreign country can be pacified after the fight. Thompson's work will continue to be the framework

⁶⁵ Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 103-110.

⁶⁶ Ngo, Quang Truong, *Territorial Forces*. (Washington DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1981).

⁶⁷ Perito, Robert, *Where is the Lone Ranger When We Need Him? America's Search for a Postconflict Stability Force*. (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2004).

for governments and historians to determine the correct way to implement future peacekeeping strategies.

Hopefully, this paper will create further scholarship regarding the breakdown of proper policing in Vietnam. Thompsonian scholarship continues to be an important area of focus on the Vietnam war, and in evaluating past and future counterinsurgency warfare. His principles establish an effective benchmark for evaluating this type of warfare. It is important, however, to not create a hagiographic portrayal of Thompson as regards his Vietnam advisory work. The failure to establish a proper constabulary police force was from a confluence of abandonment by the French, American misapplication of home-style policing, and the South Vietnamese being at the mercy of ineffective instruction. Thompson deserves criticism as well for not turning the focus of the counterinsurgency on proper deployment of the Vietnamese police. The casualties of these policing mistakes were monumental and tragic. Captain Haneke and many other misdirected soldiers were irrevocably hurt by this catastrophic strategic failure.

Sir Robert Thompson addresses in his books that policing was the British key to success in the Malayan Emergency. If Thompson's doctrine is the fundamental teachings for counterinsurgency warfare, as most scholars who have studied him argue, then the focus for Vietnam Thompsonian historians should be on the policing failures in the Vietnam war, and why Thompson himself seemed to ignore his own advice. Rather than using Thompson as merely a framework for counterinsurgency evaluation, military scholars should determine why the man who developed the doctrine of counterinsurgency decided to dismiss the central tenets in the years that followed. Constabulary policing in counterinsurgency is clearly not just infantry patrolling or peacekeeping. Until scholars

address the differences, future Vietnam scholarship may offer new theories on America's failure, but these theories will continue to have distinctions without differences.