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## **Just Good Advice: The American Advisors in the Vietnam War**

Anna Rikki Nelson  
*University of Southern Mississippi*

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Just Good Advice: The American Advisors in the  
Vietnam War

By

Anna Rikki Nelson

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Honors College of  
The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirement for the Degree of  
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Approved by

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Andrew Wiest, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of History

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Kyle F. Zelner, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of History and Chair, Department of History

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David R. Davies, Dean  
Honors College

## Abstract

This thesis uses government documents and post-combat interviews to explore the effectiveness of the American Advisory effort during the Vietnam War. This study focuses on the war in 1963 and 1964 before American ground forces entered the war and the advisory effort changed to include supporting American forces. By analyzing the reasons given by each advisor for his successes and failures, the American military could learn why the initial advisory effort failed, and why some American advisors could not work well with their counterparts in the Vietnamese leadership.

Chapter One examines the advisory effort as a whole before and during the service of the advisors in the Post-Combat Interview Project conducted by Dr. John G. Westover in 1963. The chapter discusses who the advisors were, what kind of training they received, and the historiography of the advisory effort in Vietnam. Chapter Two focuses on the Post-Combat Interview Project. Through interviews with four advisors in 1964, one can see the obstacles to the advisory effort and the varied results that each advisor achieved through his work. The interviews present the reader with the diversity within the advisory effort. Chapter Three looks at several government documents published during and after the advisory effort. These documents reveal the American government's opinion on why the advisory effort failed to create a powerful and stable Republic of Vietnam and what actions should have been taken to ensure success in this endeavor. The project ultimately finds that the problems mentioned by the advisors and by the studies done by the Department and Defense and the Department of State did inhibit the advisory effort, but the greatest challenge was the difference between the ARVN and US militaries.

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## Introduction

American advisors worked with the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, or ARVN, during the Vietnam War. These American advisors helped shape the ARVN, and often established how the American military viewed the ARVN, the military leadership in Vietnam, and the Republic of Vietnam (also known as South Vietnam) itself. With a successful initial advisory effort, before 1965, the United States could have left the war in Vietnam to the ARVN, and only played an auxiliary role. Why did the initial advisory effort fail? The advisors themselves blamed the ARVN and political corruption within the government of South Vietnam. In studies conducted by the Department of Defense in 1964, 1965, and 1971, the American government blamed the advisors for not overcoming language and cultural barriers in Vietnam. Both the advisors and the studies were right, but they revealed an even greater problem with the advisory effort. The greatest obstacle to the advisory effort in Vietnam was the difference between the ARVN and the US military. Prior to 1965, the United States wanted to build the ARVN in its image, but the ARVN was (and remained) a political entity. Promotion, supplies, orders, and missions were given and executed with a political goal. The ARVN was a tool for the political corruption that prevailed in the South Vietnamese government in Saigon. The difficulties for the advisor to form a relationship with the Vietnamese counterpart antagonized the already existing political problem within the ARVN.

In order for a relationship to form between the advisor and his Vietnamese counterpart, the American had to be open to Vietnamese customs and values, and he had to learn the Vietnamese language. The advisors and their Vietnamese counterparts had to have time to forge a relationship as well. The United States did not enter Vietnam with

the intention to be there for a long time; the US wanted to fight a fast, offensive war with superior firepower, but the ARVN and South Vietnam fought a defensive war that lasted for years. The United States wanted its involvement in Vietnam to be quick, but a successful advisory effort required time. Without the time and the consideration for the advisors to learn Vietnamese culture and language, the advisors could not form a relationship with the Vietnamese leadership, and as a result, could not overcome the differences or the political corruption in South Vietnam.



## I. The Advisors

The years 1963 and 1964 were the most important years for the American advisory effort in the Vietnam War. These were the final days of an advisory effort geared towards making the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) a force that could sustain itself without direct military assistance from the United States. Prior to the United States' direct military involvement in 1965, the advisors worked to train the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) from a small, local force with French colonial ties into a national military that could combat a Communist insurgency and win a civil war within its own country.

France was the first to receive American aid in Vietnam beginning in the early 1950s, during the French Indochina Wars. The American advisory effort transformed in 1954 after the United Nations passed the Geneva Accords, and this new advisory effort was tasked to the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), established in 1950.<sup>1</sup> After nearly a decade of involvement with the ARVN, the United States Department of Defense sent Dr. John G. Westover to interview American advisors for the Post-Combat Interview Project in 1964. The goal of the project was to ascertain whether ten years of effort had netted a positive result – an ARVN that was more capable of standing on its own. The Project, though, revealed the same problems still existed within the advisory effort that had first plagued the French and had also long haunted the Americans during their military engagement in Vietnam. According to the interviews conducted by Dr. Westover, the problems were quite basic -- advisors could not overcome language and

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support, The Early Years: The US Army in Vietnam*, (Washington D.C.: United States Army Center of Military History, 1985), 116.

cultural differences in order to form the needed relationships with the Vietnamese leadership.

The timing of the Project was one of great importance, because the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution had presented President Lyndon B. Johnson with the option of using military force in Vietnam in late 1964.<sup>2</sup> General William Westmoreland, Commander of MACV, urged direct involvement over a reliance on advisors and the ARVN, and believed superior American firepower and troop mobility would easily defeat both the North Vietnamese Army and the Communist insurgency of the Vietcong. The Post Combat Interview Project would give the U.S. advisors their own chance to weigh in on whether or not the ARVN was capable of survival or whether the war would require direct U.S. involvement.<sup>3</sup>

After-combat reports from 1963 and 1964 from American Advisors Captain Donald S. Cunningham, Major William H. Miller, Major David S. Grange, and Major Edward R. Coleman stand as representative of the Project's overall conclusions and, in general, revealed that the American advisors and their Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) units failed to complete their mission of eradicating the Communist insurgency in South Vietnam in order to better achieve a safe and secure state in South Vietnam. These advisors predicted the failure of the American and South Vietnamese war effort if the advisory effort was not better equipped with the necessary language abilities and

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Wiest, *The Vietnam War 1956 - 1975*, (Oxford, UK: Osprey, 2002), 27.

<sup>3</sup> Spector, *Advice and Support, The Early Years*, 123.

cultural understandings in order to better form strong, trusting relationships with their Vietnamese counterparts in the ARVN.<sup>4</sup>

A secure and independent South Vietnam would have made a large American presence in Vietnam unnecessary in 1965. However, the post-combat interviews used in this research, which took place in 1963 and 1964, indicate a series of problems with the advisory effort as it existed before 1965. Additional studies of the advisory effort undertaken by the Research and Development Corporation (RAND) in 1965 and by the Pentagon in 1968, sadly indicate that the problems with the training of the advisors first identified by the Post Combat Interview Project were never addressed, and ultimately crippled the ARVN at a time when a strong military force defending the Republic of Vietnam would have been most effective.

The war in Vietnam relied heavily on an advisory effort rather than a full-scale commitment of U.S. combat troops to South Vietnam. Early in the conflict, Americans did not want to fight the war for the South Vietnamese; the goal was to equip the South Vietnamese to fight their own war against a Communist insurgency and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam). These intentions changed in 1965 with the United States deploying more Americans into combat in Vietnam, but in 1963 and 1964 (the two important years for the advisors), the United States wanted South Vietnam to fight the war with their soldiers, who were trained by American advisors.<sup>5</sup>

The French created the precursor to ARVN, the Vietnamese National Army (VNA), in 1950 to combat the Communist Viet Minh forces during the French Indochina

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. John G. Westover, *Combat Leadership: A Problem for Vietnam*, (Presentation, Colloquium on Political Strategy, University of South Carolina, December 8, 1965.)

<sup>5</sup> Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years*, 106.

Wars. The VNA consisted of forces drawn from France's colonial holdings, and began as a relatively small force with little public support. The Vietnamese people viewed the VNA as an extension of their French oppressors and contrary to Vietnamese nationalism. The ARVN, backed by the United States after the Geneva Accords, was seen by many as the revival of the VNA, suffered the same lack of public support.<sup>6</sup> Between 1960 and 1963, the ARVN saw a rapid and vast expansion of 150,000 men in seven infantry divisions, one airborne brigade, a ranger force of 9,000 men, and three Marine battalions to 219,000 men in four corps, nine divisions, one airborne brigade, one special forces group, three separate regiments, one territorial regiment, eighty-six Ranger companies, and nineteen separate battalions with associated support units.<sup>7</sup>

The command for the ARVN was based in Saigon, and these ARVN leaders had political ties to the Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem. These political ties led to the ARVN leadership using the ARVN as a tool for the advancement of their political careers.<sup>8</sup> Political corruption plagued the ARVN throughout its existence, and led to several *coups d'états* that contributed to the instability of the South Vietnamese government, and consequently, the security of the state. Under the guidance of the United States, the ARVN suffered from similar problems as the VNA had under the French. The United States carved the ARVN in its image as a western-style military force. The image of the ARVN as a westernized military made it appear less Vietnamese, and therefore, the ARVN lacked the support of the Vietnamese people because it lacked the semblance of a

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN*, (New York University Press, 2008), 20.

<sup>7</sup> Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, 34-35.

<sup>8</sup> Wiest, *The Vietnam War 1956 - 1975*, 21.

national force.<sup>9</sup> Regardless, many Vietnamese men felt moved to fight for their country, and the ARVN peaked at nearly one million men.<sup>10</sup>

As the ARVN rapidly expanded between 1960 and 1963, American advisors helped train the new soldiers and the new leadership. The task of creating a Vietnamese military that could support the fledgling government excited many young officers in the American military. Originally, the 342 men of the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) were responsible for the advisement effort, but the challenging task quickly attracted the best and brightest officers of the American military. As the ARVN expanded and the advisory effort grew, American advisors were present at nearly every level of the Vietnamese military. General Westmoreland served as the chief American Advisor to the South Vietnamese military, advisors such as the men interviewed by Dr. Westover served in combat with Vietnamese forces, and advisors trained the Vietnamese soldiers in ARVN schools and training centers. Civilian advisors also aided in Pacification, the policy of supporting the civilian population with needed supplies and security in order for the insurgency to no longer have recruiting access to the civilians, through strengthening security and bolstering economic growth of different regions within Vietnam.<sup>11</sup> By 1963, the advisory effort grew to a vast and complex entity that changed from person to person and from region to region.<sup>12</sup>

While advisors served at every level of the military, the most important job fell to the advisor battalion staff because these men worked the closest with the ARVN, and

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<sup>9</sup> Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, 33.

<sup>10</sup> Wiest, *The Vietnam War 1956 - 1975*, 21.

<sup>11</sup> United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam, *Handbook for Military Support of Pacification*, (San Francisco, United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam, February 1968), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, 84.

they often saw combat with Vietnamese soldiers in missions executed by the ARVN. The staff consisted of three US Army personnel: a captain, sergeant, and first lieutenant. A chain of command existed within the battalion staff and through the corps-level advisory team.

The tactical advisor also acted as combat air support and artillery support coordinator. Firepower became an enormous force multiplier for the ARVN, and the tactical advisors controlled South Vietnamese access to firepower. The ARVN could win battles by outgunning the North Vietnamese Army or the Viet Cong, but the American advisor controlled the access to that firepower.<sup>13</sup> The success of a mission often depended on the relationship between the advisor and his Vietnamese counterpart, and an advisor achieving a strong relationship relied on his ability to connect with his Vietnamese counterpart. Language, cultural barriers, and the limited time the advisor spent with his Vietnamese unit (one year, at the most) often hindered the construction of a strong relationship between the American advisor and the Vietnamese counterpart<sup>14</sup>

Though advisement was critical to the war effort before 1965, the advisors received varying levels of training. Most advisors trained at the US Army Special Warfare School in Fort Bragg for six weeks. The courses taught counter-insurgency, background information on Vietnam, and a cursory lesson on the highly complex and tonal Vietnamese language. Some graduates of the training at Fort Bragg continued their language education at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California.<sup>15</sup>

According to Dr. Andrew Wiest's *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, most of the advisors

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<sup>13</sup> Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, 85.

<sup>14</sup> Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, 86.

<sup>15</sup> Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, 86.

heavily relied on English due to the fact that many of their Vietnamese counterparts were fluent in English. Though the advisors had a unifying language with the Vietnamese leadership, the limited exposure to Vietnamese culture and language often left the advisors unable to form camaraderie with their Vietnamese counterparts.<sup>16</sup> In the case of the advisors Dr. Westover interviewed for the Post-Combat Interview Project, the inability to form a strong relationship with their Vietnamese counterparts led to the rejection of advice the men offered and a feeling of distrust between the American and Vietnamese forces.

Dr. John Westover's Post-Combat Interview Project provides a personal voice to the historiography of the Vietnam War. The interviews coincide and agree with the research on the advisory effort. The advisors in Dr. Westover's interviews listed the same complaints that were mentioned in the research done by Dr. Andrew Wiest in his book, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, by Ronald H. Spector in his book, *Advice and Support: The Early Years*, and by Jeffrey J. Clarke in his book *Advice and Support: The Final Years*. Wiest, Spector, and Clarke agree that language and cultural differences made the formation of a relationship between advisors and Vietnamese leadership difficult.

Dr. Wiest described the American-only access to firepower as the "trump card"<sup>17</sup> for many advisors. Firepower in the form of air strikes was critical to success in military engagements, and American advisors and commanders alone were to access this firepower for the coalition. Major Miller and Captain Cunningham in Dr. Westover's interviews indicated an over-reliance on this firepower in the ARVN, and Major Miller

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<sup>16</sup> Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, 86.

<sup>17</sup> Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, 85.

mentioned that, perhaps, the fact that Americans only had access to a deciding factor in many military engagements led to the alienation of ARVN leaders.

ARVN leaders feeling alienated and over-powered by Americans added to the cultural concept of “saving face” hindering the advisory effort. Many American advisors had difficulty coping with the cultural concept of “saving face.” The advisors in the Post Combat Interview Project referenced “saving face” several times as hindering the formation of a strong relationship and honest communication between the advisors and the Vietnamese leadership. Advisors could not overcome this important cultural concept, but they had to learn how to live and function within these cultural rules. “Saving face” meant that Vietnamese men in leadership positions risked losing their reputation as a leader if the leaders worked with American advisors. For some Vietnamese leaders (such as Major May and Major Miller), so much as agreeing with an American risked the reputation of his Vietnamese counterpart.<sup>18</sup>

In *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, the greatest challenge to the advisory effort before and after 1965 was not the difference between the languages or cultures, but the difference between the war fought by the ARVN and the war fought by the United States. For Americans in Vietnam, the war could be ended quickly with the overwhelming force of industrial American firepower. The deployment period for an American advisor consisted of one year, and if that advisor saw extensive amount of combat, the deployment was shortened to six months. Some of the advisors entered Vietnam expecting to fight a fast, offensive war, but the ARVN fought a totally different war. Though the war would only last six to twelve months for an American, many of the

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<sup>18</sup> Dr. John G. Westover, *Combat Leadership: A Problem for Vietnam*, (Presentation, Colloquium on Political Strategy, University of South Carolina, December 8, 1965.)



Vietnamese leaders who worked with American advisors saw combat for years. The war to the ARVN soldier was a constant struggle for self-preservation.<sup>19</sup>

Wiest mentioned in *Vietnam's Forgotten Army* that the advisors in Vietnam received some language training, but not nearly enough to master a language as complex as Vietnamese.<sup>20</sup> The new interviews from Westover with the advisors support Wiest's assertion, and many of the advisors who were interviewed commented on problems making connections through languages (and they all reported a reliance on English rather than Vietnamese). One of the advisors, Major Miller, spoke French, but seeing as, in some cases, the Vietnamese people viewed the French as colonial oppressors, this may have hurt Miller's efforts more than it helped.<sup>21</sup>

The advisors interviewed by Dr. Westover served in 1963, and these interviews provided insight to a critical year in the advisory effort. The year 1963 saw the height of the advisory effort attempting to execute the goal of building a strong South Vietnamese force. After 1964, the goal of the advisory effort changed to help the ARVN act as support to American forces. The same problems of language and cultural barriers persisted after 1964, as evidenced by the fact that these problems are mentioned in studies conducted by the Pentagon in 1968 and by the Department of Defense in 1965. Jeffrey G. Clarke also listed these same problems in his book *Advice and Support: The Final Years*. The ARVN succeeded as a supporting force to American forces after the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, but if the goal of the advisory effort from 1960 to 1964 had been successful, the United States would have aided in the creation of a military force

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<sup>19</sup> Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, 86.

<sup>20</sup> Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, 86.

<sup>21</sup> Westover, *Combat Leadership*, 1965.

that could have secured South Vietnam against the Communist insurgency, and then American forces in Vietnam would not have been necessary in 1965.

## II. The Advisors

In 1964, the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) conducted the Post-Combat Interview Project to gather “critical encounter data” for the research and development of assistance programs in support of government engagements of conflict in rural areas.<sup>22</sup> The intention of the study was to locate problems within the advisory effort in the field and suggest solutions for these problems. The intention was also to better understand the operational conditions for advisors serving in Vietnam. The data for this study was gathered through debriefings, narratives, correspondence, reports, and post-combat interviews. This research analyzes solely the post-combat interviews produced by the IDA.<sup>23</sup>

Dr. John G. Westover collected the data for the interview project from April 17 to June 4, 1964. Post-combat interviews were accounts of events given by the person who experienced the events. Westover believed that interviews were most reliable if performed at least one month after the event in question. Every interview, like every individual, differed; no two interviews were alike. The interviews also, ideally, were performed as near to the site of the event in question. Company and lower field grade officers were the best subjects for interview projects because they were usually closely associated with combat events, had broad knowledge of the tactical situation, training for observation and evaluation, participation in decision, and these men could easily

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<sup>22</sup> Institute for Defense Analyses, *Post-Combat Interview Project*, Dr. John G. Westover, Washington DC, Institute for Defense Analyses, 14 April 1964.

<sup>23</sup> Institute for Defense Analyses, *Post-Combat Interview Project*, 14 April 1964.

communicate their ideas. Maps were also utilized in the interviews, but are not included in this research.<sup>24</sup>

Four majors and two captains were included in the interview project. All six were combat advisors during their tours of service.<sup>25</sup> This study focuses on the interviews gathered from four men. Major William H. Miller, infantry branch, arrived at Song Be, Vietnam, on 24 January 1963, and he advised the 32nd Regiment. Major Miller had the second responsibility of advising the ranger companies attached to his regiment, and within two weeks of arrival in Vietnam, he was the senior American officer on his assigned mission.<sup>26</sup> Captain Donald S. Cunningham arrived in Vietnam in December of 1963, and was appointed advisor to the 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion, 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 5<sup>th</sup> ARVN Infantry Division.<sup>27</sup> Major David E. Grange Jr. served in Vietnam approximately one year, returning to the United States in early April of 1964. Major Grange was appointed Special Forces advisory officer, and his primary responsibilities were to supervise the testing of experimental supplies, equipment, and material, and to train ARVN research and development personnel.<sup>28</sup> Lastly, Major Edward R. Coleman, artillery section, was corps training officer and corps ranger officer in Vietnam in 1963 for an unspecified amount of time. Major Coleman worked directly for Colonel Wilbur

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<sup>24</sup> Institute for Defense Analyses, *Post-Combat Interview Project*, 14 April 1964.

<sup>25</sup> Institute for Defense Analyses, *Post-Combat Interview Project*, 14 April 1964.

<sup>26</sup> Major William H. Miller, interviewed by Dr. John G. Westover, *Post-Combat Interview Project*, April 23, 1964.

<sup>27</sup> Captain Donald S. Cunningham, interviewed by Dr. John G. Westover, *Post-Combat Interview Project*, May 5, 1964.

<sup>28</sup> Major David E. Grange Jr. served in Vietnam approximately one year, returning early in April of 1964.

Wilson, III corps military assistance advisor.<sup>29</sup> These four men provide a small sample of the advisory effort.

While these interviews provide information that gives some insight to the advisory effort, using such a small sample in a large research project creates several problems. The advisory effort in Vietnam was vast and ever changing, meaning that the experience of one advisor could not be comparable to the experience of others. Also, the advisors in question all served from the same area within South Vietnam. The experiences of these advisors are only relatable to those who also served in their area. Regardless, research from Wiest, Spector, and Clarke show that the experiences of these advisors were not atypical and the relationships between these men and their Vietnamese counterparts were similar to the experiences of other advisors. The advisors all lamented similar problems: language barriers, cultural differences, and the difference in goals between the ARVN and the US. Finally, the results from each advisor were as contradictory and confusing as the advisory effort itself, and, therefore, a true testament to the complexity of the advisory effort in Vietnam overall.

In an interview on April 21, 1964, Major William H. Miller lamented the language barrier between the Americans and the Vietnamese. While Major Miller could speak French and most of his unit spoke English, orders were given in Vietnamese and often had to be reinterpreted into English by Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) personnel. Major Miller had a good relationship with his unit, but the language barrier created tension and a feeling of being “outsiders” among the Americans. In 1963, Miller’s division participated in the coup that overthrew the Diem regime. Major Miller

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<sup>29</sup> Major Edward R. Coleman, interviewed by Dr. John G. Westover, Post-Combat Interview Project, April 29, 1964.

inquired to the nature of the operation as orders were being drawn, and he was told that the division was clearing a plantation area. Miller noted that the use of eight battalions for such a menial task seemed uneconomical, but he was then assigned orders that prevented him from further inquiring into the operation. The next morning, the division rushed to Saigon, and Miller was quickly informed of the events that were about to transpire. The American command was caught by surprise by the violent coup. Miller stated, "All of the very detailed and effective planning by the 5<sup>th</sup> Division had been carried out in the presence of the MAAG officers without their being aware of its purpose." By communicating in Vietnamese, the commanders of the 5<sup>th</sup> Division were able to completely keep their American advisors ignorant of their plans.<sup>30</sup>

Major Miller experienced the language barrier a second time during an operation in which the 5th Division participated at the end of December 1963 in the Binh Duong Province. Because the operation was a sweep-and-search mission in Viet Cong territory, contact with the VC was expected. At 1200 hours, the leading elements of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Ranger Battalion fell under scattered small-arms fire from either a squad or a platoon of Viet Cong. The VC immediately fell back to the rear. The deployed companies reached a well-prepared defense of the Viet Cong 106<sup>th</sup> Battalion. The commander then realized that his men could not overcome the frontal fire from the defense, and he passed his reserve company to the rear of his command and committed it on his own right flank. The

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<sup>30</sup> Major William H. Miller, interviewed by Dr. John G. Westover, Post-Combat Interview Project, April 23, 1964.

battalion did not find a flank of the Viet Cong that it could envelop, and the VC did not withdraw or reduce fire. The situation had devolved into a standoff.<sup>31</sup>

Communications between the battalion and the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, which controlled the battalion, were excellent, and an L-19 observer aircraft flew overhead and observed the entire action. The pilot was an American and his artillery observer Vietnamese. The plane radioed a description of the firefight as it developed. All the Vietnamese units and all the advisors were monitoring the situation and in communication with each other. Major Miller was in contact with the pilot, the Ranger MAAG, and the MAAG officer with the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry. The Ranger commander called for artillery, which was delivered by a platoon of 155mm howitzers located near Dau Tieng. In the dense jungle, the VC and the South Vietnamese positions were unclear, making the observer unsure of where to place his fire.<sup>32</sup>

The battalion was closely engaged with the Viet Cong, but after reconnoitering the area, Major Miller found a unique opportunity in this firefight to deliver a powerful blow to the VC—an excellent Drop Zone (DZ) to the rear of the Viet Cong. Miller noted five possibilities that could have resulted in victory: two Marine battalions were available to aggressively move to reinforce the rangers; an infantry company in armored personnel carriers could have moved from the vicinity of Ben Cat and fought within an hour; different divisional units could have moved to the combat area in one to four hours; helicopters on the division airstrip of Bien Hoa could have advanced an infantry company to the battle within 22 minutes; or the division could have requested a General Reserve

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<sup>31</sup> Major William H. Miller, Interviewed by Dr. John G. Westover, Post-Combat Interview Project, April 21, 1964.

<sup>32</sup> Major Miller, Interviewed by Dr. Westover, April 21, 1964.

Parachute Battalion be dropped in the DZ behind the Viet Cong, which could have touched down in less than an hour.<sup>33</sup>

With all of these possibilities, Major May, the Vietnamese Acting Division Commander, chose to remain inactive. May responded to Miller's insistence for action that it should instead come from the commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry since the 32<sup>nd</sup> was the 8<sup>th</sup> infantry commander's responsibility. After Miller prodded further, the chief of staff made a telephone call to force the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry to move. Major Miller could not follow the conversation because Major May held the conversation in Vietnamese. Based on Major May's demeanor, Miller strongly questioned whether the order to move was actually given. The 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry continued to be inactive, and the operation ultimately failed resulting in heavy American and South Vietnamese casualties. The number of VC casualties was unknown as the VC quickly removed their dead from the battleground.<sup>34</sup>

The language barrier persisted with the Vietnamese interpreters and the American advisors. The language barrier was the greatest difference between Miller and Cunningham. While Miller made an effort to learn Vietnamese, Cunningham placed his trust in his translator and relied on the Vietnamese captain's English. On April 4, Cunningham's regiment was involved in a fight near Tay Ninh. Prior to the battle, Cunningham had several disagreements with the Vietnamese commanders and the province commander. Cunningham's translator stayed at his side through the problems before the battle and during the battle itself. Cunningham admitted in the interviews that he never considered the Vietnamese command structure reliable or competent. He entered his advisory position with the preconceived notion that his mission would be a failure.

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<sup>33</sup> Major Miller, Interviewed by Dr. Westover, April 21, 1964.

<sup>34</sup> Major Miller, Interviewed by Dr. Westover, April 21, 1964.



Cunningham had little faith in the ARVN because, in his experience, the ARVN soldiers and leaders had no respect for anyone without “rank,” (Cunningham’s implication was that the ARVN leadership only listened to someone with military rank and experience, regardless of the skill or education) the Vietnamese seemed especially resistant to Americans.<sup>35</sup> Cunningham’s difficulty with the ARVN may have been a result of his own unwillingness to trust the Vietnamese men with whom he worked.

The first conflict between Cunningham and the ARVN unit he advised occurred between him and Major May, who was still Acting Division Commander. Initially, Cunningham respected Major May, but May quickly lost that respect after he refused Cunningham’s recommendation for Major Fuqua, the strategic hamlet advisor, to explain how to correctly operate tank guns as artillery for Major May’s men; May claimed that he “had other plans for Fuqua,” but he never discussed these plans with Captain Cunningham.<sup>36</sup> Captain Cunningham stated early in his interview that he never met a Vietnamese commander whom he considered “competent.” Cunningham’s inability and unwillingness to understand Vietnamese culture and language influenced and possibly hindered his effectiveness as an advisor.<sup>37</sup>

On April 4, Cunningham’s regiment was involved in a fight near Tay Ninh. Prior to the battle, Cunningham had several disagreements with the Vietnamese commanders and the province commander. Cunningham’s translator stayed at his side through the problems before the battle and during the battle itself. Major May promised Cunningham

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<sup>35</sup> Captain Donald S. Cunningham, interviewed by Dr. John G. Westover, Post-Combat Interview Project, May 5, 1964.

<sup>36</sup> Captain Donald S. Cunningham, interviewed by Dr. John G. Westover, Post-Combat Interview Project, May 5, 1964.

<sup>37</sup> Captain Cunningham, interviewed by Dr. Westover, May 5, 1964.

that an American observer in an L-19 would cover his column during the assigned mission for the day. Cunningham later discovered that the observer was instead Vietnamese, necessitating a translator for communications between the advisor and the observer. Cunningham considered “second-hand information” from the translator to be less reliable, but he never made it possible to gain information firsthand by attempting to learn Vietnamese. Captain Cunningham solely relied on the little language training he received in preparation for his role as advisor.<sup>38</sup>

Once the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion received fire, Cunningham recommended to Captain Lumb that the battalion flank the enemy, and Lumb refused. As the sporadic fire from the ARVN began to take effect, the Viet Cong began to withdraw. Contrary to Cunningham’s recommendations, Lumb did not give any orders, nor did he pursue the enemy. Cunningham demanded to know why Lumb did not give pursuit, and Lumb claimed that he was waiting for helicopters to evacuate his injured. The Vietnamese captain settled for ambulances, but the VC fled before the ambulances arrived. In this instance, one of the main differences between the priorities of U.S. military advisors and their ARVN counterparts became readily apparent. For the American advisor, the war in Vietnam should have been fast and offensive. For the Vietnamese, the war became a long, drawn-out war of attrition. The ARVN fought defensively, which explained why Captain Lumb was more concerned for his injured than pursuing the enemy. Whereas, Captain Cunningham wanted to give pursuit because he wanted to fight an offensive war

Captain Cunningham always considered the American military to be the standard to which the ARVN should aspire. The captain’s criticisms always came with

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<sup>38</sup> Captain Cunningham, interviewed by Dr. Westover, May 5, 1964.

comparisons to the American military. In an interview on May 11, 1964, Captain Cunningham lamented the fact that a Vietnamese column was never as uniform as an American column. Cunningham criticized the Vietnamese men for carrying their weapons too casually, falling out of the column, and marching barefoot with their boots in their hands.<sup>39</sup> The captain was confused by his observations because they were not something he would have seen in the American military, and he made no attempt to culturally understand the Vietnamese.

Captain Cunningham also provided evidence of how complex the advisory effort tended to be and that results were often inconsistent. Cunningham complained in several of his interviews that the ARVN leaders with whom he worked never listened to him without him giving a thoroughly explained reason for his opinion. In one instance, though, a battalion commander did take Cunningham's advice. A Vietnamese gunner guarding a camp perimeter received the order to fire on any foot traffic, as all ARVN personnel were under curfew and were forbidden from crossing the trail in front of the sentries that evening. An ARVN non-commissioned officer (NCO) either ignored or was ignorant of this order, and crossed the gunner's line of fire. In accordance with his orders, the gunner shot the NCO on the spot. Captain Cunningham asked the battalion commander what would become of the gunner, and the commander told Cunningham that the gunner would go to prison for killing another man. Cunningham was horrified by this information, and exclaimed that the gunner was following orders and should be

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<sup>39</sup> Captain Donald S. Cunningham, interviewed by Dr. John G. Westover, Post-Combat Interview Project, May 11, 1964.

commended for his actions. Mystified, the commander asked if the American military allows for such actions. At Cunningham's insistence, the gunner was not punished.<sup>40</sup>

Major David S. Grange, an advisor for the Special Forces, cited the lack of a reward system for bravery and valor and a penalty system for poor behavior, insubordination, and cowardice in the ARVN as a cause for major concern. Major Grange criticized the Vietnamese concept of "saving face," claiming that constantly worrying over every man having the respect he deserves based on a system not based in skill or actions only hindered the ARVN forces. Grange worried that the concept of "saving face" made it impossible for any man to be promoted as a result of his prowess and courage on the battlefield, and without an award system, the soldiers had no incentive to perform well during the execution of operations. Grange's comments also reveal the political nature of promotion within the ARVN; promotion did not occur as a result of skill, courage, or valor but from political connections within the leadership.

Major Grange accompanied a Vietnamese Special Forces patrol near the Cambodian border in the end of June 1963. The plan was to move into Viet Cong-controlled territory, set up a position, ambush the enemy, and then return home. The patrol came upon the intended target, a VC unit, and slowly stalked it. As the VC unit was nearly at the patrol's front, one of the South Vietnamese soldiers prematurely discharged his weapon, giving away the patrol's position. As a result, the target escaped, and only a few rucksacks were recovered. Grange expected the soldier to be punished, or at least for the other men to be made aware of his mistake, but this did not happen. Grange claimed this mistake and the lack of punishment was not an isolated incident, and

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<sup>40</sup> Captain Donald S. Cunningham, interviewed by Dr. John G. Westover, Post-Combat Interview Project, May 12, 1964.

he also believed that the ARVN would never improve without a system of reward and punishment.<sup>41</sup>

Major Edward R. Coleman, III corps training officer and corps ranger officer, while not a combat advisor, identified several problems with the ARVN during his work with the South Vietnamese forces, and these problems with the ARVN hindered the success of the American advisory effort. Coleman criticized the command structure, organization, and leadership within the ARVN and within MAAG. The supply structure of the ARVN concerned Colman, and he blamed the American officials for the lack of training and discipline in the ARVN. Within the ARVN, several categories of troops existed: regulars, militia, and civil guards, but these groups were not unified. Oftentimes, one unit might have a surplus of supply, while another unit seeing action might have serious supply shortfalls. Major Coleman felt that this was a political problem that the South Vietnamese government created, and the American officials needed to pressure the South Vietnamese government to better and more evenly supply their military.<sup>42</sup>

Coleman also noted that the ARVN was decentralized. The corps structure was the highest point of centralization for the ARVN. The lack of a centralized military created a problem with communicating requests for supplies within the ARVN. Coleman mentioned that beyond the corps structure within the ARVN, everything above was a political entity rather than military. Coleman's commentary revealed the problems with the close intertwining of the military and the political. The American advisors could not simply be combat advisors; they also had to be prepared to deal with the host of political

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<sup>41</sup> Major David S. Grange, interviewed by Dr. John G. Westover, Post-Combat Interview Project, April 17 and 29, 1964.

<sup>42</sup> Major Edward R. Coleman, interviewed by Dr. John G. Westover, Post-Combat Interview Project, April 29, 1964.

problems that were prevalent within the ARVN as a result of the ARVN often being a political tool to its leaders based in Saigon near the government. Coleman seemed to indicate in his interview that the ARVN became a force to be used against political enemies within the South Vietnamese government as much as it was a force against the communist insurgency within South Vietnam.<sup>43</sup> The American advisors became entrapped in the power struggle within the South Vietnamese government.

Major Coleman also critiqued ARVN training. The major said that the same unit often followed the same path, every single day, eventually leading to ambush by the Viet Cong. While in battle, the South Vietnamese were often slow to respond, or over-excited. Moreover, the units seeing combat were often under-supplied. The Presidential Brigade and the Palace Guard were stocked to surplus while the units of the ARVN seeing combat against the VC were often in great need. The observations of where the supplies in Vietnam were going revealed the political corruption within the South Vietnamese government; President Diem was much more concerned with his personal safety than with the security of his country and people.<sup>44</sup>

In all of the interviews listed, the advisors and American military personnel cited similar problems with the ARVN and with communications between the advisor and their units, but many of these problems are also revealing of the American military. The advisors in this study saw language barriers, and were aware of the risk of relying on a translator, but these same advisors simply did not have the time or the effort to learn Vietnamese. The advisors in this study questioned whether or not the support they asked for was actually radioed because the request was given in Vietnamese. The advisors in

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<sup>43</sup> Major Coleman, interviewed by Dr. Westover, April 29, 1964.

<sup>44</sup> Major Coleman, interviewed by Dr. Westover, April 29, 1964.

this study also learned the political problems within the ARVN that prevented achieving the overall goal of creating a military capable of defending and securing the South Vietnamese state. As long as the distribution of needed supplies and promotion of talented soldiers were hindered, a successful military could not be built. According to the advisors interviewed by Dr. Westover, the greatest hindrance to the advisory effort was the political corruption embedded within the ARVN.

### III. 1964 and Beyond

The advisory effort in Vietnam, from its conception in the 1950s to the American withdrawal in 1973, was an ever-changing and varied effort that produced successes and failures. Prior to 1965, the main goal of the advisory effort was to produce a strong and stable South Vietnamese military that could defend the state against a communist insurgency. If the effort had been successful, the change in 1965 would not have been necessary. After 1965, American soldiers were deployed to Vietnam, and the goal of the advisory effort became to create a supporting force for the Americans on the ground. Why was the initial goal for the advisory effort not a success? The advisors for the Post Combat Interview Project blamed the ARVN leadership. Spector's research in *Advice and Support: The Early Years* blamed the advisors for not overcoming language and cultural differences. Realistically, both were right. The initial goal of creating a strong ARVN was not successful because the differences between the ARVN and the American military were irreconcilable. The US wanted to create a military force, but the ARVN was a political tool for the corrupt officials that existed within the South Vietnamese government. The problems of language barriers and cultural differences only further complicated an already difficult situation. The problems in the ARVN that hurt the advisory effort were political, not tactical.

After the Post-Combat Interview Project, the US government funded two more projects that involved the American advisors in Vietnam. As the advisors began reporting back their observations, the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) did little or nothing to remedy the problems that the advisors listed, but reports were filed that revealed what was successful and what was not within the advisory effort. The Research



and Development (RAND) Corporation in California prepared a project entitled *The American Military Advisor and his Foreign Counterpart: The Case of Vietnam* for the Advanced Research Projects Agency in 1965, after Dr. Westover's interview project had been completed. Dr. Gerald C. Hickey prepared the RAND project's report in Vietnam in 1964, but many of his notes were destroyed in a battle on July 6, 1964. Dr. Hickey gathered information using the same methods as Dr. Westover, through interviews with advisors; however Dr. Hickey's interviews were gathered in the field where he served with the advisors. Dr. Hickey did not utilize post-combat interviews, and he also included personal observations from his experience serving in Vietnam.<sup>45</sup>

In 1967, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara commissioned for another study to be done in Vietnam, the "Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force" (more commonly known as "The Pentagon Papers"). Secretary McNamara requested the formation of a task force to study the United States' presence in Vietnam from World War II up to 1967. The task force originally had access to CIA materials, Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) files, and State Department cables and memoranda, but the professionals working on the program had no access to White House material or interviews with anyone involved in the study (government officials, soldiers, military officers). A documentary history of the American presence in Southeast Asia was the result of this research, and in order to fill in the missing gaps in the research and to give the research more life, newspapers and magazines were also used in the study.

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<sup>45</sup> United States Department of Defense, *The American Military Advisory and his Foreign Counterpart: The Case of Vietnam*, G. C. Hickey and W. P. Davison, ARPA Order Number 189-1, Santa Monica, CA, The RAND Corporation, March 1965, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_memoranda/2007/RM4482.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_memoranda/2007/RM4482.pdf), accessed June 17, 2013.

The resulting study presented some of the same findings as Dr. Westover's study and the Rand Corporation's study on the advisors. The research for the Pentagon Papers was done in 1967, and the results were the same as the studies performed in 1964 and 1965. In 1967, the advisory goal had changed to creating a support force for American forces in Vietnam, but the obstacles for the advisors remained the same.<sup>46</sup>

RAND Corporation found that the most successful advisors worked closely with their Vietnamese counterparts. These successful advisors not only worked with the Vietnamese, but the advisors lived with, shared meals with, and remained in constant contact with their Vietnamese commanders. As a result, these advisors were able to build a relationship on trust and respect. The advisors had more time to win the trust of the South Vietnamese, and therefore, posed less of a threat to the idea of "saving face."<sup>47</sup>

The study also found that the least successful advisors were the men who had alternate duties as well as their duties as advisors. These responsibilities meant that the advisors could not spend as much time with their Vietnamese counterparts, and could not create a strong relationship. Success as an advisor relied on time, patience, and understanding, not only on military expertise. For a military that entered the war in Southeast Asia hesitantly, though, the idea of devoting time and money to the necessary cultural and language training for advisors that so many did not even understand seemed to be a waste of resources.

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<sup>46</sup> United States Department of State, *Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force*, NND 66316, Washington, DC: The Pentagon, 1967, <http://media.nara.gov/research/pentagon-papers/Pentagon-Papers-Part-IV-B-3.pdf>, accessed June 17, 2013.

<sup>47</sup> United States Department of Defense, *The American Military Advisory and his Foreign Counterpart*, March 1965.

The RAND project indicated problem areas that occurred for all advisors, and these findings agreed with the Post Combat Interview Project interviews from the advisors Miller, Cunningham, Grange, and Taylor. The advisors lacked language skills that were pivotal to their mission and a cultural understanding of Vietnam. The most successful advisors were able to conquer the language barrier between themselves and their Vietnamese counterparts. For the Vietnamese, making an effort to communicate in the local language created a greater sense of trust in an American advisor.<sup>48</sup>

Excessive paperwork and requests for data also overburdened the advisors in the field. These sorts of duties could have easily been handled elsewhere, and the requests forced the advisor to take time away from his unit. Each moment the advisor could spend with the Vietnamese was a step towards building a strong, trusting relationship. The paperwork demands also often created confusion between the advisors in the field and command at headquarters.

Building a relationship was a way to success as an advisor in Vietnam but was overlooked by both the advisors and by all of the studies, except for the RAND project, done during the war to improve the advisory effort. Major Miller, one of the most successful advisors involved with the Post-Combat Interview Project, had a closer relationship with his Vietnamese counterpart than any of the other advisors. Captain Cunningham, one of the least successful advisors, respected his Vietnamese counterpart, but he did not try to build a relationship with any of the Vietnamese people with whom he worked. All of the advisors cited cultural and political problems as potential reasons behind their lack of success. Major Miller did not trust his Vietnamese commander to

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<sup>48</sup> United States Department of Defense, *The American Military Advisory and his Foreign Counterpart*, March 1965.

make decisions for the good of the mission. He referenced the concept of “saving face” as being responsible for his Vietnamese counterpart’s outright defiance.

“Saving face” was, and continues to be, deeply embedded within Vietnamese culture, and the American advisors from the interview project (Major Miller and Captain Cunningham, particularly) did not understand this cultural characteristic at all. “Saving face” especially plagued the advisors during their tours; the cultural concept made constructive criticism impossible between an advisor and his Vietnamese counterpart. Oftentimes, a Vietnamese leader would outright disregard the suggestion of the American advisor, not for a better idea, but to prove to his men that he was still in charge. A suggestion from an American of any station had an emasculating effect on his Vietnamese counterpart.<sup>49</sup>

The solution to the issue of saving face involved not just cultural understanding (which many advisors, including Captain Cunningham, lacked), but also time. An advisor had to appear unthreatening to his Vietnamese counterpart’s status before he could be accepted as a valid and trusted source of information. With the surge in the advisory effort as the Vietnam War continued, the Vietnamese were often in contact with several different American advisors for various, but uniformly short, lengths of time. An American could not gain the trust that he needed because he never stayed with one unit long enough to establish a relationship that could overcome cultural conflicts such as saving face. The advisors served for one-year tours of duty, but this fact did not mean that

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<sup>49</sup> Dr. John G. Westover, *Combat Leadership: A Problem for Vietnam*, (Presentation, Colloquium on Political Strategy, University of South Carolina, December 8, 1965.)

one advisor stayed with one Vietnamese unit for the entire year.<sup>50</sup> Advisors such as Miller, Cunningham, and Grange mentioned staying within contact of their assigned units for only three to six months at a time – hardly long enough to build an effective personal relationship with their Vietnamese counterparts.

The Pentagon Papers asserted that in 1965, the ARVN experienced several defeats at the hands of the Viet Cong. The defeats were so catastrophic that the US government feared a total collapse of the South Vietnamese government. In the spring of 1965, the United States considered the initial goal of establishing a strong enough military force in South Vietnam to defend and secure the South Vietnamese state a failure, and the US began deploying American units into Vietnam. By 1965, the instability of the South Vietnamese government was not a solitary issue, but reoccurring problem. As the build up of ground forces in Vietnam grew, the Pentagon Papers also emphasized that the United States diverted practically all of its attention away from the advisory effort and on to the deployment of the ground forces.<sup>51</sup>

According to the RAND Corporation's study, American advisors did not understand the military structure and protocol for the South Vietnamese. The ARVN originated as the VNA under the French, and many of the officers retained their French training as officers in the American-backed ARVN. The French training tended to govern the officer's tactical thinking, and it often led to confrontation between the American

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<sup>50</sup> United States Department of State, *Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force*, 1967.

<sup>51</sup> United States Department of State, *Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force*, 1967.

advisor and his Vietnamese counterpart.<sup>52</sup> According to RAND, the advisors were often frustrated by the structured society that governed the order of command within the military. Before an officer could give any order, the order had to be approved by those above his command. The insistence on waiting for higher up approval often slowed down commands that needed to be executed as soon as possible.<sup>53</sup> The RAND project agreed with Major Coleman's assertion that the ARVN lacked an award system for valor in battle. Promotions were often given as a result of work in headquarters rather than for effectiveness in battle. The lack of an award system meant Vietnamese soldiers were less likely to risk their lives in battle, and the soldiers were also fearful of punishment for ruining or losing automatic weapons in battle.<sup>54</sup> The last and most important difference between the US military and the ARVN that RAND mentioned was the ARVN's close political ties. After Ngo Dinh Diem's assassination in 1963, the South Vietnamese government saw a years-long power struggle that impacted the military with dire consequences. The ARVN was a political tool, and it became involved with coups and changes in power that hindered its performance on the battlefield against the Viet Cong.<sup>55</sup> The differences in the militaries that RAND mentioned in its study from 1965 were the greatest obstacles to the advisory effort, and because after 1965, the advisory effort's goal changed, the issues of language barriers and cultural differences as well as adapting to the

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<sup>52</sup> United States Department of Defense, *The American Military Advisory and his Foreign Counterpart*, March 1965.

<sup>53</sup> United States Department of Defense, *The American Military Advisory and his Foreign Counterpart*, March 1965.

<sup>54</sup> United States Department of Defense, *The American Military Advisory and his Foreign Counterpart*, March 1965.

<sup>55</sup> United States Department of Defense, *The American Military Advisory and his Foreign Counterpart*, March 1965.

differences in the militaries were never addressed, and continued to wreak havoc on the advisory effort until the American withdrawal in 1973.

Language and cultural barriers were the greatest challenges for the advisory effort in Vietnam. Every advisor who took part in the various studies of the advisory effort cited complications concerning language as a major hindrance to success. The Vietnamese counterpart either issued different orders in Vietnamese, knowing that the advisor did not understand him, or he did not issue the recommended order at all. Captain Cunningham noticed this problem; Cunningham relied on a Vietnamese translator, but often questioned the translator's loyalty. The advisors were not prepared for a language barrier. Cunningham admitted that he expected the Vietnamese officials with whom he interacted to speak English, and the advisor handbooks (given to every combat advisor in Vietnam) never mentioned the necessity of learning Vietnamese. The handbooks detailed what counterinsurgency tactics were and how to teach these new tactics, but dealing with cultural and language differences was not part of the manual. The manual was revised and reissued in 1965 to cover counterinsurgency.<sup>56</sup>

In 1965, Westmoreland and MACV expanded the ARVN, necessitating the presence of more advisors. The expansion of both American and Vietnamese forces led to a decrease in quality on both sides. No longer were young and ambitious soldiers from Fort Bragg clamoring to be advisors. With the ARVN's increase in numbers, political corruption of ARVN commanders increased as well. With the increase in the advisory effort, a decrease in advisor experience ensued. As the ARVN expanded under Westmoreland's tenure at MACV, the requests for more advanced weaponry followed in

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<sup>56</sup> Department of the Army, *Advisor Handbook for Counterinsurgency*, (Washington D.C., Department of the Army, April 23, 1965.)

order to accommodate the larger military. Westmoreland was hesitant to grant these requests, as he was suspicious of the prevalent corruption within the South Vietnamese government, and he knew the ARVN was a tool in the constant power struggle in South Vietnam.<sup>57</sup>

The studies done by the Department of Defense in 1964, 1965, and 1971 evinced a much larger problem with the advisory effort. These studies criticized both the American and the South Vietnamese governments for their wartime efforts and political corruption. The South Vietnamese military answered to the political leaders located in Saigon, and any decision made by a South Vietnamese military leader had implications on that leader's career. Often, the leadership in the ARVN considered the impact a decision would make on their careers before they acted upon the advice given to them by their American advisor counterparts. At its best, the government in Saigon proved to be capricious. At its worst, the government was tyrannical. It placed an American advisor in the difficult position of proving his competency to the men in his unit below him; fighting the cultural differences he faced with the unit leader beside him, and facing the pressures from the Saigon government above him.

The United States was not excluded from erring in policy during the advisory effort. The American answer to a weakened and troubled South Vietnam was to increase the American presence, rather than building up the South Vietnamese military, government, and people. The increase in advisors in 1964 did not fix the extant problems, but created more by putting more advisors in place with less experience. The surge also meant that the advisors were given responsibilities for more paperwork and office work

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<sup>57</sup> Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years*, (Washington D.C., Center of Military History United States Army, 1988), 111.



that took them away from their Vietnamese units. Someone who did not have the responsibility of managing an entire Vietnamese unit on his shoulders could easily have handled these menial tasks.

Corruption within the South Vietnamese government led to ARVN leadership often siding with their careers rather than the advice of the American advisor. A growing number of American advisors became a qualitative bane to the advisory effort, and the constant shuffling of advisors made it impossible for any advisor to really connect with his Vietnamese unit. The American government displayed elements of distrust of the Vietnamese once the South Vietnamese were considered too weak to defend themselves against the Communist North. In 1964, the United States began committing troops to Vietnam.

An advisor had to be with his Vietnamese unit for a very long time, and the advisor had to be open to other cultures in order to overcome the cultural barrier that made a relationship difficult. The American advisor also had to stop using American culture and values as a standard to judge all other values as right and wrong. The Vietnamese would never trust an American if he always critiqued how the Vietnamese did things as compared to an America-centric way of doing things.

The political corruption within the Saigon regime also meant that many ARVN leaders were suspicious of American advisors in order to keep their jobs and social stature. The political corruption meant that winning the trust of an ARVN leader was difficult for an American advisor, and without trust, a relationship could not form. The American government made gaining the trust of the ARVN leadership even harder by refusing to trust the ARVN and South Vietnamese government. The American

government did not consider the ARVN a worthy opponent to the Communist North, and this oversight had lasting effects on the relationship between the American advisor and his Vietnamese counterpart.

The key to success was a strong relationship, and some advisors did manage to have a strong relationship with their Vietnamese counterparts. Major Miller reported that the success in the end of his mission was a result of respect and trust between himself and his Vietnamese counterpart. Rather than place experienced advisors with Vietnamese units for longer periods of time, with less paperwork, and more contact with the Vietnamese soldier, the United States increased the number of advisors, put them in place for shorter periods of time, and decreased the amount of contact the advisors had with the Vietnamese all the while pushing a larger paperwork load onto each advisor. The surge in the advisory effort seemed the obvious answer, but it only exacerbated the problem. The advisors needed to build better relationships with the Vietnamese, and these relationships required time, understanding, and trust.

## Conclusion

The advisory effort was not successful in its initial goal of creating a strong enough military in South Vietnam to defend and secure the South Vietnamese state because cultural and linguistic barriers as well as differing views about how the war should be fought made misunderstandings commonplace that spread into defiance and mistrust. The advisors blamed the military complex, the South Vietnamese government, the ARVN, and the American government for the lack of success in their tasks. All of the studies done during the war in order to remedy the advisory failure blamed the American advisors personally for their inability to connect with their Vietnamese counterparts. The studies and the advisors were right, but all these problems contributed to the mistrust that advisors like Captain Cunningham felt towards the competence of the Vietnamese and the misgivings that Vietnamese commanders like Major May felt about working closely with an outsider to command their outfit. Time and trust were the real solutions to the problems in the advisory effort, but for the United States, a country involved in a war that it did not want to be involved in, time was not an abundant asset. According to the advisors in Westover's study and in Wiest's research on the advisory effort, misunderstandings and differences between the ARVN and the US military were ultimately the greatest obstacle for the advisors. The US and ARVN fought two different wars: the ARVN fought a defensive war of attrition; the US wanted to fight an offensive war with superior firepower. The US also could not change the very nature of the ARVN. The ARVN was a political entity, and a weapon held by corrupt politicians within the South Vietnamese government. With obstacles as vast as these, creating a force to defend

an already insecure state was an understandably difficult task that each advisor, from Miller to Cunningham, tried to accomplish, each in his own way.

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