

Review - US Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam

Written by David Hunt

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DAVID HUNT, JUL 27 2013

US Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam: Military Innovation and Institutional Failure, 1961-1963
By: Christopher K. Ives
New York: Routledge, 2012

US Special Forces and Counterinsurgency in Vietnam was first published in 2007, then appeared in 2012 as a paperback in the Routledge "Strategy and History" series. The author, Christopher K. Ives, served in the U.S. Special Forces for 20 years and presently works as a security analyst. His aim is to show how, in the period 1961-1963, Special Force units in Vietnam's Central Highlands:

"demonstrated **cognitive dominance**. This dominance bridged practice and operational requirements with a multidisciplinary martial culture that embraced aggressiveness as well as mental agility. Sensitivity to local conditions as well as the larger contexts of the Montagnards and South Vietnam's security issues enabled more little victories

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than defeats by Special Forces in the mobilization of isolated highlander communities” (p. 2; author’s emphasis).

Chapter 1 (“Crossbows to Carbines”) deals with the first few months of unit deployments among Rhade communities in Darlac province as “they hunkered down next to campfires in small villages” and “wore their native bracelets, helped dig village wells, delivered Montagnard babies, and assisted the Rhade and other Montagnards in teaching themselves how to defend their families and villages” (p. 21). In chapter 2, the author comments on the background characteristics of U.S. soldiers and Montagnard communities. He sees the counter-insurgency program in the Philippines, led by Philippine leader Ramon Magsaysay with the help of CIA operative Edward Lansdale, as a model for what might have been accomplished in Vietnam.

Chapter 3 explores the U.S. Army doctrinal context and efforts to organize South Vietnamese forces, with backward looks at U.S. armed forces involved in “frontier and imperial policing” in the American west and elsewhere in the Americas (p. 53), in the two world wars, and in the Korean War. In the 1950s, Pentagon strategic thinking was in disarray. The Green Beret antidote (“a few good men”: p. 64) went unheeded, as did “the faded legacy of the frontier horse soldiers that adapted to the very different challenges of the northern Plains or the arid southwest to use indigenous scouts” (p. 66).

President Kennedy’s attempts to encourage the development of a counter-insurgency doctrine are described in Chapter 4. “South Vietnam’s nascent democratic regime proved to be neither democratic nor efficient,” the author concludes (p. 86). In chapter 5, Ives then goes on to speak favorably of the counter-insurgency work in the Highlands of CIDGs (Civilian Irregular Defense Groups), which were sponsored by the CIA in the early 1960s.[1] After this, in chapter 6, Ives (yet again) exposes the flaws of the Strategic Hamlet programme.

Chapter 7 returns to the analysis of Special Forces. Their:

“role as a buffer between minority and the majority populations was consistent with the small war’s history of the US Army. On the American frontier for much of the history of the republic, soldiers had been the only arbiters of fairness — albeit between periods of warfare -- between the inexorable westward expansion and shrinking indigenous areas of autonomy” (pp. 125-126).

Employing a mode of argument reminiscent of the Pentagon’s number-driven attempt to demonstrate progress in the war, the author states (without providing any concrete figures or documentation): “The numbers of villagers armed and defended, wells sunk or markets opened or the ever-increasing number of patients who came to either village health clinics or Special Forces sick calls had no power to persuade that the real war might be being won or lost by such means” (p. 128).

Overall, I think that this is a strange book. It is almost as if each chapter previously existed as a stand-alone essay. Put together, they tell and retell the same story, repeating the same criticisms of U.S. strategy, and citing the same cast of characters, sometimes even with the same quotes from their works (as from Robert Komer on pages 117 and 130). The dominant theme is the author’s deep attachment to the Special Forces.

“It took hard men — made lean from arduous training and countless miles walked along highland trails -- who could and would take the fight, alongside their Montagnard allies, to the insurgents.” They were “rare individuals able and willing to squat for hours by smoky fires in the mist-shrouded highlands, living in longhouses, and swilling rice wine in enormous draughts, but above all respecting the ways of the targeted communities and peoples” (p. 134).

For a scholarly treatment of counterinsurgency in Vietnam, readers might want to try Oscar Saleminck, *The Ethnography of Vietnam’s Central Highlanders: A Historical Contextualization, 1850-1990* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003). It provides a more complicated picture of highland communities than the one sketched by Ives, who offers a perfunctory citation or two from Georges Condominas and Gerald Hickey, but nothing of substance about the indigenous cultures that Special Forces operatives are said to have mastered. Saleminck also underscores the naiveté of Americans who came to think of themselves as champions of Montagnard independence from the National Liberation Front and also from the Vietnamese government, whose authority U.S. intervention was intended

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to buttress.

Interest in counter-insurgency spiked in the early 1960s (President Kennedy and his brother Robert seem to have originated the term), then declined later in the Vietnam War. It was revived in the context of U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan and given canonical expression in David Petraeus et al., *The U.S. Army-Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). But “COIN,” as it was rechristened by its acolytes, was a fleeting fashion and has been superseded by drone strikes and nocturnal house invasions. Those who wish to bring counter-insurgency back to life yet again will have to go beyond the slender treatment Christopher Ives offers in its defense.

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David Hunt is Professor of history at University of Massachusetts/Boston. He is the author of *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War* (Amherst MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008); and also “Dirty Wars: Counterinsurgency in Vietnam and Today,” *Politics and Society* 38/1 (2010), 35-68.

[1] For another example (which Ives does not cite) of the tactical approach based on platoons hunkering down in villages with the indigenes, see F.J. West, *The Village* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), which describes the Marine Combined Action Program (CAPs) in the central lowlands.

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