

The Illusion of Progress: CORDS and the Crisis of Modernization in South Vietnam, 1965–1968

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This article examines the relationship between pacification and modernization theory during Lyndon B. Johnson's stewardship of the Vietnam War. It uses Johnson's South Vietnamese pacification program, Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), to reveal the hopes, intentions, and limitations of the administration's approach. This article contends that CORDS represented Johnson's attempt to define the Vietnam conflict as a progressive expression of the Cold War through modernization theory. It also argues that CORDS's inability to resolve the contradictions implicit in development and security exposed the limits of Johnson's vision for both Vietnam and the Cold War. Finally, the article illustrates how interadministrative debates regarding the intersection of pacification and modernization anticipated intellectual tensions that divided modernization theorists and dominated the field in the 1970s.

In 1967 the State Department's Council of Policy and Planning commissioned Samuel Huntington, a Harvard University professor of international relations, to survey U.S. progress at winning the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese people. After two months in the field, Huntington produced a ninety-five page report that blistered President Lyndon Johnson's pacification and development program, known as Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS). The report contended that the program's focus on rudimentary infrastructural change, such as building centralized political institutions, pooling resources, disseminating information, and promoting industrial growth, relied upon outmoded strategies of development that he and other theorists had abandoned years before renewed U.S. interest in the civil

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side of the war.¹ CORDS had none of the intellectual tension and diversity of opinion that shaped national discourse on development theory or appeared in the leading journals. It existed in a conceptual vacuum, as if notions of modernization had never evolved beyond 1959.

Although Huntington never made the accusation outright, the report was a veiled critique of Lyndon Johnson's modernization theory guru and National Security Administration (NSA) Special Assistant, Walt Whitman Rostow. The former theorist from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and author of *The Stages of Economic Growth* was both inspiration and cheerleader for the paradigm that framed the U.S. pacification effort in South Vietnam. As CORDS went, therefore, so went Rostow. Throughout his career, Huntington never abandoned the concept of development or its potential to remake the world in an image that served America's interests. Nevertheless, Huntington's experience with CORDS validated his doubts about modernization theory and became an existential justification for a new approach to development that signaled the passing of modernization theory from the science of policymaking.

Huntington's encounter with the Johnson administration demonstrates a significant chasm in the history of America's role in Vietnam—the influence that war had on theory. In the prevailing scholarship, particularly the studies on modernization theory and pacification, modernization is the engine of the U.S. tragedy and defeat in South Vietnam. By contrast, scholars rarely examine how that failure itself affected theories of development and progress.² The

1. To avoid confusion, the concepts "development," "modernization," and "modernization theory" will connote different things in this paper. Each meaning, however, is consonant with the prevailing historiography on modernization theory (see footnote 4). I use development to refer to the general process of improvement, modernization to denote accelerated development premised upon technological innovation and a staged process, and modernization theory to reflect the system of thought based upon accelerated growth.

2. The one notable and salient exception to the scholarship on the relationship between modernization theory and the realities of American diplomacy is a recent article by Mark T. Berger, "Decolonisation, Modernisation and Nation-Building: Political Development Theory and the Appeal of Communism in Southeast Asia, 1945–1975," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 34 (2003), 421–448. Berger's study, a bold attempt at leveling the ground of modernization theory literature, captures the spirit of the prevailing scholarship. Where it succeeds is also the locus of the article's failure. Berger's focus on the intellectual dynamics of modernization theory history leaves his claims about the administrative and policy connection between the paradigm and the physical reality wanting.

pattern holds true in studies that range from Dwight Eisenhower's nation-building exercise under the leadership of Ngo Dinh Diem to the Strategic Hamlet program in John F. Kennedy's administration. Even scholarship that recognizes the intellectual strain and transformation caused by conflict over Vietnam subordinates the relationship to larger administrative or societal lessons. This article uses the genesis of CORDS, and the dialogue that took place between its architects and Huntington, to explore the relationship between war and theory in Vietnam. Huntington's critique foreshadowed a larger intellectual retreat from modernization theory that would redefine the field of development and play down its role in foreign policy. In CORDS, I contend, we see the passing of an idea.

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Until recently the relationship between pacification and modernization theory was contested ground. Pacification focused on physical and institutional security during combat, whereas modernization theory assumed a period of relative peace and rapid development.³ Michael Latham, however, obliterated that dichotomy by demonstrating how the United States fused pacification and modernization theory in its search for the right combination of security and civil reform in the hamlets of South Vietnam.⁴ What the President and his advisers sought was a coherent plan that could

3. For more on America's pacification program in South Vietnam, see Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder, Colo., 1995); Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2000); Jefferson P. Marquis, "The Other Warriors: American Social Science and Nation Building in Vietnam," *Diplomatic History*, 24 (2000), 79–105; Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York, 1978); Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York, 1999); Patrick Lloyd Hatcher, *The Suicide of an Elite: American Internationalists and Vietnam* (Stanford, Calif., 1990); Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York, 1988); D. Michael Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms: The Failure of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy* (Princeton, N.J., 1988); R. W. Komer, *Bureaucracy at War: U.S. Performance in the Vietnam Conflict* (Boulder, Colo., 1986); Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York, 1972); William A. Nighswonger, *Rural Pacification in Vietnam* (New York, 1966); Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990* (New York, 1991); and David L. Anderson, *Trapped By Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953–1961* (New York, 1991).

4. Modernization theory has an extensive body of scholarship that recent studies in the Cold War have enhanced tremendously. The key works on the relationship between modernization theory and U.S. foreign policy include Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Washington, D.C., 2004); David Engerman, Nils Gilman, Mark H. Haefele, and Michael E. Latham, eds., *Staging Growth: Modernization, Development, and the Global Cold War* (Amherst, Mass., 2003); Marc Frey, "Tools of

jumpstart economic and social development for the South Vietnamese. Similar to the intellectual debates of the early 1960s, in which scholars such as Huntington and MIT sociologist Daniel Lerner wrangled over the military's place in the modernization process, Johnson's advisers believed both that security was a precondition for growth and that sustained development framed America's presence in South Vietnam. Modernization theory, therefore, is crucial to understanding Johnson's shift in rhetoric and policy in the latter years of his stewardship of the Vietnam War.

Modernization theory gained policy and academic prominence during the 1950s. Under the fog of fear and suspicion that defined the Cold War, it gave policymakers a dynamic theory of accelerated growth, based upon a hierarchy of measurable stages they could apply without conflict or contradiction across a broad spectrum of nations, races, and cultures. As historians Michael Adas and Nick Cullather have aptly pointed out, modernization theory extrapolated the Western myth of teleological development onto postcolonial nations and gauged their progress by how quickly those nations demonstrated the following traits and behaviors: urbanization, a cosmopolitan outlook, technological innovation underscored by mass media and communications, an indigenous professional class, and greater political participation among the people, although only at the elite level.⁵ Social scientists at the nation's preeminent think tanks, such as MIT's Center for International

Empire: Persuasion and the United States's Modernization Mission in Southeast Asia," *Diplomatic History*, 27 (2003), 543–568; Berger, "Decolonisation, Modernisation and Nation-Building," 421–448; David Ekbladh, "'Mr. TVA': Grass-Roots Development, David Lilienthal, and the Rise and Fall of the Tennessee Valley Authority as a Symbol for U.S. Overseas Development," *Diplomatic History*, 26 (2002), 335–374; Latham, *Modernization as Ideology*; Donald L. M. Blackmer, *The MIT Center for International Studies: The Founding Years, 1951–1969* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002); Dean C. Tipps, "Modernization Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies: A Critical Perspective," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 15 (1973), 199–226; Ali Mazrui, "From Social Darwinism to Current Theories of Modernization: A Tradition of Analysis," *World Politics*, 21 (1968), 69–83; Ron Robin, *The Making of the Cold War Enemy: Culture and Politics in the Military-Industrial Complex* (Princeton, N.J., 2001); Nick Cullather, "Development? It's History," *Diplomatic History*, 24 (2000), 641–653; and Jonathan Nashel, "The Road to Vietnam: Modernization Theory in Fact and Fiction," in Christian G. Appy, ed., *Cold War Constructions: The Political Culture of United States Imperialism, 1945–1966* (Amherst, Mass., 2000).

5. Michael Adas, "From Settlement Colony to Global Hegemon: Integrating the Exceptionalist Narrative of the American Experience into World History," *American Historical Review*, 106 (2001), 1692–1720; Cullather, "Development? It's History," 641–653.

Studies (CIS), the academic consortium the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), and Harvard University's Department of Social Relations (DSR), made the theory popular among the nation's social and policy scientists who crusaded on behalf of post-colonial development. Ron Robin, Terrence Ball, and Immanuel Wallerstein have argued that, as experts in the Cold War, social scientists gained new standing in the eyes of American society and the federal government.⁶ No longer were the hard sciences the only area of academia that courted research grants and proffered policy advice. Now the numerous subdisciplines of social and policy science formed a veritable fifth column for the United States in the Cold War.⁷

Modernization theory also held that rational societies were intrinsically good, fundamentally alike, and perpetually dynamic. The theory's assumptions spawned a gospel of development, with all the trappings of religious dogma. Moral certitude, however, concealed a dark side of the theory that made development such an abstraction that it excused human suffering as the unavoidable but acceptable price of growth. Theorists such as Lerner, Lucien Pye,

6. For more information regarding academia and the Cold War, see Robin, *The Making of the Cold War Enemy*; Terrence Ball, "The Politics of Social Science in Postwar America," in Lary May, ed., *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* (Chicago, 1989); Immanuel Wallerstein, "The Unintended Consequences of Cold War Area Studies," in Noam Chomsky, et al., eds., *The Cold War & the University: Toward an Intellectual History of the Postwar Years* (New York, 1997); Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*; Blackmer, *The MIT Center for International Studies*; Walter LaFeber, "Technology and U.S. Foreign Relations," *Diplomatic History*, 24 (2000), 1–19; Edward T. Silva and Sheila A. Slaughter, eds., *Serving Power: The Making of the Academic Social Science Expert* (Westport, Conn., 1984); and Donald Critchlow, *The Brookings Institution, 1916–1952: Expertise and the Public Interest in a Democratic Society* (Carbondale, Ill., 1986).

7. Ron Robin and Immanuel Wallerstein have demonstrated how this relationship worked by examining the 1964 Special Operations Research Office (SORO), Project Camelot. The Army and Department of Defense created this program with a mandate to "determine the feasibility of developing a general social systems model that would make it possible to predict and influence politically significant aspects of social change in the developing nations of the world." SORO brought in leading social scientists to train military personnel in how to manage and respond to counterinsurgency in the Third World. The program barely got off the ground when ethical questions regarding the use of behavioral sciences for military purposes caused its collapse. The principled response to the use of social science in government is the other side of the backlash against modernization theory. Special Operations Research Office, Project Camelot, quoted in Wallerstein, "The Unintended Consequences of Cold War Area Studies," 225. For a full elaboration of the intellectual dispute, see Robin, *The Making of the Cold War Enemy*, 206–225.

Cyril Black, Rostow, and even Huntington extolled war as an appropriate precondition for modernization. The erosion of authority, social disintegration, human displacement, and infrastructural upheaval that accompanied war provided a clean slate for seeding development. They dismissed the claim that warfare was inherently tragic and argued instead that the military's focus on order, group affiliation, education, self-improvement, and discipline were crucial to the modern nation-state. Military modernization's danger, however, rested on its propensity to incubate despotism and to sanction what Nils Gilman has called the "indefinite deferral of democracy in the name of stability."⁸

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In 1965 President Johnson faced the first sustained bombing program over North Vietnam, the first introduction of U.S. troops, a promising but meager pacification program called Hop Tac, and a shift in the government of Vietnam's (GVN) leadership from Nguyen Khanh to Nguyen Cao Ky. In light of this situation, Johnson found modernization theory a very appealing solution to the uncertainties of the war.⁹ His political vision of a beneficent America that reached beyond its borders to Third World nations necessitated both stability and development in South Vietnam and required that they happen simultaneously. Thus, Johnson embraced modernization for its

8. Nils Gilman, "Paving the World with Good Intentions: The Genesis of Modernization Theory" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2000), 284. See also Tipps, "Modernization Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies," 210; Mazrui, "From Social Darwinism to Current Theories of Modernization," 81; and Dankwart A. Rustow, "Modernization and Comparative Politics: Prospects in Research and Theory," *Comparative Politics*, 1 (1968), 43. Ali Mazrui has noted that Samuel Huntington found this element of modernization theory retrograde and politically disastrous as early as 1964.

9. The State Department noted the limited nature of Hop Tac and made pacification an item of concern if the United States planned to gain momentum in the war. Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the State Department, Jan. 6, 1965, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, vol. 2, *Vietnam, Jan.–June 1965* (34 vols., Washington, D.C., 1996). Pacification in South Vietnam began with the Agroville program in 1954, under Ngo Dinh Diem's rule, and evolved into the Strategic Hamlet program in 1962. The hamlet program suffered from corruption and lack of commitment, leading to the creation of several permutations of pacification—Rural Construction, Rural Reconstruction, Chien Thang, and Hop Tac—that eventually led to Revolutionary Development in 1966. While there was little organization between the interim programs, Revolutionary Development provided the conceptual and institutional skeleton for CORDS. U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, "A Brief Analysis of Pacification Program," in *Project Takeoff: Assessment of Pacification* (3 vols., Washington, D.C., n.d.), 2: 2.

virtues and intangibles, as well as because it spoke to the progressive politics on which he had cut his professional teeth during the New Deal. For Johnson, pacification became the handmaiden of progress in Vietnam, and he filled his speeches with the vision of creating security through development. At the same time that Johnson increased the number of U.S. troops in South Vietnam to nearly 184,000 by 1965 and extended the bombing sorties over the North, he labored over how to bring the blessings of modernity—technology, representative government, and a self-sustaining capitalist economy—to South Vietnamese peasants. He and his advisers recognized that 1965 brought a “new war” to South Vietnam, with America assuming most of the responsibility for combat. If the United States intended “going off the diving board” with the introduction of troops, as Johnson noted with concern, there had to be counterbalancing measures on the civil side of the war.¹⁰

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara warned Johnson in 1965 that “[t]he situation has unquestioningly been growing worse.” He advised that the administration “support fully the Pacification Plan [. . . ,] particularly the basic theory—now fully accepted both on the Vietnamese and U.S. sides—of concentrating on the more secure areas and working out from these through military operations to provide security, followed by necessary civil and economic actions to make the presence of the government felt and to provide economic improvements.”¹¹ This advice set in motion the chain of events that led to the creation of CORDS. Johnson first responded to McNamara by increasing Agency for International Development’s (AID) resources set aside for the pacification effort. Once it became apparent that AID’s efforts would be insufficient due to the poor economic conditions in Southeast Asia, Johnson endeavored to create a regional development bank aimed at fortifying the region’s economy and providing lending capital.

10. Lyndon B. Johnson, quoted in “Conference of July 22 with Pentagon Officials on Committing Large Numbers of Troops to Vietnam, July 22, 1965,” in William Appleman Williams, Thomas McCormick, Lloyd C. Gardner, and Walter LaFeber, eds., *America in Vietnam: A Documentary History* (New York, 1989), 251–253.

11. Secretary Robert McNamara to the President, National Security Action Memorandum 288, National Security Files, National Security History, Tonkin, box 38, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library (hereafter cited as NSAM 228, NSF, Johnson Library).

Johnson announced this plan in April 1965 at Johns Hopkins University in a speech titled "Peace Without Conquest."¹² Replete with references to America's independence, the speech painted a dramatic picture of mission for the audience:

Tonight Americans and Asians are dying for a world where each people may choose its own path. . . . This is the principle for which our ancestors fought in the valleys of Pennsylvania. It is the principle for which our sons fight tonight in the jungles of Viet-Nam. . . . We fight because we must fight if we are to live in a world where every country can shape its own destiny. . . . This kind of world will never be built by bombs or bullets.

Instead, he asserted, it would take a large-scale planning effort and commitment to modernization that was absent from U.S. policy at the time. To emphasize the transformative impact of modernization and soften the difficult reality that accompanied it, he offered a personal story: "In the countryside where I was born, and where I live, I have seen the night illuminated, and the kitchens warmed, and the homes heated, where once the cheerless night and the ceaseless cold held sway. And all this happened because electricity came to our area along the humming wires of the REA [Rural Electrification Administration]."¹³ Johnson's own life thus bore witness to technology's revolutionary effects, which enabled him to project that vision of transformation onto the people of South Vietnam with the kind of simplicity that became modernization theory's hallmark. As a true believer in the promise of modernity, Johnson could neither countenance nor afford complexity as he set about turning rhetoric into reality.

As an initial step, Johnson had to reorient the war effort and the resources going into Southeast Asia. In a memo to AID, he made his intention clear: "The first step is for the countries of Southeast Asia to associate themselves in a greatly expanded cooperative effort for development."¹⁴ Such action would gather the necessary resources for infrastructural development in South Vietnam and would have broad appeal among the disenchanting locals whose allegiance vacillated between the North and South. The result of

12. Lyndon B. Johnson, "Peace Without Conquest," April 7, 1965, *Public Papers of the President, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965* (2 vols., Washington, D.C. 1966), 1: 394.

13. *Ibid.*, 398.

14. Dean Rusk to AID, Vietnam, Southeast Asian Development Program, May 27, 1965, box 200, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Johnson Library.

this ambition was the Asian Development Bank (ADB), which served as an investment house for East Asian nations. Johnson recruited former World Bank president Eugene Black to run the ADB because of his vast experience with the global economy and development finance. ADB also benefited from Black's extensive professional network, which gave it immediate domestic and international clout. At the ADB charter conference in Manila in May 1965, Black echoed Johnson's Johns Hopkins speech in his own presentation but added that regional economic cooperation was that first step in abating "antagonisms and warring ideologies" among groups and nations in Southeast Asia. He also called the establishment of the ADB a milestone that fostered a "common desire to improve the lot of people who no longer believe[d] that their poverty and suffering [wa]s a punishment or that they were predetermined by forces beyond human control."¹⁵ Unlike other lending institutions, such as the World Bank and AID, which had diffuse global responsibilities, the Asian Development Bank catered exclusively to the needs of Southeast Asian countries. Therefore, Johnson construed the ADB as a developmental institution and part of a wider program designed to contain communism in the region.

Johnson's closest advisers were confident that South Vietnam rested on the brink of a developmental breakthrough and needed only a large-scale lending institution like the ADB to jumpstart its infant economy. Johnson himself marveled at South Vietnam's productive capabilities, especially the potential in the Mekong Delta. No stranger to the transformative effects of hydroelectric power, Johnson noted, "[t]he vast Mekong River can provide food and water and power on a scale to dwarf even our own TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority]."¹⁶ Historian Lloyd Gardner has traced Johnson's fascination with the Mekong River Valley Project (MRVP), his enchantment with the natural resources of the region, and even the modernizing sentiment in the Hopkins speech back to Johnson's tour of South Vietnam in 1961 and the encouragement of economist Arthur Goldschmidt, a longtime friend and fellow New Dealer. Goldschmidt influenced Johnson profoundly and maintained that "Economic development

15. Address of Eugene Black, Vietnam, Southeast Asia Development Program, May 27, 1965, in *ibid.*

16. Rusk to AID, Vietnam, Southeast Asia Development Program, May 27, 1965, in *ibid.*

[was] too important to leave to the blind play of economic forces” and needed encouragement from prosperous nations.¹⁷ The Mekong Delta project, therefore, was not merely a carrot that Johnson and his closest advisers believed would lead the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table, as Gardner and others have suggested, but part of larger strategic and conceptual shift in the war.

After signing the Asian Development Bank’s charter in May 1965, Johnson boasted that the initiative offered a vision of Third World self-determination that had eluded American policymakers and intellectuals since before Woodrow Wilson’s presidency. Not sparing the hyperbole, he called it an “economic Magna Carta for the diverse lands of Asia.” This was an overstatement, but it demonstrated his belief that freedom in Southeast Asia began with the region’s participating openly and independently in the global capitalist economy. Johnson declared the ADB “the first major commitment under our promise to expand economic and social development in Southeast Asia.” The act was part of a monumental multilateral effort that promised to do the impossible: join security and social reform under one programmatic umbrella. In Johnson’s words, “the twains had met.”¹⁸

With regional economic stability apparently assured, the administration turned its attention to South Vietnamese pacification, which by that time had acquired the ambiguous designation as the Other War. The administration struggled with how to define its new direction. Although policymakers retained the term “pacification” in the end, using it interchangeably with the Other War, they debated what message the United States conveyed by holding on to such ignominious language. During the planning phase, Rostow wondered whether to change the name from “pacification,” which had a Kennedy-esque ring and the burden of the early years of the conflict, to something more progressive-sounding like “reconstruction.”¹⁹ Others agreed and pointed to the regional and historical

17. Arthur Goldschmidt to Johnson, Sept. 24, 1963, cited in Lloyd C. Gardner and Ted Gittinger, eds., *Vietnam: The Early Decisions* (Austin, Tex., 1997), 43; Lloyd C. Gardner, *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago, 1995), 195.

18. “Remarks at the Signing of the Asian Development Bank Act,” March 16, 1966, *Public Papers of the President, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965*, 1: 327.

19. W. W. Rostow to William Bundy, “An Economic Reconstruction and Development Plan for South Viet Nam,” April 15, 1965, box 200, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Johnson Library.

baggage that the antiquated concept carried, but no one had a better alternative. Despite the drawbacks of pacification, it was the one consistent feature across various regimes, administrations, and iterations of the civil side of the war. The United States and South Vietnam had administrative histories, especially in the military establishment, with a lot invested in the term. Some felt that the administration could dispense with “pacification” as the effort’s designation, but this choice would leave the endeavor without the very language it needed to work. A few in the administration, like pacification czar Robert Komer, tried to soften the image of the Other War and referred to it as “revolutionary development,” which was a clear attempt to avoid the language of empire. Nevertheless, the antiquated concept stuck, and it was one of the first of many doubtful compromises along the way to CORDS.

In February 1966 Johnson convened a meeting in Honolulu between the new leadership of South Vietnam and his top policy advisers. It was an effort to get everyone on the same programmatic and conceptual page. Ironically, around the same time that Johnson delivered his Johns Hopkins speech, South Vietnamese Prime Minister Ky and Chief of State Nguyen Van Thieu announced a new war strategy commensurate with America’s objectives. In many respects, the GVN set an agenda that appeared to anticipate Johnson’s reorientation of the war. Ky and Thieu spoke of balancing military needs and national development, increasing government efficiency, and refocusing the state on social reforms. The fullest expression of these aims came from Ky just before the Honolulu meeting.

In what amounted to a State of the Union address to his Army Congress, Ky called for a broad reform agenda that focused on structural problems in South Vietnam ranging from transportation to telephone lines. To promote economic and political stability, he emphasized direct investment in heavy and light machinery, electronics, and household appliances.²⁰ In the cities, this meant infrastructural changes aimed at providing a reliable output of power and preventing daily blackouts, public transportation improvements, and the widespread use of goods, such as televisions, radios, and motorbikes to promote middle-class values and tastes. In the countryside, Ky encouraged crop diversification for the market and

20. “Premier Ky Speaks at Armed Forces Congress,” Jan. 18, 1966, Honolulu Conference, box 44, NSF, National Security Council History, Johnson Library.

nutritional reasons, mechanized agriculture, and improved irrigation techniques; he spoke glowingly of livestock husbandry among the peasant farmers as a symbol of progress. Broad use of appliances in the cities and of livestock in the countryside would signify a shift in thinking from provincialism to a more cosmopolitan outlook. In modernization theory, that transformation represented change across a stratified arc moving from “traditional” to “modern.” Theorists focused on the journey between these two poles as the object of their analysis and the subject of their debate for over two decades. The GVN, however, struggled with the mechanics of the developmental phases and relied upon a crude model to understand the process and intent of its reforms.

Security in the hinterland remained a serious concern, however. Since time did not permit starting anew, Ky decided to recycle what he could from his predecessors’ pacification efforts. Anticipating criticism from the United States, Ky highlighted the degree and nuance of change, rather than scope and magnitude, to distinguish his attempt at pacification from what he inherited. One significant change was greater attention to local communities through embedded development agents, called the Revolutionary Development (RD) cadres, who worked much like the Peace Corps. As Ky noted, “They [RD cadres] will carry out pacification work with their main task the rebuilding of a new life in the rural areas.” A combined force of Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) troops and a contingent of locals, called the Popular Force (PF), provided protection for the RD cadres who, Ky hoped, would “establish roots with the land” and work with “officials responsible for reconstruction of social welfare facilities such as schools, dispensaries, maternity clinics, and the like.”²¹ Since Ky and the Johnson administration understood pacification as a program of accelerated economic and social development, Ky considered the RD cadres a vital step in that direction. Johnson’s advisers took a similar shine to the cadres and used them in the conceptualization of CORDS.

The Honolulu meeting illustrated the momentum that pacification had gained within a short period. It also affirmed Johnson’s belief that the GVN shared U.S. goals and interests. With the Development Bank in place and commitments to reform from the GVN,

21. *Ibid.*, 8–9.

Johnson next went to work on the U.S. side of pacification with modernization theory's staged approach in mind. Two distinct iterations of the same philosophic impulse emerged: Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) and the Mekong River Valley Project (MRVP). CORDS addressed the realities of modernization under the strain of combat, while the MRVP reflected Johnson's utopian vision of South Vietnam's future. The two programs provided the best illustration of Johnson's dialectical nation-building agenda with the individuals he chose to lead each initiative—Robert Komer for CORDS and David E. Lilienthal for the Mekong Delta. Komer was the interim replacement for NSA Special Assistant McGeorge Bundy, and Lilienthal had been the architect and embodiment of the New Deal's crowning technosocial achievement, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). Their differences began with their personalities: Komer was a pragmatist and bureaucrat who emphasized process and management, while Lilienthal was an optimist who stressed the enthusiasm that had underscored New Deal development and its penchant for experimentation.²² Together, however, they personified the imaginative new direction that Johnson applied to South Vietnam.

Johnson gave Komer managerial powers over the Other War but remained firm in his conviction that modernization should provide the means for pacification. The signs of Johnson's commitment were undeniable, even to Komer, who recalled years later the President's unusual fascination with the prospect of rural electrification in South Vietnam. Komer remarked that he had to remind Johnson to focus on the realities of the conflict, at one point jesting, "Boss, why don't we win the war first. Then we'll turn on the lights."²³ In 1966, when CORDS was in its gestational stage, rural electrification was a ridiculous ambition, and Komer knew it. Nevertheless, it succeeded at framing Johnson's vision for the region as he refocused on the Other War.

With high casualty rates among U.S. and ARVN soldiers, and with the insurgent coalition controlling significant portions of the countryside, the realities of war forced Komer to focus on security

22. For a detailed study of Johnson's effort to develop the Mekong River Valley, see David Ekbladh, "Mr. TVA"; Steven M. Neuse, *David E. Lilienthal: The Journey of an American Liberal* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1996); Lloyd C. Gardner, "From the Colorado to the Mekong," in Gardner and Gittinger, eds., *Vietnam*, 37–57; and Gardner, *Pay Any Price*.

23. Robert Komer, Oral History Interview 1, tape 1, p. 55, Johnson Library.

rather than development. In September 1966 Komer prepared a report on the Other War for Johnson, which gave an uneven assessment of U.S. policies. Although he was generally impressed with the progress in South Vietnam, Komer noted there was considerable room for improvement. Komer believed the RD cadre concept was a great step forward that gave rural citizens more confidence in their government and provided rural communities with agents who would foster economic revitalization and “bring [the] economic house in order.” In the existing program, peasant farmers received more benefits to meet their health and educational needs, and the Chieu Hoi (Open Arms) repatriation program returned an estimated 12,000 former Viet Minh defectors to South Vietnam, seventeen of whom figured prominently in drafting the country’s constitution. Komer considered these inspiring first steps in what overall was a “constructive Other War.” But such steps were not enough to assuage his belief that failure lay on the horizon.²⁴

Economic troubles still plagued South Vietnam. The Viet Cong sabotaged the means of transportation, communications, and commerce, which meant spiraling economic costs that the United States had to absorb just to keep the GVN solvent. Just as disheartening was the growing sentiment of apathy, frustration, and resentment among the citizenry. “By 1966,” Komer warned, “over two-thirds of Vietnam’s able-bodied young men of 20–30 years of age were prevented by the exigencies of war from filling their normal productive role” in society. As an antidote, he proposed strengthening South Vietnam’s industrial base. “US aid, plus that from other countries has helped to construct or expand some 800 industrial plants employing over 75,000 workers,” he noted. “Further development is handicapped as yet by shortages of long term capital, skilled labor, materials, and transport congestion.”²⁵ Despite Johnson’s high hopes of modernity, the pervasiveness of South Vietnam’s infrastructural challenges sobered Komer’s assumptions about what lay ahead. In the report, the problems fixed the discourse of pacification on the economics of modernization as the answer to social and political problems.

24. “The Other War in Vietnam: A Progress Report,” Nov. 1966, Honolulu Conference, Feb. 6–8, 1966, box 44, NSF, National Security Council History, Johnson Library.

25. *Ibid.*

The report placed heavy emphasis on the idea of revolutionary development. Previous regimes had failed at their attempts to gain the support of peasants, so Komer believed pacification had to start with them. He considered the RD cadres an innovation that shifted the focus away from questions of security to management. Komer also mentioned that the GVN's integrated approach paid tangible dividends. By 1966 they had started and completed 1,200 self-help projects and 900 hamlet schools; they had resettled 3,600 families and completed nine irrigation dams. In addition to the improvements in the local infrastructure, Komer witnessed the emergence of middle-class habits among the peasants. The 1,600 pigs, 3,300 chickens, and 4,100 ducks that the RD cadres distributed as part of a program to encourage animal husbandry suggested the GVN might have turned the corner on some of the key attributes of modernization. New goods and services among the peasant population meant there was an accompanying transformation in expectations. The data seemed to indicate that the modernization process was at work in South Vietnam, and Komer presented the changes to Johnson in those terms.

The Komer report affirmed that pacification was possible and did so in the language of modernization that saturated the administration. Nevertheless, he knew it was an optimistic assessment and tried to provide perspective to President Johnson so that he would not get the wrong impression. "I return an optimist," he wrote, "and a realist. . . . The more I learn the more I'm sobered by the realization of how much further we may have to go."²⁶ The report made no mention of the staggering toll that years of combat and inconsistent pacification measures had taken on the Vietnamese people. For example, between 1965 and 1969 the number of refugees swelled to about 3.5 million. In a ghastly demonstration of wartime tactics, by 1967 American and GVN forces had to relocate peasants in the line of fire during bombing campaigns because of the massive growth in the refugee population.²⁷

Despite concessions regarding work already done, the report was not utopian, and Komer placed the blame squarely on the

26. Robert Komer to Johnson, July 1, 1966, McNaughton Files, box 1, Paul Warnke Papers, Johnson Library

27. For more information on the human toll of pacification on the Vietnamese, see footnote 3.

shoulders of Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, advisers in Washington, and the consortium of agencies—United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), Joint United States Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO), and the State Department—assigned to it. Because the Other War served so many masters, it never achieved the focus required for lasting change. To reverse this history, he and Secretary of Defense McNamara recommended taking pacification out of the embassy and placing it under the military with a single manager at the helm.²⁸ They reasoned that a military identity would give pacification what it lacked and had missed for years—efficiency, respect, and real administrative support. By March 1967 Johnson was anxious to see the fruits of America's new posture on the war, especially after giving Ambassador Lodge a chance to show progress in his last run at pacification in 1966, the failed Office of Civil Operations (OCO).²⁹ Johnson's impatience led him to hand over the Other War to Komer completely—a tacit surrender to security concerns over modernization, which dramatically changed the nature of his vision.

Once in charge, Komer immediately did two things. First, he formed a personal advisory group consisting of important pacification administrative figures like Rostow, Assistant Secretary of the State Department Nicholas Katzenbach, and Assistant Secretary of Defense Cyrus Vance. Second, he merged OCO with MACV to form CORDS, a supra-agency that incorporated all the disparate parts of previous pacification programs, except for psychological and intelligence operations, which he left under the CIA.³⁰

CORDS ended the process begun with the Asian Development Bank in ways that few could have imagined in 1965, because it did not shine with modernization theory's gloss. South Vietnamese Prime Minister Ky worried about pacification's new direction, which appeared to retreat from the original intent of the Honolulu

28. Komer, Oral History Interview 3, tape 2, pp. 30–31, Johnson Library; Mike Gravel, ed., *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam* (5 vols., Boston, 1971), vol. 4.

29. For more on the history of the Office of Civil Operations, see Hunt, *Pacification*, 82–91.

30. "Organization and Function for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support," May 28, 1967, File 1 (2) 11/67–12/67 (1 of 3), box 59, NSF Country Files, Vietnam, Johnson Library.

conference. Komer, however, saw little deviation. To him, the North Vietnamese set the terms of the civil side of the war. Consequently, to gain an advantage, the United States had to promote social revolution in the countryside, just as the enemy did. That meant a pragmatic agenda focused on protecting the bodies and possessions of Vietnamese peasants as the way to win their hearts and minds. In his estimate, CORDS was in harmony with development, particularly with Rostow's concept of modernization, because it still privileged technology and the goal of mass consumption as the engine of social change.³¹

No matter how Komer and the Johnson administration justified their new posture toward pacification, however, Ky's intuition was correct: The objective had changed. Placing the military at the center of America's modernization program reduced development's visibility. Komer assumed that the United States could manage insurgency and terrorism, and that belief compelled him to endorse an integrated command structure and bureaucracy in the Other War, rather than a commitment to local autonomy. Investing in local participation and leadership development were distinguishable goals that might have paid tremendous political dividends in South Vietnam. Instead, the United States consolidated leadership, information, and resources at both the national and local levels, which continued the tradition of alienation that had defined pacification since the 1950s. It continued to fuel animosity toward the United States that proved insurmountable over the long haul.

Komer tried to smooth over relations with Ky and to satisfy skeptics in the Johnson administration with his insistence that pacification was a Vietnamese endeavor and that CORDS served mainly as support. This weak attempt to quiet disapproval in Saigon and Washington only deepened Ky's suspicion and garnered criticism from the U.S. military establishment. Certain branches of the military, such as the Marines, were especially disappointed that Komer promoted this view while he faced pressure to broaden successful pacification measures, like their program, the Combined

31. The seminal discussion of modernization theory, W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge, U.K., 1960), places development in a multilayered process, from premodernity to takeoff and culminating in sustained growth. Rostow's theories are pivotal to understanding systemic development in the 1960s; his importance grew exponentially as he became more deeply entrenched in the Johnson administration.

Action Platoons (CAP).³² Confronted with the expectation to show forward momentum, however, Komer's conviction about making the Other War reflect progressive ends became a servant to politics.

Once he had established CORDS, Komer began the business of development with his first program, Project TAKEOFF. The name was both symbolic and ironic, since it suggested one of the key stages of development in Walt Rostow's treatise on economic modernization, *The Stages of Economic Growth*. As Richard Hunt has observed, Komer chose the name for two reasons—to pay tribute to Rostow and to create a sense of urgency for the GVN to keep in step with the United States. TAKEOFF prefigured CORDS in both style and substance, even though it offered very few innovations from its predecessors. As Komer later confessed, "I don't think we did anything new conceptually. . . . The theory and practice of pacification had been worked out in experiments and studies and everything else for years—going all the way back to the French experience in the late '40's and early '50's." What made this pacification program new was that "it work[ed] on a major scale."³³ Since there were few significant changes in the mechanics of the Other War, TAKEOFF served primarily as an example of how to structure pacification and provided the GVN with a concentrated dose of American "candorism" that was the subtext of modernization theory in the 1960s. Organizationally, TAKEOFF had a hierarchical structure, with a single project manager in Saigon and district advisers in the provinces who coordinated the local teams and submitted monthly status reports. It also aimed at increasing the number of RD cadres, coordinating the local political machinery, accelerating Chieu

32. For more information on Combined Action Platoons (CAP), see Hunt, *Pacification*; Michael E. Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam* (New York, 1989); and Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, 43–48. As Guenter Lewy notes, Gen. William Westmoreland was aware of the success that the Marine Corps had fighting with the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) in the Combined Action Platoons in the I Corp, but he decided against expanding the program due to his affinity for aggressive military tactics. CAP, on the other hand, was defensive in nature because the Marines stayed in the local communities and ensured security once they drove out the National Liberation Front and Vietcong. Additionally, Westmoreland doubted U.S. capacity to put a CAP unit in every hamlet. Alternatively, Richard Hunt has shown that disaffection with CAP fell on both sides of the allied war effort. The Government of Vietnam's (GVN) military leaders thought that CAP encouraged Popular Forces to let Americans do the fighting for them. Resistance to the CAP idea therefore was universal among the war commanders.

33. Komer Oral History Interview 3, tape 2, pp. 46, Johnson Library.

Hoi, staging attacks against the Vietcong infrastructure, improving and expanding ARVN support, managing refugees, enhancing the indigenous fighting force or Regional Force/Popular Force (RF/PF), and instituting meaningful land reforms.³⁴

Despite its promise, by January 1968 Komer had subordinated Project TAKEOFF within the new structure, CORDS. Chief of Staff L. Wade Latham reported that Project TAKEOFF suffered from fragmented guidance in the field and a convoluted system of information gathering that fostered redundancies. The one area of TAKEOFF that received the highest regard was the CIA-inspired campaign against the Viet Cong infrastructure, the Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation Program (ICEX) or, as the GVN later renamed it, Phoung Hoang (translated as the “all-seeing bird”). Coined the Phoenix Program by U.S. officials, ICEX used a special cadre of paramilitary forces, taken mainly from the RF/PF, to carry out intelligence and eradication missions in the hamlets. The Phoenix Program exemplified Komer’s desire to take the fight to the Viet Cong in the backcountry and use similarly ruthless tactics to decapitate its leadership network.³⁵

With CORDS, however, Komer intended to “put the field back into the picture” of development and take the focus off administrative functions through improved local civil-military aid.³⁶ It integrated well over 5,000 military and civilian personnel into four regions (or Corps), forty-four provinces, and 234 districts, and it did so in an impressively short time. Having CORDS operatives in the villages as a security force compelled the GVN to increase the number of RF/PFs, which increased by 73 percent. Komer and the administration remained optimistic at the start of 1968, even as allies outside the White House began to voice their doubts.

Of the many critics, however, Samuel Huntington proved to be particularly troublesome because he attacked the theoretical underpinning of Johnson’s pacification program. Huntington had staunchly supported of the war effort since the Eisenhower ad-

34. W. T. Kerwin Memorandum, “Project TAKEOFF, June 30, 1967,” TAKEOFF folder, Center for Military History, Washington, D.C.

35. For more on the Phoenix Program, see Hunt, *Pacification*; Dale Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War* (Lexington, Mass., 1990); and Douglas Valentine, *The Phoenix Program* (New York, 1990).

36. L. Wade Latham to Komer, “Project Takeoff Year-End Wrap-up, 1967,” Jan. 10, 1968, TAKEOFF folder, Center for Military History.

ministration, a point that his friend, Henry Owens, highlighted in the cover letter to Walt Rostow that accompanied Huntington's critique. In 1965, for example, when political scientist Hans Morgenthau denounced U.S. Vietnam policy, Huntington was one of sixty-seven noted university professors who came to the administration's defense with the following statement: "We believe U.S. policy in Viet Nam is consistent with the realities of the situation, the goals of American foreign policy, and the peace and freedom of South Vietnam."³⁷ Although that support never flagged, Huntington disagreed with the theoretical and social foundations of pacification. Having just finished writing *Political Order in Changing Societies*, which questioned the assumptions and effectiveness of economic modernization, and after spending two months in South Vietnam surveying pacification for the State Department, Huntington predicted failure.³⁸

Huntington argued that pacification was at a standstill in South Vietnam. The Other War, which had been convoluted, corrupt, and repressive for many years, failed on two fronts: It neither satisfied the simple desires of the folk nor achieved the revolutionary status of the Viet Cong. He doubted whether the United States should pursue "revolution" at all, at least not designed upon Rostow's model of modernization. Rostow's theories rested on a moment when developing nations would achieve a state of high mass consumption, which would eventually grow the indigenous economy and political institutions. This version of modernization, however, assumed increasing phases of urbanization and an economy based upon consumer capitalism.

Rostow's plan ran into problems in communities that rejected urbanization and the bourgeois values of city life that accompanied it. For Huntington, this was a matter of cultural transformation, which preceded structural and economic changes, and he doubted whether dramatic concepts like "revolution" captured that relationship. To that end, Huntington admonished the administration that "Pacification is revolutionary in intent; urbanization is revolutionary in effect. Together they threaten to disrupt and destroy those remaining structures of political and social authority which exist in the

37. Douglass Cater to the President, July 16, 1965, box 1, Reference File, Vietnam, Johnson Library.

38. Author telephone interview with Huntington, Oct. 24, 2002.

countryside.”³⁹ Instead of growth, he argued, as he had in his 1965 publication “Political Development and Political Decay,” that modernization could have a reverse effect and lead to “de-development.” Standing Adlai Stevenson’s 1953 saying on its head, Huntington argued that urbanization and rapid change might cause a “revolution in rising frustrations.”⁴⁰ The result would be quite the opposite of democracy and independence; in fact, it was sure to promote nationalism.

The key to winning the hearts and minds of the people, if not the war in Vietnam, Huntington held, rested with an alternate path—accommodation. He presented accommodation as a “third way” for achieving modernization and delineated where it departed from CORDS. First, he criticized the U.S. attempt to eradicate the Viet Cong through an urban revolution that destroyed the traditional authority structure and ultimately courted resentment from locals. Second, he pointed to the institutional and emotional toll that CORDS took on U.S. troops. When faced with a break in the logic of modernization or frustration in the field, Americans retreated to their basest stereotypes about Asians, which further alienated the Vietnamese. Finally, Huntington argued that CORDS’s inflexible structure and execution contradicted the genius of the American republic. “History,” he noted, “shows that American instincts are usually revolutionary, but that our talents are mostly accommodative.”⁴¹

To demonstrate where his third way and modernization theory diverged, Huntington identified two young leaders in South Vietnam who personified the potential of each approach: Dinh Thach Bich and Nguyen Be. Their stories were almost identical: The GVN had repatriated both after fighting for the Viet Minh in the late 1940s; both abandoned the communists in the early 1950s, during French rule; both joined the ARVN in the mid-1950s, when Ngo Dinh Diem came to power; and both gained significant influence in the GVN’s pacification ministry after Diem’s assassination. Bich was

39. Samuel Huntington, “Political Stability and Security in Vietnam,” Dec. 1967, box 59, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Johnson Library.

40. Huntington, “Political Development and Political Decay,” *World Politics*, 17 (1965), 406. Adlai Stevenson was quoted as saying, “Many of the world’s troubles are not due just to Russia or communism. They would be with us in any event because we live in an era of revolution—the revolution of rising expectations.” *Look*, Sept. 22, 1953.

41. Huntington, “Political Stability and Security in Vietnam,” 80.

the special assistant for Chieu Hoi, the repatriation program that ushered in his return to the GVN, while Be managed the village of Vung Tau's Revolutionary Development training center.

But there the similarities ended. Nguyen Be was a didactic ideologue who called for reforms in the hamlets that, if necessary, would dispense with traditional practices. Bich, on the other hand, was a pragmatist who adapted to the circumstances before him without upsetting the established political system. "His aim [wa]s not to overthrow the existing groups in society," Huntington pointed out, "but to work with them and attempt to create from them a more broad-based national political movement."⁴² As the symbolism went, Nguyen Be personified the Other War and its failings, while Bich represented Huntington's path. Like pacification, Be suffered from local alienation, skepticism, indifference, and resistance.

On the U.S. side of pacification, the differences between Bich and Be played out with dire consequences. U.S. soldiers, whom Huntington characterized as optimistic at the outset of the effort, responded to the peasants' lack of interest with disdain. The process of alienation in the field tended to follow a familiar pattern: American forces showed first impatience, then frustration, and finally contempt. When the Vietnamese did not live up to their expectations, Huntington noted that American advisers resorted to essentialist arguments about the inferiority of Southeast Asians and outright racism: "In the end the Americans are driven to abandon their advisory role and do the job themselves." Part of the blame for this cultural collision stemmed from the CORDS directive to get immediate results. The rest derived from the nature of how American forces served in South Vietnam, which, he argued, made the U.S. fighting and advising force "perpetually renewed and perpetually young."⁴³

Pacification meant something different for Vietnamese peasants and American developers. To the former, it represented yet another Western deception bound for failure, while to the latter, it offered an opportunity to rescue the South Vietnamese from themselves. For Huntington, pacification illustrated a point that he had been considering for quite some time—that modernization was a fact of human development and interaction. Consequently, to

42. *Ibid.*, 79.

43. *Ibid.*, 83.

theorize an artificial process of development while not respecting the natural path of change missed the point and guaranteed failure. For this reason, he advocated a retreat from modernization and revolution and an embrace of some method of accommodation.

Huntington's 1967 report on the Other War foreshadowed a broader study of political modernization at the beginning of Richard Nixon's administration.⁴⁴ Huntington's quarrel with Johnson's pacification effort, however, was twofold: He disputed both Komer's decision to reduce CORDS workers to bureaucrats, which made them domineering and inflexible, and the limitations of Rostow's theory of modernization when faced with practical conditions. Rostow was the U.S. government's patron saint of modernization and commanded tremendous respect and influence. In CORDS, however, his theories proved too rigid. If modernization did take place, Huntington suggested, it would do so in ways invisible to Americans because neither CORDS nor the administration was equipped to recognize any signs that did not come from the book of Rostow.

Huntington's illuminating reading of the situation sent Komer scurrying for a credible defense. That January Komer responded, "I agree with Sam's obvious point [concerning] urbanization rather than pacification. . . , [but] in the short run it serves our purposes." Additionally, he argued that urbanization was an "inevitable outgrowth of the development and modernization process," which required management, not a rollback, of urbanization.⁴⁵ Huntington reiterated his main point in his response: "Accommodation not revolution should be the guide word of American policy."⁴⁶ The CIA exacerbated Komer's problems with a report that found increased communist insurgency against pacification in the backcountry. "In recent months," the report noted,

the Communists have begun to hit hard at Chieu Hoi ["Open Arms"] and refugee settlement centers, apparently judging them to be weakly protected links in the government's pacification effort as well as points at which a maximum impact can be registered on the populace. The

44. Huntington, "Getting Ready for Political Competition in South Vietnam," March 7, 1969, Records of the U.S. Forces in Southeast Asia, 1950–1975, Record Group 472, Headquarter Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, CORDS, Huntington Papers, National Archives II, Silver Spring, Maryland.

45. Comments by Komer, Jan. 3, 1968, box 59, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Johnson Library.

46. Huntington, "Political Stability and Security in Vietnam," ix.

Communists view successful counter-RD action as a means of retaining their prestige with the populace and of keeping the populace intimidated and vulnerable to continued exploitation.⁴⁷

Under increasing pressure, Komer's prose became hyperbolic about the Other War, and celebrated any event, large or small, that suggested the South Vietnamese were gaining momentum in their struggle for development. A report forwarded by Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker in October 1967 received considerable attention within the pacification bureaucracy because it refocused the Other War on modernization. The study found peasant farmers in the Mekong delta region using portable, gas-powered boat engines to power pumps to irrigate their fields, which on the surface seemed like a minor innovation. U.S. advisers, however, read the farmer's use of the pumps and the desire for increased output from their fields as a turn toward modernity, unaided by either CORDS or the GVN.

The technique itself was simple: Farmers fitted a metal sleeve around the shaft of the engine and drew water out of the canals to irrigate their rice fields. Compared to the bulky older irrigation system, which used a standard engine and centrifugal pumps, the report noted, "[t]he shrimp-tailed pump has the advantage of being lighter and simpler in its installation; hence the farmer is not required to leave to pump in the field at night." Farmers could irrigate many different fields in the course of a day, which carried the potential of increasing the farmer's yield. Additionally, the shrimp-tailed pumps became a sign of status and wealth among the delta population. Americans advisers, however, found much more meaning: The pump coincided with other economic changes in the backcountry. In rural towns like My Tho and war-ravaged provinces such as Quang Tri, radios, television sets, and even dental floss became commonplace. Because the pump offered a marketable technology for a region that had resisted economic change, and because peasant farmers invested in the engine to "keep up with the Joneses," Komer and Bunker saw this as a revolution in thinking among Vietnamese peasants.⁴⁸

47. Komer to Rostow, "Communist Counteraction Against the Revolutionary Development Program," Nov. 20, 1967, p. 1, box 59, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Johnson Library.

48. Ellsworth Bunker to Agency for International Development (AID), "The Use and Impact of Four Horse Power Gasoline Engines in Rural Vietnam," Oct. 18, 1967, in

In a relatively short period and under the radar of U.S. intellectuals and policymakers, the Vietnamese developed a culture of modernity based upon perhaps the most ancillary technology in the Western arsenal. In short, just as Huntington had predicted, the modernization revolution was taking place while U.S. officials were too distracted to notice it. As Bunker reported, “The criterion [for success] is not that the successful farmer sells more products, but that he has a motor pump.”⁴⁹ The embassy equated this sentiment with being under the influence of large economic forces but not being fully aware of what it all meant. That view suggested that peasant farmers were truly on the verge of “takeoff.”

After the Tet Offensive on January 30, 1968, Komer welcomed reports like the shrimp-tail pump story to encourage administrative support for pacification. Tet shifted the war’s focus by eroding U.S. optimism about its chances for success. Komer considered the effects purely psychological and used the rebuilding effort to keep pacification on the administration’s radar. In spite of losing 480 outposts, 200 hamlets, and almost 7,000 pacification personnel, Komer celebrated GVN rebuilding efforts and RD teams recovering 77 percent of their strength—a desperate attempt to salvage the Other War that reaped few fruitful administrative returns.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, that the pacification effort withstood the onslaught of Tet ultimately satisfied Komer. He continued to believe that security was still the most pressing concern for the Other War. Additionally, he noted that Tet had increased Ky’s commitment to pacification, which he considered an unintended boon of the surprise attack. Speaking for Ky, Komer offered,

I believe the GVN plans to place greater emphasis on those efforts which counter the enemy in the countryside, such as resecuring key roads and waterways, upgrading and strengthening the territorial security forces, pressing the attack on the VC infrastructure, reviving economic growth—especially in agriculture, and expanding the GVN presence in rural areas.⁵¹

ibid.; Hatcher, *The Suicide of an Elite*, 252–253; and Robert Samson, *The Economics of Insurgency in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), 166–168, 176–179.

49. Bunker to AID, “The Use and Impact of Four Horse Power Gasoline Engines in Rural Vietnam,” 10.

50. Interview with Komer, n.d., box 60, NSF Country File, Vietnam, Johnson Library.

51. *Ibid.*, 4. In his retrospective on the Vietnam War, Komer mined administrative documents and secondary sources to validate his optimism in 1968. The Tet Offensive had a tremendous impact on U.S. perceptions of the war, but Komer has argued that it

To Komer, the Other War was still alive, and he returned to touting modernization as its intended goal.

Komer's bold plans, however, could not restore Johnson's confidence in the war effort. When Johnson decided against running for reelection in March 1968, it signaled the death knell for modernization as a means for pacification. CORDS, however, lingered into the Nixon administration, where it was an important component of the new President's plan to win the war. Nixon's approach to nation building and pacification lies beyond the scope of this study, but his decision to bury CORDS within his Vietnamization apparatus, and then to dispense with it altogether in 1970, raises intriguing questions about the relationship between theory and policy during this period of intellectual upheaval in the development theory community.⁵²

* * *

Despite its hope-filled origins, CORDS exposed the insurmountable differences between pacification and modernization theory. The limited and difficult marriage between the two could not sustain competing definitions of progress and the role of government. When CORDS met resistance from rural Vietnamese, the administration responded rigidly and perfunctorily. Tense conditions compelled Komer to invest more faith and resources in structure and management, which in turn increased South Vietnamese resistance and assured pacification's ineffectiveness. The struggle for control and stability gave the appearance of productivity in the field, but the contradictions began to ring loud enough for the intellectual community in Washington, D.C., to take notice.

Modernization theory thereafter suffered a fate similar to that of pacification. Huntington's attack became one of the forces driving its collapse, even though his alternative called for repressive control that smacked of authoritarianism. He remained committed

energized the GVN to devote more resources to pacification and removing corrupt officials; it also compelled it to consolidate control, in effect creating the integrated structure of CORDS. For a detailed discussion of Komer's assessment of pacification in South Vietnam, see Komer, *Bureaucracy at War*, 115–129.

52. Sorley, *A Better War*, looks deeply into Richard Nixon's program for Vietnamization and argues it was a continuation of the CORDS agenda due to the visionary work of Gen. Creighton Abrams. Sorley's study is well researched and perceptive but does not provide an in-depth discussion of ideological antecedents of CORDS in the Nixon administration.

to development but considered modernization theory an attempt to make what was essentially a natural process of change into a political contrivance. In 1971 he launched a direct attack on the theory in "The Change to Change: Modernization, Development, and Politics," which amounted to a jeremiad on the state of political science. "The entire process [modernization]," he wrote, "can thus be telescoped, and the assumption that there is a well-defined progression of phases—preconditions, takeoff, drive to maturity, and the like—through which all societies must move is likely to be invalid."⁵³ This position merely reiterated a point made to President Johnson in 1968. Ron Robin has noted that even MIT's Lucien Pye acknowledged that the realities of the Vietnam War became a drag on modernization theory intellectuals.⁵⁴ Aided by the work of dependency and world-system theorists, modernization theory became retrograde, even while faith in development remained strong among academics and the political elite.

For Johnson, the Tet Offensive washed away his illusion of progress. It also forced him to search for a peaceable end to the Vietnam War in the attempt to salvage the idea of modernization and the legacy of his administration. In the twilight of his life, Johnson confided to Doris Kearns Goodwin that Vietnam snatched the Great Society, and implicitly his moral leadership, from victory's grasp.⁵⁵ CORDS, however, caused its own heartache and offered Johnson few redeemable arguments about the good his administration had done for humankind. Built upon a foundation of Cold War imperatives and modernization theory, the Other War condemned the entire administrative program to its fate.

53. Samuel Huntington, "The Change to Change: Modernization, Development, and Politics," *Comparative Politics*, 3 (1971), 298.

54. Robin, *The Making of the Cold War Enemy*, 220.

55. Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York, 1991).

