Managing Global Counterinsurgency: The Special Group (CI) 1962-1966

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Managing Global Counterinsurgency: The Special Group (CI) 1962–1966

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ABSTRACT: The contemporary American counterinsurgency discourse has emphasised a particular historical narrative of Vietnam to justify large-scale military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Absent from this narrative is any reference to the broader Cold War context in which Vietnam existed alongside numerous other small-scale counterinsurgencies and was therefore the exception, not the rule. This article seeks to redress this shortcoming by examining the way counterinsurgency was conceived and managed at the level of ‘grand strategy.’ Specifically, it focuses on the Special Group (Counterinsurgency) to demonstrate that senior policymakers under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson understood ‘counterinsurgency’ as involving ‘indirect’ assistance to foreign governments, rather than taking ‘direct’ military action with American ground forces.

KEY WORDS: Counterinsurgency, Special Group, Grand Strategy

In recent years, US officials have returned to Vietnam as a guide to Iraq, Afghanistan and the subject of counterinsurgency more generally. This historical analogy is viewed as the most appropriate, not due to the similarities between the Viet Cong and Sunni ‘insurgents’ or the Taliban, but rather because each of these cases represent instances of large-scale US military-led ‘counterinsurgency.’ In the contemporary American discourse, the connection is portrayed as self-evident. Former US Army Vice Chief of Staff General Jack Keane, one of the key architects behind the 2007–2008 Iraq ‘surge’, has emphasized that ‘After the Vietnam War, we purged ourselves of everything that had to do with irregular warfare or insurgency.’ The implication here is that Vietnam represents the only case of ‘irregular warfare and insurgency’ the US military dealt with in that period. Similarly, in recent strategy
debates on Afghanistan, only a large-scale ‘population-centric’ strategy led by the US military was said to constitute ‘counterinsurgency’, whereas other options were pejoratively labelled as ‘counter-terrorism’ and dismissed as unworkable if not defeatist.¹

In other words, the spectrum of ‘counterinsurgency’ has become a very narrow one in which it is presupposed, similar to Vietnam, that the US can indefinitely commit a significant amount of the nation’s political, diplomatic, military, and financial resources to achieve an ‘acceptable’ political outcome. The problem with this view is that it reflects a very limited view of ‘counterinsurgency’ predicated on a case selection of only three conflicts. Almost completely ignored from the analysis of Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan is the fact that these conflicts coexist alongside numerous other ‘counterinsurgencies’ that have occurred either as part of the Cold War or the Global War on Terror. In sheer numerical terms, these other small-scale cases of American ‘global counterinsurgency’ can almost be said to constitute an ‘American way in counterinsurgency’, with the three large-scale cases as the exception to the rule.

The contemporary US ‘counterinsurgency narrative’, as epitomized by the likes of General David Petraeus and encapsulated in counter-insurgency field manual FM 3–24, derives in large part from the unofficial ‘lessons learned’ from Vietnam that are featured in Andrew Krepinevich’s highly influential 1986 book The Army and Vietnam.² For Krepinevich, President John F. Kennedy’s attempt to make the US military become more proficient at ‘counterinsurgency’


²Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., The Army and Vietnam (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP 1986). John Nagl admits that he ‘stole from it shamelessly’ when writing his own doctoral thesis that later became the key ‘counterinsurgency’ text during the Iraq War – ‘Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counter-insurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam’. See Greg Jaffe, ‘As Iraq War Rages, Army Re-Examines Lessons of Vietnam’, Wall Street Journal, 20 March 2006. While the authors of FM 3–24 examined many conflicts other than Vietnam, and also make a brief reference to El Salvador in the 1980s, there is an underlying assumption not only in the manual, but also in the policy prescriptions these authors advocated in Iraq and Afghanistan, that large numbers of US forces were required and that the US military as a whole had to innovate for this purpose. See Michaels and Ford ‘Bandwagonistas’.
Managing Global Counterinsurgency 1962–1966 35

was a ‘revolution that failed’. In his interpretation, the failure in Vietnam was mainly one of the US military’s unwillingness to innovate and become more adept at ‘winning hearts and minds’ as opposed to the traditional ‘Army Concept’ of ‘search and destroy.’ This view presupposed an American military-led ‘counterinsurgency’ effort consisting of a large-scale commitment of US forces. It also presupposed the US military’s main priority could be indefinitely placed on ‘counterinsurgency’ in a single theater at the expense of other global commitments. In his book, Krepinevich makes no attempt to examine other cases where either the US Army or other US Government agencies engaged in ‘counterinsurgency’ while the Vietnam conflict was ongoing. Krepinevich’s references to the oversight provided by the high-level inter-agency Special Group (Counterinsurgency) highlight his tendency to equate ‘counterinsurgency’ reform in the US Army with ‘counterinsurgency’ reform throughout the US Government.

As this article will show, Krepinevich’s mischaracterization of the Special Group (CI)’s function, especially the way it conceived of ‘counterinsurgency’, has profound implications for the study of US counterinsurgency more generally. By removing from consideration the ideas and constraints that guided US policymakers at the level of ‘grand strategy’, the analysis of Vietnam presented by Krepinevich is therefore devoid of the broader context in which counterinsurgency was viewed in more general Cold War terms. It is the Krepinevich view that dominates the mainstream historiography on the subject, but as this article will attempt to show, this view has significant limitations.

The Special Group (CI) has yet to feature as a subject in its own right either in the US Cold War literature, or more specifically the


4Although not usually stated, this idea is implicit precisely because the duration of the conflict is unknown. It is assumed, in FM 3–24 for instance, that most insurgencies last many years and that when the US plans for a counterinsurgency, large numbers of US forces may be needed for this period. Krepinevich’s 2005 article is also explicit on this point.

5Hereafter the ‘Special Group (Counterinsurgency)’ will be referred to as the ‘Special Group (CI)’ or simply the ‘Group’. In the footnotes, the abbreviation ‘SGCI’ will be used. Referring to the men who made up the Group, Krepinevich notes ‘one wonders why a president so intent on forcing the Army to develop a new approach to this form of warfare would opt for so conventional group of men to bring about this change’. (Krepinevich Jr., The Army and Vietnam, 35) He also insists that the ‘Army would have to bear the brunt of administration efforts to counter insurgencies’ (29).
counterinsurgency literature. This gap is surprising, particularly as counterinsurgency featured so prominently in US policies in the ‘Third World.’ It is important to remember that at the level of Cold War ‘grand strategy’, the reasoning behind the need to counter insurgencies was directly connected with the fear of the Soviet Bloc, China, and Cuba potentially gaining ground in the ‘Third World’ at the expense of US interests. For this reason, if for no other, US policymakers were wary of large military commitments, and therefore crafted policies that were relatively ‘cheap’.

As a Wall Street Journal article on the Group described: ‘Nearly every Thursday afternoon seven top US policymakers … meet secretly in the tightly guarded Executive Office Building next door to the White House for a special kind of cold-war planning. Their mission is to mastermind counterinsurgency.’ Masterminding counterinsurgency around the world forced these policymakers to confront a wide variety of problems, and also compelled them to employ numerous tools to solve, or perhaps more accurately, to ‘manage’ these problems. The broad remit of counterinsurgency included sending military and police trainers to assist friendly governments to deal with actual or potential insurgency situations, re-orientating the US intelligence apparatus to monitor the developing world for signs of insurgency and to work with the governments of these countries to enhance their own capabilities, dealing with political, economic, and land reform issues, and so forth. In many cases, counterinsurgency efforts were based out of US Embassies, and were conducted on a very different timescale and with only a fraction of the resources allocated to the Vietnam conflict. Underlying these efforts was the assumption that not only would the US not take on the main burden of fighting ‘insurgents’, but that doing so would actually be counterproductive.

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8 For example, see Walt W. Rostow, View From the Seventh Floor (New York: Harper and Row 1964), 117.
This article aims then to explore the history of the Special Group (CI) not simply to tell the story of an important element of US Cold War policy during 1962–66 and beyond, but also to highlight the ‘indirect’ nature of the majority of US counterinsurgency campaigns. By examining the Group’s evolution, this article also aims to move beyond the theoretical aspects of counterinsurgency and focus on the challenges of instituting such a program within the US Government. To examine these issues, the article is divided into several sections. It will cover the Cold War origins of US counterinsurgency practice prior to 1961, discuss the development of the counterinsurgency program within the Kennedy administration leading to the creation of the Group, highlight issues the Group was directly overseeing such as training and doctrine, trace the Group’s development and use of terminology, draw out the complex and global nature of the insurgency problem and how the Group attempted to manage it, and then conclude by looking at the Group’s perceived achievements and tracing its demise and longer-term legacy.

The Cold War Context of US Counterinsurgency

The American interest in counterinsurgency during the Cold War was intimately connected with the idea that the prospect of Communist-inspired insurgency, or that of a nationalist or other type of insurgency that could be taken advantage of by the Soviet bloc, presented a global challenge, particularly in cases where instability was caused by the stress of modernization. The early US commitments to Cold War-related counterinsurgency beginning under President Harry Truman included the US interventions in Greece and the Philippines. In neither of these cases did the US military play a direct role. Counterinsurgency assistance was limited mainly to the provision of money, arms, training, and advice, with the local governments carrying the main burden. In both of these cases, the insurgencies were well developed, yet were effectively defeated within a few years.

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Under President Dwight Eisenhower there was considerable interest in boosting the ‘internal security’ capabilities of friendly governments, particularly the police forces and intelligence services. This interest was translated into the 1954 ‘Overseas Internal Security Program’ (OISP) that dispatched US police advisors to various countries faced with ‘Communist subversion’. The emphasis on police, not the military, to deal with this perceived ‘threat’, reflected a more general belief that the military was not the most appropriate instrument to deal with it. During the Eisenhower years, military assistance programs were mainly intended to help develop other countries’ conventional defense capabilities, though developing ‘internal defense’ capabilities became a priority late in the administration.

When the Kennedy administration came to power in 1961, there was only limited evidence of continuity from the previous administration in terms of thinking about how to deal with the Communist subversive challenge, and to an extent they went through a process of ‘reinventing the wheel’, particularly when it came to understanding the importance of police assistance programs. For instance, one of the key features distinguishing the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations was the latter’s emphasis both on the overall importance of ‘counterinsurgency’ as part of the Cold War, and also its intellectual association with ‘modernization theory’.

Nevertheless, there was a crucial continuity in that both presidents believed that the US was to play primarily an indirect role in counterinsurgency, leaving the main effort to the indigenous government. In a meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff

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on 23 February 1961, Kennedy pointed out that ‘it is not always possible for us to take direct action and that, for most of the problems that face us now, we will have to satisfy ourselves with training the people of these various countries to do their own guerrilla and anti-guerrilla operations.’

It is well known that when Kennedy came into office he wanted to make counterinsurgency a priority. However, he did not arrive at the White House with any specific ideas about how to make it a priority beyond some organizational reforms within the US military such as increasing the number of Special Forces. Consequently, in his first year in office, high-level government studies were commissioned to examine the problem and make recommendations. In June 1961, the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff published a paper entitled ‘Internal Defense of Less Developed World’. Highlighting the need to focus more US government assistance programs on ‘internal’ rather than ‘external defense’, such as spending more money on foreign police forces than on foreign militaries, the report noted that in 1958 the resources allocated to the OISP represented less than one half of one percent of the Military Support Program. Another key takeaway from this document was that US programs ‘lack coordination, central leadership and a governing doctrine under which US efforts and resources can be orchestrated for maximum effect’.

In December 1961, another important study was published. Under the direction of the CIA’s Deputy Director for Plans Richard Bissell a report was published entitled ‘Elements of US Strategy to Deal with “Wars of National Liberation”’. According to Walt W. Rostow, the purpose of the Bissell study was to address the question, ‘How can our military, covert, nation building and economic development programs in the underdeveloped countries be employed to deter guerrilla operations and to seal off areas?’ The Bissell Report recommended the creation of a single high-level coordinating body for the US

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17 Ibid., 3–4.
18 Ibid., 9.
19 Bissell served as chairman of the NSC Counter-Guerrilla Warfare Task Force that produced the report. The other members of the task force were Edward Lansdale, Walt Rostow and Henry Ramsey.
counterinsurgency effort. Within a few weeks of the Report’s publication, this recommendation would become a reality.

Evolution of the Special Group (CI): A Global Remit

On 18 January 1962, Kennedy signed National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 124 that established the Special Group (CI). The Group was to consist of a chairman, the Attorney General, the Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, the Director of Central Intelligence, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, and the Administrator of the Agency for International Development. Group meetings took place in the Old Executive Office Building, and were held weekly, lasting for approximately two hours. According to NSAM 124, the Group had four primary functions: raise the level of consciousness within the US Government to the problem of ‘subversive insurgency’; ensure that such recognition was institutionalized within the bureaucracy; review the resources available to the US Government to deal with the problem; and to ‘insure the development of adequate interdepartmental programs aimed at preventing or defeating subversive insurgency and indirect aggression’ in the countries assigned to it.

From 1962–66, the Group had three chairmen. General Maxwell Taylor, who was viewed as the Group’s most effective chairman, served from January–October 1962 prior to becoming the new Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Deputy Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs U. Alexis Johnson replaced him. However, Johnson only stayed for a short period, due in large part to his poor relations with Robert Kennedy, whom he described as an ‘unguided missile’. By March 1963, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Averell Harriman would be appointed as Johnson’s replacement, and remain in place until the Group was disbanded.

Initially, only three countries were assigned to the Group: Laos, Vietnam and Thailand. However this list soon expanded. Interestingly, Taylor noted that Laos need not be looked at by the Group since action was ‘being taken elsewhere’. This was most likely a reference to the original Special

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20 Memo for the Record, Subject: Background Information on the Establishment of the SGCI, NSF/RWK, Box 15, SGCI, 1964–1966, LBJL.
22 The head of the US Information Agency (USIA) would be added to this list on 13 Aug. 1962 as required by NSAM 180.
24 Interestingly, Taylor noted that Laos need not be looked at by the Group since action was ‘being taken elsewhere’. This was most likely a reference to the original Special
1962 a list of 13 countries was proposed by the State Department as sufficiently critical as to warrant the attention of the Group. Apart from the original three countries, the new list included: Cambodia, Burma, Cameroon, Guatemala, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Iran, Pakistan, and Nepal. On 16 June, NSAM 165 was approved which added all these countries to the cognizance of the Group except for Pakistan and Nepal. Over the course of the Group’s existence, there would be considerable debate about which countries should be monitored. For example, in September 1962, Cameroon was deleted from the list, and Bolivia was added to it. There was also discussion about dropping Burma from the list and adding Indonesia. In May 1963, NSC staffer Mike Forrestal suggested removing Cambodia and Laos from the Group’s list, and replacing them with Indonesia and Iraq. Once a new country was added to the list, the Group would receive ‘extensive briefings’ on it and review the Internal Defense Plans produced by the Embassy ‘Country Team’, normally on a quarterly basis. As U. Alexis Johnson noted, ‘From the experiences of these individual countries we tried to develop an appreciation of the nature of subversive insurgency generally.’ While there was a ‘permanent’ list of countries for which Internal Defense Plans would be produced, the Group also monitored many other countries where there were concerns about potential insurgency. By late 1964, the Group was regularly monitoring the Internal Defense Plans for 12 countries and supervising numerous other counterinsurgency programs. To support the Group’s work, three

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Group, otherwise known as the 5412 Committee, which was responsible for oversight of covert operations. Minutes of the SGCI Meeting, 17 May 1962. NSF/MM, Box 319, SGCI, 6/8/61–11/2/62, JFKL.
25Minutes of the SGCI Meeting, 7 June 1962. NSF/MM, Box 319, SGCI, 6/8/61–11/2/62, JFKL.
26Memo from Kommer to Bundy, 18 June 1962. NSF/MM, Box 319, SGCI, 6/8/61–11/2/62, JFKL.
29Memo from Taylor to SGCI, 27 Oct. 1962, NSF/MM, Box 319, SGCI 7/62–11/63, JFKL.
30Johnson, Right Hand of Power, 331.
31The 12 countries were Thailand, Iran, Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Bolivia, Guatemala, Saudi Arabia, Honduras, Jordan, Peru and Iraq. See attachment to Memo from Harriman to President Johnson, 16 Dec. 1964, NSF/RWK, Box 15, SGCI, 1964–1966, LBJL.
subcommittees were formed: the Latin American Ad Hoc Group, the Training Committee, and the Committee of Assistants.\textsuperscript{32}

Although Vietnam would be monitored throughout the Group’s existence, in early 1964 the Sullivan Coordinating Committee had assumed primary responsibility for Vietnam, and the Group’s role was limited to assisting that committee when required.\textsuperscript{33} Initially, Vietnam had featured prominently in the Group’s discussions, though often it was presented in a wider Southeast Asian context with Thailand receiving a similar level of attention. During this period, the Group monitored the progress of the Strategic Hamlet Program, not simply in relation to its utility in Vietnam, but also for the potential ‘lessons’ to be gleaned for similar applications elsewhere. Apart from briefings by US officials, Sir Robert Thompson and Australian Colonel Ted Serong would also brief the Group on this program. The Group would regularly monitor and offer policy guidance on other aspects of the conflict such as development programs, internal South Vietnamese politics, press relations, economic stability, and institution building.\textsuperscript{34}

**Terminology Evolution**

A key task of the Special Group (CI) was to determine the terminology employed to characterize the phenomenon it was dealing with. For instance, during the Eisenhower administration, the term ‘internal security’ was often employed. However, by the time the Kennedy administration came into office, that term fell into disfavor, and was replaced by the term ‘internal defense’, although in internal correspondence the two terms were often used interchangeably.\textsuperscript{35} Interestingly, questions were raised about the appropriateness of using the term ‘counterinsurgency’. Among Group members, there was a consensus that the term ‘internal defense’ was more appropriate, but it was also

\textsuperscript{32}Minutes of the SGCI Meeting, 17 Sept. 1965, NSF/RWK, Box 15, SGCI, 1964–1966, LBJL.


\textsuperscript{34}As early as March 1962, the Group’s oversight of Vietnam included several areas. According to one report: ‘Special attention has been focused on: improvement of the military command structure; prisoner of war interrogation; provincial surveys; and Border Ranger Forces. The economic programs in South Vietnam have been under review to assure that they are properly oriented toward counter-insurgency’. Memo from Parrott to Kennedy, 22 March 1962, FRUS, 1961–1963, Vol. VIII, Doc. 74.

\textsuperscript{35}According to one high-level document: “‘Internal defense’ is used interchangeably with ‘internal security’ in this paper in an effort to suggest a more psychologically palatable term then ‘internal security’”. See: ‘Internal Defense of Less Developed World’, Policy Planning Council, Dept. of State, 16 June 1961, p. 1.
recognized that ‘counterinsurgency’ was the President’s favored term, and therefore changing the terminology would pose some difficulties.36 According to U. Alexis Johnson, ‘None of us really liked the term “counter-insurgency”, which sounded too negative. “Internal defense” would have been better to my mind, but General Taylor said the President had deliberately chosen counterinsurgency and counterinsurgency it remained.’37

Nevertheless, the issue of terminology resurfaced several times during the Group’s existence. In 1963, Charles Maechling, the State Department’s Director of Internal Defense, observed that the counterinsurgency ‘label’ was being misused, and that some countries assigned to the Group were not necessarily confronted by a ‘Communist-inspired’ insurgency. For example, Maechling noted that ‘Colombia suffers from rural banditry; Ecuador, Guatemala and Bolivia from chronic instability; the threat in Iran will most likely be a coup, Thailand is external infiltration as much as internal.’ He also complained that the counterinsurgency label was being used to cover programs such as labor and youth, and that by approaching these issues through the ‘back door’, the result was a distortion of the ‘true nature of the problem’.38 There was also a perception problem within the US Government about using the term ‘counterinsurgency.’ Because the Pentagon had ‘captured’ the term, it aroused the suspicions of non-military agencies such as the Agency for International Development (AID), who wanted to avoid association with it.39

The problem with ‘counterinsurgency’ would emerge again during Taylor’s 1965–66 review of ‘all government activities in the field of counterinsurgency’. As part of the review, it was agreed that the problem they were examining was inaccurately described as ‘counterinsurgency’ because it failed ‘to emphasize the non-military preventive aspects of the problem’. Instead, Taylor proposed to replace ‘insurgency’ with the term ‘subversive aggression’, and referred to the ‘antidote’ as ‘counter-subversion’. ‘Subversive aggression’ was defined by Taylor as ‘the use of political subversion, sabotage, terrorist activities and guerrilla operations (singly or in combination) to overthrow a government which the United States has a cogent interest

37Johnson, Right Hand of Power, 330.
39Memo from Saunders to Komer, 13 April 1965, NSF/RWK, Box 15, SGCI, 1964–1966, LBJL.
to maintain’. Similarly, National Security Council (NSC) staffer Robert Komer noted that ‘counterinsurgency’ is ‘hard to define’ since it could cover ‘all sorts of threats’ and concurred with Taylor’s preference for ‘counter-subversion’. Among other things, it was recognized that even if US ‘counterinsurgency’ programs were successful, that the ‘Communists’ could still employ non-violent means to subvert and potentially take over a foreign government.

Overseas Internal Defense Policy (OIDP)

One of the key deficiencies of the Kennedy counterinsurgency effort initially was the lack of a generic US Government counterinsurgency doctrine that would define the problem and provide high-level guidance on how Washington would respond. This deficiency was rectified at the Group’s behest. The task of drafting a doctrine was given to Maechling. Over several months in the summer of 1962 there were numerous discussions among Group members about the doctrine’s content. Rather than being called a ‘counterinsurgency’ doctrine, the State Department preferred the term ‘internal defense’ because the term ‘counterinsurgency’ was perceived as ‘too narrowly focused on Vietnam’ style insurgencies that had already assumed considerable proportions. On 24 August 1962, President Kennedy approved NSAM 182 formalizing the OIDP as government policy. In the words of U. Alexis Johnson, this document would come to be known ‘as the “CI Bible”’. According to NSAM 182, the OIDP was ‘to

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42 Interestingly, a similar assessment had been prepared several years earlier in reference to the Group. It was noted that ‘To the extent that counterinsurgency programs are effective, the Communists will concentrate gaining power through other means’. Therefore it was suggested that the Group should become interested in developing administrative training facilities to provide trained administrative personnel especially at the provincial and district levels of underdeveloped countries. See: Memo from Davis to RFK and Dungan, 7 Jan. 1963, NSF/MM, Box 319, SGCI 7/62–11/63, JFKL.
43 Maechling discusses his role in drafting the OIDP in his ‘Insurgency and Counter-insurgency: The Role of Strategic Theory’, Parameters 14/3 (Autumn 1984), 33–34.
45 Memo from Komer to Bundy, 6 Aug. 1962, NSF/MM, Box 319, SGCI 6/8/61–11/2/62, JFKL.
47 Johnson, Right Hand of Power, 331.
The substance of the OIDP is notable in several respects, not only for what it says, but also for what it does not say. Maechling has observed that the OIDP’s ‘principal purpose was to prescribe “mission assignments” for government agencies’. Indeed, in terms of government organization, the OIDP did have the effect of encouraging each department and agency to designate an element to be responsible for internal defense matters. While the scope of the document embraced ‘the range of US measures to assist vulnerable regimes in preventing and defeating subversion and insurgency’, it does not make reference to large-scale US military intervention. Indeed, according to the document, ‘In countering insurgency, the major effort must be indigenous since insurgency is a uniquely local problem... Overly prominent participation of US personnel in counterinsurgency operations can be counterproductive.’

But if large-scale US military intervention was not mentioned as an option, then what were the US options to counter a foreign insurgency? Referring to the OIDP, Johnson noted: ‘And so our internal defense programs had to employ every asset we could muster, from better information work abroad to intensified economic development, to training local police in non-violent crowd control.’ A significant number of US options were non-military and paramilitary rather than strictly military, and even in the cases of military support, the emphasis was on supporting the local military, rather than on the intervention of US combat forces. There was, however, one exception to this, and this exception is very revealing about the way in which a direct US combat role of the sort that characterized US intervention in Vietnam after March 1965 was outside the spectrum of debate when the OIDP was written. The OIDP notes that under certain circumstances it may be necessary for US military forces to be involved in counterinsurgency operations. However, US military involvement was to be limited. Rather than potentially sending hundreds of thousands of US troops to

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48NSAM 182.

49Maechling, ‘Insurgency and Counterinsurgency: The Role of Strategic Theory’, 34.

50This was broken down as follows: State Department/Office of Politico-Military Affairs, DoD/International Security Affairs, JCS/SACSA, CIA/Deputy Director for Plans, Special Group Office, USIA/Office of Policy, AID/AID-PC, Special Assistant for Internal Defense.

51OIDP, 13. Can be found in: NSF/MM, Box 319, SGCI 6/8/61–11/2/62, JFKL.

52Johnson, Right Hand of Power, 332.

53Among the areas of support to a local government that are listed include: land reform, civic action, community development, social projects, education, labor and youth, leader groups, police (referred to as ‘the first line of defense against subversion and insurgency’), and diplomatic. OIDP, 14–18.
defeat an insurgency on behalf of a friendly government, the ‘operational’ role of the US military in a case where an insurgency had developed to ‘serious proportions’ was to take the form of supporting indigenous forces through the provision of ‘land/sea/air mobility, additional communications facilities, training assistance and advice on the conduct of counterinsurgency operations’.\footnote{OIDP, 28. When discussing an insurgency of ‘serious proportions’, the document is referring specifically to a Phase II or III level insurgency. A Phase II level insurgency is reached ‘when the subversive movement has gained sufficient local or external support, initiates organized guerilla warfare or related forms of violence against the established authority.’ A Phase III level insurgency is defined as the stage reached ‘when the insurgency becomes primarily a war of movement between organized forces of the insurgents and those of the established authority.’ (20–1).} During the discussions over military escalation in Vietnam, Taylor argued against over-militarization, similar to the OIDP’s prescription. He warned the Joint Chiefs in February 1963, ‘I am convinced that we should adhere to our past policy of keeping our ground forces out of direct counterinsurgency role.’\footnote{Telegram from Embassy in Saigon to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, FRUS, 1964–1968, Vol. II, Doc. 153.}

Following in the tradition of Krepinevich, present day counter-insurgency theorist David Kilcullen has also dismissed the relevance of the OIDP. According to Kilcullen, the doctrine was only applied to the ‘minor campaigns of the day. And it lasted only until 1966.’\footnote{David J. Kilcullen, ‘Three Pillars of Counterinsurgency’, Remarks delivered at the US Government Counterinsurgency Conference, Washington DC, 28 Sept. 2006.} By this logic then, Vietnam was the only ‘major campaign.’ Therefore, the many other countries where US counterinsurgency programs existed have little relevance, and thus the OIDP is of limited value. In actual fact, the OIDP did not vanish, but continued to serve as a policy guide throughout the 1960s and beyond. Many of the OIDP’s fundamental points about the nature of insurgency and US policy responses were retained in the 1968 document that replaced it, entitled ‘United States Policy on Internal Defense in Selected Foreign Countries’.\footnote{Paper Approved by the Senior Interdepartmental Group. FRUS, 1964–1968, Vol. X, Doc. 204.} It is noteworthy that as of 1969, US internal defense plans and assistance to foreign governments existed for some 43 countries.\footnote{Seven countries were listed as having internal defense plans. Thirty-six other countries were also receiving US internal defense assistance. Memo from Farley to Katzenbach, 26 March 1969, DDRS, accessed 12 Oct. 2010.} As such, there was a great deal of continuity in terms of US ‘grand strategy’ related to counterinsurgency, with the OIDP
reflecting several principles that would guide US policy through the end of the Cold War.\textsuperscript{59}

**Spreading the Counterinsurgency Gospel**

Referring to the OIDP, U. Alexis Johnson noted, ‘With the “Bible” written, we thus had to spread the gospel.’\textsuperscript{60} One of the most important responsibilities of the Special Group (CI) was to raise the profile of ‘counterinsurgency’, both inside the US Government as well as with allies. In order to do so, one of Taylor’s first acts as chairman was to reach out to other officials within the US Government to get their support. For example, Taylor approached the Secretaries of Labor and Agriculture as these bureaucracies would be useful in dealing with some of the non-military aspects of support to countries threatened by insurgencies.\textsuperscript{61} Prior to the formation of the Group, the military had already increased its counterinsurgency training programs for military attachés, military advisors, and for the Special Forces.\textsuperscript{62} This training was to be expanded more broadly in the military, and to emphasize such topics as civic action. Considerable emphasis was also placed on the non-military and paramilitary training of foreign police officers. One of the topics repeatedly discussed in the early months of the Group was the creation of an Inter-American Police Academy. Although the idea preceded the Group’s formation, members such as Robert Kennedy ensured that the Group used its authority to ‘prod’ the relevant bureaucracies to get the academy up and running.\textsuperscript{63} By July 1962, the Panama-based academy opened its doors. The Group would follow its progress closely and regularly receive reports on the number of students being trained there.\textsuperscript{64}

Shortly after the Group’s formation, Taylor also recommended setting up an inter-departmental subcommittee to deal with the problem of counterinsurgency training. In principle, this training was to include the study of the ‘historical background of counterinsurgency’, the study of departmental counterinsurgency tactics and

\textsuperscript{59}For further elaboration on this point, see McClintock, *Instruments of Statecraft*.

\textsuperscript{60}Johnson, *Right Hand of Power*, 332.

\textsuperscript{61}Memo from Goldberg to Taylor, 31 Jan. 1962 and Memo from Freeman to Taylor, 14 Feb. 1962 in NSF/MM, Box 319, SGCI 4/6/61–6/7/62, JFKL.

\textsuperscript{62}Minutes of the SGCI Meeting, 18 Jan. 1962. NSF/MM, Box 319, SGCI 6/8/61–11/2/62, JFKL.

\textsuperscript{63}Minutes of the SGCI Meeting, 22 March 1962. NSF/MM, Box 319, SGCI 6/8/61–11/2/62, JFKL.

\textsuperscript{64}This academy was later merged with a new International Police Academy based in Washington DC.
techniques, ‘instruction in counterinsurgency program planning’, and ‘instruction in preparation for service in counterinsurgency areas’. Rostow was nominated to head this subcommittee. The problems of modernization, which were of special interest to Rostow, would thus feature prominently in the training courses provided to senior officials. Under Rostow’s guidance, a five-week interdepartmental counterinsurgency seminar based at the Foreign Service Institute was developed, and would become one of the main means of ‘spreading the gospel’.

The seminar was supposed to be mandatory for ‘all senior personnel, including ambassadors, being assigned to underdeveloped areas’. After the first seminar in June 1962, the attendees were taken to the White House to meet with the President who then emphasized the importance of the insurgency challenge. In the following years, the seminar would process between 40 and 70 government officials eight or ten times per year. The course was even deemed important enough to delay the arrival in Vietnam of Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge for some weeks so that he could attend. Over the course of the next several years, the Group would closely monitor and receive updates about developments in the training program.

A Complex Problem Set

One of the main reasons for Kennedy’s enthusiasm for ‘counter-insurgency’ was his reaction to Khrushchev’s 1961 ‘wars of national liberation’ speech. It is generally accepted among historians that Kennedy viewed the prospect of Soviet-inspired ‘wars of national liberation’ as a significant ‘threat’ to US interests. However, the perceived threat was not simply one of Soviet-inspired ‘subversive insurgency’. For example, Kennedy’s interest in ‘counterinsurgency’ was also connected to his concern over another Cuban-style revolution in Latin America. Within a couple of years of Castro’s defeat of the Batista Government, the new Cuban government was seen to be engaged in sponsoring similar insurgencies and other

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67Johnson, Right Hand of Power, 332.
68Blaufarb, The Counterinsurgency Era, 72.
69Ibid., 73.
‘subversive’ activities throughout Latin America. In addition to the Cuban ‘threat’, the Group also closely monitored China’s role in sponsoring ‘insurgencies’ around the world. As of March 1965, CIA head John McCone was adamant that both the Soviets and Chinese would pursue an aggressive program of political action, subversion and insurgency in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East, and complained that the US was not doing enough to combat this growing threat.

The US ‘counterinsurgency’ response to this multifaceted ‘threat’ would include a diverse range of programs that would be overseen by the Group. These programs included: police assistance, support to local intelligence and security services, development programs, youth and labor activities, and redirecting military assistance from external to internal defense. The remainder of this section will examine how the Group utilized each of these methods in their approach to ‘global counterinsurgency’. In doing so, it will also attempt to demonstrate that these methods were the norm of US counterinsurgency policy, bearing a remarkable resemblance to those mentioned in the OIDP, and that by contrast, large-scale US military intervention was the exception to the rule.

As mentioned earlier, police assistance programs, otherwise referred to as ‘public safety’ programs, were a prominent feature of the Eisenhower administration’s efforts to resist perceived Communist ‘subversion’. Likewise under Kennedy, and later Johnson, the Group placed considerable emphasis on ‘police’ as a tool of counterinsurgency. Komer, for instance, would regularly complain about the undue influence of the Pentagon’s involvement in ‘counterinsurgency’, and would argue that ‘the police program is even more important than Special Forces in our global C-I (counterinsurgency) effort’. Shortly after the Group was established, U. Alexis Johnson was given the task of conducting a study on police requirements for ‘counterinsurgency’ and to give a ‘new look’ to the police program. On 20 July 1962, Johnson reported the conclusions of his study and

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72 In relation to Africa, for example, there was considerable discussion of China’s role in the Congo. See: State/INR memo from Denney to Harriman, 11 Aug. 1964. Accessed via DDRS on 15 Nov. 2010.
74 Memo from Komer to Bundy and Taylor, 18 April 1962. NSF/MM, Box 319, SGCI 4/6/61–6/7/62, JFKL.
recommended ‘expanding our foreign police assistance programs significantly’.75

In the aftermath of the report, Kennedy signed NSAM 177 in August 1962 that called upon AID to increase its emphasis on police programs, which then led to AID upgrading the profile of police assistance with the creation of the Office of Public Safety (OPS) in November 1962.76 By 1965, there were 34 Public Safety Programs, ten of which were initiated since the creation of OPS. To run these programs, OPS employed some 300 Public Safety Advisors.77 Tens of thousands of foreign police officers would be trained by OPS during this period, both abroad and in the US. In addition to the Panama-based Inter-American Police Academy, an International Police Academy was created in December 1963.78 At the suggestion of the Group, AID produced a training aid film entitled ‘The First Line of Defense’ that was intended to stress the concept that police had the primary responsibility for maintaining internal security with the military in a supporting role. This concept was at the heart of OPS training.79

Another important dimension of counterinsurgency regularly monitored by the Group was US support to local intelligence and security services, as well as paramilitary activities. As Komer observed, ‘Intelligence is vital, and the national police of these countries are the only ones who have any kind of a network, either in the cities or out in the boondocks.’80 In South Vietnam, the CIA worked very closely with that country’s numerous intelligence organizations, and pushed Saigon to develop a central intelligence organization.81 As with their support to other security services, the CIA provided material assistance to South Vietnam, such as radio direction finding equipment, as well as the training needed to operate it.82 In countries such as Colombia and Ecuador, the CIA helped develop the local intelligence apparatus,

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75 Johnson, Right Hand of Power, 338.
77 Memo from Bell to SGCI, 5 April 1965 with attached AID report on Public Safety Programs. Accessed via DDRS on 8 Nov. 2010.
78 Minutes of Meeting of the SGCI, 8 Aug. 1963. NSF/RWK, Box 414, SGCI 9/62–11/63, JFKL.
79 Memo from Bell, 5 April 1965.
80 Memo from Komer to Bundy, 6 Feb. 1962. NSF/RWK, Box 414, SGCI 7/61–5/63 White House Memoranda, JFKL.
81 Minutes of the SGCI Meeting, 21 June 1962. See also memo from McCone to the SGCI, 25 June 1962. Both documents can be found in NSF/MM, Box 319, SGCI 6/8/61–11/2/62, JFKL.
which often involved employing police trainers.83 The interest in paramilitary activities was evident from the Group’s request for a Department of Defense (DoD) Report on Paramilitary Requirements, as well as a joint DoD-CIA report on covert stockpiles of equipment and standby forces.84 One prominent example of CIA ‘assets’ being employed for counterinsurgency purposes, though working alongside US military advisors, was the dispatch of Cuban exile pilots and other paramilitary specialists to the Congo in 1964.85

In Latin America, a key problem that was addressed throughout the Group’s existence was that of ‘Communist infiltration’ of youth groups. Robert Kennedy described student groups in Latin America as ‘one of our great problems’ and urged the Group to do more to counter their penetration by the Communists.86 Group members repeatedly expressed the view that there was a need for study abroad programs to compete with the Soviet Union’s Patrice Lumumba Institute.87 US Information Agency head Edward R. Murrow recognized that dealing with youth issues was an important mission for his own agency, and therefore established a ‘coordinator of youth affairs’ within the country teams.88 However, the youth issue was not merely one that was limited to Latin America. In July 1962, for instance, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Lyman Lemnitzer called for a program of training public health officials in Southeast Asia, particularly in Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia. According to Lemnitzer, in addition to the humanitarian benefits, ‘If a large number of promising young natives were trained in ... basic medical techniques ... It would develop a body of active young men who are favourably oriented toward the United States and who, at the same time, enjoy influential stature among their countrymen.’89 It is somewhat striking that in most cases

84Minutes of the SGCI Meeting, 19 April 1962. NSF/MM, Box 319, SGCI 6/8/61–11/2/62, JFKL. The report requested by the Group in April 1962 was not just for Southeast Asian countries, but also for Iran, Pakistan, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Venezuela.
85McClintock, Instruments of Statecraft, 152–5.
88Minutes of the SGCI Meeting, 6 June 1963. NSF/RWK, Box 414, SGCI 9/62–11/63, JFKL.
89Memo from Lemnitzer to SGCI, 3 July 1962. NSF/MM, Box 319, SGCI 7/62–11/63, JFKL.
the Group’s interest in youth issues reflected an underlying belief that maintaining the ‘stability’ of friendly governments was a generational problem.

Similar to winning the support of youth, the Group was also keen to win the support of labor unions in developing countries. In May 1962, Taylor met with representatives from the Department of Labor and the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) to discuss US efforts in the field of Latin American labor, and in June, the Group met with Walter Reuther, a senior leader of the AFL-CIO. In the following years, the Group would regularly discuss labor issues. For instance, in 1963, the Group was concerned about the lack of progress in getting American labor union representatives to assist US efforts in Bolivia. Likewise, in 1965, the Group discussed the possibility of creating a program to train members of labor ministries and trade unions in Africa. The ultimate aim of this program was to ensure better government policies towards labor among African nations so that they would not be open to ‘Communist’ exploitation.

With so much emphasis on non-military and paramilitary means being employed in pursuit of counterinsurgency objectives, how then did the Group conceptualize the US military’s role? One of the key areas the Group examined was Military Aid Programs. Under Eisenhower, these programs had mainly been concerned with external defense, but with the new emphasis on ‘internal defense’, these programs were redirected to focus more on domestic threats. As such, getting local militaries to emphasize civic action became a high priority. At this time, there was considerable intellectual support for the idea that the militaries in developing countries could act as agents of modernization. By engaging in such civic action projects as ‘building...
schools and roads and improving sanitation and communications’ that would ‘spur development’ it was hoped that these activities would ‘bind the military more closely to the population.’

US military training and education programs for allied militaries were also viewed as encouraging stability. At one of the Group’s meetings in 1965, Vice President Hubert Humphrey stressed that these programs were ‘providing better leadership in Latin America’ and suggested that ‘such programs should be expanded especially among the younger officers to provide a stable element in the future.’

The US military was also expected to increase the number of Special Forces and mobile training teams deployed to underdeveloped countries. Running these military advisory and assistance programs required senior officers who were knowledgeable about the latest techniques of counterinsurgency. It was also essential to develop specific equipment to provide as military aid. It was in this regard that Vietnam was regularly referred to as a ‘laboratory’ for counterinsurgency. In a memo to Kennedy, Taylor remarked, ‘The greatest possible use is being made of South Vietnam as a laboratory for techniques and equipment related to the counterinsurgency program. Also, an intense effort is being made to spread the experience acquired in South Vietnam particularly in the Armed Forces. Thus far, 30 officers have been sent to South Vietnam as observers, and many more will be going out during the coming months.’

In terms of counterinsurgency equipment, the Group discussed Vietnam as a testing ground for defoliants, village communications systems, jungle radios, and ‘COIN aircraft.’

Yet even this relatively ‘limited’ US military approach to Vietnam was considered to be ‘over-militarized’ and unrepresentative of the kinds of insurgency situations the US would deal with. Rather than military advisors taking the lead, Komer felt that policy direction ‘must remain firmly in State and with the ambassadors in the field.’

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97 Minutes of the SGCI Meeting, 3 June 1965. NSF/RWK, Box 15, SGCI, 1964–1966, LBJL.
100 Memo from Taylor to President, 2 June 1962. NSF/MM, Box 319, SGCI 4/6/61–6/7/62, JFKL.
102 Memo from Komer to Bundy, 6 Feb. 1962. NSF/RWK, Box 414, SGCI 7/61–5/63, White House Memoranda, JFKL.
Taylor’s insistence on using Vietnam as a testing ground, Komer insisted that ‘We don’t want to focus exclusively on future Vietnams. Urban coup is as great a threat as rural insurrection. Moreover, for every active guerrilla situation in which Special Force-trained troops are needed, there are two dozen potential ones where we still have to apply preventive medicine.’

Achievements of the Special Group (CI)

By one account, the Special Group (CI) was ‘the most important foreign policy entity in the Kennedy administration’. Created at the behest of a President seeking to get the US Government ‘moving’ on counterinsurgency, the Group was the highest-level body within the government responsible for achieving this goal. The extent to which it was successful is debateable, particularly as there were many instances when it was argued that the Group should be disbanded. Similarly, many of the US counterinsurgency policies and programs during this period can be said to have been the product of individual agencies, rather than having been instigated by the Group, whose role in many respects was limited to serving as a forum to promote interagency awareness and support. However, on some important issues, the Group was credited with playing an instrumental role. For instance, in the Group’s first 18 months it was reported to have:

- played a part in various decisions that might otherwise have been delayed or never made. Included have been decisions to: Build roads to the troubled Laos border in pro-Western Thailand; to send protective barbed wire and special defense alert radios to thousands of Red-threatened villages in South Vietnam; to vastly increase counterinsurgency training throughout the government; to give special riot training to police from around the world; and to insist that the diverse elements of each US mission in underdeveloped nations develop a single plan for fighting Communists and then work together to execute it.

For Marine General Victor H. Krulak, the Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities (SACSA) on the JCS, the very existence of the Group provided ‘the mechanism to face consolidated aggressive power with consolidated quick-reacting power. I believe the

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103 Minutes of the SGCI Meeting, 19 April 1962. NSF/MM, Box 319, SGCI 6/8/61–11/2/62, JFKL.
105 Beecher, ‘US Effort to Counter Red Insurgency Guided by Little Known Group’. 

Special Group scheme is the counterinsurgency answer – at the Washington level.'

Maechling observed that the ‘primary utility of the group rests in its ability to obtain from its members high-level policy decisions on our counterinsurgency effort in the underdeveloped world and to do so rapidly and with a minimum of formality.’ Harriman concurred in this assessment and informed President Johnson that the ‘mere existence of the Group . . . has accelerated the resolution of interdepartmental problems.’

As one January 1963 internal memo highlighted, one of the Group’s most important achievements was that it had brought about the ‘desired recognition throughout the US Government’ that ‘subversive insurgency’ was an important issue. This recognition was reflected in its government-wide efforts to promote reforms in organization, training, equipment, doctrine, research and development, review of paramilitary assets, review of Internal Defense Plans, increasing the number of countries it was responsible for from three to 11, and redressing the shortfalls in the foreign police programs and civic action. The fear was that apart from the Group’s ‘surveillance’ role and monitoring of programs it had already put into place that the Group had little more to offer. And yet, the ‘surveillance’ role was perceived as an important means to keep the Country Teams focused on making progress with their Internal Defense Plans.

Among the Group’s achievements listed in a March 1963 progress report to Kennedy, in addition to those previously cited, were: coordinating an emergency program of riot control and internal security assistance to Latin American countries during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and developing plans for counterinsurgency assistance to Jordan, Iran, Pakistan and Indonesia. The funding of a Mobile Police Brigade in Indonesia was specifically highlighted as a success for the Group. During a late 1963 political ‘crisis’ in Venezuela, the Group’s efforts to get the US bureaucracy to ship ‘internal security

108 Memo from Harriman to President Johnson, 16 Dec. 1964. NSF/RWK, Box 15, SGCI, 1964–1966, LBJL.
111 Memo from Davis to RFK and Dungan, 7 Jan. 1963.
equipment’ and provide ‘on the spot training for the Venezuelan police’ was credited by the US Ambassador to Venezuela as playing a ‘vital’ factor in helping the Venezuelan government survive the crisis. In addition, the Group was credited for accelerating the procurement of equipment and other technical and advisory assistance for Thailand, Colombia, Venezuela, Iran, Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya. CIA head John McCone would also cite US assistance to Panama as one of the Group’s ‘outstanding achievements’.

Demise and Legacy

Despite its achievements the fate of the Group consistently remained a concern of its members. Part of this concern stemmed from the fact that the Group’s work had become a matter of routine that could just as easily be handled elsewhere within the Government, and at a lower level. Likewise, there was the belief that the Group was out of ideas and that unlike President Kennedy who took a keen interest in the Group’s activities, that President Johnson was indifferent. On the other hand, McCone wished to preserve the Group because he felt that there was more work to do in order to ‘combat communist subversion in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East.’ For instance, an important area in which the Group’s efforts were deemed to be lacking dealt with political development and building up institutions that could ‘take the steam out of insurgency’ over the long haul.

In September 1965, Johnson assigned Taylor the task of examining all preventive measures available to the US Government to ensure that ‘no future Vietnam situations exist’. The remit of Taylor’s

112 Referred to in Memo from Harriman to President Johnson, 16 Dec. 1964. NSF/RWK, Box 15, SGCI, 1964–1966, LBJL.
113 The ‘internal defense’ equipment included small arms, vehicles, helicopters, and communications gear. Memo from Harriman to President Johnson, 16 Dec. 1964. NSF/RWK, Box 15, SGCI, 1964–1966, LBJL.
115 Memo from Rowen to Bundy, 5 April 1965. NSF/RWK, Box 15, SGCI, 1964–1966, LBJL.
118 Memo from Saunders to Komer, 13 April 1965. NSF/RWK, Box 15, SGCI, 1964–1966, LBJL.
‘Counterinsurgency Review Board’ was extensive. The review would not only examine the more traditional elements of internal security, but also look at such issues as labor, universities, and youth. The main reason given for focusing on these non-military issues was the belief that ‘leftist subversion’ and the formation of ‘popular fronts’, not ‘insurgency’, was the more important threat to US interests in developing countries. Another key issue the Taylor review was cognizant of was the limited resources available to the US Government to wage counterinsurgencies on a global scale. Taylor relayed to Johnson the 1965 statement by Chinese Defense Minister Lin Piao to the effect that ‘the virtue of a proliferation of “Wars on National Liberation” would be to pin down and deplete our forces’. Taylor then warned ‘I believe there is always a real danger of dissipating our resources in this way.’

Although there was some hope of retaining the Group, the initiation of the Taylor review suggested that its days were numbered. A prominent feature of the review was a new organization to replace the Group that would be located in the State Department and be staffed by lower ranking officials. By 28 February 1966, the date of its last meeting, the Group was spending an increasing amount of time on Thailand. Then on 2 March 1966, Johnson approved NSAM 341 that abolished the Group and created a Senior Interdepartmental Group (SIG) in its place, to be headed by Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs George Ball. In his handover to Ball, Harriman explained, ‘I think the most serious threat at the present time is in Thailand.’ At the SIG’s first meeting, the issue of a ‘population control’ program for Thailand was the main item on the agenda.

Interestingly, rather than the SIG being a better solution to the US Government’s organization for counterinsurgency, it turned out to be a disappointment. A little over a year after the SIG’s creation, Taylor complained, almost nostalgically, that ‘In the last six months of 1966, the SIG met three times and has met only twice in 1967 ... I find little

120Minutes of the SGCI Meeting, 5 Nov. 1965. NSF/RWK, Box 15, SGCI, 1964–1966, LBJL.
122Counterinsurgency programs for Thailand should be given the same treatment at the Washington level as is being contemplated in the new approach for the management of Vietnam pacification policy and programs.’ Report from Chester L. Cooper to SGCI, 28 Feb. 1966 in FRUS, 1964–1968, Vol. XXVII, Doc. 310.
124Minutes of First Meeting of the Senior Interdepartmental Group, 8 March 1966 in FRUS, 1964–1968, Vol. XXXIII, Doc. 64.
indication on the agenda of its infrequent meetings of any serious attention to counterinsurgency and matters related to “Wars of Liberation”, a task which required almost weekly meetings on the part of the old Special Group (CI).\footnote{Memo from Taylor to Johnson, 17 May 1967 in FRUS, 1964–1968, Vol. XXXIII, Doc. 120.}

Although the Group’s attributes of high-level attention, a single-minded focus, and a regularity of meetings, was lost with its replacement by the SIG, the essential nature of US ‘counterinsurgency’ would remain remarkably similar through the end of the Cold War. It is often observed that the ‘Nixon Doctrine’ marked a departure from the ‘pay any price, bear any burden’ approach of the Kennedy-Johnson years in which large-scale direct military intervention was employed to maintain a pro-American government in South Vietnam. However, the reality was that Vietnam represented a single outlier case. As such, the ‘Nixon Doctrine’ merely represented continuity with what the US had been doing for years anyway, which was playing a mostly small-scale indirect advisory and assistance role in dozens of countries faced with a ‘subversive insurgent’ threat. To reiterate a point made earlier, in contrast to the importance placed by many scholars on military doctrine and the belief that the US military was to ‘bear the brunt’ of counterinsurgency, in actual fact it was the OIDP, with its explicit references to limited US military involvement, that was the key US counterinsurgency script of the Cold War.

Conclusion

As this article has attempted to demonstrate, the approach taken to ‘counterinsurgency’ at the highest levels of the US Government during the 1962–66 period showcases a qualitatively different definition and understanding of the subject than that which would be attributed to senior American policymakers by such scholars as Krepinevich. For these policymakers, ‘counterinsurgency’ involved assistance to a foreign government, rather than taking military action on its behalf with large numbers of ground forces.\footnote{This is to distinguish from other forms of ‘direct’ military support, such as air support, which in the Vietnam case is usually believed to have begun in 1962.} In quantitative terms alone, the number of countries that were the ‘beneficiaries’ of this ‘indirect’ version of US counterinsurgency was numerous, whereas only the case of Vietnam, mainly after 1965, stands out as the exception.

To explain why the US departed from its mainstream approach to ‘counterinsurgency’ when it chose escalation in Vietnam is worthy of a
paper in its own right, and it is not the purpose here to do so. Instead, the purpose has been to show that the vast majority of cases where the US Government conducted ‘counterinsurgency’ reflected the limitations that senior policymakers understood had to be accounted for when devising these programs. At the level of ‘grand strategy’, US policymakers recognized that resources were finite, and that as important as countering ‘wars of national liberation’ was in terms of the broader Cold War, they could not simply abandon their other military commitments, such as nuclear deterrence or the conventional defense of Western Europe, in order to conduct more large-scale counterinsurgencies. Policymakers also had to account for the ‘image’ problem. Had the US engaged in multiple large-scale counterinsurgencies throughout the ‘Third World’, it would have been a public relations disaster that would have undermined US standing in the world far worse than it suffered as a result of Vietnam. Within the US, it is almost certain such a policy would have received very little support, even from the most ardent Cold Warriors.

The senior policymakers who constituted the Special Group (CI) were content with managing a ‘global counterinsurgency’ program that had three main ‘virtues’: in terms of resource commitments the program was sustainable and took into account other national priorities; from a domestic political perspective the indirect nature of US counterinsurgency efforts ensured they remained ‘below the radar screen’; in almost all the cases, these efforts still achieved the ultimate political objective of keeping friendly governments in power even if they failed to eliminate the insurgencies. In many respects, the individual counterinsurgency programs monitored by the Group contained inherent contradictions that probably reduced their effectiveness. For example, while attempting to promote civic action and development programs on the one hand, US assistance would also be used to enhance a state’s repressive capabilities. However, the internal consistency of these policies was almost always a secondary consideration. Instead, the overriding consideration for senior policymakers was to be able to achieve the minimum goal of maintaining the ‘stability’ of friendly governments at the least cost to the United States, and this was best achieved by limiting the US military commitment to one of indirect, rather than direct, involvement in counterinsurgency.

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