

Notes on:

***Bureaucracy Does Its Thing:
Institutional Constraints on U.S. – GVN Performance in Vietnam***

by Robert W. Komer
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1. Starting in 1967, Robert W. Komer served as the Director of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) in Vietnam. In 1972, he wrote *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing* to examine how institutional factors negatively affected U.S. and Government of Vietnam (GVN) performance in Vietnam. His basic argument was: **Both governments coped with a difficult situation using institutions designed for quite different purposes.**
2. **“Why did the enormous U.S. contribution have such a limited impact for so long?”** In Vietnam, we faced a dedicated enemy and supported a weak ally. We underestimated our enemy and misjudged what could be accomplished. Our main problem, however, was institutional.

Institutional constraints rendered the U.S. and GVN response to the insurgency unduly conventional, expensive, and slow to adapt. Our institutions were hobbled by behavior patterns that inhibited their ability to cope with the unfamiliar and impeded their adaptability.

3. **The key reason the U.S. achieved so little in Vietnam was that we could not sufficiently revamp the South Vietnamese.** We failed to achieve our aims because the weak regimes we backed frittered away the tremendous resources we gave them. The GVN’s failure was our failure. We never moved the GVN, despite the potential leverage that our contributions gave us.
4. **The impact of institutional constraints is nowhere more evident than in our overly militarized response.** Our espoused counterinsurgency *strategy* was disconnected from our overwhelmingly conventional military *response*. Organizing, equipping, and training the Vietnamese armed forces as a “mirror image” of U.S. forces was a natural institutional reaction. When the Vietnamese Army failed, we Americanized the war. Instead of adapting, we fought the enemy our way because we lacked the incentive and capability to do otherwise.

U.S. search and destroy methods were a natural response of American commanders. The air war, especially, shows how an institution will play to its preferred repertoire. The availability of air power drove us to use it, even though we recognized its use had less than optimum effect. Massive intelligence empires focused on the familiar, the size and location of enemy units, to the neglect of enemy political control structures. Because we saw the enemy in our own image, we repeatedly thought we were doing better than we actually were.

5. **U.S. civilian agencies also focused primarily on what they were most familiar.** The State Department maintained normal diplomatic dealings with a failing and ineffective government. It clung to a traditionalist view of civil-military relationships, seeing Vietnam as primarily a military problem, and asserting no control over our military effort. The U.S. never subordinated military measures to an overarching political and social campaign. State’s feeble concept of institution building was merely encouraging democracy, another instance of mirror-imaging. The U.S. gave Vietnam a big army. What they really needed was an effective civil service.

6. **If our initial responses were ill-suited, why did they change so little?** Institutional forces again apply. Inertia – the reluctance of organizations to change – and a shocking lack of institutional memory resulting from short tours inhibited the learning process. Skewed incentive patterns penalized individuals trying to adapt. A lack of systematic analysis of performance was a product of the inherent reluctance of any organization to indulge in self-examination. Success was usually measured against the organization’s own norms.

In an atypical situation that cried out for adaptive solutions, institutional constraints generated a “business as usual” approach. A bureaucracy tends to adjust a given policy rather than change its structure to reflect a new policy. This is why the enormous U.S. contribution – 550,000 troops at peak, thousands of aircraft, and over \$150 billion (by 1972) – had such limited impact. Each U.S. and GVN agency preferred doing more of what it was already doing, rather than change.

7. **No integrated conflict management existed to pull together the disparate elements of the U.S. and GVN effort.** Each organization ran their share of the war with a peacetime management structure in largely separate bureaucratic compartments. In the absence of integrated management, control was ceded to the military. Redundant U.S. and GVN programs competed for scarce resources. Pacification fell victim to bureaucratic oversight. Though many correctly identified the need for it, and it was a major component of U.S. strategy, the lack of a single agency charged with pacification led to a failure to carry it out. Lack of a combined command also limited our ability to exact better performance from the GVN.

Why did the U.S. settle for a fragmented command structure? Institutional constraints, inertia, a reluctance to violate conventional dividing lines, and a hesitation to challenge civil-military relationships all played a role. Additionally, all institutions have an inclination to operate as autonomous units. Proposals for combined command, as had been done during the Korean War, were countered with arguments that that would smack of “colonialism.”

8. **What alternatives could have been pursued?** A viable alternative would have been to actually execute our counterinsurgency strategy. There was an immense gap between policy emphasis and what was actually done. Counterinsurgency did not fail in Vietnam. The U.S. and GVN devoted very little real resources to counterinsurgency. It was dwarfed by our conventional military effort. Counterinsurgency was not part of the institutional repertoire of any U.S. or GVN agency. We lacked the institutional capability to carry it out. With no major organization to champion the strategy and its programs, pacification efforts were trumped by conventional approaches. Atypical problems demand tailored solutions, yet despite the many *technical* military innovations developed for the war, there were few examples of *organizational* innovation. CORDS, by integrating U.S. civil and military advisory efforts, was one of the few.

9. **Komer suggested six solutions for organizations attempting to fight bureaucratic inertia:**

- (1) Select imaginative managers at all levels,
- (2) Revise training and incentive systems to identify and prioritize *adaptiveness* in leaders,
- (3) Set up new autonomous organizations not in conventional repertoires,
- (4) Create unified management at each level,
- (5) Assign adequate staff, and
- (6) Provide thorough analysis capability to managers.

10. **Komer nominated six recommendations for how to work with allies in the future.** Vietnam taught us that with an enfeebled ally, effective means of stimulating performance are essential.

- (1) Massive support cannot be used without viable indigenous institutions,
- (2) “Mirror-imaging” should not be the routine response,
- (3) Support should be used as leverage to affect behavior,
- (4) U.S. advisory support needs to be tailored to the situation,
- (5) Local government should create the interagency machinery required, and
- (6) The U.S. should insist on combined management, especially upon military intervention.

“If these seem like obvious ideas, think about how little we actually practiced them in Vietnam.” Our failure to account for our institutional constraints explains why despite such massive efforts and input of resources, we achieved so little for so long.

11. **Parallels between Vietnam in 1972 and Afghanistan in 2006.** Fortunately, the situation in Afghanistan in 2006 is very much *unlike* Vietnam nearly forty years ago. The enemy threat, the terrain, the government, and the political situation are dissimilar. The U.S. footprint is relatively small. But the U.S. organizations tasked with nation-building are almost the same.

What U.S. institutions are qualified for nation building? Are the organizations now tasked most nearly qualified? Capable of adaptation? Or, have we again viewed the challenge as primarily military, and therefore assigned random forces without regard to institutional capability?

Building an army is far more complex than training a machinegun team. Who in the U.S. has the institutional capability to build an army? Our journeymen trainers are building a “mirror-image” army without a well-designed blueprint, under organizations with little institutional capability. Have we, to use a construction analogy, tasked the plumbers with designing the building?

What institutional adaptations have we made? When faced with new challenges, Komer suggested “setting up new autonomous organizations not in conventional repertoires.” But in creating new organizations, especially by assembling individuals from all four services and multiple agencies, have we generated dead bureaucracy rather than innovation? New organizations, Mr. Komer, have zero institutional capability. Is this ad hoc adaptation or chaos?

What institutions have adapted to support our mission in Afghanistan? The Army, National Guard, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps all have units and individuals in Afghanistan. Has this mission generated any changes to their institutional competencies? What does the State Department do to adapt? In Afghanistan, Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) are combined civil-military organizations, but they are clearly under military control.

Lastly, we may have *less* combined command in Afghanistan than we did in Vietnam. Multiple U.S. chains interact with multiple coalition chains which interact with multiple Afghan security and government agencies. This can lead, as Komer warned, to redundant and overlapping efforts, but more importantly, to less leverage, and therefore less success with our Afghan allies.