

An account of American terrorism in Vietnam

By Patrick Martin
6 June 2000

The Secret War Against Hanoi: Kennedy's and Johnson's Use of Spies, Saboteurs, and Covert Warriors in North Vietnam, by *Richard H. Shultz, Jr.*, 1999, HarperCollins Books, New York

At a time when acts of military aggression perpetrated or planned by the US government are typically justified in the name of fighting "international terrorism," a book has appeared which documents America's role as the organizer of the biggest campaign of terrorism and sabotage since World War II.

The Secret War Against Hanoi is a detailed examination of the covert warfare carried out by the Central Intelligence Agency and the Pentagon in North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia during the Vietnam War. The author, Richard Shultz, a professor of international politics at the Fletcher School and former instructor at the US Military Academy, was given unprecedented access to the classified files of the Pentagon's Studies and Observation Group (SOG), which directed the terrorist campaign during the most intense period of US intervention in Vietnam, from 1963 to 1972.

It is hardly Shultz's intention to expose the war in Vietnam as a criminal and terroristic enterprise. He espouses a conventional pro-military, anticommunist outlook and argues the traditional complaint of the right wing during the Vietnam War: that excessive restraint and oversight by civilian authorities, especially in the Johnson White House, hamstrung the war effort, in this case the covert side of operations. Nonetheless, despite this political standpoint, Shultz has assembled a mass of factual material which documents the type and range of US operations in the North, as well as in Laos and Cambodia, and demonstrates both the ferocity and ultimate futility of these efforts.

The covert warfare against North Vietnam began with the assumption of the presidency by John F. Kennedy in January 1961. Kennedy, his brother Robert, the Attorney General, and such key aides as Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, Walt Rostow, William Bundy and Roger Hilsman were all enthusiastic supporters of counterinsurgency. They viewed "unconventional warfare" as the appropriate tactic for combating the upsurge of guerrilla struggles for national independence, which they identified, in the prism of the Cold War, as part of the global struggle against communism.

The covert war in North Vietnam was not a "rogue" operation, but one directed and even set into motion by the White House. One of Kennedy's first directives to the CIA after he took office was to demand that the agency initiate covert operations in North Vietnam, to "give Ho Chi Minh a taste of his own medicine." CIA officials, who had attempted without success to develop an agent network in the North in the period following the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, were extremely skeptical about the prospects.

One CIA veteran, Herbert Weisshart, provided six reasons why North Vietnam "was the most difficult target against which to run psywar and other cover operations." These included the lack of any incipient or developed resistance force; the aftermath of the victory over French colonialism in 1954, including popular support for "the Hanoi regime's effort to build a progressive and economically sound nation"; exceptionally strong controls over personal movements; closed borders,

with no outward flow of Catholics or minority tribesmen who could be recruited; little non-communist travel or commerce into North Vietnam; and the nature of the South Vietnamese regime, which "in the early 1960s offered little in the way of an attractive alternative to the NVN target audience."

Kennedy ignored such cautionary signals from within the national security apparatus. The new administration viewed the question of covert warfare in Vietnam largely within the framework of the experience of World War II, equating Stalinism with Nazism and believing that a resistance movement in North Vietnam would spring up along the lines of the resistance in France or Italy (which, ironically, was largely dominated by the Stalinists). One top State Department policy-maker, Roger Hilsman, had actually served in the World War II OSS (forerunner of the CIA), organizing anti-Japanese guerrilla units in Burma.

For three years, the CIA undertook a relatively limited campaign of activities against North Vietnam, inserting a total of 250 agents, all South Vietnamese, who were to engage in espionage, sabotage and selective assassinations. They were intended to conduct psychological warfare and distribute anticommunist propaganda. The effort was an admitted failure. By 1963, the agency considered that only four teams and one single agent were still functioning, about 15 percent of those sent into the North.

Impatient with the pace of the counterinsurgency campaign, the Kennedy administration decided in the summer of 1963 to turn over responsibility for operations against North Vietnam to the Pentagon. The CIA was instructed to hand over its agents and projects to a new Pentagon unit, given the deliberately opaque title of "Studies and Observations Group" (SOG), which was to employ military personnel to plan and carry out a more ambitious program of covert warfare.

SOG conducted four major operations: further agent penetration of the North; naval bombardment and the landing of sabotage teams on the northern coast; psychological warfare against the civilian population of the north; and military actions in Laos, and later Cambodia, aimed at monitoring and disrupting Vietnamese operations along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the principal supply route for the National Liberation Front in the South.

Agent penetration of the North involved the insertion of another 250 South Vietnamese in the course of five years, from 1963 through 1967. These efforts continued to prove largely futile, and by late 1967, SOG commanders believed that only seven teams and a single agent were functioning, a tiny return for a large investment. But the reality was even worse.

Robert Kingston, the incoming chief of OP 34, the unit responsible for infiltration, ordered a thorough reassessment of the operations, conducted in early 1968. CIA and Defense Intelligence Agency counterintelligence specialists evaluated all case officer reports and related materials and concluded that every team which was thought to be functioning inside North Vietnam was actually under North Vietnamese control. Every one of the 500 agents sent by the CIA and the Pentagon during a seven-year period had been captured or turned into double agents. "It was a complete double cross," Shultz writes, "a seven-year spoof that had seen nearly 500 agents inserted into NVN but none brought back out ..."

The maritime operations mounted by SOG consisted of raids on the North Vietnamese coast by small vessels supplied by the United States and operated by South Vietnamese personnel; occasional landings on the coast to carry out sabotage of ports, communications and industrial facilities; and the kidnapping of Vietnamese fishermen, who were taken to an indoctrination camp, propagandized, and then returned to the North.

These operations had no significant impact on the military course of the war, but did provide the pretext for the passage of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution in August 1964, which the Johnson administration cited as its legal authority for the massive escalation of the US military involvement in Vietnam, without a declaration of war. Congress passed the resolution after reported attacks by Vietnamese PT boats on the *USS Maddox*, a destroyer which the Navy claimed was on routine patrol in international waters in the Gulf of Tonkin.

There are conflicting reports about the attacks on the *Maddox*, at least one of which was imagined by the sailors on the ship. There is no disputing what the *Maddox* was doing in the Gulf of Tonkin. It was participating in two covert operations: backing up a maritime raid on the North Vietnamese coastline, and monitoring North Vietnamese air defenses which were being probed by US warplanes in a type of action known as a "DeSoto attack," practiced by the Pentagon everywhere on the perimeter of the Soviet bloc during the Cold War.

In these operations, warplanes adopted a course for the Soviet Union, China, North Vietnam, etc., triggering the activation of the target country's air defense systems, which could then be profiled for the planning of future military actions. (Many analysts believe that the shoot-down of KAL Flight 007, the South Korean jumbo jet which was destroyed by Soviet air defense fighters in 1983 after it penetrated Soviet airspace over Sakhalin Island, was the byproduct of a DeSoto attack gone awry).

While the maritime operations were not a complete debacle, given undisputed US control of the sea and air, they accomplished little beyond inducing North Vietnam to strengthen its coastal defenses. After 1965 these defenses had become so well organized that South Vietnamese crew members were increasingly unwilling to go ashore and confined their actions to firing from a distance.

SOG maritime attacks on North Vietnam were also linked to psychological warfare. Hundreds of Vietnamese fishermen were captured in the course of the US-directed raids, and taken to an offshore facility, where they were recruited to a fictitious anticommunist guerrilla force supposedly operating in the North, called the Sacred Sword of the Patriots League (SSPL). The purpose of this activity was to deceive the North Vietnamese into believing that there was an actual insurgency and induce them to divert resources into combating it, thereby weakening their support for the NLF in the South.

This preposterous effort was never effective. The North Vietnamese were never fooled, and repeatedly exposed the phony operation. Shultz cites an article in *Hoc Tap*, the theoretical magazine of the Vietnamese Communist Party, which reported radio broadcasts from the fake SSPL, through which the US government was seeking to convince the North Vietnamese population that "This movement, which exists only in their imagination, has succeeded in organizing bases against the people's government in a number of provinces and cities of North Vietnam."

Like most US covert operations, the purpose of secrecy was not to conceal the operation from the "enemy," who was well aware of it, but from the American people, while the Johnson administration denounced North Vietnamese reports of US terrorist attacks as "communist propaganda."

The fourth and most developed of the counterinsurgency campaigns were the operations mounted by SOG against the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Some of these were purely terroristic—placing posters on trees along the trail attacking Ho Chi Minh or making obscene comments about Asian

women, with mines planted in the ground underneath to blow up anyone who tried to rip down the posters.

Others were quasi-military, as SOG sent teams into Laos to try to spot convoys of trucks or troop concentrations and target them for aerial attack. But again, as in the maritime operations, the actual effect was to compel the Vietnamese to strengthen their military security along the trail, develop the road system into a whole network with many alternate routes, and improve their ability to detect and strike back at SOG infiltrators. As a result, US casualties on these operations steadily increased, reaching a level of 50 percent per mission in 1969.

So powerful were the defensive positions along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, thanks at least in part to SOG probing, that when, in early 1971, the South Vietnamese army sent its best units storming into Laos in an effort to smash up the trail, they were pulverized by North Vietnamese artillery and routed.

Shultz refers only once in passing to the 1998 exposure of Operation Tailwind, in a CNN broadcast which provided substantial evidence that SOG employed nerve gas in at least one attack on a North Vietnamese base in Laos where US defectors were allegedly hiding. CNN retracted the broadcast under pressure from the Pentagon and right-wing veterans' groups, and fired the producers. Shultz makes no attempt to factually refute the allegations in the CNN report, only citing the supposed timidity of the Johnson and Nixon White House in relation to special operations to suggest that use of nerve gas would never have been authorized in Washington.

While Shultz denounces the Tailwind exposé, he reports one aspect of the SOG campaign against the Ho Chi Minh Trail that underscores the Cold War mentality of the entire US military intervention in Vietnam. This is the case of Captain Larry Thorne, SOG operations officer for the raids into Laos, who was killed in action there.

Thorne was born in Finland in 1919, entered the Finnish army in 1938 and fought in the 1939-40 war against the Soviet Union. He subsequently conducted guerrilla warfare against the Soviet forces after the Finnish regime allied itself with Nazi Germany and reentered the war. As Shultz tells it, "In September 1944, Finland surrendered to the Soviet Union. Thorne didn't. He joined the Germans, attended their school for guerrilla warfare, and then fought with their marines until the war ended.

"The Soviets wanted to get their hands on Thorne and forced the Finnish government to arrest him as a wartime German collaborator. They planned to take him to Moscow to be tried for war crimes. Thorne had other plans. He escaped, made his way to the United States, and with the help of Wild Bill Donovan became a citizen. The wartime head of the OSS knew of Thorne's commando exploits..."

Thorne joined the US army and his expertise in guerrilla warfare led him into the Special Forces Group, where he was commissioned a first lieutenant, eventually rising to the rank of captain and commanding a Special Forces team in Vietnam, before joining SOG.

The story of Larry Thorne says a great deal about the real nature of the US war in Vietnam, which combined anticommunism, anti-Asian racism, and barbarism toward the Vietnamese population. There are definite parallels between the US-directed slaughter in Vietnam and the Nazi atrocities on the Eastern Front. But Shultz recounts the career of this Nazi collaborator turned American Green Beret as though it were a tale of epic heroism.

The political perspective of Shultz's book can be summed up in one sentence towards the end, where he laments: "Throughout its existence, SOG fought two formidable enemies—North Vietnam's leadership in Hanoi, and America's leadership in Washington." He repeatedly criticizes Lyndon Johnson for pulling back from the commitment to counterinsurgency initially made by John F. Kennedy. The Johnson White House and State Department—above all special envoy Averill Harriman, a particular *bete noir*—rejected proposals from SOG commanders to initiate

guerrilla warfare in North Vietnam.

According to Shultz, the CIA was obsessed with the "lessons of Hungary," when the Eisenhower administration decided against any direct intervention during the 1956 anti-Stalinist uprising, in part out of concern over a possible nuclear confrontation with the USSR. Both the CIA and the State Department opposed any operation whose goal would be the overthrow of North Vietnam, for fear this would produce a Korea-style military intervention by China. As a result, the covert war, like the war as a whole, was deprived of any strategic rationale.

It is significant, in its own way, that the Pentagon has tacitly sponsored such a volume, giving the author access to secret files and allowing him to interview former SOG personnel who would normally be sworn to silence. The book thus becomes part of the effort by the military brass to overcome the long-term effects of the Vietnam debacle and advance its claims against civilian authority.

But the real lessons of Vietnam are underscored by Shultz's admission, throughout the book, that every level of the US secret warfare command in Vietnam was saturated with the conviction that "our" Vietnamese could not be trusted and that agents of the North Vietnamese or the National Liberation Front had penetrated the South Vietnamese intelligence and command structure.

Shultz interviewed one leader of the maritime operations against North Vietnam, who declared that he never involved his South Vietnamese counterparts in the planning of operations and did not inform them of the timing or target. Asked why not, he replied, "I would not trust anybody but an American, and when the Vietnamese were getting ready to go [on a mission] they went into isolation under American scrutiny."

In addition to the colossal debacle of the agent insertions in the North, many of the cross-border raids into Laos and Cambodia were compromised by NLF and North Vietnamese intelligence. Shultz was told of one such case by General John Singlaub, who commanded SOG for two years. Singlaub said that a North Vietnamese colonel penetrated the office of the prime minister of South Vietnam, Gen. Nguyen Cao Ky, and intercepted information which Singlaub had provided to General Cao Van Vien, chairman of South Vietnam's Joint General Staff, which Vien had shared with Ky.

According to Singlaub: "Somehow they had communications that allowed them to be able to alert Hanoi on short notice. I can understand how they got word to North Vietnam for an operation that's going to take place a week later, but my gosh, some of these things were pulled off in less than forty-eight hours."

Even 30 years after the fact, this US officer and fanatical anticommunist (Singlaub played a major role in arming and financing the Nicaraguan contras in the 1980s) marvels at the persistence and resourcefulness of his Vietnamese opponents, without any comprehension of the revolutionary determination which was the source of their superiority over the better armed and equipped South Vietnamese forces.

Despite the author's focus on military details, especially the conflicts within the US command structure, the most important single conclusion from this study is political, not military: the American intervention foundered on the inability of the US government or any of its military or intelligence agencies to understand, let alone successfully counter, the revolutionary impulses that motivated the Vietnamese people.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>