The Secret War against Hanoi: Kennedy’s and Johnson’s Use of Spies, Saboteurs, and Covert Warriors in North Vietnam

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Hue. George W. Smith offers a very good perspective on what such street fighting is all about.

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At its core, this is a remarkably well told story of failure—heartbreaking failure to be sure, and failure despite the heroic efforts of some remarkable men to achieve success, but still failure. The U.S. covert war against Hanoi was, as this book makes clear, patently unsuccessful. That it could have been otherwise makes the story all the more compelling.

A leading expert on low-intensity conflict and covert warfare, Shultz has filled a gap that has troubled those who for decades have been trying to understand the Vietnam War. Using meticulously documented research, and writing in a reader-friendly style, Shultz lays out the history of the U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam Studies and Observations Group (usually referred to simply as “SOG”) from 1964 to 1972. Such a book is arguably long overdue, but classification of material and the lack of documented interviews with former SOG members crippled previous attempts. At worst, the operations of SOG have suffered gross distortions, turning one of the war’s most interesting features into farce and pulp fiction. Happily, this is no longer the case. Now, using newly declassified documents, Shultz lays to rest many of the myths—including the now-infamous CNN claim that Operation TAILWIND involved killing U.S. deserters and the use of the nerve agent Sarin.

Shultz begins his tale by explaining how an aggressive Kennedy administration, angered and humiliated by the Bay of Pigs, formally placed CIA-controlled covert operations against North Vietnam under military leadership. President Kennedy, his brother Robert, and other key advisors wanted immediate results, and they ignored the fact that a covert operation takes time to achieve its desired effect. Nor was the military high command ecstatic about gaining this new responsibility. A generic aversion to special operations, fear of where Kennedy might be taking the Army, and distrust of many involved in Special Operations, resulted in a bureaucratic struggle of rare intensity and duration. One of the tragic ironies emerging from Shultz’s research is that from the beginning, senior U.S. military and political leaders effectively prevented SOG, which was charged with the new covert mission, from achieving its full potential.

Thus, the cards were stacked against SOG from the start. One obstacle was an administration that, following President Kennedy’s assassination, seemed hesitant to take advantage of apparent opportunities. Nor did SOG ever receive proper support from the military or CIA leadership. Opposition from senior members of the State Department was at times ferocious. In addition, SOG’s South Vietnamese counterpart was never fully trusted, possibly with good reason. As a result SOG rarely had the right mandate or qualified people, operated under byzantine restrictions, and never achieved a rapport with the one organization that could have dramatically increased its effectiveness. Shultz also
points out that from time to time SOG created its own problems. There was concern over discipline and, more problematic, security vulnerabilities of which the group seemed unaware.

Nonetheless, SOG managed to carve out a role for itself, eventually running four major types of operations against the forces of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam: cross-border commando operations in Laos and Cambodia, aimed at observing and interdicting the Ho Chi Minh Trail; insertion of South Vietnamese agents into North Vietnam to carry out resistance operations and deception; maritime interdiction and commando operations against the North Vietnamese coastline; and psychological warfare operations aimed at North Vietnam. While some of these, such as the insertion of agents into the North, were carried out only by Vietnamese personnel, others, such as actions against the Ho Chi Minh Trail, also involved Americans. Shultz extensively covers these operations, and the reader cannot help but be impressed by the courage of those who carried them out. However, because these efforts were never integrated into the overall strategic plan (if ever such a plan truly existed), the results were less effective than they might have been. Yet despite it all, SOG came close enough to offer a tantalizing vision of what could have been done. This is one of the most depressing and intriguing aspects of the entire book.

If Washington and Saigon did not take SOG’s efforts seriously enough, the same cannot be said of Hanoi. The North was extremely sensitive to SOG’s actions and worked hard to counter them. In this the North Vietnamese were remarkably successful. If the United States did not get covert operations right, the North Vietnamese certainly got counter-covert operations right. The book explores the Vietnamese actions in some detail, much of it for the first time. This facet of the book makes fascinating reading.

For students of U.S. national security decision making, this book is a superb case study. Shultz not only discusses the operations of USMACV/SOG but examines and describes how these issues were handled in the Pentagon and the White House. Furthermore, he does not limit his examination to the actions of cabinet members, military commanders, or key presidential advisors but sheds light on organizational structures, procedures, and lower-ranking action officers. This aspect of the process is all too often overlooked.

There are many familiar names to be found here. These include such Special Forces legends as Dick Meadows, who was to be responsible for advance ground reconnaissance during the failed Iranian hostage rescue attempt; and Colonel “Bull” Simmons, who led the brilliantly executed but unproductive prisoner-rescue raid against the Son Tay prison. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and General William C. Westmoreland both have their say, as do the general’s Navy and Marine Corps counterparts. Some readers might feel that presenting these disparate viewpoints is enough, but given the failure of SOG to live up to its potential and its losses in lives and treasure, reasoned judgments of responsibility and accountability should be made. Shultz does not shirk from this task, and his conclusions are convincing.

Richard Shultz wraps up with a masterful summation and analysis of the longest U.S. covert campaign in wartime. He also provides a brief overview of the status of the Special Operations community today. In doing so he poses
interesting questions for covert operations of the future.

If this were all The Secret War against Hanoi accomplished, it would be a significant contribution to our understanding of the Vietnam conflict, thereby earning a place on our bookshelves. But Shultz has also performed a long overdue and badly needed service in recognizing the tremendous human cost associated with SOG’s operations. The casualty figures are simply staggering. For example, of approximately five hundred agents placed in North Vietnam, apparently all were killed or captured; some were “doubled.” Only slightly less appalling are the casualty rates suffered by the U.S.-led reconnaissance teams that operated against the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The worst year was 1969, in which counter-trail operations in Laos experienced a 50 percent casualty rate. It is only fitting that the danger these soldiers faced and the sacrifices they made be part of the public record of the Vietnam War.

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On the northern perimeter of the Arlington National Cemetery, clearly visible from the adjacent highway, stands a huge bronze monument embodying perhaps the world’s most famous war photograph: the flag-raising on Mount Suribachi during the seizure of Iwo Jima in February 1945. Flags of Our Fathers, told by the son of one of the men represented by the figures, is an intensely personal history surrounding this event, a riveting story guaranteed to evoke emotion in any reader interested in what Tom Brokaw has called “the greatest generation.”

Although Bradley is neither a strategist nor a military historian, he understands the significance of Iwo Jima and places it properly in the context of World War II. This is not revisionist historiography. Bradley solidly affirms Truman’s decision to drop the atomic bomb to save American—and Japanese—lives, because the alternative would have been even more horrific. The author’s depiction of the training regimen, camaraderie, and exploits of the U.S. Marine Corps will make all Marines proud. However, he is not so kind to other services, often portraying them as weak willed, unprofessional, even incompetent.

James Bradley is the son of John “Doc” Bradley, a Navy corpsman who joined five Marine brothers-in-arms during the Herculean struggle to wrest “Sulfur Island” from the Japanese. In the course of the battle, these six members of “Easy” Company were memorialized for raising the American flag, an image captured by Joe Rosenthal’s Pulitzer Prize–winning photograph. Three of the six never returned home—a testimony to the overall casualty rate of 84 percent for E Company in the thirty-six day conquest of an island a third the size of Manhattan.

The complete story of the flag raising was never told, because the principals considered the photograph insignificant when compared to the sacrifice of those who did not return. Like many of their fellow veterans, the three survivors adamantly refused to discuss the details of their war experiences, even keeping secret their awards for heroism under fire. Following his father’s death in 1994, Bradley interviewed the friends and loved ones of all the men to tell the “real story” behind the photograph.