

## Sir Robert Thompson and the U.S. defeat in Vietnam

A decade after the Korean War, British geopolitical strategy concentrated on provoking another, even more serious reverse for the United States, the Vietnam War. After British intelligence had eliminated President Kennedy, who had intended to withdraw U.S. forces from Vietnam, London's assets in the U.S. liberal establishment set out to induce the Johnson administration to commit half a million ground troops to South Vietnam. At the same time, the London regime of Prime Minister Harold Wilson remained critical of the U.S. effort, and no British forces were sent to Vietnam, although Australia did provide a contingent.

One British intelligence operative who played a vital role in convincing the Johnson administration to launch the Vietnam adventure was Sir Robert Grainger Ker Thompson, who was touted in *Newsweek* and *U.S. News and World Report* during the mid-1960s as the world's preeminent expert in guerrilla warfare.

Born in 1916, Thompson held a history degree from Cambridge and was fluent in both Mandarin and Cantonese Chinese. During World War II, Thompson had been a member of Gen. Orde Wingate's Chindits, a prototype of later special forces. He later commanded "Ferret Force," a British anti-guerrilla unit in Malaya, where he devised the strategic hamlet program that was later to fail miserably in Vietnam. By 1961, Thompson was Secretary for the Defense of Malaya. In this year, Thompson was invited to South Vietnam by President Diem; he became the chief of the British Advisory Mission and a key adviser and counterinsurgency "idea man" to Diem.

Thompson never concealed his contempt for the United States. His favorite slur on the ungrateful colonials was, "The trouble with you Americans is that whenever you double the effort you somehow manage to square the error."

### The U.S. buildup

The best strategy for the United States would have been to avoid a commitment of U.S. ground troops to Vietnam altogether, as Kennedy had insisted. But once U.S. forces were engaged, Sir Robert was instrumental in blocking the implementation of any possibly effective military strategy.

In 1965, as the U.S. buildup began, South Vietnamese Defense Minister Gen. Cao Van Vien had submitted a strategy paper entitled "The Strategy of Isolation," in which he posed the problem of cutting off the infiltration

of troops and supplies from North to South, arguing that if this were done, the insurgency in the South would wither on the vine.

Cao Van Vien wanted to fortify a line along the 17th parallel from Dong Ha to Savannakhet, a point on the Mekong River near the Laos-Thailand border to interdict the famous Ho Chi Minh Trail, a strategic artery used by motor vehicles and which was flanked by gasoline pipelines. Cao Van Vien wanted to follow this with an amphibious landing north of this line, near Vinh along the 18th parallel, to cut off the North Vietnamese front from their rear echelons and supply lines. The goal would have been to deny North Vietnam "the physical capability to move men and supplies through the Lao corridor, down the coastline, across the DMZ, and through Cambodia . . . by land, naval, and air actions."

According to this plan, the blocking position from the DMZ to the Mekong could have been manned by eight divisions (five U.S., two South Korean, and one South Vietnamese) while Marine divisions could have been kept ready for the amphibious attack. U.S. forces would have remained on the defensive, in fortified positions; it would be left to the South Vietnamese Army to deal with the guerrilla forces in the South Vietnamese countryside. This meant there would have been no search and destroy missions by the United States, no My Lais, and far fewer U.S. casualties.

The rejection of this strategy in favor of counterinsurgency is a testament to the influence wielded by Sir Robert.

### The counterinsurgency strategy

Thompson was the most authoritative spokesman for the military doctrine of counterinsurgency, a warmed-over version of British colonialist-utopian clichés stretching back to the atrocities of the Boer War. During the early 1960s brush-fire wars in the Third World, counterinsurgency tactics to deal with communist guerrilla warfare became an obsession in Washington, and Thompson was able to parlay his specious Malaya credentials into pervasive influence.

On July 5, 1965 (when the United States had slightly more than 50,000 soldiers on the ground in South Vietnam), Thompson assured *Newsweek* that a U.S. ground combat role was "unavoidable," but that "if the right things are done within Vietnam at the present moment, then the American combat role, which is comparatively small compared with the Vietnamese role, should be sufficient to halt [the Viet Cong]." At this time, the long agony of Johnson's escalation of the U.S. troop presence was just beginning.

In 1982, Col. Harry Summers of the U.S. Army pub-

lished *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*, which reflected an effort by the Army War College at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania to determine the reasons for the U.S. defeat. One of Summers's conclusions was that the U.S. command at all levels had been thoroughly disoriented by the illusion that Vietnam represented a new form of people's revolutionary warfare, to which traditional military doctrine no longer applied. Summers cited Sir Robert Thompson as the leading spokesman for the counterinsurgency school, highlighting the Briton's claim that "revolutionary war is most confused with guerrilla or partisan warfare. Here the main difference is that guerrilla warfare is designed merely to harass and distract the enemy so that the regular forces can reach a decision in conventional battles. . . . Revolutionary war on the other hand is designed to reach a decisive result on its own" (p. 113).

In an April 1968 article in *Foreign Affairs*, Thompson had argued that a true U.S. strategic offensive in Vietnam would require "emphasis on nation-building concurrent with limited pacification," including "the rebuilding of the whole Vietnamese government machine." For Thompson, "it is the Khesanhs which are the diversion," a reference to the U.S. Army's conventional battle against the regular North Vietnamese Army near the Demilitarized Zone on the North Vietnam-South Vietnam border. For Thompson, the communist guerrilla structure in South Vietnam was characterized by "its immunity to the direct application of mechanical and conventional power." Victory would therefore be decided "in the minds of the Vietnamese people."

Thompson advised that American soldiers be deployed into political action and "nation-building" in the Vietnamese countryside. He was opposed to U.S. thrusts against the North Vietnamese regular army. In the event, it was the North Vietnamese regular army which finally destroyed the Saigon government, with a 12-division armored attack across the DMZ in March 1972 (which failed) followed by the victorious assault by 17 North Vietnamese divisions which captured Saigon in March-April 1975. As it turned out, the war was won by conventional military forces, although the guerrilla insurgency diverted a large portion of Saigon's available divisions, which were thus unable to take part in the final, decisive conflict.

### Thompson was 'exactly wrong'

In the light of all this, Summers and the War College are right in concluding that "with hindsight it is clear that by Sir Robert Thompson's own definition, he was *exactly wrong* in seeing the war as a 'classic revolutionary war.' The guerrillas in Vietnam did *not* achieve decisive results

on their own. Even at the very end there was no popular mass uprising to overthrow the Saigon government" (Summers p. 113, emphasis added).

The Korean War had also seen extensive guerrilla activity in South Korea by North Korean and communist infiltrators. An effective division of labor had evolved which had given primary responsibility for maintaining order on the home front to the South Korean army, while U.S. forces concentrated on countering the international aggression of North Korea and China. But this traditional approach was associated with the now-demonized Gen. Douglas MacArthur, leaving the dangerous vacuum in military doctrine that was filled by Thompson's counterinsurgency theory.

Unfortunately, during the Vietnam era there was no figure comparable to MacArthur capable of forcing the repudiation of the bankrupt new pseudo-strategy.

### The political dimension

In addition to the obvious military disadvantages of Sir Robert's strategy, there were also political disadvantages that contributed in their own way to ultimate defeat. These are summed up by Gregory Palmer in *The MacNamara Strategy*: "The official view, supported by the advice of Diem's British adviser, Sir Robert Thompson, was that the appropriate strategy was counterinsurgency with emphasis on depriving the enemy of the support of the population by resettlement, pacification, good administration, and propaganda. This had two awkward consequences for American policy: It contradicted the reason given for breaking the Geneva declaration, that the war was really aggression from the North, and, by closely associating the American government with the policies of the government of South Vietnam, it made Diem's actions directly answerable to the American electorate" (Palmer, pp. 99-100).

For Thompson, the struggle against the Viet Cong was everything, while the North Vietnamese regulars were virtually irrelevant.

But was Sir Robert just another bungler, just another in the long line of marplot Colonel Blimps that stretches from Lord Raglan and Lord Lucan at Balaklava and Haig on the Somme, to Percival at Singapore and Montgomery at Arnhem? Not bloody likely. Thompson was a deliberate liar and saboteur, as can be seen from his *Foreign Affairs* piece highlighting the Viet Cong, which was written after the January 1968 Tet offensive, when the Viet Cong's main force units had been virtually obliterated. Thompson's role was that of a Secret Intelligence Service disinformation operative. The widows and orphans of Vietnam—and America—should not forget the evil Sir Robert.—*Webster G. Tarpley*