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Lyndon Johnson with South Vietnamese Chairman and Prime Minister in Guam, 1967

Building Partner Security Forces:

Sometimes War *Is* the Answer

By MATTHEW W. MARKEL

What I want to stress above everything else is the foundation of an Army—its officer corps. With one, any problem can be overcome, without one, all other efforts are in vain.

—General Matthew Bunker Ridgway, 1969[1]

Building other peoples' armies is a vital part of the war on terror, and it promises to remain integral to U.S. strategy for some time. It is perhaps our central focus in Iraq and Afghanistan. Much of the debate about whether we are winning or losing these wars hinges on the readiness of indigenous forces to fight. As James Fallows pointed out recently, U.S. officials have made mistakes along the way.[2] We are getting one paramount thing right, however: we are getting these forces into the fight early.

Indeed, our prospects for developing effective Iraqi security forces appear promising. The horror induced by suicide attacks on weddings and restaurants, the past horrors of the Ba'ath regime, and what is known or guessed of the insurgency's objectives all seem to have created a sense of urgency among the Iraqi people. A disciplined campaign to develop a democratic political process promises to deliver a stable government that does not need to rely on military patronage to create support. In the end, the Iraqis are in the fight.

The ill-fated commitment of Iraqi forces in Fallujah in April 2004 and elsewhere must be seen in this light. Although several units broke under the strain, their battlefield performance exposed incompetent commanders and systematic weakness, allowing these defects to be remedied. Michael Yon's dispatches from Mosul, in which he described the extraordinary partnership among the 1st Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, and Iraqi police and army units there, illustrate how well those Iraqi organizations responded to the challenge of combat. Indeed, the improvements in those units' capabilities led to their redeployment to more troubled regions. To be sure, progress remains uneven, but the general trend is upward. These forces are learning as they must—by fighting.[3]

The United States has been in this kind of situation before. In both Korea and Vietnam, it used essentially the same methods it is using now to build the Afghan and Iraqi security forces: developing a U.S.-style training base, embedding advisors, initiating an intensive collective training program, and partnering American units with indigenous units. In Korea, those methods were sufficient to allow the army of the Republic of Korea (ROK) to withstand the worst the Chinese could throw at it, all in roughly 7 years. But over 18 years of effort did not suffice to render the army of the Republic of Vietnam capable of standing on its own. The key to our success in Korea and failure in Vietnam lay in our ability or inability to develop indigenous military leadership in those countries, and that could prove true in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In Korea, General Matthew Ridgway's single-minded focus and unique abilities to assess and foster leadership revived the Eighth U.S. Army and helped rebuild the ROK army. Ridgway may not have been as successful without the ongoing war, however, for that enabled him to assess Korean leaders under actual combat conditions. Moreover, urgency inclined the Syngman Rhee government to support any measure that promised to improve the army's effectiveness, given that South Korea had been almost overrun twice. Such urgency was not present in Vietnam, where an apparently unlimited U.S. security guarantee allowed coups to pose a more immediate threat than insurgency. Furthermore, whatever else could be said of William Westmoreland and his predecessors, none was the equal of Ridgway.

Responding to Pressure

In South Korea, the U.S. Army forged an effective, disciplined partner army capable of defending itself in 7 years. While that pace might seem frustratingly slow to contemporary American leaders, in retrospect it is both astonishingly fast and extraordinarily successful. Indeed, initial results were disappointing, as the catastrophic defeats in the summer of 1950 illustrated. ROK forces disintegrated under attacks by the more numerous and better equipped North Korean army. Outnumbered and outgunned, ROK units fought hard but not always effectively, severely mauling the North Koreans before being overwhelmed themselves. The sudden collapse of the ROK army dictated American intervention. But by 1953, the army had matured. Over the course

Lieutenant Colonel Matthew W. Markel, USA, is a Strategist serving with the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command's Futures Center. He holds a PhD in history from Harvard University.

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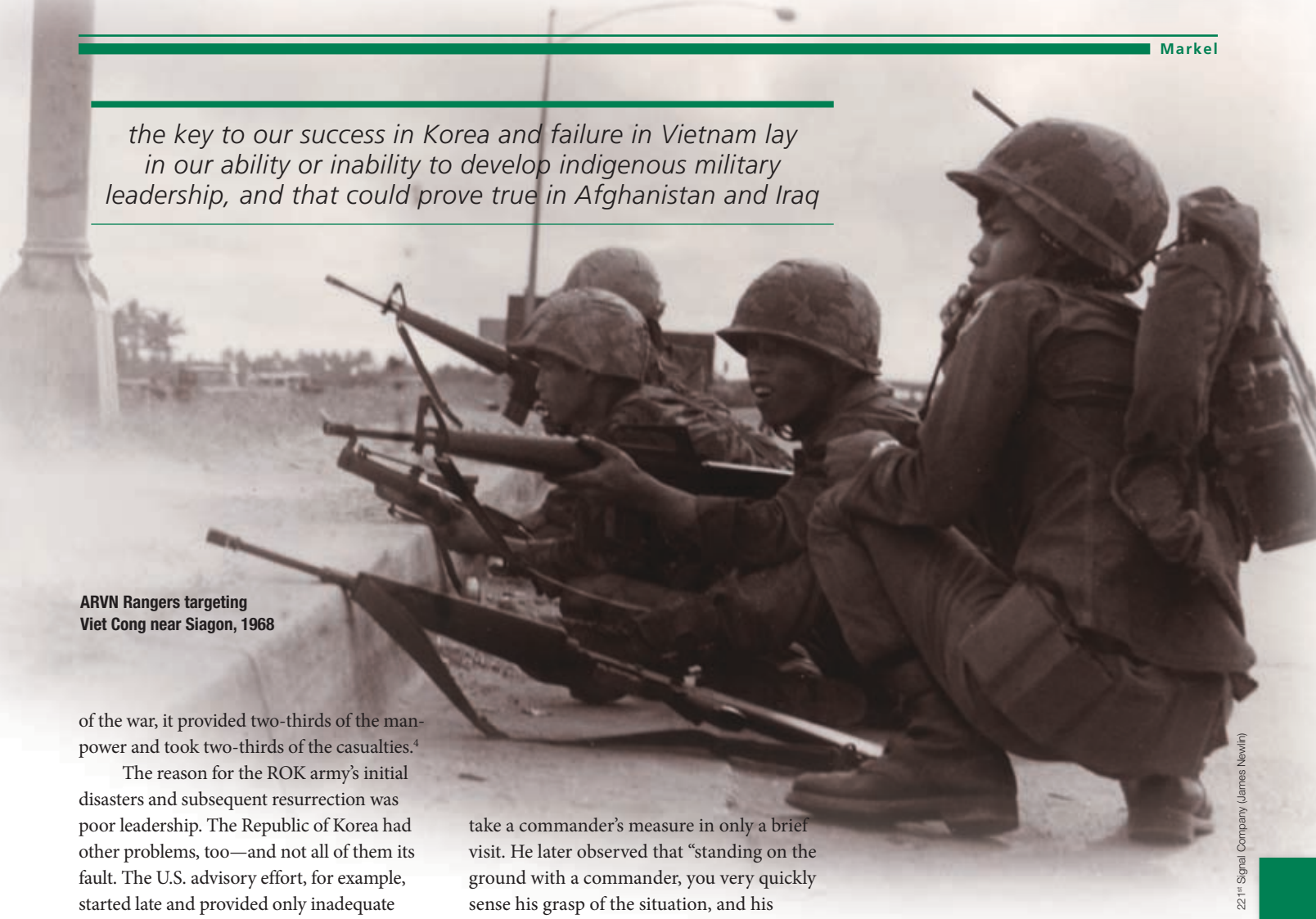

ARVN Rangers targeting Viet Cong near Siagon, 1968

221st Signal Company (James Newlin)

of the war, it provided two-thirds of the manpower and took two-thirds of the casualties.[4]

The reason for the ROK army's initial disasters and subsequent resurrection was poor leadership. The Republic of Korea had other problems, too—and not all of them its fault. The U.S. advisory effort, for example, started late and provided only inadequate to obsolete equipment. This circumstance certainly played a role in the initial defeats, but the scale and quality of American assistance increased dramatically after war's outbreak without corresponding improvement in ROK army battlefield performance. Ridgway responded to Rhee's importunities on the subject flatly, stating:

We weren't going to get anywhere with your [ROK] *army until you get some leadership. You haven't got it from the Minister of Defense on down and until you get it, it's just hopeless. Don't you ask me to arm any more of your people. You've lost enough equipment now to equip six of our divisions.*[5]

Ridgway was not much happier with the quality of leadership in the Eighth U.S. Army.[6] In both cases, having identified the problem, he went about fixing it with his characteristic energy.

The General focused on division and corps commanders, visiting every ROK division and corps commander frequently. As with the Eighth Army, he proved able to take a commander's measure in only a brief visit. He later observed that "standing on the ground with a commander, you very quickly sense his grasp of the situation, and his confidence or lack of it." Ridgway's methods required a pool of officers trained in at least the rudiments of military operations leadership. The Korean Military Advisory Group (KMAG) provided this pool. By the time the war ended, KMAG reached a strength of 2,000 officers and noncommissioned officers, who provided a small advisory team at each echelon of command down to the battalion level, as well as a fairly robust ROK school system. The United States started the advisory effort with real energy only after hostilities had commenced.

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, establishing a Korean constabulary to maintain internal order was only one of many priorities for the occupying U.S. XXIV Corps. The first request for an assistance group of 150 men went unfilled. Eventually, as the likelihood of war increased, the Army authorized an assistance group of about 500 men, enough to support a ROK army of about 65,000. Only after conflict began, however, did the United States conduct the advisory mission with anything approaching the requisite intensity. Because the U.S. Army was overstretched and Korea was such a forbidding assignment, KMAG strength usually fell far short of its requirements. For instance, at its highest authorized strength of 2,000, it was organized to support a ROK army of 250,000, but that army had actually grown closer to 500,000 by that point.[7]

The major problem was not that either KMAG or the Republic of Korea was indifferent to leadership, but rather that both lacked any solid means for assessing it. Without such an assessment, Korean leaders had no reason to resist the political expediency of military patronage. The onset of war changed all that. Combat provided the necessary yardstick. At an elementary level, Ridgway could evaluate division commanders while they did their jobs; he did not have to guess how they might perform under stress based on personal characteristics.

More importantly, Ridgway had the unstinting support of the South Korean government. Rhee placed the ROK army under U.S. command, complete with the authority to relieve and appoint commanders. This contrasted sharply with the prewar

politicization of the officer corps. This willingness also reflected the gravity of the situation. With survival at stake, with U.S. commitment and even capability in question after the initial defeats of July and November 1950, the Rhee government was in no position to quibble with any measure to increase the combat effectiveness of its armed forces. War enhanced the relative legitimacy of Rhee's regime. Authoritarian and somewhat corrupt, Rhee clearly benefited from the awareness that internecine conflict would only result in a communist victory. He thus had no need to propitiate restive elites, all too keenly aware of the implications of unification on North Korean terms.

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A Frog in Warming Water

In Vietnam, on the other hand, 18 years of direct and generous American advice and assistance were not enough to enable the Republic of Vietnam Army (ARVN) to forestall the North's "Great Spring Victory" in 1975. Of course, one cannot discount the deleterious, even crippling, impact of the cessation of U.S. aid on the army's morale and capability. All the same, the shortcomings the ARVN displayed in its final defeat were the same ones that had plagued it since its birth. Stolid and courageous in the defense, ARVN units seldom displayed much capability in the attack. In the final volume of *Advice and Support* (the U.S. Army's history of its effort to develop the Republic of Vietnam's Armed Forces), Jeffrey Clarke attributed these shortcomings to military leadership.

These shortcomings persisted in spite of a U.S. advisory effort that was in every respect more lavish and more intense than that of the KMAG. The efforts did not, however, include entrusting the mission to an officer of Ridgway's stature. John O'Daniel, Samuel Williams, Paul Harkins, and William Westmoreland were all fine Soldiers with distinguished military records, but none was a Ridgway. Nor did U.S. efforts include engaging the ARVN in actual combat. The insurgency increased in intensity only gradually; Hanoi did not formally restart it until 1959, 5 years after South Vietnam attained independence. When the insurgency reached a crisis point, the Johnson administration Americanized the war, shouldering the ARVN to the side. Paradoxically, for all the war's length, few ARVN units fought both hard and often. Those that did, such as the airborne battalions or the 1st ARVN Division, became quite skilled. Most, however, were tied down in static security missions where they had little opportunity to improve their proficiency.

While the perception of the ARVN as unwilling or unable to fight was, at worst, only partially true, it never demonstrated a consistent ability to plan and conduct offensive combat operations. In 1963, after 8 years of American tutelage, the ARVN proved unable to exploit a 10-to-1 advantage to wrest control of the village of Ap Bac from 3 Viet Cong battalions. During the Tet Offensive 5 years later, ARVN units held their positions tenaciously, assisted by massive U.S. artillery and air support, but made no attempt to exploit these defensive victories. Lam Son 719, the ill-fated 1971 attempt to interdict the Ho Chi Minh trail, turned into a debacle as the ARVN proved unable to coordinate and conduct offensive operations at the division and corps levels without their American advisors. In 1972, the ARVN repeated its victories of 1968, holding ground tenaciously but attacking little. The final collapse in 1975 was precipitated by President Thieu's ill-conceived and poorly executed decision to evacuate the Central Highlands. ARVN soldiers could fight hard, but their leaders proved mostly incapable of synchronizing and integrating their efforts.[8]

No American commander in Vietnam had the authority that Ridgway had possessed over the ARVN. In part, that lack of authority resulted from General Westmoreland's decision not to seek a combined command that included authority over the ARVN. He made this decision to avoid the appearance of colonialism. By the time General Creighton Abrams took over, the best one could say of the situation was that the die had already been cast. Moreover, as Ronald Spector has argued, whatever the differences in concept between Westmoreland and Abrams, both declined to impose those concepts on their subordinates. Unwilling to impose their will on U.S. forces under their command, Westmoreland and Abrams were unable to dictate to the Vietnamese.

Instead, both Westmoreland and Abrams provided their assessments informally and confidentially to General Cao Van Vien, chief of the Vietnamese Joint General Staff. Sometimes the Vietnamese would act on such recommendations, but more often they would not. More perniciously, the Vietnamese made few merit promotions and even fewer promotions based on battlefield performance.

This failure to promote on the basis of merit largely squandered an American advisory effort patterned on KMAG, even though it was more robust in almost every respect than its predecessor. Like the mature KMAG, the Military Assistance and Advisory Group–Vietnam (MAAG–V) sought to improve Vietnamese military capabilities through a combination of education and advisors. MAAG–V's initial effective strength was about 740, which allowed it to maintain advisory teams down to the regimental level and support a school system for the ARVN. As the situation deteriorated, advisory strength grew to 3,000 in the field by the end of 1963 and peaked at about 14,000 in 1971, by which point advisors were embedded at every echelon of military command and in almost every aspect of the counterinsurgency effort. Once American units were committed in bulk, Westmoreland (and then Abrams) attempted to pair them with ARVN units to improve the effectiveness of the latter, with only indifferent success. The language barrier and the absence of an effective combined command inhibited such relationships.[9] The failure of the American advisory effort cannot be attributed to inadequate effort.

One reason this robust advisory effort had so little effect was that ARVN had so few opportunities to gain relevant operational experience. The North Vietnamese did not decide to resume the armed struggle into 1959, essentially giving the South a 5-year breathing spell. During that time, the ARVN spent most of its effort in static security missions inherited from the French domination, with little opportunity for unit training. The ARVN formations that descended from these units continued in this static role for over a decade, with one eye on potential insurgents and the other on potential coups.

This deterioration apparently induced greater apprehension in American leaders than in the Vietnamese. Even at Ap Bac, ARVN units had not been defeated; they had

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merely let victory elude them. In any case, this deterioration led to the Americanization of the war. It was now America's turn to relegate the ARVN to static security missions, while U.S. troops waged the so-called big unit war. Toward the end of 1967, feeling that the Military Assistance Command was gaining control of the military situation, Westmoreland did start to push ARVN into conducting operations in conjunction with U.S. troops, but the absence of combined command hamstrung the effort. By then, the U.S. advisory effort had been going on for twice as long as it had taken KMAG to produce an effective ROK army. Only after Tet did General Creighton Abrams, now the American commander in Vietnam, begin to emphasize the Vietnamese conduct of operations.

Even then, the tendency of most advisors to make good the deficiencies of the Vietnamese stunted the collective professional development of the ARVN officer corps. Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, one of the few excellent Vietnamese commanders, noted that advisors did most of the planning for ARVN operations, coordinating and integrating the artillery, air, and logistical support for the units to which they were assigned. Vietnamese officers had a relatively cavalier attitude toward such functions, preferring to rely on their instincts rather than their staffs. That meant that American advisors got all the practice in synchronizing combat power. When the ARVN attempted a major operation without its advisors (the 1971 invasion of Laos), it displayed glaring weaknesses in planning, coordinating, and conducting operations.

Yet even if Westmoreland had achieved a combined command, it is unlikely that any government of Vietnam would have surrendered control over highly sensitive personnel decisions. South Vietnamese political and strategic realities inhibited opening military careers to talent. Loosely stated, while the insurgency posed a long-term threat to the South Vietnamese state, a coup could overthrow the government in an afternoon.

More fundamentally, South Vietnam possessed little inherent legitimacy. Ngo Dinh Diem had attempted to govern from a minority Catholic base, alienating most of the Buddhist citizenry. Seizing power through coups hardly increased the legitimacy of his successors. Military patronage, especially the distribution of staff sinecures to urban elites, provided an important source of support for the government. It made little sense for any Vietnamese government to court short-term political and strategic collapse in hopes of improving the long-term effectiveness of the ARVN, especially given the apparently unlimited U.S. commitment. By the time the limits of that commitment had been reached, the structural weakness of the ARVN had been too deeply built in to change. It would be a huge mistake, however, to conclude that the ARVN was simply incapable of fighting. The problem was not that its units would not fight, but that too few of them were actually fighting at any given time.

In retrospect, what the ARVN needed most was to be engaged in active operations, in which its leaders were held accountable for the results. Such engagement would have allowed American advisors and ARVN senior leaders to form valid assessments of South Vietnamese officers based on results, instead of bickering over conformity to differing paradigms of character and doctrine. Such assessments would have been almost useless, however, without a South Vietnamese willingness to act on them. Such willingness was not forthcoming as long as U.S. forces were providing an unlimited guarantee of the Republic of Vietnam's independence. Thus while the initial deployment of U.S. combat troops in 1965 to prevent the ARVN's collapse may have been unavoidable, deploying more troops in an attempt to win the war for them undercut longer-term efforts to render the ARVN independent.

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Partner states must be willing and able to make effectiveness the principal criterion for military advancement. While seemingly obvious and unobjectionable, opening careers to talent is painful in nascent states, where awarding government office is usually a key means of gaining and maintaining political loyalty. When the survival of the state and its society clearly depend on the effectiveness of its security forces, there is a powerful inducement to adopt such a principal. The Republic of Korea, having barely escaped catastrophe twice, and in some doubt as to the extent of the U.S. commitment, was willing to make the leap. The Republic of Vietnam, mistakenly confident of the unlimited extent of U.S. commitment, was not.

Certainly, the U.S. Army's history makes clear that it is possible to forge a great army under peacetime conditions. But U.S. virtuosity is the product of decades of effort. We say it takes 16 years to develop a battalion commander or a good first sergeant, 20 for a brigade commander or command sergeant major. Whether we needed the whole span, building the U.S. Army that triumphed in Operation *Desert Storm* took 18 years and had a solid base on which to build. We do not have 18 years in Afghanistan and Iraq, and we would not want to take that long if we did. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] "How the Korean Army Improved: Interview with Gen. Matthew Ridgway, USA, Ret.," in *A Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War, 1965–1972*, vol. 7, *Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (II)*, ed., Thomas C. Thayer (Springfield, VA: National Technical Information Service), 239. Hereafter cited as Ridgway interview.

[2] James Fallows, "Why Iraq Has No Army," *The Atlantic Monthly* (December 2005).

[3] This summary is drawn from David Petraeus, remarks to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, "Iraq's Evolving Forces," November 7, 2005; and Michael Yon, available at <http://michaelyon.blogspot.com/2005/09/battle-for-mosul-progress-report.html>.

[4] For ROK performance in the final battles, see Walter G. Hermes, *Truce Tent and Fighting Front* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1992), 466–476.

[5] Ridgway interview, 241.

[6] In *South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1992), 17, Roy C. Appleman records the material inferiority of the ROK army. For Ridgway's opinion of the U.S. Eighth Army's leadership when he took over, see Matthew B. Ridgway, *The Korean War* (New York: Da Capo, 1986), 88–89.

[7] Hermes, 341–345.

[8] The description of Ap Bac is drawn from George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 3d ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1996), 97–98.

[9] Ronald H. Spector describes the establishment of the U.S. advisory effort in *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941–1960* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1983).