Lyndon Johnson assumed the presidency just three weeks after Diem’s overthrow in November 1963. He could hardly have been more different from the man he replaced. Whereas John F. Kennedy had oozed youthful, even naïve, optimism about America’s capacity to do good through an activist role in the world, Johnson’s priorities were domestic. He pursued the most ambitious legislative program since Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, advancing civil rights, federal aid to education, and health-care programs for older and poor Americans. Despite his desire to stay focused on this domestic agenda, which was dubbed the Great Society, Johnson was tormented by the deteriorating situation in Vietnam. Faced with a choice between allowing the collapse of South Vietnam and paying a steep political price at home or risking becoming mired in an unwinnable conflict that would undermine his domestic agenda, Johnson chose the latter.¹

Johnson came eventually to leave a heavy imprint on U.S. nation-building efforts in South Vietnam. But his appreciation of the importance of the GVN developing strong and legitimate institutions developed only slowly over time. He also came to realize that nation building enabled him to frame the war at least in part as a constructive, positive activity—one in which the United States would strive, as he told his aides, “to build as well as to destroy.”² Although some critics have argued that Johnson interfered with the war effort by attempting to export his Great Society domestic programs to Vietnam, it was in fact an inescapable part of U.S. strategy to focus on the GVN’s relationship with its rural population.³ As the war ramped up in the period 1963–1966, Johnson
and his aides orchestrated a nation-building escalation alongside the military buildup. Although the president had initially pictured the nation-building effort as focused on meeting the material needs of the Vietnamese poor, he and his close aide Robert Komer eventually came to focus on what the French had dubbed pacification—the spreading of GVN control and coercive power across as much of the South Vietnamese countryside as possible. It was this agenda that led to the decision by the administration to create CORDS in May 1967, setting the stage for a unified and comprehensive nation-building effort for the remainder of the time that American forces were in South Vietnam.

**Embracing the “Do-Gooders”**

When Johnson assumed the presidency in November 1963, he was by no means an ardent crusader for increased U.S. involvement in the internal affairs of South Vietnam. At the first meeting Johnson held on Vietnam, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara brought up the topic of economic aid to South Vietnam. Johnson said that he supported aid, “but at the same time he wanted to make it abundantly clear that he did not think we had to reform every Asian into our own image. . . . He was anxious to get along, win the war—he didn’t want as much effort placed on so-called social reforms.” CIA director John McCone noted afterward that he detected a “President Johnson tone” that contrasted with the “Kennedy tone” in that the new president had “very little tolerance with our spending so much time being ‘do-gooders.’” McNamara came away with the same impression. Johnson believed the coup against Diem had been an example of unwise U.S. meddling in South Vietnam, and instead wished to focus on taking action against North Vietnam. His first significant policy initiative was to order stepped-up covert action against the North.

Johnson’s concern about the post-Diem situation in South Vietnam was well placed. After the November coup, Saigon entered an era of profound political instability that would not come to an end for nearly two years. Coup and counter-coup were launched by various factions in Saigon, each distinguished not by its nation-building vision but by its plan to divvy up the spoils of office to its followers. Lacking any central impetus, rural nation-building efforts remained marginal or nonexistent. Meanwhile, the U.S. military effort to seek a partner for nation building in the GVN’s central institutions was providing little relief. In 1964, the U.S. military command prodded the GVN to adopt a military pacification plan called Hop Tac, aiming at reasserting a GVN presence in the provinces around Saigon. It is illustrative of the disjointed efforts of the U.S. agencies in South Vietnam, and the limitation of their efforts to areas where they happened to find talented South Vietnamese partners, that Kien Hoa, the scene of the CIA’s
most promising effort, was not viewed by Westmoreland or by the ARVN as a priority province at that time.\(^7\)

The Hop Tac campaign itself achieved results that can be described as minimal at best, and which in turn showed the ARVN’s unsuitability as a nation-building partner at this time. ARVN generals remained absorbed in Saigon politics, an obsession that both fueled and was a by-product of the repeated coups that occurred throughout 1964. At least one Hop Tac mission was aborted only for the forces assigned to it to next be spotted back in Saigon participating in a coup.\(^8\)

Most Vietnamese military commanders considered the campaign to be American in conception and hence showed little interest in making a success of it, exposing the limits of American influence. The commanders of the units involved in Hop Tac saw few benefits in risking the wrath of their superiors by incurring casualties in pursuit of a cause that was valued by the Americans but of little apparent interest to any of the rotating cast of generals sitting in the Presidential Palace in Saigon. In November 1964, the director of the U.S. office supporting Hop Tac reported frustration at “the general lack of motivation and drive” shown by ARVN officers who saw the war as “a way of life rather than something to finish off quickly.” Because the slow progress of the program was determined by the national political situation and the general attitude of ARVN officers, factors the United States did not have sufficient leverage to alter, a “marked increase in [the] rate of progress” was believed “beyond the control of the U.S. unilaterally.”\(^9\)

Meanwhile, the overthrow of Diem led to a decisive shift in policy in Hanoi. In early 1964, the Communist Party adopted Resolution 9, which shifted North Vietnam from a posture of assistance and aid to southern revolutionaries to one of a full-out push for victory. The NLF, which by now had mobilized substantial military might, began driving ARVN forces out of large areas of the countryside. A far greater number of North Vietnamese Army (NVA) advisers arrived to professionalize the guerrillas, along with draftees to buttress their numbers. In late 1964, Hanoi decided to deploy and maintain multiple NVA regiments in South Vietnam for the first time. By the time they entered combat at the end of the year, the Communist movement had already established a “liberated zone” stretching from the Central Highlands down to the northwestern reaches of Saigon. About half of both the population and territory of South Vietnam were under some form of Communist control.\(^10\) “Throughout the countryside, we moved to consolidate our control in liberated areas and accelerate the establishment of NLF governmental entities in disputed regions,” an NLF guerrilla later wrote. “The object of this effort was not to take land, but to create a strong and continuous NLF administrative presence, which villagers would accept as their valid government.”\(^11\)

As the Communists consolidated their own administration, minds were focused in Washington on the weakness of their ally in Saigon. For Johnson,
this included a quick realization that “getting along and winning the war” was inseparable from addressing the perennial ineffectiveness of the GVN. Doing so did not require remaking it in America’s own image, but it certainly seemed to require doing something. “From all that I have heard,” Johnson cabled Saigon in January 1964, “I could not be more in agreement that political energy is at the center of the government’s problem in South Vietnam.”\(^\text{12}\) Again later that year he reemphasized “the importance of economic and political actions having immediate impact in South Vietnam,” which was “governed by a prevailing judgment that the first order of business at present is to take actions which will help to strengthen the fabric of the Government of South Vietnam.”\(^\text{13}\)

What exactly to do was less clear. The period between the fall of Diem and the final decision to dispatch U.S. combat forces in 1965 was characterized by a growing frustration with the state of drift in South Vietnam and the inability of U.S.-based officials to influence the situation.\(^\text{14}\) Their counterparts in South Vietnam pointed out in response that there was little they could do unilaterally under present conditions to change the marginal character of their efforts.\(^\text{15}\) Frustrated and facing increasingly bold Communist attacks on American installations in South Vietnam, Johnson returned to his starting place: attacking the North. From February 1965, the U.S. launched air strikes in North Vietnam. As well as deterring attacks against American assets, the aerial campaign had the goal of strengthening the morale of a GVN by finally taking the war to the North. But such a psychological fillip could go only so far, especially if it provoked Hanoi into greater escalation in the South in response.\(^\text{16}\) Increasingly on the brink of military collapse and further than ever from being a viable nation-state, South Vietnam needed radical American intervention if it were to be saved.

From the middle of 1965, Johnson directed just such an intervention. Alongside the military escalation that began with Marines splashing ashore at Da Nang, he also launched an escalation of rhetoric and action aimed at reforming the GVN. Johnson’s initial thinking on the issue was closest to the materialist and developmentalist USOM view, and this affected how he approached the problem. In a famous speech at Johns Hopkins University in April 1965, Johnson made clear that he considered economic and social development in South Vietnam a necessity on par with the war effort. “In areas that are still ripped by conflict, of course development will not be easy,” he declared. “Peace will be necessary for final success. But we cannot and must not wait for peace to begin the job.”\(^\text{17}\) This was in contrast to an earlier draft of the speech that he had rejected, which relegated development to a task that would follow the war.\(^\text{18}\) The Johns Hopkins speech has often been dismissed as rhetoric, given its call for large-scale development projects—such as constructing a Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) on the Mekong—which were incompatible with the escalation in the war that Johnson
was about to launch. Its claims were indeed fanciful. But it ought to be seen as one component of a broader nation-building push by the president and his subordinates. This push would eventually give birth to CORDS, which would have a much greater influence on the war than the stillborn idea of a TVA on the Mekong.

But in the chaotic conditions of mid-1965, neither the Americans nor the GVN was in the position to launch a nation-building push in any realm beyond that of rhetoric. In May, Johnson asked National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy if there was “anything we can do with land reform at all.” “Yeah, we can do land reform, but we can’t do it until the government will say it,” Bundy replied. “And . . . the government’s goddamn busy doing other things.”19 The Americans were busy too, and they had few concrete ideas about nation building anyway. The debate over nation building at this time took place at a high level of abstraction without being enriched by detailed knowledge of the actual situation in South Vietnam, much as it had under the Kennedy administration. While Johnson stressed the importance of social and economic measures to improve the lives of South Vietnamese peasants, his advisers stressed alternative—but equally broad-brush—approaches. McNamara, Bundy, and Secretary of State Dean Rusk all agreed in September that it was necessary to stress “pacification,” using the old French colonial term for establishing governmental control of the rural areas. As McNamara explained, this primarily meant helping the GVN develop an effective internal security apparatus: “You can’t win it [the war] with American troops going out after Viet Cong terrorists—it just isn’t going to be done that way.”20 U.S. proposals for pacification had in the past focused on the need to control the population through police measures, not by providing them with material goods or winning their active participation against the Communist movement.21 Frank Scotton, an architect of the early cadre programs who visited Washington on leave from Vietnam around this time, remembered that “when I raised the need for political development from the ground up, eyes glazed.” The priority now, he was told, was “stability at the top.”22 The Communist offensive of 1964–1965 had some administration principals wondering if it was premature to worry about anything but how U.S. divisions were faring in battle. Writing to Johnson in December, Bundy admitted: “We do not have a complete and fully developed political, economic and social program to match the major new military deployments proposed for 1966.” Such a program could be developed in the fullness of time, he continued, “but we have to understand that unless and until there can be military victories, this program is irrelevant.”23 This was a stark but accurate assessment of priorities in wartime Washington in 1965.

As Johnson pressed for more focus on his “development” agenda, he was ill served by the bureaucratic system he had established for running the war. The
main forum for the discussion of wartime strategic issues in the Johnson administration was the “Tuesday lunchtime” meeting of Johnson and his senior advisers. In keeping with the president’s informal but demanding style, the meetings usually took place without the preparation of either a detailed agenda or minutes. The principals present were bound by the fierce loyalty that Johnson demanded of his subordinates to follow the path set out at the meeting, but their own subordinates were often in the dark about what had even been discussed. Conversely, the scope of views expressed at the meetings was strictly limited by their secretive and tight-knit nature. Johnson discouraged dissent, and he did not provide a forum for the discussion of detailed policy papers prepared lower down in the bureaucracy, as President Nixon’s National Security Council system would later do. Management of the war was also hampered by the fact that throughout 1965, there was no individual in Washington above the rank of colonel (or its civilian equivalent, GS-15) who was working full time on the issue of Vietnam.

In this system, nation building was a bureaucratic orphan. The regular attendees at Tuesday lunchtime were Johnson, McNamara, Rusk, Bundy, CIA Director William Raborn (succeeded by Richard Helms), and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Earle Wheeler. USAID, which was overseeing Phillips and Fraleigh’s fast-expanding provincial advisory network, was unrepresented at the meeting. And while the CIA had assets in Vietnam that were working on the task of strengthening the GVN, under Johnson the agency was relegated to the role of a provider of intelligence rather than shaper of policy. Helms recalled that there was “no occasion in all the meetings I attended with him” that Johnson asked for his opinion on policy. The relatively small size of both CIA and USOM assets in South Vietnam made it difficult for them to contribute to a policy discussion that was dominated by military voices. As the military had come to dominate the American presence in South Vietnam, McNamara was Johnson’s most important adviser on the war. But McNamara was consumed by the military effort, and to a lesser extent by “pacification.” Both USOM and CIA personnel who got the opportunity to brief McNamara about their own nation-building approaches found him unresponsive and uninterested in following up.

With other administration principals uninterested, the president was a key catalyst in pressing the national security bureaucracy to focus on nation building. Even if his own idea of “development” was a diffuse and unfocused starting point for a discussion of nation building, he continued to press the issue. The very day after Bundy sent his pessimistic memo about the “irrelevance” of such efforts, Johnson was again telling his aides that he demanded “more non-military action/leadership of more senior rank and energy.” This presidential predisposition would soon be encouraged by Johnson’s political needs to shift the domestic debate over the war onto more positive ground. Combined with the emergence
of new and more stable leadership in the GVN, the ground was set for the creation of a comprehensive U.S. nation-building effort in South Vietnam.

The GVN and the Honolulu Conference

“On Thursday, February 4 [1966] I left the White House area for my first leisurely lunch in many weeks,” recalled Chester Cooper, one of Bundy’s deputies. “I returned to the West Basement at about 2:30 to find Bundy desperately trying to reach me.” A summit between the American and South Vietnamese heads of government—the first time these two figures would meet—had been hastily called in the time it took Cooper to have lunch. It would begin just two days later. Cooper worked furiously to patch together a quick agenda for the meeting and reserve the required hotel rooms in Honolulu, which was at the height of tourist season. It was only late in the day that it occurred to one of the Americans to inform the South Vietnamese ambassador of what was about to take place. When they decided to invite him to travel with the presidential party at the last minute on Saturday morning, the ambassador “raced madly from his home in Chevy Chase to Andrews Field and barely made the plane.”

Despite its significance for the war, the Honolulu conference emerged in this chaotic fashion because it was conceived as little more than a short-term political expedient for Johnson. In early 1966, he was facing mounting domestic criticism of his war strategy. A Christmas pause in the bombing of North Vietnam and a related “peace offensive” had generated no results, leaving the administration red-faced as it resumed bombing. On February 3, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee announced it would hold televised hearings into the war, promising many news cycles of discomfort for the administration. Trying to find a way to divert media attention with a dramatic gesture, Johnson telephoned Rusk and suggested that the American and South Vietnamese presidents meet for the first time at Honolulu. When Daniel Inouye, a senator from Hawaii and member of the Foreign Relations Committee, asked to attend the conference, Johnson rejected his request and declared that the meeting was only being held anyway because of the committee and its “goddamned report” on the war. Cooper’s lunch was interrupted shortly afterward.

Given how little preparation the American side made for the conference, it is unsurprising that during it they continued to talk about the need to strengthen the GVN in the same abstract and vague terms they had used so far. Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., the U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam, spoke of an “economic and social revolution, in freedom,” while Johnson spoke of “better methods for developing a democracy.” The president warned both the Americans and the
Vietnamese present that he would demand to see progress on these amorphous goals by the time of the next summit, including wanting to know “how have you built democracy in the rural areas? How much of it have you built, when and where?” The bizarre demand to quantify democracy was in keeping with an abstract American discourse on South Vietnam that did not engage seriously with either the inherited problems of the GVN or the roots of the NLF’s appeal in the rural areas. Nor did the conference address the thorny problem of how to bring together the different approaches taken by the various agencies in South Vietnam, which were as divided and fragmented in their efforts as ever.32

However, the conference came at a particularly opportune time for the GVN, even if—given the meeting’s origins in American political machinations—this was purely by chance. The U.S. military escalation ordered by Johnson from mid-1965 had finally brought an end to the revolving-door coups that had characterized GVN politics since the fall of Diem. In June 1965, a new junta had seized power, headed by Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky and Chief of State Nguyen Van Thieu. The two men could hardly have been more different. Ky, initially the dominant figure in the twosome, was not yet thirty-five years old. Flamboyant and impulsive, Ky, with his signature lavender flying scarf and ivory-handled pistol, was instantly recognizable. He had served for several years as commander of South Vietnam’s air force, a politically sensitive position given its potential to swing the balance in the frequent coups that beset the capital. One of the first pilots to fly covert missions against North Vietnam, Ky still managed to get airborne every day by commuting the two miles to his office by helicopter. Politically naïve and hence malleable in the hands of the more experienced, he worked hard to cultivate a daredevil public image. His efforts were aided by his glamorous wife Dang Thi Tuet Mai, an air stewardess who was nicknamed Miss Air Vietnam and was reported to be just as handy with an ivory-handled revolver as her husband.33 Thieu was older than Ky at forty-two years, was “married to Nguyen Thi Mai Anh, a shy and modest housewife,” and was a much more cautious speaker and political operator. He had risen through some of the most prestigious combatant commands in the ARVN and cultivated a network of support in the lower and middle ranks during a long stint as superintendent of the Dalat military academy after South Vietnamese independence.34 Considered by other personalities in the GVN as more conservative and less dynamic than Ky, Thieu, with his methodical style, would eventually eclipse his partner and rival.35

When Ky and Thieu first emerged at the forefront of the South Vietnamese regime, many Americans regarded them as “absolutely the bottom of the barrel.”36 Vietnamese observers were skeptical too. Bui Diem, who served Ky somewhat skeptically as an aide, reported that a common joke held that if Ky and Thieu were put in a blender, then “what came out would be a good deal better for
The two ruled through a directorate of generals. In a further example of Saigon’s aping of the techniques that had allowed the Vietnamese Communist movement to become so successful, Ky created an Armed Forces Council with sixteen hundred members down to the rank of colonel. The idea, Ky claimed, was to allow ideas to flow upward from those closest to the impact of decisions, much like the Communist movement’s structure. Ky privately referred to the directorate as the “politburo,” and boasted that it was “similar to that of the Communist party, which had proven remarkably durable.” However, in deference to staunchly anti-Communist colleagues, he referred to it as his “politburo” only in private. Apart from this organizational innovation, coming to power just as the United States began its military escalation also had distinct advantages for the new regime. American officials had made clear their displeasure at Saigon’s repeated coups in recent years, but only now did they have the political leverage to discourage them. As the influx of American forces began to blunt the effect of the Communist offensive in mid- and late 1965, the political situation in Saigon also stabilized. There would never again be a coup against the regime’s leadership.

FIGURE 4. The Honolulu Conference. Seated around the table clockwise from right foreground: Nguyen Cao Ky, Robert McNamara, Nguyen Van Thieu, and Lyndon Johnson.

National Archives identifier 192497, Johnson White House Photographs, White House Photo Office Collection, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.
By committing the United States so publicly to the regime of Thieu and Ky, the Honolulu Conference was instrumental in this political stabilization. The two were exhilarated to be summoned at such short notice to receive the American stamp of approval—unsurprisingly, given how effectively this reinforced their domestic authority. They and other members of the GVN delegation made sure they told the Americans what they wanted to hear, even when it became clear how detached from the realities of South Vietnam some Washington-bound Americans were. Ky “thought it strange” when Johnson pressed the GVN to put NLF defectors on the radio to denounce the movement, and when he suggested they “develop better contacts with the communists to gain increased understanding of the movement.” As Ky knew but declined to explain to the president, “few Vietnamese, and fewer Vietcong, owned radios.” Nor did Ky, whose father-in-law had been assassinated by the Communists, feel that he needed a lecture on understanding the movement. Nevertheless, he nodded along with the president.39 Meanwhile, other GVN representatives made a host of highly specific promises, including building 913 kilometers of roads, encouraging village handicrafts, and promoting rural electrification.40 These were expertly tailored to appeal to Johnson’s desire to focus on rural “development” and show a benign side of the war to the American people, even if they bore little relation to the capabilities and intentions of the GVN in the rural areas. As Ky later wrote, the conference showed that the GVN and American “views of the world were quite different,” a point echoed by Bui Diem.41 Outside critics were also quick to point out that little would result from the conference. Dismissing the high-sounding words about reform spoken at Honolulu as nothing but a smokescreen, the NLF issued a statement noting how the United States had “summoned their servants in Saigon” for a “farce of a conference” aimed only at “further intensification and expansion of their aggression in South Vietnam.”42 The veteran French journalist Bernard Fall likewise predicted that the promises made at Honolulu would amount to little.43

More consequential was the communiqué issued by both parties at the end of the conference, which committed the junta to eventually promulgating a new constitution and instating civilian rule in Saigon. How seriously the South Vietnamese leadership took this commitment is unclear. Bui Diem, whose skepticism of working for Ky was partly fueled by his own desire for a return to civilian rule, was delighted to find both Ky and Thieu “too euphoric” about dealing with the president of the United States as equals at an international summit to worry too much about the specifics.44 Although no timeline was provided for this transition—something the duo would have been unlikely to agree to—this represented a black-and-white commitment that both Americans and South Vietnamese could hold the regime to. In the short term, the disconnect between abstract American demands for “democracy” and “social revolution” and the
GVN’s intentions meant the conference had virtually no impact on the GVN’s activities in the rural areas. But in the long term, the regime was now committed to an activist agenda that would gradually—whether they liked it or not—take concrete form.


In early 1966, Robert Komer was a deputy to Bundy on the staff of the National Security Council (NSC). Born in 1922, Komer had escaped what he seems to have considered an uninspiring future in Saint Louis by means of a scholarship to Harvard, where he completed undergraduate studies and an MBA. Along the way he was drafted, entering the war in Europe as a private assigned to write operational histories of the war in the Mediterranean theater. In January 1944, he was stranded on the Allied beachhead at Anzio in Italy, enduring months of heavy bombardment before a successful breakout. Rising steadily through the ranks, Captain Komer was discharged after the war and entered the employ of the newly formed CIA in 1947. As a midwesterner of modest means in the patriarchian and refined environment of the early CIA, Komer relied on intellect and brashness in equal measure, much as he had in the similar social environment at Harvard. Throughout his career, he proved adept at cultivating his politically and socially better-connected mentors. His success as an intelligence analyst led to his being assigned as the CIA’s liaison to the NSC, and at the start of the Kennedy administration he was asked to join its staff full time. Here he came to know Johnson, who recognized him as an able and reliable subordinate. For his part, Komer showed the same affection and fierce loyalty to Johnson as he had to the other mentors who had catapulted him from the banks of the Mississippi to the heart of American policy making.45

After the Honolulu Conference, when Johnson wanted to appoint an aide to drive progress on the ambitious agenda agreed there, he turned to Komer. The president was not picking Komer because of his expertise or enthusiasm for the war. Komer was—in his own words—a “tabula rasa on Viet Nam,” and he had discouraged more junior colleagues from getting their careers entangled in what he saw as a distraction for the United States.46 Rather, Johnson valued Komer’s loyalty and reputation as a brash expediter, the latter of which earned him the nickname “the Blowtorch.” In the aftermath of Honolulu, Johnson continued to conceive of nation building in South Vietnam as primarily involving economic development that would win the allegiance of the rural population through addressing their material needs. He told Komer that henceforth he would be in
CHAPTER 2

charge of “the other war . . . a war to build as well as destroy.” Komer was told to focus on “generating a massive effort to do more for the people of South Vietnam, particularly the farmers in the rural areas.” Komer recalled that Johnson continued to see this “other war” as “largely being a sort of building of TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority] and REA [Rural Electrification Administration],” transplanting his knowledge of large-scale American development initiatives to Vietnam.

Johnson had a rhetorical preference for these “high modernist” development schemes that promised sweeping transformations through centralized plans. But despite the president’s focus, U.S. personnel on the ground continued to favor decentralized approaches that sought incremental change through alliances with province chiefs and village communities. The fragmentation and decentralization of resources still prevalent among U.S. civilian agencies in South Vietnam made any other approach impossible. Lacking high-level relationships with members of the new junta in Saigon and eclipsed many times over in resources by the growing American military machine, the efforts of the civilian agencies seemed more marginal than ever. American civilians also seemed out of touch with the war effort and unsure of the relationship between the military effort and their own activities. In January 1966, U.S. officials from the agencies interested in nation building had reached a consensus that it would take “several years’ more fighting at least on the current scale before the GVN will be in a position to exercise effective control over substantially all of South Viet-Nam except over Viet Cong base areas.” But even Ky had recently told McNamara that he expected to control no more than 50 percent of the country’s population in two years’ time.

U.S. nation builders in South Vietnam were as far as ever from a comprehensive and coordinated plan to strengthen the GVN and come to grips with the NLF’s hold on the countryside. Richard Holbrooke, who joined Komer’s staff in the White House, reported as late as February 1967 that a visitor to South Vietnam could “visit ten provinces and you will get as many concepts and methods for pacification; not field expedients being tested but just different concepts about what the program is about.” Komer pronounced the situation to be “a mess!” and pledged to bring “order out of chaos.” Komer later said that the nonmilitary aspects of U.S. involvement in South Vietnam—what was then called “the other war”—had “never really been satisfactorily defined.” “So I worked up my own definition,” he recalled. “After all, nobody else knew what it was either.” His lack of background knowledge does not seem to have overly perturbed him. Instead, the Harvard MBA focused on what he later called the “fascinating” issues of bureaucratic management involved. As for the intrinsic problems of nation building in South Vietnam, Komer “borrowed liberally from the people and studies
which impressed me.” These included Sir Robert Thompson and Victor Kru-lak, the commanding general of the Fleet Marine Force, Pacific. But Komér’s desire for quick results, reliance on others for policy ideas, and unfamiliarity with the situation in South Vietnam could sometimes get him into trouble. Not long after starting his job, he conceded to Johnson that he had “just pushed the town [Washington] hard on the new land reform program Lodge so enthusiastically endorsed till I found it so vague and half formed that it will require complete redoing.” Komér’s efforts would continue to be dogged by an enthusiasm that was often not tempered by knowledge.

As he began to travel frequently to South Vietnam and learn more about the situation there, Komér was quick to realize that Johnson’s grand developmental schemes were unrealizable. Instead, Komér had to focus much of his early attention on trying to cope with the monetary inflation and port congestion that accompanied the U.S. military buildup. Beyond that, he saw that the Communist movement’s military offensives had eroded even the pretense of a GVN presence across much of the country. Having been launched into the job because Johnson wanted to stress transformative rural reform in South Vietnam, Komér instead came to focus on the much narrower topic of establishing the GVN’s physical control of the countryside. By May 1966 Komér was reporting that he had “progressively lowered my sights from the desirable to the do-able.” He told Johnson in the same month that “I have on my desk many imaginative ideas for urban reconstruction, industrial development, people-to-people projects, educational schemes. These make sense in time, but not until we control inflation and pacify more of the countryside.” This brought Komér to the conclusion that it was a “military failure” to loosen the Communist movement’s military grip that was the most immediate problem, not the failure of the civilian agencies to strengthen the GVN. In September, he told McNamara that “60–70% of the real job of pacification is providing local security.” “If the military will only clear and hold the hamlets,” he told Johnson, “I’ll produce plenty of lollipops.”

Komér had arrived at a view of nation building that blended elements of the military and USOM approaches. Like McNamara, he had come to see “pacification”—the physical control of the countryside—as primarily a coercive task. It would be accomplished by soldiers and police, not CIA agents or USOM personnel whispering in the ear of a GVN province chief. But Komér also conceived of a role for “lollipops,” the provision of social and economic aid to the rural population, in the aftermath of the imposition of control by GVN security forces. With this emphasis he was fulfilling the mandate originally given to him by Johnson, even if he did so in a way that was more commensurate with the realities of the conflict. The result was a sequential “clear and build” policy that tied the U.S. military and civilian efforts in South Vietnam together into a coherent whole. Even
so, Komer did not engage with the broader problem of how exactly the United States was supposed to prod the GVN into overcoming the deficiencies that had led to the birth of the NLF and the explosion of the conflict to begin with.

Having formulated this understanding of the conflict, Komer took the next logical step: advocating for the absorption of the responsibility for nation building by the military. Early on in his new role, Komer had worried that “we are not thinking big enough.” He reached the conclusion that giving the job to the military, with its vast resources in South Vietnam, would force an enlargement of vision. He was determined, he told McNamara, on “bringing the military fully into the pacification process.” Komer had also come to see the military as a more promising vessel for implementing the presidential will. “Soldiers go where they are told,” Komer complained to Johnson, “but about three key civilians turn us down (funny how they develop physical disabilities) for every one who accepts.” Especially with difficulties getting the right personnel, Komer believed it could “take at least eighteen months in my judgment to get a civilian management structure which might handle pacification as effectively as MACV could today.” By October, Johnson seemed to have come around to this point of view and now recognized the immediate primacy of security in South Vietnam, and of the military’s role. “I don’t think AID can run anything anywhere,” Johnson told McNamara. “I don’t think they have personnel. I think what personnel they have is generally not too competent—ex-schoolteachers and things of that kind. They’re a third of their people short out there. They advertise and trying [sic] to get them—I don’t think they have the type that can take over when the troops move out.” Johnson went on to add that “I do have a respect for the military, or I would have respect for a chief of police that’s had some training in protecting people from coming in with terror at night and things of that kind.”

Komer’s vision of nation building as a combination of security and lollipops sat uneasily with CIA, USOM, and State Department personnel who had been focused for years on the problems of nation building on the ground in South Vietnam. Having watched the NLF grow from its origins as a popular uprising against Diem, many of these Americans had been uneasy with Johnson’s military escalation. The idea that their nation-building efforts might now be subordinated to the soldiers made their heads spin. The CIA, whose efforts had focused on painstakingly cultivating South Vietnamese leaders like Chau and supporting them through cadre programs patterned on the NLF, believed any attempt to scale up their efforts could only be accomplished at the expense of the political sensitivity and local knowledge that made them successful. George Carver, who was special assistant for Vietnam affairs to the agency’s director, Richard Helms, was particularly scathing of Komer’s proposals in a memo to his boss. Criticizing Komer for his “gee whiz” style and “tone of activist omniscience which masks
some fundamental misconceptions,” Carver argued that although management and resources were important, “the essential aspect of pacification is one of doctrine.” Carver believed that the CIA’s cadre programs had found the right formula for success, and needed time to show it. To “give this program a military cast . . . would ruin its chances of success.” Helms emphasized this himself to Komer, saying that greater MACV control could threaten the “irregularity, local characteristics and individuality of leadership” that were “the essentials of our pacification effort.” Stressing “the political heart of the pacification program” as opposed to a narrow focus on “security,” Helms was keen to point out that the goal of the program was a “motivated population, not merely an administered one.” An overemphasis on “statistical successes” and standardized organization, especially when it interfered with the work of “political motivation” that the CIA claimed to know so well, would threaten the program. But ominously for his own argument, Helms admitted that he “cannot contest your statement that we cannot match the MACV presence throughout the districts.”

Opposition to Komer’s proposal from the State Department and USAID primarily contended that placing all nation building under MACV would undermine the prospects of stable, civilian government appearing in South Vietnam. Dean Rusk’s own Vietnam experts were concerned about the “impression” the move might make, making it look like pacification had “become a civil affairs / military government matter, with all the overtones of the US taking over in an occupied country.” They also feared that the move might impact the balance of forces within the Saigon government itself, complicating efforts to move toward civilian rule. They worried that putting American military officers in charge of strengthening the GVN would only reinforce the ARVN’s dominance over the GVN, and particularly its rural governance. It would also reinforce the position of the four ARVN corps commanders, who had come to exercise far-reaching control over rural government in their zones. Rusk wrote to McNamara that his “principal problem” with the proposal “was that we seem to be moving toward military govt.” AID director William Gaud shared this reservation. State and AID believed that a civilian central government would be more responsive to the needs of the South Vietnamese populace and thus better able to establish the ties of mutual obligation between state and citizen that were at the heart of nation building, and that civilianization should therefore be encouraged over the long term. At the CIA, Carver viewed the point as “valid,” although, perhaps in deference to the bureaucratic division of labor that he was in the midst of chastising Komer for not respecting, he advised Helms that “we feel it is a consideration we should let them [State] argue.”

Komer, backed by McNamara and ultimately by Johnson, did not view any of these objections as decisive. His need to demonstrate tangible success to the
president was too great to place his faith in South Vietnam’s national political process, which was not due to produce a civilian government through an election for over a year. As he told McNamara, “the fact remains that the bulk of GVN pacification assets are under military control.” As for the nefarious role of the corps commanders, “I agree, but doubt it will be politically feasible to push the ARVN corps commanders out of the picture for a while. If so, let’s use them, not deplore them.” Even though Komer later told Johnson that “the political plus from an elected government would far outweigh any likely loss of administrative efficiency,” encouraging such an outcome was not his short-term priority. He remained wedded to pragmatically working with the current, military-dominated GVN. Indeed, Komer believed that military personnel on the U.S. side would be more effective at motivating and advising ARVN personnel than civilians could be, a belief that seemed more compatible with maintaining ARVN influence within the GVN, given that the bulk of resources and personnel on the U.S. side were also from the military. Komer’s view stemmed from his belief that it was essential to begin a much more comprehensive push to increase GVN control of the population imminently. This desire for quick progress was at odds with the careful incrementalism that underlay the objections of the civilian agencies.

Nor did Komer share the CIA’s preoccupation with doctrine and the conceptual underpinnings of nation building. Komer did not believe that a successful program relied on “a sophisticated concept centrally orchestrated,” but rather on “good” local GVN leadership that was provided with “adequate resources.” By eliding what was meant by “good” government in the context of South Vietnam—a problem that had clearly vexed the GVN itself—Komer placed his faith in an increase of scale. Unwilling to wait for the chance emergence of exceptional Vietnamese leaders like Chau, Komer hoped somehow to substitute American resources and know-how. Holbrooke, who had worked for USOM in South Vietnam, worried that his boss did not appreciate the difficulty of turning local policies that had been found to work in one area into larger, national schemes without a commensurate loss of quality. Unlike officials in the civilian agencies, Komer was more concerned about quantity than quality. Though acknowledging that there was “great confusion, and widely differing views, on what pacification . . . means and how to carry it out,” he was more impressed with the “massive” resources that would be available in 1967. “By sheer weight alone, this mass application cannot help but produce significant results in 1967,” he told Johnson.

Johnson was won over, and had decided by October 1966 that nation building should be placed under MACV. Yet he was still reticent to ride roughshod over the civilian agencies or to make it appear that he was rushing to militarize nation building. Johnson therefore mandated that civilian agencies be given a
ninetys-day trial period from November to consolidate their own operations in South Vietnam and show results before nation building would be turned over to MACV. There is little evidence that anyone in Washington saw this arrangement, known as the Office of Civil Affairs (OCO), as more than a sop. Johnson had come to understand that MACV’s involvement and an emphasis on local security were necessary prerequisites to his larger ambitions, and to demonstrating progress in the war to the American public. General Harold K. Johnson, the secretary of the army, astutely judged the direction the political winds were blowing in this regard when he cabled Westmoreland to say that “the more I ruminate about the rate of progress in Vietnam and the inevitable relationship to our own elections in 1968, the more convinced I am that you will be given full responsibility for the program sometime after the first of the year [1967].”

General Johnson turned out to be correct. In January, after the OCO had been in existence for several months, Westmoreland reported that detailed pacification planning, ARVN involvement in pacification, and the coordination of military and civilian assets in the field were all still problems. By April, Major General William DePuy, Westmoreland’s special assistant for pacification, was still reporting that pacification was “regressing” in I Corps, showing only “limited progress” in II and II Corps, and at a stalemate in IV Corps. In late February, as the civilian agencies continued to fight what seemed an inevitable drift toward military control, Helms had the CIA prepare a paper for the State Department on the prospects for nation building in 1967. While again criticizing the “administrative, imposed connotation” of MACV’s approach to nation building as against the more politically minded doctrine of the CIA, the paper warned against “undue expectations of rapid success” and stated that the goals set for 1967 were “modest,” with a further million civilians to be added to “secure areas.”

With this implicit confession that although the CIA disapproved of the military’s approach, it was not able to promise success either, Johnson took the final step and placed nation building entirely under MACV in May. He also decided to dispatch Komer to Saigon to head the new organization, and later in the month Komer followed Fraleigh and so many Americans before him in stepping off a plane into the Saigon heat. It had taken nearly two years since the war started, but America finally had a dedicated nation-building agency—and a man to run it—in South Vietnam. It now remained to be seen what it was capable of.