When briefing the interminable stream of visitors who came from the United States to hear about the progress of the war effort in 1967, Brigadier General William Knowlton liked to show them a map. It depicted in red and green shades the areas of South Vietnam controlled by the Viet Minh and the French colonial regime at the time of the Geneva Accords in 1954. “Every Vietnamese government since 1954,” he told one delegation, “has had to deal with the aftermath of this map.” In parts of what used to be northern Annam—now the South Vietnamese military district of I Corps—children had grown to be adults while knowing nothing but rule by the Communist movement and its fronts. Even when Diem had the movement on the ropes in the late 1950s, there had still never been any effective GVN authority in these areas. Other large, densely populated provinces on the central coast—places like Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, and Quang Ngai—remained Communist bastions. Farther south, the Mekong Delta was a patchwork of red and green, and a menacing band of red hung like a noose around Saigon, from where ARVN’s Hop Tac operations had failed to dislodge the Communists. And no map based on a concept as crude as physical control could account for the hidden allegiances of the rural population or the places where an underground Communist infrastructure still owned the night.¹

It was telling that Knowlton could use a map from 1954 to illustrate the situation at the time of his briefing in late 1967. Despite the U.S. military escalation and a stabilization of the political situation in Saigon, the GVN had still made few inroads in the country’s rural areas. But 1967 also brought the final cre-
ation of the Office of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), which many American nation builders hoped would allow them to overcome the fragmented nature of their previous efforts to assist the GVN. An American nation-building agency that mirrored the GVN’s own governmental organs from Saigon to the remotest district, CORDS was designed to allow the United States and the GVN to work together on joint plans to strengthen the South Vietnamese regime, build links with the rural population, and undermine the Communist movement’s grip on the villages. But as 1967 drew to a close, it became increasingly clear that even as the Thieu-Ky regime proved more effective than its predecessors and the Communist movement was under pressure like never before, both the Americans and Vietnamese most committed to reform faced tough—and perhaps insurmountable—challenges.

War Comes to South Vietnam

When American combat units first arrived in South Vietnam in the summer of 1965, their immediate task was to stave off an imminent Communist victory. Both the NLF and regular North Vietnamese Army units had carried out increasingly audacious operations aimed at inflicting serious defeats on ARVN forces. Despite South Vietnamese operations around Saigon, the NLF military machine had continued to mobilize manpower in the area. In the waning days of 1964, it unleashed its newly created Ninth Division in the battle of Binh Gia near the capital. For four days the NLF occupied a government stronghold, repulsing counterattacks by the ARVN’s strategic reserve, made up of elite ranger, airborne, and marine units. The South Vietnamese suffered hundreds of casualties, leaving two ranger companies and a marine battalion operationally ineffective. The NLF claimed to have suffered only a few dozen casualties, and they did not leave a single body on the battlefield. After achieving the NLF’s greatest victory yet over the ARVN, the Ninth Division melted back into the countryside. An attempt to pursue them, named Operation Nguyen Van Nho after the slain commander of the marine battalion, turned up nothing.²

Although the Ninth Division was equipped with heavy weaponry infiltrated from North Vietnam, its manpower was drawn from Cochinchina. With the NLF’s own forces capable of annihilating entire formations of the ARVN’s strategic reserve, the entry of NVA units into the battle in the South promised even worse to come. As 1965 progressed, the NLF and NVA launched a general offensive. Le Duan, the Communist movement’s paramount leader in Hanoi, hoped that the movement’s forces could cause the collapse of the ARVN before the United States would have a chance to react and intervene. The movement’s
administrative infrastructure in South Vietnam moved into high gear, mobilizing peasants into the NLF’s main force units. In a series of large operations in and around the Central Highlands, the NVA and NLF moved to force the government to deploy its strategic reserve and then annihilate it. Once these reserves had been worn down, the path would lay open for Communist forces to enter Saigon, hopefully accompanied by a mass civil uprising against the GVN and the Americans. By early June, Communist offensives were chewing through multiple ARVN battalions per week, presaging the imminent collapse of the force’s cohesion and will to fight.3

These were the conditions in which the first American combat units arrived in 1965 under General William Westmoreland. U.S. forces had to spend considerable time establishing their bridgeheads, constructing an enormous logistical system, and managing the influx of troops before they were able to go on the offensive. By October 1966, there were about 350,000 American military personnel in theater. While the arrival of U.S. forces stiffened the resolve of the ARVN and allowed for spoiling operations to be launched to stave off imminent defeat, it was not until late 1966 that Westmoreland was equipped for a nationwide offensive. The search-and-destroy operations he launched throughout 1966 were mainly intended to keep Communist forces off balance and prevent them from massing for attacks on American or GVN strongholds. Nevertheless, poor American intelligence—compounded by the GVN’s lack of supporters in the rural areas where battles were fought—meant that the Communists controlled the tempo of the fighting, and American units nearly always fought on the tactical defensive after suffering ambushes.4

The political situation in Saigon likewise settled into a stable but inconclusive and uninspiring pattern. The Thieu-Ky regime brought an end to the era of revolving-door coups, but there were few initial signs it would be able to restore even naked physical control of much of the country, much less win the complicity of the rural population. GVN local authorities had largely retreated to district towns and other fortified positions in the face of the Communist movement’s growing administrative and military might. As James C. Scott has pointed out, the tendency of landlords and officials to flee and seek the protection of a distant state power that was so despised in many rural communities underscored their distance and alienation from the peasantry.5 Even to reassert its presence sufficiently to rebuild the reviled apparatus of local government that had existed prior to the coup against Diem would be a huge task for the Thieu-Ky administration.

Between the start of the U.S. buildup and the creation of CORDS, American nation builders in Vietnam continued to operate in their previous stovepipe fashion. Governmental stability in Saigon, an increased availability of resources, and slightly improved coordination between military and civilian efforts enabled
American actions to have greater impact. But there continued to be widespread
disagreement among Americans in different agencies about whether the impact
they were having was the right one. These disagreements had only grown more
heated in the precarious environment of the last few years. The analysts who
wrote the *Pentagon Papers*, who were intimately familiar with American policy
debates, noted that those interested in what was called pacification were “often
in such violent disagreement as to what pacification meant that they quarreled
publicly among themselves and overlooked their common interests.” As we saw
in the previous chapter, this made the creation of CORDS controversial. But it
also affected how pre-CORDS nation-building efforts developed, something that
had an impact on the eventual workings of CORDS itself.

After 1965, nation-building efforts took place in a new military context. As
American forces established themselves and began to push outward from their
bases, they took on most of the burden of fighting large enemy units. ARVN
forces, meanwhile, adopted the tasks of providing static defense to populated
areas and—at least in theory—“pacification.” As Westmoreland explained in
July 1965, the United States would focus on “large, well organized and equipped
[enemy] forces,” which they would locate through search-and-destroy operations.
Westmoreland hoped the United States could do most of its fighting in remote,
sparsely populated areas, like the Ia Drang Valley, in which the first major clash
between the United States and the NVA occurred in November 1965. Meanwhile,
it fell to the ARVN to provide South Vietnamese villagers in the populated areas
with security “from the guerrilla, the assassin, the terrorist and the informer.”
Westmoreland was cognizant of the need for nation building, but his concept
of operations left undefined how exactly it was supposed to be achieved behind
the military shield provided by the United States. As the military emergency of
mid-1965 eased, both the CIA and USOM attempted to work with the GVN to
provide an answer to this question.

The CIA sought to capitalize on governmental stability in Saigon to transform
the local cadre efforts discussed in chapter 1 into a national effort. In doing so, it
worked with a number of key figures in the GVN. The first was Chau, who became
head of a national cadre program established in November 1965 on Thieu’s ini-
tiative. The second key Vietnamese figure was Nguyen Duc Thang. Born in Cao
Bang Province, a traditional home of rebels and independence fighters on the
border with China, Thang entered a Viet Minh youth organization at the age
of sixteen. Like Chau, he claimed to have left after the awe he felt toward his
Communist superiors turned to unease and then disgust at their brutal actions.
His family’s social status was high enough to allow him to enter the University
of Hanoi, and in 1952 he graduated from a French officer-candidate school as a
classmate of Ky. After independence, Thang rose to the rank of major general in
the ARVN, and Ky made him head of the GVN’s Ministry of Rural Development (MORD) in late 1965. At Ky’s insistence, MORD then assumed responsibility for the cadre program, with Thang as Chau’s superior.⁹

The nucleus of the GVN’s new cadre program was a training center at Vung Tau, a beach town near Saigon. By centralizing training and direction of the numerous local cadre programs that had sprung up over the previous years, both the Americans and Vietnamese involved in the effort hoped to produce a program with nationwide impact. Thang hoped to overcome the problems inherent in the patchwork nature of previous, local initiatives, arguing that “the principal problems in the situation are the lack of clear doctrine and definition of pacification; lack of a pacification plan since 1963, with military plans backing up a nonexistent pacification plan; no clear chain of command for pacification; and lack of clearly defined techniques for pacification.”¹⁰ Control by the central government also meant that Saigon would not have to fear that the cadres were being used to create local political bases or undermine the central state. As a result, existing local cadre programs were ordered dissolved and their personnel screened for aptitude and loyalty before being sent to Vung Tau to be molded into instruments of the GVN’s nation-building agenda.¹¹

The first class of what came to be known as the Revolutionary Development (RD) cadre matriculated at Vung Tau in February 1966, around the time of the Honolulu Conference.¹² Like their predecessors in Kien Hoa, the RD cadres were charged with befriending the villagers whom they served among, carrying out agitprop for the GVN, directing small-scale economic aid projects, and ferreting out NLF cadres and supporters. As an American who worked closely with the major Vietnamese figures behind the RD program said, they were “quick to admit that they have adopted and adapted to the RD Program much of the dogma and techniques of the Vietnamese Communists.”¹³ ARVN chief of staff Cao Van Vien himself described the RD concept as “Communist-inspired,” whereas Don Luce and John Sommer called the cadres “imitation VC.”¹⁴ In this, the RD program followed the example of Chau’s cadre effort in Kien Hoa.

On the one hand, the emergence of the RD program signaled that with the military and central political situation becoming less desperate, the GVN was ready to begin an effort to establish a rural political base. As the U.S. Mission wrote in its campaign plan for 1967, “Revolutionary Development is the integrated military and civil process to restore, consolidate, and expand government control so that nation-building can progress throughout the Republic of Viet-Nam.”¹⁵ The RD cadres were to be the “vanguard elements” of this process.¹⁶ But on the other hand, attempting to achieve this goal via a cadre program modeled on the NLF was paradoxical. Chau had designed his cadre system in Kien Hoa on the assumption that the regular GVN bureaucracy was irredeemable. Like the
NLF, he aimed not to improve that bureaucracy, but to supplant it. The result had been the system of “parapolitics” described by Chau’s CIA handler Stuart Methven, who became an acolyte of the approach he learned from his Vietnamese colleague. According to Methven, parapolitics was an emergency measure taken when the regular government could not be reformed quickly enough to deliver necessary results, as was the case in South Vietnam. Although it was hoped that the cadres would “provide the bridge for the government to cross over so that it can establish itself among the broad base of the population,” this was by no means guaranteed, especially if the government remained unreformed. In fact, the recourse to parapolitical measures could actually delay the reform of the regular government because the province and district leaderships were not themselves required to build support among the people.  

As an emergency measure, parapolitics could hence retard the ultimate goal of nation building. 

A further problem with the RD program was the relationship of the cadres to local GVN authorities. The Communist movement’s cadres became the leaders of the villages in which they served, and were at the bottom of a chain of command that passed through NLF district and province leaderships until ultimately terminating in Hanoi. This created a structure of authority that paralleled the GVN and competed with it for the complicity of the peasantry and to mobilize their resources for the war effort. Like the NLF, the RD cadres also paralleled the regular GVN authorities at the villages and hamlet level. But this made much less sense when their ultimate aim was to reform and proselytize for the GVN rather than to destroy it, as the Communists sought to do. Furthermore, the parapolitical structure of an RD cadre was extremely shallow, having no presence above the village level. RD cadres were ultimately responsible to the local GVN province chief, meaning they had little practical authority or capacity for independent action. There was no guarantee that the province chiefs would be interested in addressing GVN abuses that the RD cadres reported, which were mostly the result of the province chief’s own actions. This system had worked in Kien Hoa because Chau was the province chief, providing the cadre with a link to an individual who could address the grievances of the population. But Chau had been a rare kind of province chief, and mostly the RD cadres were either ignored or used as a regular paramilitary without any political function. At best, they might build sympathy for the GVN through their personal actions, but they could not systematically reform it.  

The RD program was riven by disagreements, both between the Vietnamese and the Americans and on the GVN side itself. Chau was convinced that nation building in South Vietnam could be successful only if the idea of South Vietnamese nationhood was fostered. He had learned from his time observing how the Viet Minh functioned that there needed to be a “sense of nationalistic conviction
and motivation on the part of everyone involved” to rival the impetus provided by the Communist movement. Only then could the “colonial and postcolonial legacy” of the GVN be overcome. Like Colby and Methven, he placed a high premium on the indoctrination of cadres and the ideas they would espouse in the villages. Chau wanted the cadres to operate in teams of eighty each, with half dedicated to the political work of proselytizing for the GVN, mapping out the aspirations and allegiances of local villagers, and reporting grievances. The remaining forty would provide paramilitary functions, both protecting the team and training village militia after the fashion of the NLF’s local guerrillas. But with Colby back in Washington, Chau found that the local CIA leadership had different ideas. Chief of Station Gordon Jorgenson pushed for fifty-man teams, with forty assigned to paramilitary duties and only ten carrying out the political tasks that Chau considered the heart of the program. The CIA’s offer to house his headquarters in their own facility in Saigon also convinced Chau that the Americans did not understand the GVN’s need to protect its nationalist credentials. The figure of fifty-nine-man teams was eventually agreed, but this was much closer to the American position and led Chau to react angrily by attempting to marginalize Americans involved with the effort.

Chau and the CIA managed to maintain a working relationship, however fractious. But Chau eventually fell victim to the still-unstable political situation within the South Vietnamese government itself. Although Thieu and Ky had brought an end to the era of continuous coups, their regime remained beset by internal fissures and conflicts of personality. Chief among them was the conflict between Thieu and Ky themselves. The two men both suspected that the other was attempting to build a personal power base and relationship with the Americans in order to eventually sideline his rival and emerge as the paramount leader of South Vietnam. Chau’s position at the forefront of an effort to build a rural political base for the GVN made him a natural target of suspicion for Ky loyalists, who suspected that this base might ultimately serve the interests of Chau’s patron, Thieu. The situation took a surreal twist when Chau discovered that Vung Tau’s commander, Captain Le Xuan Mai, was an adherent of the Dai Viet, an anti-Communist Vietnamese political party that had been involved in the disputes and coups of the post-Diem years. The party was much more radical even than Chau in its desire to overthrow the Vietnamese social and political order, and vehemently opposed to Ky, whom it considered corrupt and licentious. Like most non-Communist Vietnamese nationalists, the Dai Viet had never been able to advance beyond its urban, educated base. Now it appeared that Captain Mai and a band of like-minded instructors had been using the Vung Tau center to indoctrinate cadres to spread not only anti-Communism but also the Dai Viet’s heavily antigovernment and anti-Ky beliefs in the rural areas. Chau and John
Paul Vann believed that CIA personnel, having never bothered to translate the training material used at the center into English, had not noticed.22

Whether this was true or not, the issue blew into the open when Chau attempted to have Mai dismissed and take over the operations of the center himself. In response, a large number of instructors at Vung Tau distributed weapons and organized their students to put up armed resistance to Chau’s appointment. Perhaps hoping he would mishandle the situation and so could then be dismissed, Thang placed a battalion of paratroopers at Chau’s disposal and told him to do whatever was necessary to restore order. Chau instead managed to restore order peacefully and persuade Mai to move on through unclear means. Shortly afterward, he quit the government to seek office as a legislator, apparently in disgust at political infighting in the GVN. The affair showed that even if the ARVN generals had stopped launching coups against each other, political and personality clashes still hampered the emergence of GVN institutions at the center, much less in the rural areas.23

The Office of Rural Affairs started by Rufus Phillips and Bert Fraleigh was also afflicted by conflict in the years prior to the creation of CORDS. The duo’s attempt to transform USOM by building up a network of provincial government advisers had run into opposition among more traditional USAID personnel who believed the aid mission should focus its efforts on the central government in Saigon. In 1964, James “Big Jim” Killen, former head of USAID’s mission in South Korea, became head of USOM. In Seoul, Killen had pushed hard for USAID to avoid taking on too many of the functions the South Korean government should have been performing for itself, and he brought similar priorities with him to Saigon. Questioning whether provincial agents tended to sap the autonomy of GVN local government by “institutionalizing an excessive dependence on the USOM representative to do things they should be doing for themselves,” he took steps to reduce the influence of Fraleigh’s young Tigers in the provinces.24 Somewhat paradoxically, Killen also took aim at the system of providing province representatives a per diem to live off the local economy, arguing that they should be provided with a higher standard of living as a means of inducing respect from the Vietnamese. He eventually launched security investigations against a number of Tigers—including, in some cases, on the spurious grounds that they had homosexual relationships with their Vietnamese counterparts—and in late 1964 had Fraleigh and thirty of the Tigers recalled to Washington.25 Fraleigh eventually resigned from USAID altogether in 1967, disgusted by what he viewed as the gutting of the program he had helped establish. Back in Washington, one Tiger penned a ballad titled “The Legend of James D. Killen” to lament the changes. “The moral of the story, is plain with A-I-D,” it read, “You don’t work for the people, you work for bureaucracy!”26
Although Killen’s moves seemed to go against the trend of increased American involvement in South Vietnamese rural affairs, his opposition to the Tigers won him support in some quarters. Both the philosophy behind the program Fraleigh had established and the personnel he had recruited to staff it came in for criticism as American involvement in South Vietnam grew and the problem of nation building drew the attention of other agencies. As we saw in the previous chapter, Fraleigh had sent his young charges forth into the provinces with a general remit to make provincial government run more smoothly, develop links between it and the rural population, and enthuse the Vietnamese with American can-do spirit. But other Americans increasingly began to question whether “BA generalists” recruited from the Peace Corps and IVS could effectively advise the grizzled ARVN majors and colonels who made up the majority of South Vietnamese province chiefs. “You couldn’t get a province chief to listen to a boy of 22 or 23,” said one USOM official who served in South Vietnam in 1966, summing up a common perspective. “He knew he wouldn’t have the experience.” Chau remembered that the first time he saw the American sent to be his adviser in Kien Hoa Province, he thought “I don’t need any babies down in this province; I’ve got enough problems.” One adviser even wrote a ditty that mocked the pretensions of his youthful colleagues. “Now Colonel, you’re forty, I’m just twenty-two,” it began, “but I’ve been to college, so I’ll advise you!”

Others took aim at the materialistic philosophy that lay behind USOM’s activities, focusing as they did on hoping that villagers would be so grateful for minor economic aid projects that they would abandon a Communist movement whose bread and butter was nationalism, revolution, and social empowerment. One older American who worked alongside the Tigers was openly contemptuous of what he regarded as a “pathetic reliance on the belief that good works like fertilizer and improved rice seed are an end in themselves without regard to the political implications these things involve.” Colby was likewise concerned with having USOM involved in village cadre efforts, believing they were “technical adviser[s] . . . [and] not, as a rule, operationally oriented.” As the war escalated, more and more Americans were in a hurry to see concrete results from their nation-building efforts, and dismissive of the idea that simply providing economic goods to the villagers was enough. While Fraleigh had stressed that the Tigers’ goal was to help the Vietnamese people, the generation of advisers who served during the military buildup were more inclined to believe that, as one put it, “your primary purpose in going overseas is the interest of the United States government. It is not the interest of Vietnam—this is our foreign policy that we are implementing.” Altruism would not be enough to achieve U.S. goals.
In the northern reaches of South Vietnam, the U.S. Marine Corps was carrying out its own program to attempt to strengthen the GVN. These were known as the Combined Action Platoons, or CAPs. The CAPs aimed to expand a zone of security around Marine installations and populated areas in I Corps, the Marine Corps area of operations in South Vietnam. Integrating closely with an ARVN unit and living in close proximity to South Vietnamese villagers, the Marines trained the GVN soldiers and carried out civic action projects in an attempt both to provide security and to win over the villagers to the GVN’s cause. One recent writer has declared CAPs to have been “the conflict’s best example of American COIN [counterinsurgency],” and other authors have argued that they should have been extended beyond I Corps to other parts of South Vietnam.

But while the CAPs had limited success as a tool of counterinsurgency, they were no more capable of nation building than any other U.S. initiatives in the war to date. William R. Corson, the Marine Corps officer who was in charge of the CAP program at its height, considered the CAPs mainly a means of protecting Marine bases. It was explicitly not a program that aimed at preparing the GVN to be self-sufficient in the event of U.S. withdrawal, or to establish ties of mutual obligation between the GVN and its citizens that would enable the GVN to meet the challenge of the Vietnamese Communist movement. Corson viewed the GVN as a predatory institution that it was best to cut entirely out of the process of providing for local security and economic benefits to the Vietnamese people. Instead, he focused on direct interface between Marine units and Vietnamese villagers, and on winning support through manipulating what he called the “acquisitive bent of the Oriental.” The CAPs hence combined the “parapolitical” weaknesses of the RD program with the excessive materialist focus that marked USOM’s efforts. As Colonel Robert Montague, Komer’s military aide and later an official in CORDS, pointed out, the impact of the CAPs was not “permanent” because “everyone knew the Marines weren’t going to be there very long.” Lacking any answer to the problem of reforming the GVN in a holistic manner, Corson was instead reduced on one occasion to punching a corrupt district chief in the face. The deficiencies and failures of these previous American nation-building efforts formed the background for the creation of CORDS. The bureaucratic rivalries and ideological disagreements that had afflicted them did not disappear when they were amalgamated into the new agency. And despite CORDS’s clever bureaucratic structure, mirroring as it did the GVN at every level from Saigon to the districts, there was no guarantee that Americans and Vietnamese would be able to work together in harmony, or that they even ultimately shared the same goals. A punch in the face was unlikely to improve matters, but would CORDS do any better?
CHAPTER 3

Setting Up CORDS

By May 1967, many of the individuals who would be key players in the U.S. nation-building effort until the end of the war were in Saigon. At the beginning of the month, Ellsworth Bunker arrived to take up the post of ambassador, and General Creighton Abrams arrived to serve as Westmoreland’s deputy, charged with overseeing the development of the ARVN. Komer arrived to take over as head of CORDS, which was established in late May. In Saigon, Komer became a civilian deputy to Westmoreland with the personal rank of ambassador, equivalent to a four-star general. As the deputy for CORDS (or DepCORDS) to Westmoreland, he had at his disposal the resources of all civilian U.S. agencies concerned with nation building, and a sizable military contingent as well. L. Wade Lathram, who had been director of the transitional Office of Civil Operations, became Komer’s deputy. His deputy in turn was Knowlton, who had been head of MACV’s Revolutionary Development Support division. Komer also obtained responsibility for U.S. efforts to develop local militia forces to counter the NLF, and for rooting out the NLF’s administrative and political infrastructure in the villages. CORDS hence took responsibility for the war in the villages in all its civil and military components. Such an organization was unique in American history. As an official history noted: “To have civilians fully operating in a military chain of command was extremely rare in the history of the United States; it had certainly never before occurred on such a scale.”

At the level of each of the four military corps commands in South Vietnam, the OCO director for each region became the corps DepCORDS, charged with overseeing advice to the GVN’s civil government. He then assumed control of an integrated military/civilian staff that paralleled that of CORDS in Saigon, along with the ability to supervise the chief U.S. adviser to ARVN forces in the corps areas on matters pertaining to the support of nation building. At the province level, the current civilian and military teams were consolidated into one organization with a single manager. Either the senior civilian or military officer was elevated to the position of overall manager, known as province senior adviser (PSA), with the other as his deputy. This led to a “sandwich” management structure in which a civilian boss always had a military deputy, and vice versa. The decision as to which arrangement to adopt in each province was taken on “the basis of security in the province, civil-military balance in the RD effort and [the] qualifications and experience” of the personnel involved. In areas where security was poor, the PSA was more likely to hail from the military, and the initial balance saw twenty-five military PSAs versus twenty-two civilians. Finally, the arrangements at the district level largely mirrored those at province, with the exception that owing to the severity of the security situation in 1967 and the fact
that not all districts had OCO representatives at the time CORDS was created, in most cases the officer serving as MACV district adviser was appointed the district senior adviser (DSA), with a civilian deputy.

The result was a nation-building organization of unparalleled reach and size. Tens of thousands of Americans would join CORDS to work on nation-building tasks during the remainder of the war. Although it has often been alleged that the United States failed at nation building in South Vietnam because key figures failed to be interested in the problem, the CORDS system won the full support of Bunker, Westmoreland, and Abrams. Komer had no complaints about his relationship with Bunker, which he characterized as “intimate.” Using a phrase that would later be associated with Abrams’s tenure as commander of MACV, Bunker told both U.S. civilian and military leaders in South Vietnam in May 1967 that he favored a “one war” approach to the conflict that combined military and civilian assets both to fight the war and strengthen the GVN. Though his call to facilitate the GVN in carrying out a “social revolution” was vague and contrary to Komer’s focus on local security, he gave Komer wide latitude to work as he wished. Bunker’s backing was important, as under a system that had first been established by a grant of authority from President Johnson to Ambassador Maxwell Taylor in 1964, the ambassador was the senior American in South Vietnam, to whom even the commander of MACV was subordinate. Bunker chaired the Mission Council, a policy-making body that consisted of the local heads of the various American agencies in the country along with the ambassador’s deputy and the MACV commander. With the creation of CORDS, Komer took a chair in the council, and he also attended Westmoreland’s leadership conferences with his top subordinates. Despite the allegation by Lewis Sorley that Westmoreland was uncomprehending of nation building, Komer found Westmoreland highly supportive and believed that “the way Westmoreland handled the thing was one of the basic reasons why CORDS worked.”

As well as giving all of the Americans interested in nation building one high-ranking voice in American councils, CORDS also finally eliminated the problems created by the “autonomous baronies” of the various U.S. agencies that Colby had described. The U.S. presence in the provinces and districts was now unified under one chain of command and spoke to its South Vietnamese counterparts with one voice. With the inclusion of military assets, CORDS was also able to have a presence in every district throughout South Vietnam. This was of particular importance to Komer, who had brought with him from Washington his belief in the importance of the primacy of local security for nation building. There was now a single organization, stretching from Saigon to the remotest districts, which had the capacity to coordinate all necessary resources on the U.S. side in support of nation-building plans and programs and then to work with the GVN to see them implemented.
Komer set to work on the same “fascinating” management problems that had captivated him in Washington. For CORDS to work, the GVN would need to develop central institutions capable of conceiving a nation-building strategy and implementing it throughout the country. The ministry would develop national concepts for nation building, decide on priority areas for their implementation, and then allocate the resources accordingly and direct the local personnel involved. As well as helping conceive the plans at the center, CORDS would also help to execute them at each level of government down to the district. In theory, this top-down cooperation between Americans and South Vietnamese would allow for sweeping reforms of the GVN directed from the center.

CORDS could be viewed as a bureaucratic scaffold erected around the GVN’s organs of governance, allowing American workmen to access all parts of the regime from top to bottom. In theory, they would work in harmony with their South Vietnamese counterparts in the structure itself to improve the regime. It would also make it easier for Saigon to control and reform its own structure of rural government, as the central regime could work with the Americans manning the scaffold to intervene in district and provincial governance. This would allow the United States and the GVN to jointly move beyond the stopgap measures of the RD cadre program, which after CORDS was set up came to be viewed as a “transitional” step. RD had led the way by being “the first GVN program that had truly national scope,” but now the focus was on developing the GVN’s “normal processes of government.” Parapolitical emergency measures would become a thing of the past as CORDS enabled a wholesale, top-down reform of the GVN. As Frank Scotton later wrote, “reform, unlike revolution, must start at the top.” But as we shall see, there was always the potential for disagreements between the American and GVN workmen scurrying around the scaffold, and no guarantee that the measures CORDS pushed would be beneficial in any case. However well designed in theory, CORDS in practice would require a complex process of compromise and negotiation to work.

Making this work involved avoiding a number of pitfalls of which the American nation builders who had come before CORDS, and their Vietnamese counterparts, were well aware. One was ensuring that the new, more muscular American organization did not undermine the very GVN capacities it was designed to develop. CORDS was, as its name implied, a support organization. CORDS officials were not supposed to run village governments, distribute rice to refugees, or personally root out the NLF’s political cadres. Rather, they were to help develop the GVN’s capacity to do these things for itself. As Komer put it, the nation-building effort had “room to breathe behind the military shield” created by Westmoreland’s offensives in 1966–1967, but it was a “GVN responsibility, with the U.S. providing advice and resources.” This made the sustainability of
any strengthening of the GVN critical. As Montague had pointed out in his critique of the Marine CAPs, CORDS was not going to be around forever. Bunker put it like this in January 1969: “My yardstick of success here is what the Vietnamese can do themselves, because that eventually is the ultimate test. They’ve got to take over someday. It’s quite clear that we’re not going to be here forever. And what we can get them to do—through instruction, through persuasion, through pressure, in whatever way—to do the job themselves is the ultimate yardstick of success.” Yet this was not the whole story. CORDS personnel did not generally perceive their role as merely to unthinkingly support whatever the GVN wanted to do, but rather to influence the GVN to reform in ways the Americans believed conducive to its long-term survival. In this respect, CORDS had more of the spirit of Fraleigh and his young Tigers than of the traditional USAID bureaucrats represented by Killen. According to Fraleigh, an off-color joke that did the rounds among more action-oriented Americans in South Vietnam concerned a bull brought in by USAID for “stud purposes” who “refused to perform because he was there as an ‘advisor’ only.” It is no wonder this joke was popular among the province and district advisers of CORDS, many of whom came from the military and believed along with Fraleigh in the need to offer “positive solutions” to the GVN’s problems. This meant that CORDS aimed to influence and change and not just “support” the Saigon regime. Few Americans in South Vietnam had any illusions about the deficiencies of the GVN by 1967, and there was widespread understanding that reform might often involve making the South Vietnamese act in ways they did not want to. As Chau had discovered in the conflict over the size of his cadre teams, the fact that the United States was providing resources for a program often gave it a lot of influence over its design. As Komer described in 1970:

The Vietnamese ran every single operating program. Pacification was and is 99 percent pure Vietnamese in its staffing. Now, we did an awful lot of advising, managing, prodding, cajoling, and where necessary, pressuring from behind the scenes. We were the bankers. We provided the bulk of the logistics support. We were the shadow management. Most of the new initiatives in pacification, most of the program design, the management techniques, were ours, but transferred to the Vietnamese. I think that pacification stands as a model of U.S.-Vietnamese rapport.

In this passage, Komer describes many of the different ways that U.S. officials interacted with their GVN counterparts. Because CORDS staff were not directly in the GVN chain of command, they always had to operate via the indirect exercise of influence. “The totality of our U.S. effort is inserted into the society of [South Vietnam] at thousands of key points—each one is referred to as a
Vietnamese counterpart,” a U.S. Army report titled *A Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of Vietnam* (PROVN) had asserted. “Whether, and how, he can be influenced is crucial to the achievement of U.S. objectives.” The means of influencing GVN officials ran the gamut from persuasion and flattery to the threat of sanctions or the application of some other form of pressure. The correct amount of pressure or “leverage” to place on the GVN was one of the issues that had long divided U.S. nation builders. Too direct an involvement in South Vietnamese affairs was controversial in the USAID mission. The extent of USOM’s deployment in the rural areas of South Vietnam was unprecedented in its history, and was resisted by some officials. In late 1966, a journalist who covered USOM’s activities in South Vietnam wrote that it was “axiomatic in the United States mission that you must ‘get along with your Vietnamese counterpart’ or get out.” Even after the creation of CORDS, Komar believed that this attitude “lasted on in USAID, those parts that were not under our control.”

At the other end of the spectrum of the debate on leverage were the military authors of PROVN, all of whom had extensive experience in South Vietnam. The study’s authors considered “nonfunctioning Vietnamese officialdom” to be “the crux of the matter and the harsh reality of our situation” and called for a high degree of involvement by U.S. personnel in the affairs of South Vietnam. “If we lose in Vietnam,” the report noted, “we pay the price no matter how carefully American officials rationalize the need to respect Vietnamese sovereignty.” PROVN painted a picture of a GVN that was unable to save itself and would need the United States to “stimul[ate] social reform as required” if it were to survive. Paraphrasing the Serenity Prayer, the authors said that U.S. personnel must possess “the courage to become directly involved where we must, the patience to abstain when appropriate and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Colonel Volney Warner, who had worked on PROVN and then joined William Leonhart’s White House office, continued banging the drum during 1967. Warner called for a “scaffolding of influence” that allowed for the exercise of leverage by relatively low-level personnel in CORDS, including the ability for PSAs to withdraw support from GVN provincial programs that were not performing. He also raised the issue of “an explicitly negotiated U.S.-GVN influence relationship” that would lay down obligations on both parties and allow for the exercise of sanctions on the GVN, such as the withholding of funds for key programs, if necessary.

Komar had his own ideas about how leverage ought to be used to improve GVN performance. Eschewing grand theories of leverage, Komar was insistent that its exercise was an art of the possible and that it be used discriminately rather than as part of a formal framework. Komar would have agreed with White House advisers who exulted that “for the first time the Mission structure is sufficiently integrated to permit its influence to be properly focused.” By unifying the U.S.
nation-building effort, CORDS had created the capacity to coordinate the exercise of leverage against all levels of GVN officialdom, from Saigon down into individual villages. But Komer continued to believe that the best way to exercise influence over the South Vietnamese was informally and quietly. Many of the South Vietnamese officials involved in attempting to reform the GVN—especially Chau and Thang—were particularly sensitive to the charge that they served American masters, especially when they went against the preferences of their own countrymen. Komer hence wanted to retain tight control over the exercise of leverage rather than devolving it to lower levels.61 As he explained in January 1968, “I do not want leverage considered as an advisory tool available to all our field personnel. It should only be applied at certain key power centers and only when other advisory techniques have not brought results. Even then, as few people as possible should know that we imposed our way and what methods we employed to do so.”62 This did not mean that CORDS personnel in the provinces were not supposed to try to influence their GVN counterparts; that was in fact the sum total of their job. What it did mean was that the direct imposition of the U.S. will or the use of coercion was to be limited. Komer was willing to go only so far away from the old USAID admonition to get along with your Vietnamese counterpart or get out. Given that the work of CORDS depended on a good relationship with GVN officials, threats to remove American support or resources would jeopardize the daily functioning of CORDS if they caused a GVN official to “lose face by knuckling under to his advisor.”63 Komer directed that if disputes arose at the provincial level over the actions of GVN officials, then PSAs should get the official to agree to an action plan and hold him accountable for implementation. But if cooperation was not forthcoming, then the PSA’s only recourse was to report the incident up the chain of command. Komer, Westmoreland, and Bunker would then decide what action was to be taken in light of overall U.S. interest.64 Westmoreland also favored a “low key, behind the scenes” approach to influencing the GVN.65 How much change could be leveraged out of the GVN under such conditions would be a key question for CORDS.

Komer had once been in favor of a greater use of leverage but believed that he had “mellowed” since arriving in-country and realizing “that the practical problems just look a lot different when you’re out there on the implementing end.”66 While he acknowledged that the United States had to pressure the GVN into reforms, this pressure had to be carefully calibrated so as not to undermine the independence of the GVN in the long term. It was also crucial to avoid a nationalist backlash that would make the GVN’s task of winning over the rural population even more difficult. For the thousands of Americans who now came to South Vietnam convinced they could leverage useful reform from the country’s regime, doing so both effectively and sensitively became the key challenge ahead.
Cords’s First Year

It was in Komer’s hard-pushing nature to hit the ground running. After CORDS was established in May 1967, he set about trying to have an immediate impact on the effectiveness of the GVN’s local government. As during his time in Washington, he seemed to place his faith in the mass application of American resources to achieve this end. He had little to say about long-running disagreements between U.S. agencies over how best to pursue nation building, for instance whether the provision of economic goods or the intangibles of motivation and ideology were more important. Komer’s general message was for everyone to push harder on all fronts, and eventually the GVN would muddle through. But his efforts were frustrated by two long-running problems in South Vietnam: the rural security situation and the return of governmental instability in Saigon. Faced with these challenges, Komer and CORDS appeared to be as helpless as their predecessors.

Komer’s attempt to have an immediate impact on GVN performance was known as Project Takeoff. He named it for Walt Rostow’s theory of economic takeoff, which held that developing countries passed through a number of stages of economic development before taking off into self-sustaining growth. In a vivid demonstration of the impossibility of applying large-scale visions of modernization to wartime South Vietnam, Komer’s goals in the project were considerably more limited.

While Thang had attempted in 1967 to impose on provincial and district governments an overall national plan for strengthening the GVN, based largely on the RD cadre effort, he had failed. Corps commanders and province chiefs continued to operate as they wished, with little fear of punishment if they did not follow central direction. As was typical in South Vietnam, the program had also been slow to begin until after the Tet celebrations, which fell at the end of January. In the words of CORDS officials, the GVN’s reform efforts for the year remained hampered by an adverse security situation, “a general lack of enthusiasm among officials at all levels of GVN participation,” and the limited ability of central GVN officials such as Thang to coordinate and influence local government around the country. These were the perennial bugbears of South Vietnamese rural governance. Security problems continued, and no major improvement appeared to be on the horizon if the war remained within its current dynamics. A major CORDS report in August concluded: “The VC have the capability to counter pacification throughout SVN with few exceptions. The strength of the infrastructure and local VC units has not changed substantially despite successes . . . against main force units.” In other words, the struggle for security, much less nation building, was only just beginning. It was around this time that Knowlton was briefing visitors from Washington with a map that showed how little progress had been made in controlling the countryside since 1954.
A fundamental problem faced by the GVN as it attempted to spread its administrative control throughout the country was a lack of resources. Even with U.S. forces fighting the bulk of the main-force war, the GVN did not have the military or administrative assets to control all of the countryside at the same time. Even where an ARVN presence could be established, South Vietnamese soldiers were frequently abusive toward the local population and defined their goal narrowly as preventing the visible movement of enemy units. This meant that an ARVN presence might appear to provide “security” while doing nothing to challenge covert NLF administration, much less the population’s allegiance to it. The main U.S.-backed attempt to bridge the gap between the people and the GVN’s local organs thus far—the RD cadres—were often unwelcome in the villages as well. But even if they had been successful, there were not enough RD cadres to go around. This was especially the case given the high rate of attrition they suffered. In the summer of 1967, the political scientist Samuel Huntington arrived in South Vietnam for a six-week study of the GVN’s nation-building program. After visiting fifteen provinces in all four corps areas, Huntington concluded that “improvements in security produced by the introduction of a governmental presence last only so long as the presence lasts.” After government forces left, the NLF’s administration resurfaced. Noting that the United States and the GVN did not have “sufficient military forces, administrative personnel, or RD cadres to saturate the entire countryside simultaneously,” Huntington concluded that “pacification by itself cannot produce comprehensive or lasting rural security.”

Project Takeoff was CORDS’s attempt to improve the situation against this grim background. The project was, according to one briefing, “designed to focus attention on the top priorities and to marshall the effort and the resources to make pacification work.” It did not involve any new projects or initiatives, but rather was designed to emphasize the activities that Komer felt were most important at that stage. Project Takeoff accordingly set eight priorities: improving 1968 planning, accelerating a program called Chieu Hoi aimed at encouraging defections from the NLF, mounting an attack on the NLF’s infrastructure, expanding and improving ARVN support of pacification, expanding the RD effort, increasing refugee-handling capabilities, revamping the police, and pressing land reform. These were all goals the GVN was already pursuing. Nation builders who had been in the country longer than Komer were quick to note the lack of originality in the plan. John Paul Vann wrote to Daniel Ellsberg in August that “Komer has been a big disappointment to me” and sardonically questioned the value of a plan that was a mere “intensification of current efforts.” Others shared Vann’s skepticism. Corson, the Marine officer who was handy with his fists, stated: “Komer made it plain to the CORDS people that they were going to do better and were going to operate as a team, but then he neglected to make clear exactly what they
Much as the attempt by Washington officials to urge forty-one different programs on the GVN in the summer of 1965 had shown they lacked a coherent plan, Project Takeoff was a sign that Komer had no clear sense of priorities or idea of how to deliver a radical departure in U.S. efforts.

Nor did Komer manage to make headway in winning the cooperation of key figures in the GVN for a joint program in 1967. Without the involvement of the Saigon leadership in drawing up the CORDS programs, there was little incentive for provincial and district officials around the country to follow them. With the Americans remaining outside the chain of command and acting merely as advisers, GVN officials had nothing to gain by following a program that their own bosses in Saigon seemed to regard as unimportant. Even if Komer had possessed a clear and incisive vision for how to achieve nation building, rather than a vague list of priorities, he would have been stymied by the continued infighting and lack of focus on rural nation building that continued to characterize Saigon politics.

The problem started with Thieu and Ky. Bolstered by the American support he had received during the Honolulu Conference, in early 1966 Ky tried to orchestrate the ouster of the Vietnamese commander of I Corps, Nguyen Chanh Thi. The son of a French mandarin from the old imperial capital of Hue, Thi had been one of the most independent of the corps commanders, running his realm as a personal fiefdom. Following the practice of local strongmen back to the days of the emperors, Thi aligned himself much more closely with local political forces in the northern reaches of South Vietnam than he did with the central government. In his case, this meant cultivating ties with the activist Buddhist movement, which was strong in and around Hue. Though this movement was extremely diverse, its core idea was a rejection of violence by both the Communists and the GVN and an embrace of what one activist called “the politics of reconciliation to bring peace and happiness to the country.” The movement’s leaders refused to take a stance in favor of either side in the war, viewing soldiers on both sides as helpless peasants who were “victims of society’s ignorance and injustice.”

The moral evenhandedness of the movement was interpreted by the GVN as tacit support for the Communists, and the movement was even suspected of being secretly directed from Hanoi. Thi’s flirtation with the movement was hence extremely provocative to Saigon. When Ky finally moved against Thi, Buddhist leaders declared a “struggle movement” and attracted dissident ARVN units to protect them. After months of a tense standoff, loyalist ARVN units crushed the dissidents in street-to-street fighting in Hue and Da Nang. Thi was sent into exile and the Buddhist leader Thich Tri Quang put under house arrest, ending the struggle movement.
From the perspective of Thieu and Ky, the removal of Thi was a necessary step to decrease the autonomy of a corps commander who had gone too far. It also meant crushing the last organized movement in South Vietnamese urban politics that was strongly anti-American, as the burning of the U.S. consulate in Hue during the struggle movement had demonstrated. But it also had other consequences. During the course of quelling the movement, the duo felt compelled to agree to a timeline for the national constitutional assembly and subsequent elections they had agreed to in principle at the Honolulu Conference. This would mean a civilianization of the government, at least formally, with either Thieu or Ky leaving the armed forces and becoming the civilian president. Although the Thieu-Ky regime had seen off the last major non-Communist challenge to the Saigon regime until the end of the war, they now became absorbed in the question of what the outcome of the election would be. Until September 1967 when the elections were held, Thieu and Ky were engaged in a struggle for power with each other to determine who would emerge as the paramount figure in the GVN. They had little time to worry about CORDS. Project Takeoff was not briefed to GVN officials because “the attention and effort of the GVN has been so taken up with the elections that Takeoff would not have been understood or given the time it merits.” Komer nevertheless brought the subject up with Ky, who gave it a “vague blessing.” In these conditions, even with the best ideas in the world, CORDS could accomplish little.

According to Vann, it was “absolute madness” to expect programs drawn up unilaterally by Americans without the backing of Saigon to be followed by provincial and district governments throughout the country. Local advisers were left to attempt to persuade their GVN counterparts on their own, a task made only marginally easier by the creation of CORDS. The new agency did at least put an end to what Bui Diem called the “rivalries and bureaucratic games” fought between Americans at the local level when their efforts had been split between various agencies. This had diluted American influence by overloading local GVN officials with conflicting advice, making it easy for them to ignore it. Yet while the creation of CORDS did at least unify advisory functions on the American side, this did not necessarily make it easier for local advisers to exercise leverage over their counterparts.

The ability of CORDS advisers to achieve their goals was dependent entirely on how they managed their relationship with their GVN counterpart. Advisers communicated extensively with their GVN counterparts and often became aware of a gaping chasm in worldview and priorities. Advisers necessarily spent much of their time managing this relationship. They could not impose their will through coercion, and most believed it counterproductive to establish a belliger-
ent or hectoring relationship with their counterpart. Instead, they likened their roles as akin to acting as diplomats, lobbyists, or confidence tricksters.  

Most province chiefs hailed from the urban, French-influenced class and had little understanding of the rural population. They had risen to field-grade ranks in the ARVN, meaning they had likely participated in the war against the Viet Minh on the side of the French, or been trained by officers who had. What contact they did have with the rural population thus far in their career had often been down a gun barrel. And having risen to respectable ranks in the byzantine politics of the ARVN without been killed or purged, province chiefs frequently went about their new jobs with an abundance of caution. Most American advisers found their counterparts difficult to persuade to change their established patterns of behavior just because an enthusiastic new American had arrived in their orbit. Americans were often struck by what they regarded as the lethargy of Vietnamese local officials, while others complained that the chiefs hardly knew their provinces better than the Americans did and refused to travel around them.

How to manage their counterpart relationship correctly was the key task facing CORDS advisers, and often forced them into compromises. Having few methods of acting unilaterally, they had to accomplish almost everything in cooperation with local officials. “This is the Vietnamese country and we’re advisers,” explained one American who served in 1966. “This is one of the things we have to realize—we are nothing but advisors and when we act in any capacity other than advisors we are out of our element. I think that persuasion is the word that is necessary and I think that it is very necessary to be able to persuade by being knowledgeable and know what we’re doing.” Another adviser, who served in I Corps in the same year, felt that doing anything against the wishes of the province chief was unwise. “The day when we start going this way and he wants to go the other way,” he remarked, “our usefulness is terminated.” The application of careful persuasion after gaining the chief’s trust—which this adviser believed could take four or five months, or over a third of the length of an advisory tour—was the only way to go. The creation of CORDS did little to change this dynamic. Most advisers operated circumspectly, believing that developing hostile relations with their counterpart would destroy their ability to operate. Guidance sent to all PSAs noted that advice should be given to the province chief “in privacy so that he will not lose face when passing it to subordinates.” Acting as a behind-the-scenes counselor and manipulator, advisers clearly had some power but still relied on their local partner. In 1970, an end-of-tour report by Louis F. Janowski, a Foreign Service officer who served in various advisory positions in IV Corps, stated that “too often good counterpart relations simply means letting your counterpart do exactly what he wants or raising minimal objects [sic] to his actions.”
Virtually no adviser regarded his counterpart as a puppet who was easy to manipulate into doing what the adviser wanted. “Brad” described the handicaps that faced advisers in interacting with their counterparts on an equal basis. “In the first place,” he began, “let’s face it, you probably tower over the guy, you weigh twice what he does, you probably are enjoying a salary several times his, and you have all kinds of amenities that he probably does not enjoy, such as access to the PX and all the goodies therein.” Given the fact that advisers could also leave the country if they had to, whereas GVN officials could not, Brad concluded: “You’re starting the relationship under a hell of a handicap, and it’s a miracle that the guy doesn’t hate your guts on sight.”

It was also incredibly difficult for an adviser to grasp the context in which his counterpart operated. An American adviser faced with the task of understanding the political, cultural, social, and economic intricacies affecting Phu Yen’s province chief in 1968 confronted the same task that a Vietnamese would have faced if parachuted into California and ordered to understand the priorities of Governor Ronald Reagan. One document written by an experienced adviser and distributed for the edification of his PSA colleagues listed sixty-four separate questions about the counterpart’s religious affiliations, business interests, sex life, political links, and educational background, the answers to which could bear on his behavior. Few American advisers were equipped to understand even a fraction of these factors, and the language barrier only exacerbated the problem.

One of the main problems facing CORDS advisers on a daily basis was encouraging their counterparts to focus on the rural population even when this did not accord with their own interests or priorities. The fact that almost all province chiefs were ARVN officers with a limited background in understanding rural life meant that PSAs could find it difficult to get them to agree on the importance of such efforts. By late 1971 a CORDS briefer reported that in rural South Vietnam, “the center of power rests with the province chief, who is by and large an Army Colonel, does not have an M.A. in Economics or Public administration, and has been fighting a war all his life.” The chief’s characteristic response to being told to involve himself in civil matters, the briefer said, was “to have nothing to do with it because he would have nothing to say.” Vann considered the GVN to be “dominated by military men who have to be coerced into performing civil functions, and it was a strange role for them to perform.”

Cao Van Vien, chief of staff of the ARVN, likewise commented after the war that “most ARVN field commanders acted as if they were totally detached from the problems of pacification and concerned themselves solely with military matters.” According to Vien, the fault lay with the Americans, who had trained ARVN commanders to fight conventional war and left them “woefully inadequate as contestants of the ‘other war.”

CORDS advisers faced the difficult task of undoing what decades
of ingrained cultural and social biases and professional training had wrought on their counterparts.

In attempting to persuade their counterparts to focus on civil functions, the methods used by CORDS advisers varied. Most sought to see their counterparts at least daily, and also to develop social relationships with them. Because of their access to the technical knowledge on matters such as agriculture that American provincial organizations could supply, as well as access to the resources that CORDS was willing to invest in local development and reform programs, advisers could become valuable to their counterpart. Yet most advisers felt the need to not appear too indispensable, lest they undermined the appearance of the province chief’s autonomy and sovereignty within his own province. One adviser commented that “it was very difficult to work in such a manner to try to get things done and to control things while, at the same time, presenting the facade that I was not manipulating anything.”95 Another described his job as akin to a lobbyist, but one who did not want to seem too close to the province chief lest it arouse suspicion that American interests were in fact governing the chief’s actions. “Try not to give the overly [sic] impression that you are with him all the time,” he advised, “because he either resents it or if he doesn’t resent it, he starts looking like an American puppet.”96 With factors such as these limiting the direct influence that an adviser could have on a province chief, some sought indirect means such as developing closer relationships with the province chief’s deputies. They could then plant an idea further down the GVN hierarchy and endorse it when it came across the province chief’s desk, maintaining a facade of noninterference.97 However, such interventions seemed to undermine the long-term goal of fostering an independent GVN.

Far from being the compliant puppets of NLF propaganda, GVN officials also actively sought to manage the relationship with their American counterpart in a way that benefited their own interests and in line with their own conception of their duties. As CORDS advisers were attempting to reshape the behavior of their Vietnamese counterparts, GVN officials were also attempting to shape and control the behavior of the Americans. The description by “Anh” of his handling of American officials is instructive. A self-confident son of the rural elite, Anh was born into a rich landowning family in Kien Tuong Province. Deprived of the ability to enjoy the family fortune by the coming of the revolution and war in the 1940s, he partook of the rural elite’s traditional way out by fleeing to Saigon with his family as his home province became a Communist stronghold. Proud of his rural roots, Anh attended the National Institute of Administration (NIA) and began working in local administration under the Diem regime. Along the way he attended college courses in government administration in the United States, including at Michigan State University and the University of Connecticut.
Choosing to continue to work in government service despite the possibility of much higher salaries in the private sector, Anh was exactly the sort of socially conscious civilian that many Americans and Vietnamese leaders like NIA chief Nghiem Dang saw as crucial to strengthening the GVN.98 Anh believed that Americans had to be domesticated and taught to “think Vietnamese” if they were to be successful advisers, while one Vietnamese adviser to IVS despaired at whether this was possible, as his countrymen had “our own way of thinking, our own logic,” which was difficult for Americans to understand.99 Anh said that the Americans “should think that they work for the Vietnamese” and “never” give orders themselves. Instead, the only proper role of Americans was to “advise discreetly” while remaining invisible behind their counterpart. Vietnamese officials like Anh worried that an influx of thousands of American advisers would undermine the apparent independence and sovereignty of local GVN organs, and called for American contingents to place a focus on the quality rather than quantity of advisers. “I recommend very strongly that Americans be trained as advisors, not doers,” he told USAID personnel, “as otherwise you will leave the impression of being a conqueror, a colonialist, or a capitalist”—in other words, the exact impression of American personnel that NLF propaganda aimed to create.100 Another South Vietnamese official who had “known and worked with many Americans” also strongly believed that CORDS should stick to its role as a “support” organization rather than appearing to override the sovereignty of Vietnamese officials. In his view, good American officials were “humble” and only distributed material aid or advice through Vietnamese channels, so it could be clear to the population that “their local government helped them.”101 Vien likewise believed that “there was a requirement for US advisers to be modest and self-effacing in their life and work.” They also needed to “exercise tact and persuasion instead of leverage to get things done, because no Vietnamese could stand a loss of face”—especially to a foreigner. For the Americans to act otherwise would give credence to the “vicious slanderings of Communist propaganda.”102 Anh made clear that he viewed the balance of power in the relationship between him and his adviser as favoring himself. He mused about the possibility of having to “oust” a bad adviser, and boasted of another that “I made him behave the way he should, one way or another.” Anh also believed it was crucial for the effectiveness of any GVN government official that he maintain his independence, as any Vietnamese who seemed too close to the Americans or who seemed to display what Anh regarded as American patterns of thought—“modern, scientific and rational”—risked being ostracized by the rest of the GVN hierarchy.103 While Vien believed that the presence of U.S. advisers had led to “modern management techniques” and “scientific knowledge” diffusing throughout the GVN hierarchy, Anh’s grassroots perspective suggests this cultural and organizational change was
limited in practice. Anh also questioned the quality of many American advisers, and by extension the usefulness of their presence. He complained that while the French had sent their best administrators to Vietnam, the Americans did not seem able to muster a similar cohort of experienced and dedicated officials. “For the sake and honor of the United States, which has very good administrators as far as I know,” he said, “they should send their good administrators, who should impress the Vietnamese.” Faced with the prospect of having to work with less impressive Americans, he advised his Vietnamese colleagues to closely study the weak points of their counterparts and work around them. He also complained that younger Americans like the Tigers could give the impression of “lacking in experience,” and said he preferred middle-aged Americans who had technical expertise rather than young generalists.

An incident in 1966 demonstrated that even the vast amount of American combat power deployed to South Vietnam could not protect U.S. advisers from threats of physical violence at the hands of their counterparts if they went too strongly against their wishes. A USOM province representative believed he had discovered a corruption scandal with “implications all over the Delta.” At the time, the local corps commander was General Dan Vang Quang, whose financial dishonesty was notorious. Believing that corruption needed to be rooted out if the GVN was to become stronger and more legitimate, the American began investigating. Then one night the local chief of police invited him to ride in his car to inspect a remote outpost, only for the adviser to feel the cold muzzle of the carbine pressed against his neck from the backseat. With the help of a “goon,” the police chief was attempting to intimidate the American to get him to stop asking questions. When the adviser informed his superiors in Saigon, they told him they were powerless to take action and offered him a transfer to another province. They were unable to take any action against the police chief, and with Ky having offered corps commanders the power of virtual warlords within their fiefdoms, the central GVN would not act against him either. Despite its reconfiguration of the American presence in the provinces, CORDS could do little to address problems and dynamics such as these without the cooperation of the central GVN in ending the corps commander system. But with their attention elsewhere and their reliance on the commanders undiminished, neither Ky or Thieu was willing to take such a step in 1967.

Faced with these problems, long-serving nation builders like Vann believed that Komer and CORDS had done little to help them. Having to deal daily with corrupt or incompetent GVN local officials shielded by the corps commander system, they began to question the value of Komer’s subtle approach to influencing an apparently unmoved GVN. Advisers like Vann wanted much more dramatic action from the center to radically overhaul the GVN’s system
of rural governance. “What is desperately needed,” Vann opined to Ellsberg, “is a strong, dynamic, ruthless, colonialist type ambassador with the authority to relieve generals, mission chiefs and every other bastard who does not follow a stated, clearcut policy which, in itself, at a minimum, involves the US in the hiring and firing of Vietnamese leaders.” Another American wrote that “Saigon has apparently given up all hope of regaining lost leverage over RD/pacification execution despite repeated pleas from field advisors and a history of program failure.” Castigating what he saw as “supersensitivity for Vietnamese sensibilities,” he added: “With 200 men dying each week to buy [the] GVN time, it is very difficult for me to agree that the RD program is primarily a Vietnamese affair.” But a heavy-handed U.S. approach is precisely what Bunker, Komer, and Westmoreland all ruled out, as likely to be too upsetting to nationalist sensitivities and risking derailing the constitutional process. Given the potential for anti-American unrest that the Buddhist struggle movement had revealed, their opinions appear valid.

Out in the provinces, the Communist movement remained largely unmoved by GVN nation-building efforts in 1967. Given the honesty with which the internal documents of the Communist movement usually addressed problems and shortcomings, this is notable. American military operations were placing pressure on its infrastructure, but observers in the movement saw little evidence that U.S. and GVN military victories were being followed up by nation building. In the central lowland province of Phu Yen, an NVA infantry division had been placed on the defensive by American search-and-destroy operations, and the number of people living in the Communist “liberated area” had shrunk to one-tenth of its peak size. Assessing GVN actions, the NVA observers correctly concluded that the operations had three phases: search operations to drive away large Communist units, police efforts to go after party infrastructure, and the effort to “re-organize their control” by reestablishing GVN village and hamlet administration. Whenever the enemy tried to move beyond stage one, “these occasional efforts were only temporary and would disappear as we redoubled our efforts,” the NVA reported. Lacking the assets or policies to reoccupy the entire countryside, much less carry out nation building, the GVN was disrupting Communist control but doing little to establish its own. An NLF agent reported from Phu Yen in June that although the RD cadres were spreading “demagogic” propaganda and trying to ingratiate themselves with the villagers, the GVN was having little success in reestablishing permanent hamlet governments. Although enemy military operations were forcing Communist cadres to live an underground or mobile life and making it difficult for them to engage with the population, there seemed little indication the GVN was making inroads among the population either.
Disillusioned with the Saigon regime—and reeling from his conflict with Thang—Chau had left its service in 1967 to run as a legislator. Still head of the Ministry of Revolutionary Development (MRD), Thang was hence the highest-ranking GVN official who kept his attention on rural reform. Thang hoped in 1968 to subordinate the corps commanders to the central government and to push a national reform effort, with benchmarks to be met and punishments to be dispensed if they were not. Yet he was unable to successfully curb the autonomy of the four “warlords” in the corps areas. The notes taken by a U.S. liaison officer of a meeting in late September 1967 reflected the fact that “at least two (if not all four) of the Corps had completed their 1968 RD plans long before coming to the meeting . . . MRD officers were not amused.”

More fundamental reforms of the structure of the GVN would be required if the autonomy of the corps commanders was ever to be reduced enough to allow the central state in Saigon to design and implement national programs of the sort Thang wanted. For the GVN to acquire the strength to contest the Communist movement, it needed to revamp the relationship of Saigon to its local organs of power. Thang devoted much energy during this period to pushing for reforms of the relationship between Saigon, the corps commanders, and province chiefs. He wanted to reduce the power of the corps commanders to appoint province and district chiefs, which the commanders used to shelter incompetent and corrupt officials. As one American wrote of the futility of economic aid delivered via a corrupt government, “too many Vietnamese counterparts see no value in the program and either have no desire to execute it or demonstrate an intolerable knack for converting the Self Help program into a Help Yourself program.” Thang believed the solution was to appoint province and district chiefs directly from Saigon, removing the ability of corps commanders to shelter corrupt officials in return for kickbacks. Under Thang’s proposals, province and district officials would be selected by the Saigon authorities and trained at Vung Tau. Thang’s proposals were thus a continuation of the task of centralizing the nation-building effort, removing its direction from the hands of the myriad local GVN actors who had come to prominence in the chaotic years since the coup against Diem and instead enforcing national plans and standards set in Saigon. Duly appointed by the central GVN, the new breed of province and district chiefs would be beholden to it.

The problem was that those local officials who stood to lose from such reforms did not intend to be passive throughout this process, and neither Thang nor the Americans had the power to bring about such an overhaul of the GVN. The fate of Thang’s efforts revealed much about how little had changed in South Vietnamese politics even after Thieu won the presidential election of September 1967. Regardless of the veneer of civilian government,
Saigon politics remained military politics. Thieu was extremely reticent to undermine the power of the corps commanders, because he believed that he owed his position to them and because to challenge them would create, as he told an American interlocutor, “dissension and instability.” Protesting that he had no independent power base to resist coups, Thieu said he had “no intention of standing against the entire army as President Diem did.” Even though Thieu had emerged as president after the 1967 elections, his ongoing rivalry with Ky also made him skeptical. Given that the proposals for the selection and training of province and district chiefs would allow Thang and Ky to select the individuals involved and then, as an American observer put it, to “control the countryside through the province chiefs” who were beholden to them for their jobs, this only compounded Thieu’s problems by essentially demanding that he take power away from his own key constituency and place it in the hands of his opponents.

As the dispute between Thieu and Thang raged, Komer and other high-level U.S. officials were forced by their own theory of leverage to tread carefully, even though they broadly favored Thang’s proposals. Thang’s own attitude limited what they could accomplish on his behalf. Like Chau, Thang was unwilling to ask for Americans to back him against figures in his own government, believing it would undermine his nationalist credentials. Komer and other U.S. officials tried to use their access to Thieu to gently influence him in favor of Thang’s proposals, but their results were limited. On January 2, 1968, Thieu tried to square the circle between his two main constituencies—the ARVN and the Americans—by announcing limited reforms to the structure of the armed forces. The corps commanders and commanders of ARVN divisions would have their power over the provinces diluted, Thieu announced. But the change would come only once a number of what a senior U.S. observer considered “crippling stipulations” had been met, including an improvement in the military situation, which was unlikely anytime soon. Thang responded by submitting his resignation. Bunker and the CIA believed that Thieu was right to move cautiously in curtailing the prerogatives of the military, and Westmoreland went so far as to tell Thang’s military superiors that Thang “is old enough to know better” than to resign. This split in the U.S. community was the final nail in the coffin of any attempt to use U.S. leverage at the center to make Thieu move more rapidly. Faced with the prospect of a governmental collapse and the central GVN’s complete loss of control as in the period after the coup against Diem, Komer’s preference for working with the corps commander system broadly as it currently stood, combined with the fear of the unknown, overrode any desire to push for radical change. Then, just as an apparent impasse loomed, it was broken—in the most violent and undesirable way imaginable.