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## Bureaucracy at War: U. S. Performance in the Vietnam Conflict.

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# PROFESSIONAL READING

“One should not glibly criticize the bureaucracies for playing out their institutional repertoires; someone—the President—had to let them get away with it.”

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Rear Admiral S. A. Swarztrauber, U.S. Navy (Retired)

Komer, Robert W. *Bureaucracy at War: U.S. Performance in the Vietnam Conflict*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1986. 174pp. \$17.50

**R**obert Komer aptly titled this book. The words, *Bureaucracy at War: U.S. Performance in the Vietnam Conflict*, nicely imply the thesis that bureaucracies do not win wars.

I met Ambassador Komer in Vietnam in 1968, when I was a brown-water navy commander and he was deputy to COMUSMACV for CORDS and then again about ten years later when I was a flag officer and he was UnderSecDef (Policy). I have not always agreed with his views, but was happily surprised to be able to applaud most of what I read in his new book.

He has done us a great service by putting his Vietnam experience and thoughts down. He was certainly one of the top civilian actors and one who saw it from both the seat of government and the rice paddies. This concise book makes an excellent counterpart to Colonel Harry Summers' *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*, similarly pondering the war, but with a military mind's eye. (See *Naval War College Review*, March-April 1983.) Like Colonel Summers, Komer sees an omnihead, turf-protecting bureaucracy running things. Below the President, “everybody and nobody was responsible.” One is led to the conclusion in both books that only a President could have made the difference, either by making the war his number one priority or by appointing a czar with extraordinary authority.

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Rear Admiral Swarztrauber holds a Ph.D. in Interuational Affairs and writes widely on U.S. national security affairs.

Komer does not critique the Washington decision or policymaking process, but, given that decisions and policy were promulgated, he criticizes their execution or performance. This is a management-oriented book.

Bureaucracies tend to do things they are comfortable with, like doing, and do best, using tried and true procedures. They are characterized by inertia or momentum, as the case may be, and resist change. Vietnam called for innovation, flexibility, and adaptability; but the bureaucracy's response was usually the "school solution." If the conventional remedy did not work, the dosage was increased—more of the same, escalating the effort.

Komer fairly acknowledges that generals will behave like generals and does not fault them for it. He places equal blame on the military bureaucracy and civilian bureaucracy as both have the same weaknesses. He points out that the socio-economic-political side of the war—he equates counterinsurgency with pacification—got high-level Washington lip service as early as the 1950s, but little was actually done until the late 1960s when it was too late. He calls this a policy performance gap—a gap between what was said in Washington and what was actually done in Vietnam. He assails the lack of follow-up mechanisms, and the failure to appropriate money and talent. He believes that pacification might have been successful if tried before the massive "over-militarization" of 1965 and provided it had been given a full-scale try.

There were two main constraints on America's ability to do better.

First, we failed to do better because we placed too many of our eggs in a weak basket, that of the South Vietnamese Government. Komer describes the painful and frustrating process of trying to persuade, then coerce, Diem and others to combat corruption and institute reforms. We failed to extract performance as the price for the aid and assistance we offered. We did not use the leverage available to us and there was very little to lever. America became a prisoner, a classic trap for great powers dealing with weak allies. Vietnam used its weakness as leverage on us better than we used our strength as a lever on Vietnam. Given the fatal weakness of the Vietnamese leadership we should have worked around it.

Second, we failed because of institutional constraints. There is a bureaucratic tendency to see a mirror image. The enemy is expected to react to stimuli like we do. We mounted a conventional war using the conventional weapons we had, "hoping" to meet a North Korean or Warsaw Pact-type main force enemy. In 1965, when we were deprived of South Vietnam's ability to help themselves, and we pushed our ally aside to win their war for them, we "Americanized" the war. Yet, there existed no American solution for Vietnam.

Even our intelligence was skewed toward the "main force" concept, so we consistently underestimated the enemy. Foreign Service Institute courses were irrelevant to Vietnam. Twelve-month tours meant no institutional

memory. The JCS did not do critical analyses of the war effort, but merely rubberstamped COMUSMACV requests. The best officers traditionally went to line combatant assignments, not to advisory and pacification assignments. When top military leaders disagreed with the President, their institutional “can do” prevented them from saying no, and resigning, if necessary, in protest.

The great irony of this according to Komer is that America’s leaders clearly knew Vietnam was different and needed a different approach. Yet we let the bureaucracies play out their institutional repertoires. Our leaders knew that the measures we took were half measures—long shots—and might not suffice.

Among his suggestions for “next time”: there should be established strong, unified management, and means must be forged to *force* the bureaucracy to adapt. Komer laments that his suggestions are restatements of the obvious. But the obvious was not so obvious during Vietnam and we probably have not learned from our expensive mistakes.

While this is a very valuable book, Komer did let his personal and political biases show through occasionally. He does not believe the war was overmanaged from Washington, but rather undermanaged. Too much, he feels, was left to the military. He flatly states that the President and SecDef never infringed on the traditional military control over the conduct of the war inside Vietnam. My experience was otherwise. River patrol forces, at least, were hamstrung by rules of engagement that were mandated by OSD.

He acknowledges that the air war and mining against the North had considerable effect on the enemy but does not deal with the Administration’s failure to exploit it. Nor does he adequately treat management’s preoccupation with domestic—Great Society—programs and its failure to focus the necessary attention on the war effort, to mobilize public opinion, and to cut through the bureaucratic inertia. One should not glibly criticize the bureaucracies for playing out their institutional repertoires; someone—the President—had to let them get away with it.

