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John Southard, *Defend and Befriend: The U.S. Marine Corps and Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam*. Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2014. Pp. xvi, 207. ISBN 978-0-8131-4526-6.

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When it comes to evaluating American strategy during the Vietnam War, the lure of asking “What if?” is overwhelming. What if, for example, the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) had pursued a strategy less focused on defeating enemy main force units and instead stressed dismantling insurgent forces entrenched inside South Vietnam? The question is especially intriguing in light of claims that the US Marines had in fact been pursuing a promising alternative strategy, only to be undermined by MACV’s conservative commander, Gen. William C. Westmoreland. Eschewing the general’s obsession with battle and body counts, the Marines were implementing a combined action program that involved maintaining a presence in South Vietnamese villages and developing bonds with local militias, while uprooting a stubborn insurgency. Replicated across Vietnam, these measures might have led to victory, at least according to proponents of counterfactual history.<sup>1</sup>

In *Defend and Befriend*, John Southard (Georgia State Univ.) examines combined action platoons (CAPs), small Marine-led units that operated in the villages of South Vietnam’s northernmost provinces from 1965 to 1970. He offers an interpretation deeply at odds with the (in some quarters) popular image of US forces engaging in little more than “remorseless killing.”<sup>2</sup> He believes the Marines assigned to work closely with the Vietnamese were far better able to understand and adapt to their surroundings—in fact, “Marines and [medical] corpsmen actually grew fond of their villages and the people” (xiii). Southard’s story details the growth of young Marines’ cultural awareness within the limits of what could be achieved in a civil war that long preceded American intervention. Although his father served as a Marine in Vietnam, the author observes strict impartiality in questioning the counterfactual theory of an alternative strategy that might have won the war.

Southard begins and ends by placing the CAP program in the context of senior military commanders’ plans to ensure and sustain a stable, independent, noncommunist South Vietnam. Unfortunately, his characterization of US military strategy is often facile and unsupported by relevant research. He relies too heavily on a select few secondary works that perpetuate the standard tropes of attrition and a search-and-destroy mentality—“American generals initiated an annihilation strategy” (5). He seems unacquainted with essential primary sources<sup>3</sup> that could have informed a more nuanced view of MACV planners’ comprehensive strategy for countering both political and military threats in South Vietnam, while yet defending against attacks by the North.

Southard is right, however, to emphasize the nearly intractable problems Marine commanders faced in trying to connect local villagers with their central government in Saigon. Arriving in the spring of 1965, the III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) had established enclaves, first to secure air bases, before addressing population security. Southard debunks the common notion that the Marines benefited from lessons learned in small wars before World War II. In fact, senior Marine leaders “deemed counterinsurgency unrealistic,” and even President John F. Kennedy’s “bid to spread the importance of counterinsurgency across all services fell mostly on deaf ears in the Corps” (15). Instead of systematically confronting the National Liberation Front (NLF) threat, US forces resorted to inconsistent, ad hoc efforts to protect the population from a committed insurgency. Southard highlights the obstacles confronting Marine commanders in the early

1. See, e.g., Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U Pr, 1986).

2. See, e.g., Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (NY: Metropolitan Books, 2013) 28.

3. Easily available in, e.g., the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series; see John M. Carland, “Winning the Vietnam War: Westmoreland’s Approach in Two Documents,” *Journal of Military History* 68 (2004) 553-74.

phase of the CAP program—a lack of doctrine, inadequate language training, and a persistent distrust of local militia forces.

Despite his contention that Westmoreland cared for nothing but high body counts, the author devotes a whole chapter to comparing the combined action program with comparable US Army initiatives in Vietnam. He notes that both the Army's Special Forces and its Mobile Advisory Teams “had to overcome the same general military and cultural barriers as CAP Marines” (33). Manpower shortages forced Army advisors to spend less time in individual villages in order to cover more ground more rapidly while training as many indigenous militiamen as possible.

While Southard never specifies which approach—Marine or Army—proved more useful, he does cast doubts on the efficacy of the Marine program. Although, after the 1968 Tet offensive, III MAF stressed mobility (CAPs no longer operated in a single village for the duration of their tours) most combined platoons rarely ventured far from major roadways. More importantly, senior South Vietnamese army officers preferred the Army's mobile approach, which made territorial forces less dependent on US advisory teams than did the Marine program.

The heart of the book lies in its chapters on the selection, training, and daily life of the CAP Marines and their South Vietnamese counterparts. The goal of senior Corps leaders like Gen. Lewis Walt to conduct population-centered counterinsurgency was thwarted by the difficulties of operating along the demilitarized zone between South and North Vietnam and the porous border with Laos. Commanding officers regularly filled program quotas with unqualified Marines and “often ‘volunteered’ unit misfits for CAP duty” (61). The increasing menace posed by professional North Vietnamese battalions made US commanders reluctant to deploy their best men to villages far from the (ill-defined) “front lines” in Vietnam. Poor linguistic and cultural instruction crippled the efforts even of the many capable CAP Marines who found themselves abruptly immersed in a strange new world.

Survival in CAP units depended on cultivating cordial relations with the Vietnamese people—“Tips from villagers could forewarn the Marines about enemy whereabouts and upcoming maneuvers” (71). Southard never fully explains why the Tet offensive took the Marines so off guard or how CAP leaders reacted to similar intelligence gaps. He does, however, note the importance of local history in the hesitancy of villagers to divulge information to foreigners. Many South Vietnamese had quickly learned during the French colonial period that supporting the wrong side could have deadly consequences. Thus, even though Marines gained a better understanding of the plight of their hosts, they often trudged through their fields and villages “not knowing what or who lay ahead of them” (80). Southard observes that most Marines appreciated the pragmatism of civilians caught in the storm of war, but the inability of CAPs to keep pace with the rapidly changing dynamics of village life raises more doubts about the assumptions underlying the combined action program. Even the CAPs' “indispensable” medical corpsmen could not overcome the villagers' inherent distrust of outsiders (87).

These problems extended to relations between US Marines and South Vietnamese militias, or Popular Forces (PF). In a telling chapter, Southard exposes not only the complexities of mounting joint operations by foreign and local forces but, more importantly, the collapse of such operations when US forces departed: “When they left assigned villages, very few CAP Marines had confidence that the PF would continue to operate as they had during the American presence” (106). Outsiders, it seemed, could achieve only so much. While inadequate pay and a faulty promotion system certainly affected PF performance, a feeble commitment to the Saigon government's vision for the future put them at a big disadvantage against an ideologically motivated enemy. Southard correctly writes that not all insurgents fought for political reasons—all sides took a pragmatic approach to the war—but PF loyalty remained suspect throughout the combined action program's existence. As one Marine lamented of his supposed South Vietnamese ally, “Man, I just don't know whose side that guy is on” (117).

Such deep-seated reservations on the ground cast doubt on the viability of the entire CAP program. Perhaps Westmoreland, well aware of the flaws in the Marine approach, was more perceptive than his critics allow. Southard, however, leaves readers with a mixed message. In his book's final chapter, on US mili-

tary strategy, Westmoreland reappears as a hidebound officer hypnotized by body counts. Yet only one footnote cites material from MACV archives (in this case, a yearly report) to illustrate his strategic thinking. A diligent exploration of primary documents would have yielded a more discerning diagnosis than an “institutional obsession with conventional war” (123). Surely, smart army officers saw the war as more than just a straightforward slugfest.

In fact, both Westmoreland and senior Marine commanders in Vietnam realized that true security could not be achieved simply within the villages. The population at large had to be shielded from external threats as well, a point often overlooked by critics. Although he oversimplifies Westmoreland’s strategic thought, Southard properly stresses Hanoi’s commitment to an “aggressive strategy” (137). Even though he wrongly identifies Vo Nguyen Giap as “the chief architect of North Vietnam’s military strategy” (37), he pinpoints a crucial impediment to the CAP program’s success: neither Westmoreland nor Walt could ignore the enemy main force units operating in I Corps’ sector. Thus, blaming the MACV commander for the program’s shortcomings is misguided. In actuality, Southard writes, the “general US manpower shortage in Vietnam provided the most formidable barrier to program growth” (125). Some readers may find this argument unconvincing, but the exigencies of allocating scarce resources in a war entailing costly elements of nation building were both real and urgent.

In September 1970, III MAF deactivated all CAPs outside of Quang Nam. The Marine experiment in pacification and cross-cultural exchange had fallen short of its aims of protecting the population and forging bonds between villages and their central government. Even Gen. Creighton Abrams, Westmoreland’s successor and an advocate of a “one war” approach, was unimpressed by Marine methods. But by then, of course, the Marines had abandoned their static version of the combined action program in favor of a more mobile concept. The program, as originally designed, had lasted less than three years. While both Westmoreland and Abrams had given their Marine subordinates full leeway to carry out CAP programs for population security, all their efforts failed to create a viable political community able to withstand internal and external threats in the northern provinces of South Vietnam. In this sense, Southard has furnished a sobering reminder of the limitations of American power during the Vietnam War.

Southard states that “this book is necessarily an analysis of CAPs from the American perspective” (3). In his US Marine-centered presentation of wartime pacification efforts, the voices of the local population are drowned out. As younger historians make increasing use of Vietnamese sources, new questions will demand investigation. How, for example, did civilians in CAP villages judge Marines—as unwelcome interlopers or charitable allies?<sup>4</sup> How did NLF members assess their Marine adversaries? Did the CAPs constitute any serious threat to the political and military infrastructure of insurgent forces? Finally, what can we learn from an in-depth study of the Popular Forces, who engendered such criticism yet suffered so much in a long war fought at the local level?

The jointly published US Army and Marine Corps Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (2006), illustrates some of its new theoretical prescriptions through historical vignettes, endorsing, Southard notes, the Vietnam-era combined action program as “a model for countering insurgencies” (148). But the “what if” counterfactual of the Marines’ alternative strategy, at least in Southard’s accounting, is problematic at best: in the end, American-led CAPs could not legitimize the Saigon government in the eyes of the South Vietnamese people. The more optimistic post-Vietnam War narrative confers on the Marine Corps a special place among the services; and, too, Southard argues persuasively that young CAP Marines came to respect the villagers they worked among. But FM 3-24’s rosy picture of an exemplary counterinsurgency approach ignores the difficulties of fighting an unconventional war in which the Marines neither defended nor befriended their Vietnamese allies as well as they might have hoped.

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4. Southard does make good use of one excellent study examining the war from the villagers’ perspective—James Walker Trullinger Jr., *Village at War: An Account of Revolution in Vietnam* (NY: Longman, 1980).