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### Acronyms and Abbreviations

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAIL</td>
<td>American Anti-Imperialist League</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACS</td>
<td>Air Commando Squadron</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACTIV</td>
<td>Army Concept Team in Vietnam</td>
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<td>AFVN</td>
<td>Armed Forces Vietnam Network</td>
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<tr>
<td>agit-prop</td>
<td>agitation-propaganda</td>
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<tr>
<td>AP</td>
<td>Associated Press</td>
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<tr>
<td>APT</td>
<td>Armed Propaganda Team</td>
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<tr>
<td>ARCS</td>
<td>Air Resupply and Communications Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>ARVN</td>
<td>Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BJU-1</td>
<td>US Navy Beach Jumper Unit 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA</td>
<td>Civic Action or Civil Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CANLF</td>
<td>Committee to Aid the NLF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chieu Hoi</td>
<td>GVN’s open arms program to induce defections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIA</td>
<td>Central Intelligence Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIAA</td>
<td>Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIDG</td>
<td>Civilian Irregular Defense Group (South Vietnam)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CINCPAC</td>
<td>Commander in Chief in the Pacific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COI</td>
<td>Coordinator of Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comintern</td>
<td>[Soviet] Communist International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CORDS</td>
<td>Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support pacification program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COSVN</td>
<td>Central Office for South Vietnam (NLF headquarters)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPI</td>
<td>Committee on Public Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTZ</td>
<td>Corps Tactical Zone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DARPA</td>
<td>Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOD</td>
<td>US Department of Defense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRV</td>
<td>Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FBIS</td>
<td>Foreign Broadcast Information Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPWD</td>
<td>General Political Warfare Department (South Vietnam)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HES</td>
<td>Hamlet Evaluation System</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ICP      Indochinese Communist Party (Dong Cong San Dong Duong)
ICS      Information and Censorship Section
JCS      Joint Chiefs of Staff
JUSPAO   Joint US Public Affairs Office
KMT      Chinese Kuomintang
Krestintern [Soviet] Peasant International
LBS      Liberation Broadcast Service
LLDB     Luc Luong Dac Biet—South Vietnamese Special Forces
LPA      Liberation Press Agency
MAAGV    Military Assistance and Advisory Group, Vietnam
MACPD    MACV Psychological Operations Directorate
MACV     Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
MACV-SOG Military Assistance Command, Vietnam—Studies and Observations Group
MAF      Marine Amphibious Force
MEDCAP   Medical Civic Action Program
MI2      Military Intelligence 2 Section
MO       Morale Operations Branch (OSS)
MTT      Mobile Training Team
NCOs     noncommissioned officers
NLF      National Liberation Front (National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam)
NSAM     National Security Action Memorandum
NSC      National Security Council
OPC      Office of Policy Coordination
OSS      Office of Strategic Services
OWI      [US] Office of War Information
PATs     People’s Action Teams
PAVN     People’s Army of Vietnam (North Vietnam)
PBR      Patrol Boat, River
PDC      Propaganda Development Center
PLAF     People’s Liberation Armed Forces (the VC military force)
POET     Psychological Operations Exploitation Team
POLWAR   political warfare (South Vietnam)
PORT     Psychological Operation Reaction Team
PRG      Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam
PSYOPs   psychological operations
PSYWAR   psychological warfare
PWB      [US] Psychological Warfare Branch
PWD/SHAEF  Psychological Warfare Division/Supreme Headquarters
Allied Expeditionary Force
RB&L  Radio Broadcasting and Leaflet
RVNAF  Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces
SACSA  Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special
Activities
SORO  Special Operations Research Office
SOW  Special Operations Wing
SSPL  Sacred Sword of the Patriots League
TIRS  Terrorist Incident Reporting System
TO&E  table of organization and equipment
UPI  United Press International
USAB&VAPAC  US Army Broadcast and Visual Activity Pacific
USAID  US Agency for International Development
USIA  US Information Agency
USIS  US Information Service
USOM  US Operations Mission (American embassy in Saigon)
VC  Vietcong
VCII  Vietcong Initiated Incidents reporting system
Vietminh  League for the Independence of Vietnam (Viet Nam Doc
Lap Dong Minh Hoi)
VIS  Vietnamese Information Service (South Vietnam)
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It is early morning on 8 December 1966, the bright dawn of a relatively cool, dry day in South Vietnam. A battalion from the United States 1st Infantry Division surrounds the village of Chanh Luu, 30 kilometers north of Saigon. The troops are part of Operation Fairfax, General William Westmoreland’s push to clear Communist guerrillas of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (National Liberation Front, NLF, the Front) from the area surrounding the capital. Soldiers painstakingly comb the red dirt road in search of mines as they approach the village. At 0800 hours, mobile field teams of the 246th Psychological Operations Company carrying loudspeakers, food, and psychological operations (PSYOPs) posters and leaflets enter the village, which until recently had been controlled by Vietcong. The children of the village eagerly swarm around as the Americans distribute candy.

Meanwhile, work begins to remove all traces of enemy propaganda images from the village. In their place are fresh, colorful posters. Troops paint a pro-government slogan on the wall of the only stone building in Chanh Luu. A wizened grandmother crowds the team to get a specially designed calendar as soldiers make the rounds of the village shops. In connection with the mission, male villagers of fighting age are assembled for intelligence interviews. There are many suspected Vietcong in this village.

Suddenly... crack! A few villagers open fire when a combined team of South Vietnamese and American soldiers attempt to round them up. The situation is quickly brought under control, leaving nine enemy dead and several wounded. American casualties are light.¹

This small firefight—lasting all of five minutes—was a minor action in a very long war. Yet it marked a shift to what became the most sustained, intensive use of psychological operations in American history. The United States Army launched numerous PSYOP programs and distributed as many as 50 billion leaflets in an area the size of California during the course of the war. And yet it remains a mostly unexplored area of American history.
Introduction

Propaganda and the War

What brought these men to the remote village of Chanh Luu on that bright Tuesday morning? I seek to answer this by analyzing psychological operations in Vietnam. Focusing on the period 1960–1968, this book analyzes the development of PSYOP capabilities, the introduction of forces, and the decisions that created the Joint US Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO) and the 4th PSYOP Group to manage American PSYOP activities in the war. Rather than pursuing an isolated examination, I place these operations within the wider context of Vietnam and the Cold War propaganda battle that the United States fought simultaneously. We will examine such operations across the entire theater, by all involved US agencies. This book addresses the complex interplay of these activities, as well as the development of PSYOP doctrine and training in the period prior to the introduction of ground combat forces in 1965. Finally, it will show how the course of the war itself forced changes to US doctrine.

Although this is primarily a look at the American effort, PSYOPs never occur in a vacuum. The enemy and friendly forces, as well as civilians, all impact the information environment. This forces a constant reevaluation of programs and a shift in focus. Without setting these operations within the context of the wider war, American PSYOPs make little sense. As such, this study also discusses the development of alternative sources of information, especially from the governments of North and South Vietnam and, to a lesser extent, those of Australia, South Korea, and the Philippines.

Due to the ebb and flow of a long war like Vietnam, many historians have made the mistake of concentrating on this or that short period, often centered on 1968. Or they err in declaring the war lost by 1965 when clearly it was not. In the end, war unfolds in the realm of chance. Understanding a long war like Vietnam requires historians to take a long view. Perseverance on both sides is vital in a desperate struggle such as the Vietnam War. The last side standing, no matter how bloodied and battered, no matter how many mistakes were previously made, is the winner. This truism is particularly true of psychological war, which unfolded over many years with numerous twists and turns.²

The debate rages to this day over what to even call the various combatants in this war, such was the degree to which propaganda infused all aspects of the conflict. Participants assumed names for themselves with an eye toward influencing audiences. Similarly, they applied pejorative labels to the enemy, such as “puppet” or “bandit,” to diminish support. While the South Vietnamese government styled itself as a “democracy,” it was no such thing during the period in question. It might have evolved into one, perhaps similar to South
Korea. However, events halted its evolution. As such, this study will avoid using the terms *free* or *democratic government* to describe the Republic of South Vietnam.

A similar debate rages over the antigovernment insurgency. The NLF was a creation of the Communist government in North Vietnam. It used the so-called united front tactic developed by V. I. Lenin and refined by Ho Chi Minh to create mass organizations that could magnify the power of small, dedicated Marxist groups seeking power. Inherent in this tactic was keeping the Communist core hidden behind a shroud of seemingly legitimate mass organizations. The NLF was a propaganda weapon for the North in this war.

In recent years, it has become common in Western academic circles to shun the term *Vietcong* as a presumed pejorative. The debate over such labels, like much in the study of the Vietnam War, arose out of the propaganda efforts by both sides. The Vietminh, the original resistance movement, is a contraction of *Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh*—the League for the Independence of Vietnam. This was the front created by Ho Chi Minh in 1941 to resist the Japanese occupation of Indochina, and the term remained in fashion after the 1954 Geneva Accords on Vietnam’s temporary division and France’s withdrawal to the South. The Vietnamese Communist Party (*Viet Nam Cong-san Dang*) was formed in October 1930. The term *Viet Cong* (rendered as *Vietcong* in modern usage) appeared in Saigon newspapers beginning in 1956 as a contraction of *Viet Nam Cong-san*. By using this, South Vietnamese and American officials attempted to delegitimize the original movement by identifying it clearly as a Communist front. The *Cong* is the same as in *Viet Nam Cong Hoa*, or the Republic of Vietnam, and holds no inherent negative undertone. The negative aspect arises when it is used to describe Communists who are trying to hide their connection to the NLF. Thus, the negative perception is associated with an attempt to keep the truth hidden. To be precise, the term has no negative connotation, unless one has a negative view of Communists.

In contrast to the NLF, the term *Vietcong* is more descriptive of the organization. In 1975, the correctness of the term became manifest when the North Vietnamese won the war and immediately changed the country’s name to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Without delay they disbanded the NLF, arresting some of the members who had been duped into joining. Members of the NLF sacrificed their lives, liberty, and honor for an organization that acted simply as camouflage. As Truong Nhu Tang, a founding member of the NLF and minister of justice for the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam (PRG), later wrote, his betrayed comrades “believed they were sacrificing themselves for the humane liberation of their people.” Truong himself fled Vietnam when the truth became clear. Thus, despite its
Introduction

propaganda origins, the term *Vietcong* was more descriptive of what the force was. It is also the term for the enemy more commonly understood by Americans. As such, this study primarily uses *Vietcong* to describe the organization, although it does use the NLF title as well.

This is a study for English speakers. For ease of reading Vietnamese words, no diacritics or special characters are used. Most place-names are written as known to Americans. For instance, this study uses *Vietnam*, rather than the more correct *Viet Nam*. Some quoted material does not follow this rule. When in quotes, all terms are as originally written, so both styles of Anglicization will appear in this study. Similarly, most period documents used the Wade-Giles system for Chinese words, so this study mostly uses that system.

**Evolution of Psychological Operations**

Throughout the years, terminology related to psychological operations has shifted meaning and connotations. Buzzwords for each generation further confuse the issue. Thus, prior to an investigation into the historical use of PSYOPs by the United States, we need a statement of definitions and an introduction to the arcane terminology of psychological operations as it was then understood.

The term *propaganda* is derived from the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide (Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith) founded by Pope Gregory XV in 1622. He formed this group to spread Christianity to other nations. Until World War I, the term maintained a benign connotation of spreading information. This began to modify due to the use of discredited atrocity propaganda during that war. By the end of World War II, the term had fallen into general disrepute in America, but it still retained its benign meaning in military doctrine.5

The phrase *psychological warfare (PSYWAR)* came into vogue after 1940 to describe wartime propaganda. However, in the Cold War era, the less hostile-sounding *psychological operations* gained popularity in America. As then described in US Army doctrine, PSYOPs encompassed “those political, military, economic, and ideological actions planned and conducted” to influence foreign citizens. This included PSYWAR, propaganda, and psychological actions, referring to military activities performed for their planned psychological value. By 1962, PSYWAR was narrowly defined as PSYOPs directed against hostile nations or armies.6

This is not, strictly speaking, a study in communications theory. It is an attempt to provide a detailed historical framework for understanding the psychological war in Vietnam. From a communications perspective, future researchers may want to dig into the material using such theories as reasoned
action and social learning to better analyze what programs were effective and why. For this study, I primarily work through the application of cultural narratives.

All societies have fundamental narratives or myths that enable members to communicate. Humans often understand the world through these stories. A key tactic in propaganda is to frame an argument within preexisting national narratives understood by the audience. As long as possible, people will hold on to that narrative as the propagandist inserts contrary messages. As the narrative reaches a tipping point, the old dogmas are undone and not likely to be responded to. Related to this is the concept of the filter bubble. People seek messages that agree with their worldview, creating a challenge for those involved in PSYOPs to overcome. The North Vietnamese often used the direct method, attacking the narrative head-on. As noted below, this was not successful over the long term. As Benjamin Franklin found, subtle propaganda that leads the target away from his narrative to that preferred by the propagandist is often more effective. Much of propaganda attempts to create cognitive dissonance in the target audience. Deeply held beliefs are difficult to change, especially once emotions become involved. The propagandist needs to attack these beliefs indirectly or the target will build a defensive wall. PSYOPs focus on changing behaviors in the short term, but some beliefs must change to accomplish long-term shifts. By carefully presenting facts that force the target to call into question his current understanding, the target becomes susceptible to an alternative narrative.

Along with this, message reinforcement and confirmation through multiple media and high-status individuals help drive home the internal questioning. One form of this process is laundering information through third parties. The North Vietnamese were skilled at this process, making an announcement, having it repeated by friendly foreign parties, then replaying that story as fresh news or proof of the facts.

Another propaganda tactic at which the North Vietnamese excelled was agitation-propaganda (agit-prop). This system consisted of two mutually reinforcing actions. Propaganda in this case refers to the detailed explanation of party views on a given topic. These are provided to party leaders so that they can use this line in agitating the population. Agitation typically consisted of slogans geared at raising anger among the target audience, thereby short-circuiting rational thought. Closely aligned with this is critical theory, a concept developed by German Marxists in the 1920s. Critical theory argues that the way to foment successful revolution is to criticize all aspects of the society. Such agitation will eventually strike at a target’s individual grievance, opening avenues for agitation and agit-prop. The goal is to identify a grievance and follow this seven-step chain:
Dissatisfaction → agitation → resentment → slogans → mobilization → creation of conflict → rise from ashes with a new society

Repressive tolerance is a tool within agitation. As Herbert Marcuse described it, *tolerance* is simply a code word for those ideas the propagandist approves of. All other ideas must be repressed through ridicule or force. Agitation aims to short-circuit thinking by the target by encouraging members to actively take part in and internalize the repression of counter ideas. This can be very effective, especially in functioning civil societies at peace. However, societies at war, such as Vietnam in the 1960s, seem to be less susceptible. Perhaps because war, as opposed to political conflict, works at a baser level of life and death, agitation of minor grievances is less effective.\(^9\) In a study of the radical organizer Saul Alinsky of Chicago, Hillary Rodham (Clinton) described the use of agitation in America. She noted that Alinsky saw conflict as “the route to power” because agitation polarized the masses, opening them to exploitation.\(^10\) Rodham quoted Alinsky as arguing that the role of the propagandist/organizer was to serve “as an abrasive agent to rub raw the resentments of the people of the community.” This is representative of the agit-prop system used by both Ho Chi Minh and the American antiwar protest movement during this period.\(^11\)

Contrary to popular myth, the psychological war was not simply about winning hearts and minds. What matters is behavior—not whether an audience likes you. Behavior that supports your military and political objectives is the goal. Attitudinal change may be nice and, over a multiyear period, may enhance cognitive dissonance that supports behavioral change. However, in wartime the priority is behavior change. As was found in Afghanistan during the US war there, focus on marketing models for propaganda may lead to situations in which the target audience agrees with your message but acts in contrast to it due to other influences taking precedence. Market-share increase or positive branding may work in a peaceful setting. However, there is not a precise analogy between choosing a cola and choosing to risk one’s life to call a tipline. PSYOPs share more in common with the rough-and-tumble of an election campaign or a police investigation. Clouded understanding of PSYOPs often leads operators to focus on the wrong messages.\(^12\)

Another myth about propaganda is that it primarily uses lies. Certainly, it is about subjective rather than objective truth, and lies may be as effective as the truth in the short run. However, in the long run, the truth will surface. The corrosive effect of lies on credibility must always remain in the forefront of the operator’s mind. As shown below, the Vietcong and North Vietnamese often had nimble propaganda programs, largely based on subjective truth. But the lies and inability of words to match deeds diminished that program over
the years. The same can be said of the American public relations operation under President Lyndon B. Johnson. Credibility, once lost during wartime, is nearly impossible to regain.

The mutual goal of tactical-, operational-, and strategic-level PSYOPs is to find weaknesses or vulnerabilities in the target audiences that make them susceptible to messages and thereby influence their behaviors. For instance, a group of soldiers cut off and low on food might be highly susceptible to a theme that offers lenient treatment and food for surrendering. The key task for PSYOP intelligence analysts is to identify a target audience that is reachable and susceptible to messaging. The audience selected must be accessible to the messages: it must be able to receive the radio broadcast, to retrieve leaflets, or to meet face-to-face. The target must also be susceptible to the messages. In other words, the target must be willing to listen to the specific argument, theme, or emotional appeal made and that can cause the desired change in behavior. Finally, the target audience must be able to carry out the change in behavior sought.\(^\text{13}\)

To conduct effective psychological operations, it is necessary to determine clear psychological objectives, asking: What is the change desired? For each supporting objective, a specific target audience must be selected so that effective themes can be devised to appeal to specific circumstances. A high level of empathy is necessary to gauge how products may be viewed through the eyes of often incongruous target audiences. Inherent in such empathy is cultural understanding. This requires detailed intelligence and analysis of the so-called human terrain—that is to say, the culture and ethnic factors that affect the battlefield during an insurgency. A person from outside a group may have difficulty navigating the nuances of a culture (yet another lesson of the Vietnam War).

Desirable behaviors in the context of Vietnam might include increased support for the South Vietnamese government or decreased support for the Vietcong. The objective must be a measurable change in behavior by the target audience. From this basis, the psychological operator can derive discrete psychological objectives that will help achieve the larger objective. If the larger objective is to decrease support for the Vietcong, a supporting objective could be that the target audience provides tips on VC locations or that Vietcong personnel rally to the government side. Both are specific changes in behavior that support the goal of decreasing support for the VC and are measurable. There is no way to measure what is in a person’s heart, but one can measure the number of calls they make to a tipline.

An example is targeting South Vietnamese families with members in the VC, using themes that good treatment awaits those who rally to the Saigon government. They are accessible via multiple media, may be susceptible to
themes that will allow family members to return, and they can urge family members to rally. For the psychological operator, the effect of targeting this audience can be measured by correlating operations along this line in a specific area with so-called rallier numbers (i.e., those who rallied to the South Vietnamese government). This will always be an imperfect correlation, but it is an indicator in the analysis of operational effectiveness.

By contrast, persuading North Vietnamese civilians living in a totalitarian society to change government behavior is not a reasonable target. They might be targetable by leaflet or radio, or they may be susceptible to a message calling for the end of the war, but in a totalitarian nation they are powerless to effect change. Thus PSYOPs might make them sad while leading to little measurable change in the short term. Such activities could, however, be part of a longer-term campaign to foment discontent leading to revolution or internal strife.

In the US military, PSYOPs represent the primary military element specifically tasked to communicate with and influence foreign populations. Although other branches frequently encounter civilians, their attention is on specific tactical missions. Infantry focuses on closing with the enemy. Artillery units focus on indirect fire. Military intelligence is typically focused on gathering order-of-battle information (identifying and locating enemy conventional forces). All branches focus on security. In this context, most personnel in the field often see foreign civilians as an obstacle whom they must keep at arm’s length. However, the primary mission of PSYOP personnel is to interact with civilians.

More so than other branches of the military, PSYOP units can operate at once on all levels of war. A tactical PSYOP team with a loudspeaker may be the only method of dissemination for a strategic message. Also, strategic PSYOP messages aimed at international audiences to build support for an action can quickly spread through the international press to affect the operational and tactical levels as stories are acquired by the local press. Thus, effective PSYOPs require coordination of messages to prevent information fratricide.

The weapons of the PSYOP unit include loudspeakers, leaflets and handbills, films, face-to-face talking points, and gifts. In PSYOP parlance, these are generically referred to as “product.” By working with key local leaders, developing relationships, and utilizing product, tactical PSYOP teams hope to influence the target audience. Consistency of message, themes, and symbols aimed at informing and influencing behavior are essential for PSYOP effectiveness.

Beginning in the administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower and continuing into those of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard M.
Nixon, many in key leadership positions saw PSYOPs as an essential element in maintaining influence during the Cold War. Consequently, the United States developed civilian and military organizations to implement this. However, PSYOP doctrine was formulated without understanding the prerequisites for conducting psychological operations in a counterinsurgency environment such as Vietnam. Additionally, PSYOPs alone cannot achieve strategic objectives. At best, PSYOPs can assist with tactical changes in behavior and support long-term shifts in outlook among the targeted population. Policy makers occasionally failed to understand this.

**Propaganda Development in Vietnam**

North and South Vietnam simultaneously developed their own propaganda programs, the latter heavily influenced by the United States, the former by Ho Chi Minh’s experience. Between 1960 and 1965, the United States had to improvise and adapt current PSYOP structures and doctrine to meet the Vietnamese insurgency challenge. The process was influenced greatly by Edward G. Lansdale, a proponent of psychological operations and longtime adviser on operations in Vietnam. In this opening phase, the United States acted primarily as an adviser to South Vietnamese programs. The Americans largely succeeded in this advisory role. During the rapid expansion of forces between 1965 and 1968, American PSYOP structures were tested constantly. As they assumed greater roles, PSYOP units struggled to meet the surge in demand. Individuals often had to learn on the job while adapting operations to a wide spectrum of missions and cultures. Although imperfect, they succeeded in many campaigns. At the same time, the South Vietnamese organization for political warfare (POLWAR) made great strides.

During the Vietnam War, the United States followed a doctrine that included strategic, tactical, and consolidation PSYOPs. Strategic PSYOPs aim to influence large segments of the target nation’s population, using themes that “exploit economic, military, psychological, and political vulnerabilities” and that are “usually designed to reduce the effectiveness and internal control apparatus of the target government.”14 Taking place at the strategic level, the focus was more on broad themes and global target audiences. Often, the goal is to influence a relatively small number of actors, such as leaders, to behave in a way consistent with military goals. Tactical PSYOPs are focused on the immediate tactical situation. Moving civilians off the battlefield and encouraging enemy surrender are key tasks of tactical PSYOPs. At the operational level are such activities as assisting deception operations and, during the Vietnam War, so-called consolidation PSYOPs. Consolidation focused on the civilian population “with the objective of facilitating operations and
promoting maximum cooperation among the civilian population.” At the strategic and operational levels, radio broadcasts and targeting of international press became principal methods of dissemination during the Vietnam War.15

Within all levels of war, psychological operations may be conducted using what were then known as “white,” “gray,” and “black” messages. White, or overt, propaganda are messages clearly attributed to the element publishing the message. In other words, the author of the message is not hidden; Voice of America radio broadcasts is the classic example. Gray messages disseminate products with no discernible author, such as leaflets or posters without attribution. Black, or covert, propaganda is attributed to a party other than the one producing it. During the Vietnam War, white and gray PSYOPs were primarily conducted by the US Army and the Joint US Public Affairs Office, while the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and, later, the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam–Studies and Observations Group (MACVSOG) were principally responsible for black PSYOPs, including deception operations aimed at causing the enemy to waste resources or to react. During the Vietnam War, the US Army had primacy for American military propaganda and the US Information Agency (USIA) was responsible for the civilian program.16

Despite the tremendous effort put forth during the war, very little was written about the PSYOP activities afterward. Although a wealth of primary source material exists covering PSYOPs in Vietnam, few secondary sources analyze it. Within this small universe, even less has been written by someone not directly involved in operations in Vietnam. Thus, little exists that is written by someone who can remain historically dispassionate while still understanding the arcane art of tactical PSYOPs. This study seeks to fill that gap. It argues that American and South Vietnamese PSYOPs were poised for success by 1965 and that, by 1968, had achieved a number of objectives. However, PSYOPs alone were not sufficient to win the war.

Collectively, most books about the Vietnam War, and specifically PSYOPs, resemble the story of the three blind men trying to identify an elephant by touching different parts. No overarching narrative or chronology exists of the PSYWAR and the complex interactions of operations by all parties. The studies may be factually correct, but still come to the wrong conclusions. Among this small body of work, there is no consensus yet on the extent of success, or the cause of failure, for the PSYOPs program in Vietnam. This is unusual because the Vietnam War arguably saw the most intensive use of psychological warfare in history. The common assumption seems to be that, because the North won the war, its program must have been more successful.

Due to politicization and positional loyalty among authors and academics regarding the Vietnam War, it is nearly impossible to derive a consensus
opinion on most of its facets. Thus, although this study cites many reputable books on the war, I believe an accurate historical framework can be derived only by cutting though the propaganda substructure supporting many of these books. This study focuses on the war through the documents rather than the postwar political filters. This method contains its own problems—purposely or inadvertently incorrect documents not least among them. However, without cutting out its propaganda roots, historians of Vietnam are doomed to feed on fruit from the poisoned tree. Here, postwar studies are used mostly to provide facts, to double-check the analysis of documents, and to ensure I do not stray too far afield. However, the analysis is solely this author’s, as are the failures in this area.

This is not a history of the entire war. It makes no claims about why the North won. I do not assess the rightness of either side to go to war or how that war was fought overall. Although related to the pacification effort, this work is not a study of pacification, either. It is a history of the psychological war, or, as Radio Hanoi alluded, the dogs barking in the night. Understanding the organization, objectives, reactions, and themes is impossible, however, without setting these items within the context of the war and the North’s counter-program. As this book will demonstrate, by 1968 the North’s propaganda was increasingly ignored in the South.

This also is not a history of the antiwar movement in America and makes no claims about the effect of that movement on US policy. However, after analyzing the North Vietnamese and VC propaganda programs, it became clear that this topic was unavoidable. The extent of the targeting of the antiwar movement by the North and the level of message reinforcement, and the actual propaganda messaging and theme development provided by members of the antiwar movement to the North, made it impossible to ignore. This study does not pass judgment on the movement’s impact on the war effort, although there are indications that there was an effect. Rather, this history focuses on the targeting of that movement by North Vietnam and its surrogates and the support provided by specific individuals within the movement. I will leave it to future historians to consider the effect on American actions.

In order to make this narrative coherent, I have chosen to highlight a few individuals whose influence on the psychological war covers many years. People such as Ho Chi Minh and William Colby are well known. Edward Lansdale is also known, but to a lesser extent. Others such as Nguyen Be, influential in the South Vietnamese pacification effort, Truong Nhu Tang, justice minister for the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam, and Frank Scotton, a USIS field operator in South Vietnam, are virtually unknown outside of researchers of the Vietnam War. Their activities help provide a useful structure to what might otherwise be a fractured narrative.
Conclusion

The American PSYOP forces went to Vietnam with little knowledge of the history and culture of the country and little experience conducting psychological operations in a counterinsurgency. As this book will demonstrate, despite these drawbacks they had considerable success during the period 1960–1968. In advising, innovating techniques, and developing equipment they made great strides. However, they faced an experienced enemy in the psychological war. And though the North’s propaganda increasingly fell on deaf ears in the South, it developed mutually supporting linkages with the American antiwar movement. This program effectively exploited President Johnson’s lack of candor on the war, as well as the sound of his uncertain trumpet, to rally a broad movement. As such, 1968 proved to be the year of collapse of morale among the Vietcong and the disintegration of American political will to continue the war under Johnson’s leadership.