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U.S. MILITARY ADVISORY EFFORT IN VIETNAM: MILITARY ASSISTANCE ADVISORY GROUP, VIETNAM, 1950-1964



President Harry Truman had approved National Security Council (NSC) Memorandum 64 in March 1950, proclaiming that French Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos) was a key area that could not be allowed to fall to the communists and that the U.S. would provide support against communist aggression in the area. However, NSC 64 did not identify who would receive the aid, the French or the South Vietnamese. The French did not want the aid to go directly to the South Vietnamese and opposed the presence of any American advisory group. Nevertheless, the U.S. government argued that such a team would be necessary to coordinate requisitioning, procurement, and dissemination of supplies and equipment. Accordingly, an advisory group was dispatched to Saigon. In the long run, however, the French high command ignored the MAAG in formulating strategy, denied them any role in training the Vietnamese, and refused to keep them informed of current operations and future plans. By 1952, the U.S. would bear roughly one-third of the cost of the war the French were fighting, but find itself with very little influence over French military policy in Southeast Asia or the way the war was waged. Ultimately, the French were defeated at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu and withdraw from Vietnam, passing the torch to the U.S. In 1964, MAAG Vietnam would be disbanded and its advisory mission and functions integrated into the U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), which had been established in February 1962.

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Detailed Description:

Historical Description

MAAG, Indochina; MAAG, Vietnam

In September 1950, President Harry Truman sent a Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) to Vietnam to assist the French in the First Indochina war. The President claimed they were not sent as combat troops, but to supervise the use of \$10 million worth of U.S. military equipment to support the French in their effort to fight the Viet Minh forces. By 1953, aid increased dramatically to \$350 million to replace old military equipment owned by the French.

The French Army however, was reluctant to take U.S. advice, and would not allow the Vietnamese army to be trained to use the new equipment, because it went against French policy. They were supposed to not only defeat enemy forces but to solidify themselves as a colonial power, and they could not do this with a Vietnamese Army. French commanders were so reluctant to accept advice that would weaken their time-honored colonial role that they got in the way of the various attempts by MAAG Indochina to observe where the equipment was being sent and how it was being used. Eventually the French decided to cooperate, but at that point it was too late.

In 1954 the commanding general of French forces in Indochina, General Henri Navarre, allowed the U.S. to send liaison officers to Vietnamese forces. But it was too late, because of the siege and fall of Dien Bien Phu in the spring. As stated by the Geneva Accords, France was forced to surrender the northern half of Vietnam and to withdraw from South Vietnam by April 1956.

At a conference in Washington, D.C. on February 12, 1955 between officials of the U.S. State Department and the French Minister of Overseas Affairs, it was agreed that all U.S. aid would be funneled directly to South Vietnam and that all major military responsibilities would be transferred from the French to MAAG under the command of Lieutenant General John O'Daniel. A problem arose however, because the French Expeditionary Force had to depart from South Vietnam in April 1956 pursuant to the Accords. After the French defeat, it was renamed MAAG Vietnam (MAAGV) in 1955, as the U.S. became more deeply involved in what would come to be known as the Vietnam War.

The next few years saw the rise of a Communist insurgency in South Vietnam, and President Diem looked increasingly to U.S. military assistance to strengthen his position, albeit with certain reservations. Attacks on U.S. military advisers in Vietnam became more frequent. On October 22, 1957, MAAGV and U.S. Information Service installations in Saigon were bombed, injuring US military advisers. In the summer of 1959, Communist guerrillas staged an attack on a Vietnamese military base in Bien Hoa, killing and wounding several MAAGV personnel. During this time, American advisers were not put in high ranking positions, and President Diem was reluctant to allow American advisers into Vietnamese tactical units. He was afraid that the U.S. would gain control or influence over his forces if Americans got into the ranks of the army. The first signs that his position was beginning to shift came in 1960, when the number of official U.S. military advisers in the country was increased from 327 to 685 at the request of the South Vietnamese government. By 1961, communist guerrillas were becoming stronger and more active. This increased enemy contacts in size and intensity throughout South Vietnam. At this point, Diem was under pressure from U.S.

officials to liberalize his regime and implement reforms. Although key elements in the U.S. administration were resisting his requests for increased military funding and ARVN troop ceilings, MAAGV played a significant role in advocating for a greater U.S. presence in the country. Throughout this period relations between the MAAGV and Diem were described as "excellent," even through the advisers were doubtful of his ability to hold off the insurgency.

Newly-elected President John F. Kennedy agreed with MAAGV's calls for increases in ARVN troop levels and the U.S. military commitment in both equipment and men. In response, Kennedy provided \$28.4 million in funding for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), and overall military aid increased from \$50 million per year to \$144 million in 1961. In the first year of the Kennedy administration, MAAGV worked closely with administration officials, the U.S. Operations Mission, and the U.S. Information Service to develop a counterinsurgency plan (CIP). The CIP's main initiatives included the strengthening of ARVN to combat the Communist insurgency, which had the corollary effect of strengthening Diem's political position. At the same time President Diem agreed to the assignment of advisers to battalion level, significantly increasing the number of advisers; from 746 in 1961 to over 3,400 before MAAGV was placed under U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) and renamed the Field Advisory Element, Vietnam. At the peak of the war in 1968, 9,430 Army personnel acted as advisers down to the district and battalion level to train, advise and mentor the ARVN, Republic of Vietnam Marine Corps, Republic of Vietnam Navy and the Vietnam Air Force.

MAAG, Indochina had three commanders: Brig.Gen. Francis G. Brink, October 1950-August 1952; Maj.Gen. Thomas J. H. Trapnell, August 1952-April 1954; and LtGen John W. O'Daniel, April 1954-November 1955. MAAG, Vietnam was commanded by Lt.Gen. Samuel T. Williams, November 1955-September 1960; Lt.Gen. Lionel C. McGarr, September 1960-July 1962; and Maj.Gen. Charles J. Timmes, July 1962-May 1964.

Source Note: RG 472, Records of the United States Forces in Southeast Asia, 1950-1975, Records of the Military Assistance Advisory Group Vietnam, 1950-1964, Adjutant General Division