

# Book Reviews



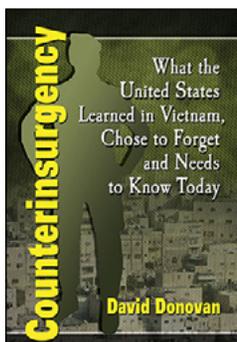
## ***Counterinsurgency: What the United States Learned in Vietnam, Chose to Forget and Needs to Know Today***

By David Donovan

Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2015,

224 pages

Reviewed by LTC (Retired)  
Rick Baillergeon



As a young company grade officer in the mid-1980s, I vividly remember reading David Donovan's *Once a Warrior King*. In it, Donovan discusses the time he spent as a military advisor in South Vietnam's Mekong Delta. It was a book that articulated the human dimension of war as well as any I had read. Without question, this volume had a huge impact on me and many of my peers who had read it early in their military careers.

Since the publication of his book, Donovan (pen name for Terry Turner) has kept a very quiet profile in military history literary circles. For many years (decades), I had hoped and looked for another book by Donovan. However, as I later found out; he had focused his attention in academia and science. Much to my surprise, I recently discovered he had just published *Counterinsurgency: What the United States Learned in Vietnam, Chose to Forget and Needs to Know Today*. Needless to say, my anticipation and expectations were extremely high.

Within *Counterinsurgency*, Donovan has taken his Vietnam War experience and combined it with decades of reflection. The result is a book that concisely addresses counterinsurgency (COIN) operations in the past, present, and future. Within the past, he keys on the practices and lessons learned of the Vietnam War. The present obviously addresses operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Finally, in regards to the future, Donovan offers expert advice and vision on an area that is clearly not going away in the near or far term.

To address this continuum, Donovan is aided by the book's simple yet highly efficient organization. He divided the volume into nine chapters, each focusing on a specific aspect of COIN. These chapters range the gamut from questions a country should ask itself before considering COIN operations to recommendations for the advisors on the ground. In total, Donovan provides readers with an incredible amount of information and advice in roughly 200 pages.

Donovan's writing skills have clearly not eroded in the past three decades. He has taken a topic many authors tend to overcomplicate and made it understandable for readers. As he displayed throughout *Once A Warrior King*, Donovan is

extremely gifted in gaining and then maintaining a reader's attention. These attributes combined with the conciseness of the volume make this a very quick read.

I believe there are two things that differentiate Donovan's effort from the preponderance of books written on COIN. First, I have found that many of the more popular books tied to COIN are more academically written and focused. There is clearly a need and an audience for these books. Donovan, on the other hand, has strived to craft a book that does not possess the academic overtones to it. Because of this, readers will find it easy to comprehend and should have little difficulty grasping Donovan's excellent teaching points.

Second, most COIN books published are either focused at the strategic level or with the boots on the ground. Donovan has attempted to address both. As he states in his introduction, "The discussions in this book are intended for those who think about counterinsurgency from a policy perspective as well as to those who do counterinsurgency in the field." Donovan is able to treat both areas effectively as well as those in-between areas which make COIN operations so challenging.

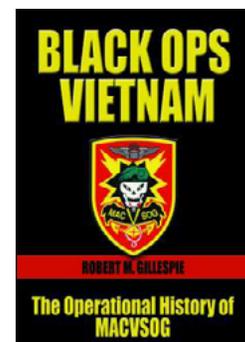
Within *Counterinsurgency*, Donovan makes excellent use of the insight of other former Vietnam War advisors. To achieve this, he has inserted dozens of their vignettes throughout the book. Each is filled with critical lessons learned. Donovan addresses their value and the apparent underappreciation by others when he states, "Those experiences are as relevant today as when they were freshly learned. Sadly, they have been available for decades, a repository of experience and knowledge apparently overlooked and certainly uncalled upon."

Donovan has crafted another incredible book. *Counterinsurgency* is superbly written, impeccably organized, and will unquestionably benefit everyone who reads it. It clearly exceeded the high expectations I had for it. I will now anxiously look forward to his next book. Let's hope it is not another 30 years between volumes!

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## ***Black Ops Vietnam, The Operational History of MACVSOG***

By Robert N. Gillespie  
Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2011, 305 pages  
Reviewed by Chris Timmers



U.S. foreign policy in the Far East took a fairly strong beating in the late 1940s with the "loss" of China

(Mainland China). The beaten back threat of Communist guerillas in the Philippines was also fresh on the minds of State and Defense Department planners in the early 1950s. Creeping Communism was in further evidence as the French were booted out of Vietnam in 1954. The U.S. was committed to blunting this advancement as it moved, in varying degrees. Vietnam could not be abandoned to the unrestricted advance of Communism; new democratic states in Southeast Asia would be threatened by the fall of Vietnam, so the U.S. had only one choice: Oppose this Communistic/totalitarian advance by all means possible. Remember that the French retreat had entailed only the removal of French forces up to the 17th parallel and the removal of all French troops in the northern part of the country, Laos, and Cambodia; the part of Vietnam south of that border ("South" Vietnam) was not included in the Paris Peace treaty of 1954. But that distinction was no problem for the Communists in North Vietnam; they began a campaign of infiltration and guerilla warfare almost immediately before the ink had dried upon the document.

So what did the U.S. do given this reality? In January 1964 it formed the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam Studies and Observation Group (MACVSOG). MACVSOG is now known, if it is known at all, as a covert, Special Operations outfit which contained elements of the Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and South Vietnamese defense forces.

But from the start the whole program was beset with problems. To begin with, senior Army officers (who, after all, really ran things) were not supportive of the effort. Gillespie includes remarks by Army Chief of Staff GEN Harold Johnson who referred to Green Beret soldiers as "fugitives from responsibility." Furthermore, GEN William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, was highly skeptical of unconventional forces. He was a straight-laced West Pointer who had grown up through the ranks of airborne Infantry and was a conventional Soldier all the way.

Other problems would soon manifest themselves: Vietnamese members of infiltration teams would often "turn" and betray their South Vietnamese allies. Additionally, finding officers and NCOs with experience in unconventional warfare proved to be more difficult than thought.

Given all the challenges MACVSOG faced, particularly the highly ambitious mission it was given and the lack of support from the highest echelons in the U.S. Army, is it any wonder that the organization never produced any tangible, successful, and lasting results? That a force of just over 10,000 combat effectives would be expected to fight and win in three countries (North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) and inflict damages and casualties designed to discourage North Vietnam's designs is, in retrospect, fanciful. Ten thousand troops isn't even a full division. The U.S. had the equivalent of six full divisions in South Vietnam alone, and we know the difficulties they had.

The story of MACVSOG is told professionally and with the right amount of passion. I can say that, as a former Infantryman, I would have liked a greater read on the pilots (U.S., Taiwanese, South Vietnamese) who flew missions deep into enemy territory. They are some of the many unsung

heroes of this conflict.

But my problem with this book is in one of its conclusions. Gillespie writes, "It was the supreme irony that the United States, with its revolutionary origins and the sacrifices made by both sides during its own Civil War... which failed to comprehend the dedication of the Vietnamese people to the creation of a unified state. So bound up was the United States in the Cold War ideology... that it failed to see its own values, determination, or history reflected in those of the enemy."

Excuse me? "The dedication of the Vietnamese people to the creation of a unified state?" It was not the dedication of any peoples to the unified state of Vietnam but the dedication of a Communist cadre to impose state totalitarianism over the southern section of Vietnam. Our revolution was against the British and sought to expel totalitarianism; the Communist North Vietnam sought to install it. Our revolutionary heroes had absolutely nothing in common with the soldiers who marched in step with of the Vietcong, Viet Minh, or NVA. If our revolutionary heroes are not different from the "heroes" who united Vietnam, how does one explain the thousands of boat people who were the result of North Vietnam's victory?

No, our failures in Vietnam were many, but not appreciating the zeal of the Vietnamese to "unite" their country is not among them.

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***Unraveling: High Hopes  
and Missed Opportunities  
in Iraq***  
By Emma Sky  
NY: PublicAffairs, 2015,  
400 pages

Reviewed by CPT Sam Wilkins

Emma Sky's *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq* presents a timely narrative of the

American involvement and ultimate failure in Iraq. Sky, a British native and graduate of Oxford, served in Iraq as the representative of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Kirkuk from 2003-2004 and as the political advisor (POLAD) to GEN Raymond Odierno from 2007-2011 in spite of her vocal opposition to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Sky's unique perspective and deep understanding of Iraqi political culture make *The Unraveling* a valuable contribution to the evolving historical narrative of the campaign in Iraq. Her astute analysis and observations offer the most cogent explanation, to date, of the failure of the American "endgame" in Iraq from the sectarian fissures under Nouri al-Maliki's government to the consequential rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) or Da'ash.

Sky's work begins in the strategic city of Kirkuk in 2003. Located on the ethnic fault lines between the resurgent Kurds and Sunni Arabs and lying astride vast quantities of oil, Kirkuk represented a microcosm of the difficulties facing

