

By Marc S. Miller

**F**OR MONTHS THE NEWS FROM CENTRAL America was encouraging. Sandinistas and contras negotiated, and only the Reagan administration was openly unhappy with the prospect of peace.

Unfortunately, the White House militancy was not a far-right quirk. Congress is now threatening to send military aid to the rebels, illustrating the bipartisan allegiance to a rising doctrine that ties the U.S. to unpopular governments and illegitimate insurgencies.

Far from being a compromise, a congressional vote for aid would continue the war against Nicaragua. In response to this military threat, the Sandinistas must maintain their own armed forces. Thus, war undermines the Nicaraguan government by draining the nation's economy and encouraging curtailment of civil liberties.

Underlying U.S. policy in Nicaragua—and throughout the Third World—is the dangerous concept euphemistically named low-intensity conflict (LIC). The stepchild of Vietnam-era counterinsurgency, LIC is "our most likely threat for the remainder of this century," says George Bush, parroting the words of a 1985 Army service manual. As then-Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger told a 1986 conference on LIC, "the world today is at war."

Consider El Salvador, blessed with almost 1.5 billion U.S. dollars since 1985. Every year, with Nicaragua diverting public attention, Congress quietly approves another half-billion dollars or so. As much as the contras, El Salvador epitomizes the way the U.S. wages war with LIC.

Certainly Gen. Eugenio Vides Casanova expects the U.S. to continue paying his bills. As the Salvadoran minister of defense told me recently, he has been assured that "there is no price that could be placed on" his contribution to U.S. aims. In fact, Washington views El Salvador as a victory since the rebels have not yet won. Said George Shultz two years ago, "In El Salvador, we see how the wise provisions of sufficient economic and military assistance obviate the need to consider any direct involvement of American forces."

Such sparing use of U.S. troops and weapons is the justification for the term "low-intensity." Instead, LIC offensives include military operations by surrogates (like Vidas Casanova), covert actions, political organizing and economic and "humanitarian" aid—all coordinated to impose Washington's view on the world. LIC is especially suited to Third World situations in which the "Vietnam syndrome" hinders the ability to overthrow enemies and protect—or coerce—friends through purely military means.

While the pieces of LIC are familiar, as a doctrine it reflects new priorities among war-makers. As Michael Klare and Peter Kornbluh observe in *Low-Intensity Warfare*, the new outlook "identifies Third World insurgencies—and not Soviet troop concentrations in Europe—as the predominant threat to U.S. security." In the words of the armed service's joint low-intensity conflict project, "The day of reckoning is at hand in the Philippines, in Central America and in the Middle East; soon it may come in Southeast Asia."

A 1987 White House policy statement, *National Security Strategy of the United States*,

## U.S. Third World policies threaten permanent war

endorses LIC and itemizes the Third World threats to U.S. interests, with "interruption of Western access to vital resources" placed first. It also warns of the "gradual loss of U.S. military basing and access rights" and the "gradual shifting of allies and trading partners away from the United States into positions of accommodation with hostile interests." The list concludes with "expanded opportunities for Soviet political and military gains."

Washington's adherence to this undeclared world war encompasses Democrats as well as Republicans. LIC's official status rose in 1986 when Congress created the position of assistant secretary of defense for special operations and low-intensity conflict. However, the first nominee, Kenneth Bergquist, withdrew his name after opposition from senators who had advocated the new job: he was too traditional. An ex-

**Dramatic increases in special operations divisions of the armed services make it clear that the Reagan administration and Congress have adopted low-intensity conflict—or, war against the Third World—as basic policy.**

special forces commander, Bergquist's Washington career began in 1977 as a CIA "operational intelligence officer." His duties, according to his Defense Department resume, included "paramilitary activities requiring extensive foreign travel."

**Discriminate Deterrence:** Despite the name, LIC is not limited, as its targets are well aware. Rather, it represents a commitment to total war. That comprehensive view is enshrined in the White House document, which cites "a variety of policy instruments," such as "economic, political and informational tools, as well as military assistance."

Reflecting LIC's emphasis on political ends, it wages war first with non-military means. Col. Harry Summers Jr., until recently an analyst at the Defense Department's Strategic Studies Institute, has cited President Reagan's 1984 pronouncement of a "communist reign of terror" in Central America as a use of "political and psychological instruments of power." The address increased public support for contra aid, while simultaneously intimidating Nicaragua.

Military maneuvers in Central America and the Caribbean act as similar psychological weapons. Sara Miles, author of *The Real War: Low Intensity Conflict in Central America*, points out how maneuvers—like votes for contra aid—have forced Nicaragua to spend money on defense instead of the social programs central to Sandinista popularity. After

the 1983 "Big Pine II" military maneuvers in Honduras, which included 10,000 U.S. troops and a rehearsal to invade a Central American nation, Nicaragua instituted a draft. The U.S. then dropped leaflets urging Nicaraguans to resist the draft.

LIC doctrine has led to a mushrooming—and cynical—role for public and private agencies. *Discriminate Deterrence*, the 1988 report of the Defense Department's blue-ribbon Commission on Integrated Long-Term Strategy, declares that "the U.S. will need not just Defense Department personnel and material, but diplomats and information specialists, agricultural chemists, bankers and economists, hydrologists, criminologists, meteorologists and scores of other professionals."

The head of the U.S. Military Group in El Salvador has put LIC's pragmatic perversion of humanitarian aid succinctly: "civic action shows the people that the army doesn't just go in and rape." According to a 1987 report by Sen. Mark Hatfield (R-OR), Rep. George Miller (D-CA) and Rep. Jim Leach (R-IA), the Salvadoran military violates U.S. law by having "direct authority over the major U.S.-funded 'civic action' programs." That violation serves U.S. policy. With three-fourths of aid to El Salvador classified as non-military, supplying food, medicine and other "humanitarian" items to the armed forces is central to LIC strategy.

Nevertheless, that report, aptly entitled "Bankrolling Failure," documents a defeat for LIC, and Vides Casanova may lose his job precisely because he carries out the doctrine. Many Salvadoran military leaders are angry that LIC's "winning hearts and minds" approach means they must restrain their death squads. They also resent the control over Salvadoran affairs that LIC gives to the U.S.

Even the Salvadoran military has no dispute with another part of LIC. Civic action may be counterinsurgency's carrot, but U.S.-backed forces also wield LIC's proinsurgency stick. In Nicaragua, LIC makes sense of seemingly irrational contra attacks on health centers, schools, churches, farms and international workers. Says Miles, "there is a conscious effort to remove successful social programs" that generate goodwill for the Sandinistas. Columbia University public health researchers Richard Garfield, Thomas Frieden and Sten Vermund attribute declines in hospitalization and in feeding programs for undernourished children to closed health centers—contras have completely or partially destroyed 65 clinics—and to the need to mobilize more than 5,000 health-care workers into the militia.

**Permanent war:** That civilians should suffer from LIC is not surprising, since it is a doctrine of war. But attacks on noncombatants can jeopardize international and domestic acceptance—and congressional funding. Therefore, among LIC's greatest advantages and fundamental requirements are its low profile and emphasis on surrogates and covert operations.

Nevertheless, LIC doesn't eliminate U.S. combat involvement. If surrogates can't do

the trick, highly trained, highly mobile units—for example, the Army's 1st Special Operations Command, headquartered at Fort Bragg, N.C.—are prepared to perform, in Shultz' words, a "multitude of tasks," ranging from giving civilians medical care to guerrilla operations. And to engage in LIC, Congress has mandated a National Security Council board for low-intensity conflict and an inter-service U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOC).

Dramatic increases in the special operations divisions of the Army, Navy and Air Force bear out the growing commitment to LIC. As of mid-1987, when USSOC was activated at Florida's MacDill Air Force Base, the command covered 34,000 special-operations forces, including active, reserve and national-guard personnel. About 25,000 additional personnel—classified as "special-operations qualified"—have undergone the same training. Rebuilding of special operations, which peaked during the Vietnam War at 3,700, started in the late '70s—under the Carter administration.

Despite this growth, the U.S. public remains oblivious to LIC's actions, covert or overt. But the doctrine's advocates believe that it must win wider support. J. Michael Kelly, an Air Force deputy assistant secretary, says, "I think the most critical special operations mission we have today is to persuade the American people that the communists are out to get us." Public acceptance is crucial, Shultz announces, because LIC is a long-term policy: "The safeguarding of fragile democracies and vulnerable allies against subversion, in Central America or elsewhere, will require more than brief and quickly completed uses of American power."

LIC proponents—inside and outside the executive branch and in both parties—are quietly but consistently engaging in a permanent, offensive war. The battlefield reaches the Philippines, where U.S. dollars fund the Aquino government's war against the New People's Army. It foments civil war in Afghanistan, where Congress appropriated more aid for the rebels than the administration requested. And it finances aggression in Angola, where the U.S. collaborates with South Africa. In every case, the enemy is ostensibly communist subversion, but the targets and the victims are self-determination and the potential for a constructive, democratic U.S. foreign policy. ■

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By Andrew J. Rotter  
Cornell University Press, 278 pp., \$29.95

**By Marvin E. Gettleman**

IN SEVERAL SENSES THE VIETNAM WAR is still being waged. In Indochina itself, a power struggle rages over Kampuchea. Reaganites try to find places, like Central America, to avenge the defeat inflicted on American forces in Vietnam 15 years ago. The battle of books also continues, as these three recent volumes demonstrate. One is a right-wing account, fully in accord with Jeane Kirkpatrick's defense of dictators, another—by far the best of the lot—is an exploration from a left perspective. But the one I will start off with is an academic study that occupies some awkward middle ground in the political spectrum.

Andrew Rotter's *The Path to Vietnam*, originally a Stanford Ph.D. thesis, attempts to illuminate the beginnings of the post-World War II Indochina struggle in the fateful Truman administration decisions to back Gaullist France in an attempt to reassume imperial control in French Indochina.

Rotter views the recolonization decisions almost exclusively from Washington's perspective. While certainly an actor in post-war power politics, the Truman administration shared the stage with other protagonists who are unmentioned or inadequately discussed in Rotter's account.

**Invisible Vietnamese:** We shouldn't blame him overly much for not dealing with the Russians, but Stalin after all was at the Potsdam Conference, and there is no record of the leader of the first socialist society raising the slightest objection to the dismembering in 1945 of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (arguably, the world's second socialist society), a development that set the stage for the French takeover.

But the Vietnamese, too, are invisible in *The Path to Vietnam*. Besides giving insufficient recognition to the fact that it was their country, Rotter fails to give adequate attention to Ho Chi Minh's efforts to obtain recognition from the Truman administration, attempts that were ignored much as Ho's 1919 appeals to the Wilson administration had been. Still, given the norms of current

## How Vietnam succumbed to the Washington syndrome

mainstream scholarship, and its fanatical devotion to multi-archival diplomatic research, Rotter's failure to use French sources is astounding. He does use a few tidbits from the British archives; but surely in a book devoted to finding out why the Americans came to the aid of the French, we should expect the perspective of Quai d'Orsay.

Rotter seems to have succumbed to an occupational disease of researchers by unconsciously adopting the value system and priorities inscribed in his sources. He blandly passes on the views that post-World War II conflicts in Indochina reveal the Chinese "agenda...of expansion," and the effectiveness of bold Soviet Cold War initiatives.

### ASIA

No doubt it would be awkward to preface discussion of each document unearthed from the Acheson Papers in Independence, Mo., with the disclaimer "U.S. policymakers believed that...." But without some such device, and without serious attention to the myths and misconceptions that accompanied Washington's decisions, Rotter becomes in effect an advocate of the very views he is trying to analyze and criticize. *The Path to Vietnam* fails to illuminate U.S. diplomacy, French statecraft or the Vietnamese society on which both acted so destructively.

**An old hand:** Ellen Hammer's *A Death in November* is equally disappointing, but for different reasons. An old Indochina hand, author of the 1954 classic, *The Struggle for Indochina*, she has now produced a soft-focus exercise in nostalgia and innuendo, the political message of which seems to be a retroactive application of the Kirkpatrick doctrine—stick with the dictators we've got, because if you help topple them, the Commies will take over.

Hammer's new book concentrates on the Ngo Dinh Diem era, which came to an end with Diem's "death [by assassination] in November," 1963. She disarmingly recognizes the well-known flaws of the Diemist dynasty: its favoritism to an elite of largely Roman Catholic supporters, its tendency to favor landlords over peasants and to repress former Viet-minh supporters, coupled with inept attempts to enforce authoritarian rule. When Diem and his sinister brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu (head of the U.S.-trained secret police) began using force to hold down the majority Buddhists, the regime's fate was sealed.

Hammer knows this story better than most; she even concedes that

any hope for an American-backed independent regime in Vietnam was a self-contradictory "mirage," yet seems incapable of disentangling herself from that very illusion. Her thesis is that, for all his shortcomings, Diem and his "first Republic" were the last, best U.S. hope. Diem seemed the perfect embodiment of what the Americans wanted not only in Vietnam but elsewhere in the former colonial world as well: a "third force," neither tainted by prior collaboration with imperialism nor associated with Communism.

Hammer, an unreconstructed Diemist, cannot explain why Diem became a liability in the minds of Kennedy-era war managers, and her explanation degenerates into mere diatribes against journalists whom she believes exaggerated the significance of protests against the Diem administration (especially the self-immolations of Buddhist monks), and against Henry Cabot Lodge, the U.S. ambassador in 1963, who gave the green light to anti-Diem conspirators. Hammer never subjects the various American ideological rationales for intervention in Vietnam (including the "third force" notion) to critical scrutiny.

**The perfect war:** James William Gibson, however, does this brilliantly in his ironically titled book, *The Perfect War*. On the question of the Diem era, Gibson lays bare that regime's underlying political economy, and how it and its largely Roman Catholic supporters virtually made war on the country people of Vietnam. When this split between the regime and the people openly surfaced in the first Buddhist crisis of 1963 (there was to be another three years later), the "need" to remove Diem made perfect sense to U.S. policymakers in search of a "perfect war" that could be publicly justified as being mounted in behalf of justice, and

reform and democracy in Vietnam.

But Gibson does not merely describe the U.S. rationales for the Vietnam War in its evolving stages—counterinsurgency, pacification, the air war and "Vietnamization" (building up ARVN)—he "deconstructs" them in a creative demonstration of the political uses of the sometimes esoteric and apolitical techniques of literary analysis. Despite excessive length and a few nagging factual errors (uncorrected in the paperback edition), *The Perfect War*, in this reviewer's opinion, ranks with some of the best American writing on Vietnam, including Jonathan Schell's early reportage, now gathered into *The Real War* (1987), and Neil Sheehan's *Bright Shining Lie* (1988).

Gibson's answer to the question of What Happened in Vietnam is an immensely improved version of the conflict-of-cultures theory that informed Frances Fitzgerald's 1972 *Fire in the Lake*.

Gibson reads the war as a text, an Orwellian communications system in which the enemy had to be envisioned as both an exotic "foreign Other" and also as an analogue of "us," subject to the same pressures for consumer goods, getting ahead, etc., that presumably animate the typical Yankee.

In such a system the Vietnamese would be thought susceptible to the punishing pressures of technologically sophisticated war-making that would, if directed against them, presumably make suburban Americans say "uncle." And when the Vietnamese patriots refused to give up, the Americans had few alternatives other than to turn up the military pressure; technowar began to take on a life of its own.

**The ultimate datum:** In their headlong pursuit of military victory, Washington war managers lost sight of Vietnamese civil society. So while

Americans enjoyed an overwhelming technological advantage, they could not overcome the revolutionary nationalists of Vietnam, who had fought successive phases of Japanese and French domination. Although Gibson recognizes that this Vietnamese determination, which U.S. technowar managers were unable to grasp, was the ultimate datum in the outcome of the war, his focus on American illusions precludes full attention to the Vietnamese side of the conflict. Therefore, his work has to be supplemented by the one major American study of the Vietnam War that never loses sight of the Vietnamese side—Gabriel Kolko's *Anatomy of a War* (1985).

But what Gibson does perhaps better than anyone is to read the nuances of American war rationalizations. He also skillfully shows how opposition to the "technowar" strategy developed among American troops in the field and at the airbases from which strikes against both northern and southern Vietnam were launched. He reconciles two hitherto disparate bodies of American war literature, the strategic theories of the generals and the war managers, on the one hand, and the memoirs of the "grunts," on the other.

Ordinary soldiers, well aware that most combat actions were initiated by those designated as "the enemy," resented being used as bait in "search and destroy" missions designed to inflate "body counts," which would result in promotions for the officers. Pilots had similar complaints about boosting "sortie rates" that put them at increasing risk, with dubious military advantage. Gibson shows how the war against the Vietnamese was mirrored by a related struggle within the U.S. armed forces. Eventually, the ordinary U.S. soldiers arrived at their own assessments and were often able to impose their own battlefield rules on commanders. This was the process called in the field "working it out," perceived by American military brass not inaccurately as a "collapse of discipline."

The work of Gibson, Schell, Kolko, Sheehan and others makes it now impossible to uphold what used to be the conventional idea that Vietnam was a "quagmire" into which the U.S. was somehow unwittingly enticed. The far more accurate view was that Vietnam itself fell victim to the "Washington syndrome"—an ethnocentric certainty that America could never lose a war, naive faith in technological fixes, systematic underestimation of Third World revolutionaries: the ideological by-products of a world empire in unacknowledged decline. ■

**Marvin E. Gettleman** is author of the '60s historical anthology *Vietnam: History, Documents and Opinions*, which was updated in 1985 (with Marilyn Young, Jane and Bruce Franklin) as *Vietnam & America* (Grove Press).

**What James William Gibson does better than anyone is to "read" the nuances of American war rationalizations.**

