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The Psychological War for Vietnam, 1960–1968 by Mervyn Edwin Roberts III.

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In his new book, military historian Mervyn Roberts (Central Texas College) has produced a comprehensive, well documented, multi-layered, and appropriately illustrated study of US psychological operations (PSYOPS) during the war in Vietnam. In so doing, he reminds us that such activities, with their perplexing blend of "white," "gray," and "black" messages (10), did not occur in a vacuum and takes pains to include the perspectives of enemy officials and planners in Hanoi, Saigon, and Beijing.

Roberts's military background[1] certainly informs his analyses, but it is his gifts as a historian and skilled rapporteur that make his narrative so instructive and engaging. The volume's chapters offer a virtually year-by-year account of how the war as it was envisioned in Washington, Saigon, and Hanoi actually played out on the ground in Vietnam, particularly in regard to psychological operations. "American … PSYOPS were poised for success by 1965, and … by 1968 had achieved a number of objectives, [but] …PSYOPS alone were not sufficient to win the war" (10).

The author begins with a historical survey of the evolution of US psychological operations, discussing the work of the Committee of Public Information and the Office of War Information in World Wars I and II. But Vietnam was different: there were no frontlines and no easily discernible enemy. The US military would be engaged in counterinsurgency, not repelling an invasion or fighting conventional pitched battles. This new type of war required new tactics. The change began, Roberts notes, with President John Kennedy's 1961 order to overhaul the American military presence in Vietnam as the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). Into that new structure went more advisers, more equipment, and "the first PSYOP Mobile Training Team" (66). The Army also revisited sections of its 1955 field manual dealing with psychological operations and updated two key areas: intelligence—its sources, acquisition, valuation, and dissemination—and "PSYOP support to counterinsurgency operations" (66). To that end, "The Special Warfare School at Fort Bragg … began offering a course for counterinsurgency … to provide commissioned officers and civilian personnel with … the latest doctrine and techniques of … psychological operations" (67). Language courses were also made available.

Roberts's picture of America at war includes GIs fighting Viet Cong and NVA regulars, a ramped-up bombing campaign north and south of the 17th parallel, and an intensified PSYOPS campaign. Leaflets and safe conduct passes rained down over contested areas, radio stations beamed messages over multiple wavelengths, and loudspeakers mounted to jeeps, planes, and helicopters blared messages just about everywhere. These techniques bore fruit in the form of enemy defections. The Chieu Hoi (Open Arms) program had started in 1963, but, Roberts asserts, the boost in PSYOPS messages in 1965 produced "a quantity of defections … [that] was straining the ability of the Chieu Hoi centers to handle them" (173). The defection/resettlement program was a bright spot in the information war.

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The US message was getting stronger, Roberts contends, because there were more messengers. By the end of 1965, PSYOPS personnel were plying their trade with US Marines and South Vietnamese forces near the DMZ (162) and Special Forces in the Central Highlands. In October, the Okinawa-based 7th Psychological Operations Group "assumed responsibility for all American PSYOPS in East Asia" (196). Their efforts enjoyed the support of the newly created Joint US Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO) and the new MACV commander, Gen. William Westmoreland, who had been interested in PSYOPS since the Korean War (113). The military-civilian alliance was supposed to coordinate with the expanding PSYWAR effort accompanying the expanding ground war.

A major theme of the book is the pressure put on all US agencies, civilian and military, to eradicate the Viet Cong. But how to do so while accurately measuring results was not always obvious. Roberts's research suggests that defections were increasing briskly through early 1967 concurrently with PSYOPS measures; but military commanders felt their big unit sweeps in the same period were more responsible for defections. Chieu Hoi was not the only way to get the job done: "The 25th US Infantry Division awarded platoons ten points for each 'possible body count,' one hundred points for each enemy crew-served weapon captured, and two hundred for each tactical radio captured" (229).

Roberts argues that PSYOPS personnel might not have gotten all the help they had hoped for from the military. "Poor political indoctrination of US troops often hampered attempts to build the positive relations needed to succeed in pacification operations" (229). He also notes that, in the opinion of one captured VC cadre, US troops' killing and injuring of noncombatants and destruction of civilian property hurt American efforts to stop VC recruitment. He identifies other problems that frustrated PSYOPS efforts, including inadequate training of personnel and a shortage of language-trained soldiers (237, 239). Then the events of 1968, including the Tet Offensive, dramatically altered the circumstances of America's ground war, including its PSYOPS program.

The Psychological War for Vietnam is an authoritative study of the failure of American efforts to win hearts and minds in that war. Mervyn Roberts has done historians and students of the Vietnam War a great service by so persuasively clarifying why those efforts fell short.