



A close assessment of a key American military strategy during the Vietnam War

Clear, Hold, and Destroy *Pacification in Phú Yên and the American War in Vietnam*

By Robert J. Thompson III

★ 2021 Golden Pen Award—Winner

By the end of the American War in Vietnam, the coastal province of Phú Yên was one of the least-secure provinces in the Republic of Vietnam. It was also a prominent target of the American strategy of pacification—an effort, purportedly separate and distinct from conventional warfare, to win the “hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese. In Robert J. Thompson III’s analysis, the consistent, and consistently unsuccessful, struggle to place Phú Yên under Saigon’s banner makes the province particularly fertile ground for studying how the Americans advanced pacification and why this effort ultimately failed.

In March 1970 a disastrous military engagement began in Phú Yên, revealing the enemy’s continued presence after more than three years of pacification. Clear, Hold, and Destroy provides a fresh perspective on the war across multiple levels, from those making and implementing policy to those affected by it. Most pointedly, Thompson contends that pacification, far from existing apart from conventional warfare, actually depended on conventional military forces for its application. His study reaches back into Phú Yên’s storied history with pacification before and during the French colonial period, then focuses on the province from the onset of the American war in 1965 to its conclusion in 1975.

A sharply focused, fine-grained analysis of one critical province during the Vietnam War, Thompson’s work demonstrates how pacification is better understood as the foundation of U.S. fighting in Vietnam.

Robert J. Thompson III is a historian with the Films Team at Army University Press. His articles on military history and strategy have appeared in the *New York Times* and *The Strategy Bridge*.

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