not until after the Iran Contra affair did more moderate voices in the administration come to the fore who believed that “terrorism is not our number one priority. Terrorism is primarily a police and intelligence problem rather than a foreign policy problem” (p. 153). Toaldo stops his story there and mentions the Lockerbie case only in passing and as a departure from the War on Terror concept.

The concluding chapter sums up the hypothesis, well proven as it is, that a military approach to counterterrorism never went unchallenged within the administration and that the concept was skewed by Cold War thinking and ignorance of regional dynamics in the Middle East. Toaldo also highlights the similarities and differences between Reagan’s War on Terror and George W. Bush’s attempts at reviving the concept after the September 2001 terrorist atrocities.

Overall, Toaldo ought to be commended for an insightful study, one that provides detailed accounts of the genesis of Reagan’s counterterrorism policies and the first War on Terror. By using both primary and secondary documents, Toaldo develops a solid argument and a fluent narrative, although a strictly chronological approach would undoubtedly have made it easier to follow his argument. The narrative jumps between events of the 1970s and then the mid-1980s and discusses the decisions taken by the administration in between, rendering the story difficult to follow.

Moreover, the abrupt ending without a detailed assessment of the Lockerbie bombing creates the impression of a mission partly unaccomplished. Seeing how the U.S.-Libya relationship in the mid-1980s was a circle of provocation and retaliation, the Lockerbie case can be understood in this context as a response to U.S. retaliation for the La Belle attack. Studying Lockerbie and its aftermath in more detail would have been appropriate and would have bolstered Toaldo’s hypothesis that after 1986 the U.S. approach to terrorism changed. Without such analysis, this claim does not appear to be substantiated enough. Also, although the book relates to Sterling’s Terror Network hypotheses, a critical discussion of her work comes only in the final pages. Moving this to the introduction would have made more sense and facilitated the reader’s understanding of the matter. In the same vein, the Iran Contra affair is never really explored in depth, which is surprising given its centrality to many of the developments assessed in Toaldo’s book. These caveats aside, Toaldo has succeeded in producing an informative, well-researched study of a topic whose afterlife has extended long beyond the 1980s.


Reviewed by Robert B. Rakove, Stanford University

A sizable omission in the historical literature has been rectified. In Blowtorch: Robert Komer, Vietnam, and American Cold War Strategy, Frank Leith Jones offers a
well-researched, incisive, compelling interpretation of a critical yet often-overlooked Cold War policymaker.

Robert William Komer has a peculiar standing within the historical literature on Washington’s Cold War. He emerges forcefully in histories of U.S. regional policy in the postcolonial world or of Lyndon Johnson’s war in Vietnam as a dynamic, tireless, often abrasive policymaker (he earned the nickname “Blowtorch” from Henry Cabot Lodge). Yet, until now, he has almost always been relegated to the supporting cast. With few exceptions, his peers in government wrote scarcely anything about him in their own memoirs.

Komer, for his part, did little to help would-be biographers. He left behind no major collection of letters, no diaries, and only a “lifeless” unpublished memoir of his time in government service. Secretive and unreflective, he wrote nothing about his early life in Saint Louis, where he grew up (pp. 6, 10). Documentation on Komer’s personal life is minimal, yet the picture Jones compiles in his first chapter is intriguing. Komer’s restlessness and lack of interest in commerce drove him to escape from the Midwest, his ambition and intelligence secured him a place in the Harvard University class of 1942, and his stoicism helped him survive the deadly beaches of Anzio.

What can reasonably be construed about Komer outside his professional life is limited, however. His copious and expressive memoranda and published works, and the oral histories he contributed to the Kennedy and Johnson presidential libraries provide the basis for this biography. Consequently, Blowtorch offers an intellectual and professional biography of Komer, depicting its subject as an underappreciated strategist. Other facets of the man, notably his political and social views and the role (or absence) of religious faith in his life, remain shrouded.

Komer is most often linked to Johnson’s counterinsurgency policies, and yet, as Jones notes, Komer’s career in government spanned most of the Cold War. During the three-and-a-half decades from 1947 to 1981 he spent only eight years (the Nixon-Ford period) out of government. Nearly alone among his peers from the National Security Council (NSC) staff under McGeorge Bundy, Komer returned to the executive branch in 1977 under President Jimmy Carter, serving at the Defense Department. Blowtorch divides roughly into thirds, examining Komer’s early life and years on the NSC staff, his Vietnam years, and finally his work in the Defense Department and subsequent retirement.

Jones chronicles Komer’s maturation as an intelligence analyst in the early Central Intelligence Agency, noting the influence of his Harvard mentor William Langer and the legendary Sherman Kent. Jones situates Komer as a strategist among managers within the NSC staff (although this point is pushed somewhat far). Successive chapters note Komer’s profound impact on two policy issues: managing the Yemeni proxy conflict between Nasserism and its conservative enemies, and arranging aid to India in the wake of the autumn 1962 Chinese invasion. These are important events, ably chronicled, and illustrative of Komer’s emergence as a major actor in the Kennedy White House. Yet still more remains to be written on myriad other policy questions.
Naturally, the heart of the book examines Komer’s efforts to craft a coherent, effective pacification strategy in Vietnam. First from Washington, then from an office in Saigon, Komer battled recalcitrant bureaucracies, worsening domestic opinion, and a few equally strong personalities in the army and Saigon embassy. Like George Herring, Jones is inclined to credit Komer with improving a bad situation, and he debunks the image of Komer fixating solely on illusory statistical measures. Nevertheless, Blowtorch does not quite enter the realm of Vietnam revisionism. Komer himself perceived a need to show progress before the 1968 election; the Tet Offensive undercut him entirely. His commitment to the war was professional, not theological. Pondering his efforts in 1971, he mused: “Maybe [the policy] couldn’t be carried out.... But in another real sense, we could have done a hell of a lot better than we did out there.” Komer’s most substantial publication, ultimately published under the title Bureaucracy at War, remains a striking analysis of the limitations of the U.S. war effort in Vietnam: the inability of willful, tradition-minded bureaucracies to understand what the war required of them.

Jones makes a strong case for treating Komer as a pragmatic strategist, yet this language can imply a similarity to better-known figures: George Kennan, Henry Kissinger, and Zbigniew Brzezinski. Komer thought strategically and quoted Carl von Clausewitz, but he was atypically concerned with secondary and tertiary policy problems. Kissinger was quick to declare when details bored him, and Brzezinski was prone to linking local developments to a grand Soviet design. By contrast, Komer stayed late into the evenings firing off memoranda on questions of implementation. He had broader views of the Cold War and the position of the United States in the world, but the questions that mainly preoccupied Komer were operational and tactical. Although these levels of policy practice are not mutually incompatible, Komer’s flair for the day-to-day intricacies of implementation probably came at some professional cost. Even when his job titles changed, he remained roughly on the same tier across three presidential administrations. He remarked in 1981: “I’m basically an operator.”

Moreover, Komer, unlike his grand strategist counterparts, proved strikingly reticent in retirement. He had ample time after the end of the Carter administration to publish his own memoirs, but he neglected to do so. Writer’s block is an unlikely explanation. Komer, the blunt man of action, had little interest in explaining his life’s choices to the broader world. His publications were invariably works closely focused on policy questions, with his Vietnam book, Bureaucracy at War, the closest he came to autobiography. His taciturnity may have chafed him later in life—Jones suggests that his final years were bittersweet—but Komer never sought the authorial limelight.

When he ventured back into the public sphere, he did so to argue about the merits of specific policy assumptions. An intriguing late chapter in Blowtorch recounts Komer’s involvement in contentious 1980s battles over the Reagan administration’s plans for a 600-ship navy. To a degree, Komer was defending his own legacy—the Reagan White House rationalized its military expansion by disparaging the strategic
planning of its immediate predecessors—but Komer's trenchant assault on the gaudy plans of Navy Secretary John Lehman conveyed a broader rejection of the unilateralism of the early 1980s, and a forceful articulation of the value of alliances.

Komer’s relative obscurity thus stems in part from his own talents and choices. If he never ventured forth to ask Does America Need a Foreign Policy? as Henry Kissinger did, his influence on U.S. foreign policy remains profound. Numerous policymakers learned (and suffered) under his tutelage, Richard Holbrooke and Richard Haass among them. His wartime criticisms of bureaucratic culture found a new audience decades later: copies of an earlier version of Bureaucracy at War were circulating within the Green Zone in Baghdad, initially as samizdat among dissenters, then as required reading. The hard questions Komer asked about the gap between policy and implementation have found new relevance in the post–Cold War world, and this sterling biography will be of essential value to scholars and practitioners.


Reviewed by Christopher Darnton, Catholic University of America

The primary objective of this edited volume is to demonstrate that the systematic killing of civilians by rightwing governments in Cold War Latin America qualifies as genocide, opposing the common argument (based on the definition in the 1948 United Nations Convention on Genocide) that political groups, unlike ethnic and national ones, are excluded from such considerations. The authors largely succeed in making this case, developing parallel illustrations from four countries in the later stages of the Cold War (Guatemala and Colombia in the 1980s, Argentina and Chile in the 1970s), although—as the authors recognize—these violent episodes have been frequently studied under alternative frameworks such as state terrorism rather than genocide. Taken together, the chapters powerfully depict a prolonged regional pattern of human rights abuses by governments that generally enjoyed some degree of U.S. support, against perceived domestic enemies generally on the political left. The volume is usefully structured to address in separate sections not only the “underpinnings” but also the “mechanisms” and “aftermath” of violence (pp. v–vi). The emphasis on mechanisms is particularly important, because so much existing work already focuses either on causes or on memories of political violence. Future research should be encouraged to trace the diffusion of specific practices such as torture, rendition, and disappearance across countries and organizations, which would also shed further light on foreign influences on Latin American violence. Valuable models might include Darius Rejali’s Torture and Democracy, João Resende-Santos’ Neorealism, States, and the Modern Mass Army, and Brian Loveman’s For La Patria.