

Blowtorch: Robert Komer, Vietnam, and American Cold War Strategy, 2013, 401 pages, Frank Leith Jones, 1612512283, 9781612512280, Naval Institute Press, 2013

History has not been kind to Robert Komer, a casualty of bad historical analysis and inaccurate information. A Cold War national security policy and strategy adviser to three presidents, Komer was one of the most influential national security professionals of the era. The book begins with a review of his early life that helped shape his worldview. It then examines Komer's influence as a National Security Council staff member during the Kennedy administration, where he helped set its activist course regarding the Third World. Upon Kennedy's death, Lyndon Johnson named Komer his "point man" for Vietnam pacification policy, and later General Westmoreland's operational deputy in Vietnam. The author highlights Komer's activities during the three years he strove to fulfill the president's vision that Communism could be repelled from Southeast Asia by economic and social development along with military force. Known as "Blowtorch" for his abrasive personality and disdain for bureaucratic foot dragging, Komer came to be seen as the right person for managing that effort, and in 1968 was rewarded with an ambassadorship to Turkey. The book analyzes Komer's work during the Carter administration as special adviser to Secretary of Defense Harold Brown and Under Secretary of Defense for Policy and credits him for reenergizing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's conventional capability and forging the military instrument that implemented the Carter Doctrine in the Persian Gulf--the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force. It also explores his final role as a defense intellectual and critic of the Reagan administration's defense policies. The book concludes with a useful summary of Komer's impact on American policy and strategy and his contributions to counterinsurgency practices, a legacy now recognized for its importance in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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