

Inside Report . . . By Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

The Unbuilt Airplane

OVERLOADED with intercontinental missiles and nuclear weapons, the United States does not have—and will not soon have—a cheap and suitable aircraft for guerrilla fighting in Vietnam.

Considering the fact that this inadequacy is related to life and death in combat, it may be rightly called a scandal. But no congressional investigation will uncover a scapegoat.

For this is a collective guilt shared by Defense Department civilians, Air Force bomber pilots, Navy brass and, most of all, by the inexorable workings of The System.

The System can be beaten in times of great peril. There is a legendary story of how one fighter plane was off the drawing boards and into production in two months during World War II. But today no effort has been made to beat The System.

To the uniformed military, this has significance far beyond the lack of anti-guerrilla aircraft. To them, it is just another indication that the Government is not pursuing the Vietnam war with its utmost capability.

IN BRIEF, the facts are these: For want of anything more suitable, U.S. aviators today fly high-powered Air Force and Navy jet fighter-bombers in support of ground troops against Vietcong guerrillas. This is roughly comparable to fighting a mosquito



Novak Evans

with a cannon. The jets simply cannot maneuver adequately at the low speeds necessary for effective support of troops.

A plane has been designed specifically for this mission: The counter-insurgency aircraft or COIN. A two-engine propeller-driven plane specifically designed for guerrilla warfare, it now has been ordered by both the Air Force and Marine Corps. Yet, not even optimists believe it will be ready for Vietnam before the spring of 1968.

It need not have been. Some seven years ago Marine Corps aviators were seriously planning a COIN aircraft. Had they been helped and encouraged, the plane could have been ready by mid-1961. Instead, they ran head-on into The System.

Both Navy and Air Force brass turned thumbs down. With defense spending set at a fixed level, they wanted to develop big missiles—not waste their money on little propeller-driven airplanes.

If the infantry had fol-

lowed the same logic, the Army would have discontinued research and production of rifles and concentrated on heavy artillery and tanks.

Air Force opposition was particularly adamant. Jet pilots had little interest in an old-fashioned, unexciting propeller plane. Bomber-minded brass headed by Gen. Curtis LeMay were scornful of planes for ground support action.

BUT ALL the blame cannot be heaped on the brass. To Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's cost-efficiency experts, the COIN looked like an unnecessary expenditure that didn't meet their slide-rule requirements. Even last summer, when U.S. involvement in Vietnam was rising, top Pentagon civilians told us the COIN might be a waste of money. After all, they said, Vietnam would probably be over by the time the COIN was built.

The unsung hero of this costly Pentagon dog-fight was Dr. James Wakelin, then Assistant Secretary of the Navy, who escorted the COIN through heavy flak from the Navy, the Air Force and the civilians. The Navy finally decided it wanted the COIN for Marine aviation. Gen. John P. O'Connell, who replaced LeMay as Air Force chief of Staff a year ago, reversed LeMay's decision and ordered COIN aircraft to support Army ground operations.

Yet, in its tortuous course through The System, the COIN was transformed. As technicians tinkered with it, it intensibly grew larger and more costly. Innovations designed to make it more suitable for guerrilla warfare—such as a special location of fuel tanks to limit the possibility of fire in crashes—fell by the wayside. Even in development, the COIN became a victim of the system.

Indeed, the COIN is so altered that some of its early enthusiasts now reserve judgment whether it will do the job in Vietnam. And if we turn the corner against the Vietcong a year from now, as the Pentagon earnestly hopes, Vietnam

may not even be the testing ground for the COIN. The war may be over before the plane designed to fight it is ready.

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