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VIETNAM: WHAT WENT WRONG?

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For a country as unaccustomed to losing as the United States, defeat in Vietnam was bewildering. Some people find it inconceivable that American power could be beaten by a ragtag group of Third World extremists. As a result, they assume the explanation must lie within. The most popular scapegoats are students and the press. “America lost because of its democracy”, argues Colonel Joseph P. Martino, a retired USAF officer. “Through dissent and protest it lost the ability to mobilize the will to win.” “For the first time in history”, argues Robert Elegant, “the outcome of a war was determined not on the battlefield but on the printed page and, above all, on the television screen”. Such profoundly absurd statements can only be explained by a deep ignorance of events on the ground in Vietnam. The war was at first enormously popular. It became unpopular when the events on the battlefield ceased to provide justification for the war”s costs in lives and money. In other words, American soldiers had first to taste defeat in Vietnam for the war to become intolerable at home. The inadequacies of the American war effort were real; they have nothing to do with faulty perception or savage betrayal. The US suffered a strategic defeat. This raises a worthy question: would a different strategy have brought victory?

On Strategy

The most popular strategic criticism focuses upon the flaws of limited war, which left soldiers with “one hand tied behind their backs”. According to the 1980 Myths and Realities survey by the Veterans Administration, 47 per cent of the public and 72 per cent of Vietnam era veterans agree that “Our troops were asked to fight in a war which our political leaders ...would not let them win”. Among those who experienced combat duty in Vietnam, 82 per cent agree. This line of argument is popular, as it allows the imagination to conjure up a scenario in which victory was possible. Thus, in the popular Rambo films, the hero, upon being ordered back to Vietnam, asks his superior: “Sir, do we get to win this time?”

To Lyndon Johnson, limited war seemed politically sensible. McNamara, during his confident phase, asserted that “The greatest contribution Vietnam is making ... is that it is developing an ability in the United States, to go to war without the necessity of arousing the public ire”. But critics contend that this half-heartedness caused defeat. “It seems rather obvious that a nation cannot fight a war in cold blood, sending its men and women to distant fields of battle without arousing the emotions of the people”, General Bruce Palmer argues. “I know of no way to accomplish this short of a declaration of war ... and national mobilization.” Summers feels that a declaration would have made the war “a shared responsibility of both the government and the American people”. Westmoreland agrees: “As a student of the history of war, and remembering the relatively recent Korean War experience, I was aware of the likelihood that a limited war, fought with limited means for limited objectives, would put special strain on the body politic”.

American commitment was lacking. “We never made any effort to create a war psychology in the United States”, Dean Rusk admitted. “We tried to do in cold blood perhaps what can only be done in hot blood”. But the argument that a declaration of war would have inspired greater commitment is deeply flawed. The Korean War, another limited war, was also fought without a formal declaration, yet the US managed to attain its objectives.

Disenchantment with the Vietnam War grew because objectives were not obtained, despite the claims of political and military leaders. As the credibility gap widened, support for the war fell. It is difficult to see how a declaration of war would have prevented this development.

Furthermore, for most Americans the war was tolerable up until 1968 precisely because it did not touch their lives. On that score, Johnson was probably right about the need to maintain business as usual. Clausewitz understood that “War is no act of blind passion, but is dominated by the political object, therefore the value of that object determines the measure of the sacrifices by which it is to be purchased. This will be the case, not only as regards extent, but also as regards duration. As soon, therefore, as the required outlay becomes so great that the political object is no longer equal in value, the object must be given up.” A declaration of war would have implied mobilization of the reserves, a shift to a war economy, cancellation of social programmes, and, one suspects, more stringent control of the media and of civil liberties. It seems unlikely that these measures would have made the war more popular. Americans would rightly have asked themselves whether the political object - the fate of South Vietnam - justified such sacrifice.

It is also reckless to assume that Congress or the American people would have approved a declaration of war in 1965. Where was the threat to American security, the vital prerequisite to such a declaration? A lot of dominoes would have had to fall before people in San Francisco felt threatened. The Tonkin Gulf Resolution was popular precisely because it was not a declaration of war. It proposed limited action, which seemed justified in the circumstances. At the time, the resolution did not seem any more monumental than similar measures pertaining to the Middle East and the Formosa Straits which Eisenhower had pushed through Congress in the previous decade.

Summers also argues that the US never formulated a viable strategy designed to win the war. Military planners mistakenly believed that unlimited firepower and modern weaponry could take the place of strategy. American forces were tied to “the strategic defensive in pursuit of the negative aim of wearing the enemy down”, with progress measured solely by the body count, or by the amount of ammunition expended. This line of argument has proved popular. Sixty-eight per cent of commanders polled by Kinnard thought US objectives lacked clarity. “The US was committed to a military solution, without a firm military objective”, one commander remarked. “The policy was attrition - killing VC - this offered no solution - it was senseless.”

Summers feels that “Instead of orienting on North Vietnam - the source of war - we turned our attention to the symptom - the guerrilla war in the south.” The “tyranny of fashion” meant that counterinsurgency, not conventional warfare was pursued. In other words, the US abandoned the standard method by which it won wars, in favour of a bad imitation of its enemy's tactics. It should have recognized that, despite appearances to the contrary, the war was not an indigenous insurgency, but an invasion of the South by the North - a conventional war masquerading as a guerrilla conflict. This being the case, “the Army should have taken the tactical offensive along the DMZ across Laos to the Thai border in order to isolate the battle and then deliberately assume the strategic and tactical defensive”.

Palmer advances a similar argument, even going as far as to argue that victory could have been won with four fewer American divisions than were actually mobilized. A five division force (two American, two Korean, one ARVN) along the DMZ, with a further two American divisions to extend the line to the Lao-Thai border, would effectively have “isolated the battlefield”, cutting the South off from Communist infiltration. According to Palmer, this would have created “a military shield behind which South Vietnam could work out its own political, economic and social problems. Cut off from substantial out-of-country support, the Viet Cong was bound to wither on the vine and gradually become easier for the South Vietnamese to defeat.”

The United States certainly had the capacity to fight this sort of war. With sufficient force and a willingness to extend the ground war into Laos and Cambodia, it might have isolated the battlefield. But what would the consequences have been? The US fought a limited war against a communist threat at the height of the Cold War. Yet none of her major allies actively supported her mission. It is not hard to imagine what the world reaction would have been had the US fought more aggressively. Leaving aside the potentially very dangerous reaction of the USSR and China, one has to bear in mind the effect such a strategy would have had upon the stability of the NATO alliance.

Isolating the battlefield could not have been achieved as cheaply or as easily as Summers and Palmer suggest. The logistical complications of trying to create a Maginot Line along the DMZ and through Laos were immense. Vietnam was not Korea, where different terrain and the defence of a peninsula made a barrier feasible. Nor was it the wide open spaces of Eastern Europe, the battleground which American conventional tactics

presupposed. Much of the area in question was dense, hilly jungle which favoured the infiltrator. “Some have considered it practicable to seal the land frontiers against North Vietnamese infiltration”, Westmoreland once commented; “yet small though [South Vietnam] is, its land frontiers extend for more than 900 miles”. If Laos had been sealed off, might the DRV have extended the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Thailand? No barrier can ever be impenetrable, and the frustrating fact of Northern incursions was that they did not need to be big to be successful. The revolution could survive on a trickle. Small convoys of trucks could make a huge difference to the PLAF, but if trucks failed to get through, bicycles might. If bicycles proved too obtrusive, supplies could be hauled on the backs of coolies.

The highest level of American casualties during the war were suffered by Marines who guarded the DMZ. Communist guerrillas had their greatest success with lightning raids against static targets. As a barrier force, the Americans would have been sitting ducks for incessant sapper attacks and artillery bombardments. But, even assuming that the US could have prevented incursions by Northern troops and supplies, victory was still contingent upon neutralizing the NLF (which controlled vast areas of South Vietnam in 1965) and building a viable government in the South.

Good government could not be learned overnight, nor could hearts and minds be won quickly. American troops would have had to remain on station during a slow process of nation-building, an open-ended commitment which the American public would have found progressively intolerable. The importance of the political object would have quickly evaporated. Though the communists claimed otherwise, the US had no imperialistic interest in Vietnam. Unlike the French, they derived no direct advantage from occupying the country. They did not want to stay.

The great problem with the Palmer/Summers thesis is the minuscule role it assigns to the PLAF. There is no evidence to suggest that removing the DRV from the equation would have persuaded the PLAF to lay down its arms. In the vast majority of engagements, Americans fought the PLAF, not PAVN. The PLAF would undoubtedly have been worse off if supply lines from the North had been cut, but it would still have been able to wage war. In 1967 the CIA estimated that the vast majority of supplies used by the revolution originated in the South. Self-sufficiency and adaptation were the NLF's strongest assets. It geared its effort to supply levels, shifting between periods of dormancy and great activity. Time was on its side. It did not need to win the war, it had only to avoid outright defeat. Its strategy was based on the certainty that eventually Americans would tire of the war. Its political object was of sufficiently great importance to justify a long war and heavy casualties.

The Summers thesis has great appeal because it postulates a scenario in which the US could have won the war by doing what came naturally. But it is based on a blinkered view of the war. Summers is fond of relating an incident which occurred when he met PAVN Colonel Nguyen Don Tu in 1975. “You know you never defeated us on the battlefield”, Summers rather stupidly remarked. Tu pondered the statement a moment,

then replied: “that may be so, but it is also irrelevant”. He was probably astounded that, after such a long war, Summers should still be so ignorant of its true nature.

The Other War

Those who recognise the importance of the NLF to the communist war effort, among them Andrew Krepinevich, advance a decidedly different thesis than Summers and Palmer. Krepinevich argues that the US paid insufficient attention to the “village war”, and thus failed to adopt an effective counter-insurgency strategy. Failure resulted because the US tried to mould the war to suit conventional strategy, rather than adapting strategy to suit the war. Instead of fighting big unit engagements, which had little bearing on the eventual outcome, the US should have concentrated upon bringing security to the peasantry, thus allowing the RVN eventually to win hearts and minds. Krepinevich denounces the “Army Concept” which, he describes as "the Army's perception of how wars ought to be waged reflected in the way the Army organizes and trains its troops for battle. The characteristics of the Army Concept are two: a focus on mid-intensity, or conventional, war and a reliance on high volumes of firepower to minimize casualties - in effect, the substitution of material costs at every available opportunity to avoid payment in blood." This argument has a great deal of merit. Westmoreland did underestimate the importance of the village war and considered PLAF guerrillas mere “termites” who could be safely left to the ARVN. But ARVN proved unequal to this task, and the failure to break the NLF's hold upon the peasantry contributed to the American defeat.

To fight a guerrilla insurgency required subtlety, stealth and patience. Americans instead applied raw power. They had some success, but it was success similar to that of the man who burns down his house in order to rid it of termites. The reluctance to sacrifice lives - summed up in the ubiquitous sentiment: “expend shells not men” - in practice meant that many innocent Vietnamese civilians were killed so that a few Americans could live. In 1972 John Paul Vann observed: "I have walked through hundreds of hamlets that have been destroyed in the course of a battle, the majority as the result of the heavier friendly fires. The overwhelming majority of hamlets thus destroyed failed to yield sufficient evidence of damage to the enemy to justify destruction ...”

Indeed, it has not been unusual to have a hamlet destroyed and find absolutely no evidence of damage to the enemy.... The destruction of a hamlet by friendly firepower is an event that will always be remembered and practically never forgiven by those members of the population who lost their homes." The defense specialist Herman Kahn argued in 1968 that “The United States must adopt as its working position that the lives of Vietnamese civilians are just as valuable as American lives”. But for the American military such an idea was preposterous. In their efforts to protect themselves, they made more enemies.

But counter-insurgency was not the sure-fire solution which Krepinevich suggests. It required a massive level of commitment. Westmoreland admitted that with “virtually unlimited manpower, I could have stationed troops permanently in every district or province and thus ... enabled the troops to get to know the people intimately, facilitating

the task of identifying the subversives and protecting the others against intimidation.” To be effective, counter-insurgency had to go hand in hand with aid programmes; standards of living had to rise at the same time that security was strengthened. But this sort of pacification strategy would have taken too long, again, the American people had no patience for a protracted political/military campaign. In a conversation with Robert Shaplen in 1970, a demoralized American economic-development worker summarized the immense difficulty of pacification: “two Vietcong in a hamlet can still undo most of what we've accomplished”.

In Dynamics of Defeat, Eric Bergerud argues, rather convincingly, that the chances of winning the war by fighting the “other war” were less than by pursuing a more aggressive conventional strategy. The problem was one of time and manpower. The US had a very small number of combat troops. (We should recall that only around 15% of the 600,000 troops in Vietnam at the peak actually fought.) Dispersing them to cover a greater area, as Westmoreland recognized, would have been playing into the hands of the PLAF. The guerrillas would have loved to be able to slug it out in the hinterlands with lightly armed Americans. The US Army, Bergerud feels, was organized as it was because that was the best way for a modern democracy to fight a war. The Army's motto of “bullets not bodies” suited a citizenry who accepted the principle of fighting communism, but did not want to lose men. Spreading out and fighting a real counter insurgency war, while deploying firepower sparingly, would simply have meant more Americans sent home in body bags.

The task of training men for counter-insurgency was in any case hugely complicated, especially since GIs were limited to a one year tour of duty. It was arguably also a diversion from the American military's intended purpose, which was to fight a conventional war against the Soviet Union. Did it make sense to undergo a massive military transformation in order to win a small war in Asia? “We're watchdogs you unchain to eat up the burglar”, one battalion commander argued. “Don't ask us to be mayors or sociologists worrying about hearts and minds”. “I'll be damned if I permit the United States Army, its institutions, its doctrines, and its traditions to be destroyed just to win this lousy war”, an American officer once exclaimed. Guenter Lewy cites this as evidence of the Army's stubborn refusal to adapt. It seems instead an impressive ability to take the long view.

Was Victory Possible?

Loren Baritz rejects the Krepinevich thesis on the grounds that cultural conditioning impeded adaptation to the challenges Vietnam posed. “War is a product of culture ... Our managerial sophistication and technological superiority resulted in our trained incompetence in guerrilla warfare.” There is plenty of evidence to support this argument. Sophisticated weapons were used because they were available, not necessarily because they were appropriate. For instance, studies have revealed that slower propeller-driven aircraft were more efficient at destroying targets in this type of war than jet aircraft and resulted in fewer civilian casualties and crew losses. Yet over 90 percent of sorties were flown by jets. Baritz argues that there was no escape from the tyranny of technological

war: “The military's continuing claim that we could have won the war if it had been allowed to fight the war differently is pointless. We could not have fought it differently. ... The American way of life and war meant that we could not succeed as counterinsurgents.”

This seems excessively deterministic. It is also peripheral to the real issue. Defeat was inevitable not because of strategic failures, but because America backed an ally which had no future in Vietnam. Both Summers and Krepinevich, from different directions, argue that the conditions could have been created in which the RVN could have transformed itself into a benevolent, responsible and representative government. Yet during nearly thirty years of American involvement the Saigon regime provided no evidence that it was capable of such a transformation. The RVN did not become corrupt and cruel because it was, by 1965, losing the war. It was corrupt and cruel by nature. Improving the military situation in South Vietnam would not have eradicated its venality. The RVN could not easily overcome the fact that it was an urban, Westernized and largely Catholic elite which ruled over a rural, eastern, poor peasantry. Those with power were reluctant to change because exploitation was profitable in the short term. Strategic tinkering would not have transformed the social conflict at the heart of the Vietnam war.

Anti-communism had great popular appeal, but the RVN government had little. It was difficult to motivate soldiers to defend a regime which had no real identity, and a state which was an invention of diplomats. These weaknesses forced the regime to look outward for support, namely to the United States. While American assistance undoubtedly made South Vietnam stronger militarily, it weakened the regime politically by exacerbating its worst faults. “The American dollars have really changed our way of thinking”, the ultraconservative Father Nguyen Quang Lam wrote in 1975. “People compete with each other to become prostitutes, that is to say, to get rich in the quickest and most exploitative manner.” The American presence was living proof that the Saigon government could not control its own fate. The American way of war also fundamentally altered the character of South Vietnam, creating a society and an economy which were not sustainable in the long term.

Some have argued that the US should have forced the RVN to reform. It was a great mistake, Robert Komer contends, that the US did not use “more vigorously the power over the [RVN] that our contributions gave us. We became their prisoners, rather than they ours.” But forcing the RVN to change (assuming this was possible) would merely have underlined its puppet status, leaving the Americans vulnerable to charges of neocolonialism. Some time ago, in a different theatre of war, T. E. Lawrence recognized the difficulties of creating an effective alliance between unequal partners. It is “better they do it imperfectly than you do it perfectly”, he argued, “for it is their country, their war, and your time is limited”. It is also difficult to force an ally to improve whilst at the same time making it clear that you will not let them fail. For the US, the RVN's survival was always more important than its morality. Cynics in Saigon exploited that situation.

The US was not only saddled with a weak ally, it also faced a formidable enemy. “They were in fact the best enemy we have faced in our history”, one general confessed to

Kinnard. In 1945, after the Japanese surrender, General Douglas MacArthur warned General Jacques LeClerc, the new Commander in Chief of French forces in Indochina, about the difficulties of fighting Vietnamese nationalism: “if you expect to succeed in overcoming the resistance of your enemy ... bring soldiers, and then more soldiers, and after that still more soldiers. But, even after all the soldiers you can spare are there, you probably still will not succeed.” Three quarters of the commanders polled by Kinnard felt that the US did not sufficiently understand the enemy. One general complained of a “gross misconception of North Vietnamese capabilities, values and determination”.

David Chanoff, who interviewed many veterans of the revolution, “came away with an appreciation for why their side triumphed and our side didn't”. He explained: “Utter ruthlessness and massive social manipulation on the part of the Northern-led party played a large role, of that there's no doubt. ... But even more important was a quixotic disregard for the impossible, a quality I came to think of as "ordinary heroism". So many apparently normal human beings had demonstrated in one way or another a damn the consequences approach to life that it began to seem like a national trait.” It is perhaps difficult for Americans raised on stories of the Alamo, San Juan Hill and Iwo Jima to accept that they were defeated by a spirit more powerful than their own.

The revolution's potent mix of military and political struggle gave it a profound advantage over its adversaries. It was able, because of its contact with the peasantry, to fight and rule with economy of force, thus making the most of meagre resources and limited personnel. And, no matter how much it might have resorted to cruelty, terrorism and occasionally cynical acts, it retained a moral superiority over the Saigon regime which allowed it to maintain political legitimacy. It represented, in other words, the best causes: economic and social justice and national independence, even if those causes often became distorted in their pursuit.

This political supremacy meant that the revolution could never be defeated purely by military means alone. Sir Robert Thompson feels that the Americans, and by extension their RVN allies, “fought a separate war which ignored its political and other aspects, and were not on a collision course with the Vietcong and North Vietnamese, who therefore had a free run in the real war”. Or, as Larry Cable states even more succinctly: “The American war in Vietnam [was] irrelevent to the Vietnamese wars”. Granted, the stubbornness which some Americans displayed in attempting to mould the war into a familiar form was prodigious. “It is fashionable in some quarters to say that the problems in Southeast Asia are primarily political and economic rather than military”, General Earle Wheeler claimed in November 1962. “I do not agree. The essence of the problem in Vietnam is military.” But, while it is tempting to believe that the war could have been won by an army of sociologists and political scientists spreading a benevolent culture among an ignorant peasant population, such fantasies do not accord with the reality in Vietnam. The PLAF were not a bunch of barefoot guerrillas but a highly trained, fiercely determined and well-armed fighting force which was at its best in small unit actions. A small force of American counter-insurgency specialists, as envisaged by Thompson, might have worked in Malaya, but Malaya was not Vietnam. No matter how much money and effort was devoted to pacification, it could not work unless the PLAF main force

units were neutralized. This explains why the greatest progress in pacification was made after Tet, when the PLAF effectively removed itself from the contest.

As Wheeler's assertion demonstrates, American decision-makers did not really understand the threat with which they were faced. Edward Lansdale, who had an intimate understanding of revolutionary politics in Southeast Asia, wrote a scathing attack upon American policy in a 1964 article entitled “Vietnam: Do We Understand Revolution?” The short answer was “no”. “There must be a heartfelt cause to which the legitimate government is pledged”, Lansdale argued, “a cause which makes a stronger appeal to the people than the Communist cause, a cause which is used in a dedicated way by the legitimate government to polarize and guide all other actions - psychological, military, social and economic - with participation by the people themselves, in order to bring victory.”

Without such a cause, the “legitimate” government had no real claim to legitimacy. Or, as another expert observed in 1967, “It is not possible to fight something with nothing.” The non-communists of South Vietnam were a spirited, determined group keen to resist the imposition of an alien ideology. They were a massive force. But the Saigon government never discovered how to harness their energy and embody their dreams.

Thus, the American effort was never more than a delaying force. When American ground troops began arriving in 1965, the defeat of the Saigon regime was imminent. The Americans delayed that inevitable consequence by around ten years. Both the French and the Americans, not to mention the Saigon regime itself, resorted to force because of the unassailable supremacy of the Communists in the political arena. All three learned (or should have learned) that force by itself was inappropriate, because the application of force made the political appeal of the insurgency all the greater. The harder they tried to win the war, the more disruption they caused, and the more remote victory became.

Alternative military strategies such as those proposed by Summers and Krepinevich might have produced a more effective military conduct of the war, but they do not address the political question. It was within the power of the US to effect a stalemate on the battlefield and perhaps even to impose a temporary military defeat upon revolutionary forces, but military dominance could only be sustained if the US commitment was open-ended. Once Americans departed, communist political strength would prevail. The communist strategy was based on the absolute certainty that the US could not stay in Vietnam forever.

A few years ago, when I was finishing the writing of my study of the war, I was faced with the task of finding a title which accorded with the general thesis of the book. I came up with “Wrong War”, only to find that some early bird had grabbed that worm before me. I still like the title. It was a wrong war, not a war fought wrongly.

So, what went wrong? Nothing. Or, at least, nothing of crucial importance. It was the war itself that was wrong.

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