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# A STRATEGIC PERCEPTION OF THE VIETNAM WAR

by

HARRY G. SUMMERS, JR.

There is a famous Jules Feiffer cartoon in which one of the characters, having just made what he believes to be the telling point of a long and involved argument, is devastated by the riposte "Now let us define your terms." To avoid such a fate, it is best to define your terms in advance, and for this particular argument the main term to be defined is "strategic," for there is a fundamental difference between strategic perceptions of the Vietnam War and historical perceptions of that conflict.

Military strategy is officially defined as "the art and science of employing the armed forces of a nation to secure the objectives of national policy by the application of force, or the threat of force."<sup>1</sup> Strategic appraisal of the Vietnam War, therefore, would properly involve an examination of that war through the application of theoretical principles to both the military means employed and the political ends that were to be achieved, not only to account for success or failure but also to revalidate the principles themselves. Carl von Clausewitz, that master theoretician on the nature and conduct of war, labeled this process "critical analysis," a procedure that involves three different intellectual activities.

The first of these is "the discovery and interpretation of equivocal facts . . . historical research proper." Then there is "the tracing of effects back to their causes." Up to this point, historical and strategic analysis travel the same path, for most military historians would agree that these first two intellectual activities accurately describe the nature of their profession. But with the next intellectual activity the paths

diverge. The third process is "the investigation and evaluation of means employed," and Clausewitz went on to say that "critical analysis is not only an evaluation of the means employed, but of *all possible means* . . . One can, after all, not condemn a method without being able to suggest a better alternative."<sup>2</sup>

What this divergence of paths tells us is that while the test of a work of military history is the degree to which it accurately portrays precisely what happened and why, military theory is tested "by the application of theoretical truths to actual events." "Here," Clausewitz said, "theory serves history, or rather the lessons to be drawn from history."<sup>3</sup> Simply put, military history provides us with a set of answers. Military theory, on the other hand, provides what our current doctrinal manuals describe as "military planning interrogatories—a set of questions that should be considered if military strategy is to best serve the national interest."<sup>4</sup>

## THE FIRST STRATEGIC QUESTION

In *On War* Clausewitz emphasized that

the first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish . . . the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.<sup>5</sup>

Practically from the beginning of our involvement in Vietnam, the received "theoretical truth" was that the conflict there was a *revolutionary* war. Sir Robert Thompson, British expert on insurgent warfare, explained how revolutionary war differed from conventional war:

Revolutionary war is most confused with guerrilla or partisan warfare. Here the main difference is that guerrilla warfare is designed merely to harass and distract the enemy so that the regular forces can reach a decision in conventional battles . . . . Revolutionary war on the other hand is designed to reach a decisive result on its own.<sup>6</sup>

With this "new kind of war," conventional military histories were deemed useless, and the classic theories and principles of war derived from these histories by Clausewitz, Jomini, Liddell Hart, J. F. C. Fuller, and others were considered irrelevant. They had been replaced by the works of Mao Tse-tung and Vo Nguyen Giap on revolutionary war and the theories of academic "counterinsurgency experts."

The model for such a war was not derived from our then-recent experience in Korea where we also had fought to contain communist expansion, but from the British experience in Malaysia. As British researcher Gregory Palmer noted:

The official view supported by the advice of Diem's British Advisor, Sir Robert Thompson, was that the appropriate strategy was counterinsurgency with emphasis on depriving the enemy of the support of the population by resettlement, pacification, good administration, and propaganda.<sup>7</sup>

Counterinsurgency doctrines thus channeled our attention toward the internal affairs of the South Vietnamese government rather than toward the external threat.

Clausewitz observed that "we see things in the light of their result, and to some extent, come to know and appreciate them fully only

because of it."<sup>8</sup> If we apply the theoretical truths of revolutionary war to the actual events of the Vietnam War, we find that they do not fit. The Viet Cong did not achieve decisive results on their own. Instead, their actions fit Sir Robert Thompson's description of "guerrilla or partisan warfare" almost exactly—they harassed, distracted, and wore down the United States and South Vietnam so that by 1975 the regular forces of North Vietnam could reach a decision in conventional battles. In the Afterword to a collection of papers presented at a 1973-74 colloquium on "The Military Lessons of the Vietnam War" at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, where more than 30 distinguished military and civilian panelists discussed the merits of counterinsurgency, panel organizers Air Force Colonel Donald D. Frizzell and Professor W. Scott Thompson sadly concluded:

There is great irony in the fact that the North Vietnamese finally won by purely conventional means, using precisely the kind of warfare at which the American army was best equipped to fight . . . . In their lengthy battle accounts that followed Hanoi's great military victory, Generals Giap and Dung barely mentioned the contribution of local forces.<sup>9</sup>

Only in retrospect is it obvious that the North Vietnamese used the smokescreen of

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revolutionary war to hide their true intentions. Part of this smokescreen was the so-called National Liberation Front, which was portrayed as an indigenous South Vietnamese organization leading the revolutionary war against the Saigon regime. With victory long since won, the North Vietnamese have not bothered to keep up this pretense and now freely admit that the NLF was their own creation. In a French television documentary broadcast on 16 February 1983, North Vietnamese Generals Vo Nguyen Giap and Vo Bam freely admitted their subterfuge. As reported by *The Economist*,

General Bam admitted the decision to unleash an armed revolt against the Saigon government was taken by a North Vietnamese communist party plenum in 1959. This was a year before the National Liberation Front was set up in South Vietnam. The aim, General Bam added, was 'to reunite the country.' So much for that myth that the Vietcong was an autonomous southern force which spontaneously decided to rise against the oppression of the Diem regime. And General Bam should know. As a result of the decision, he was given the job of opening up an infiltration trail in the south. The year was still 1959. That was two years before President Kennedy stepped up American support for Diem by sending 685 advisers to South Vietnam. So much for the story that the Ho Chi Minh trail was established only to counteract the American military build-up . . . . General Bam got his orders on May 19, 1959. 'Absolute secrecy, absolute security were our watchwords,' he recalled.<sup>10</sup>

It is not surprising that we were deceived, for many South Vietnamese members of the NLF were equally deluded. But now the denouements of former NLF leaders such as Truong Nhu Tang<sup>11</sup> provide valuable sources for "the discovery and interpretation of equivocal facts [and] the tracings of effects back to their causes." With such a reexamination it will become increasingly apparent that, unlike the First Indochina War between France and the Viet Minh, which was

a revolutionary war, the Second Indochina War between North Vietnam and South Vietnam was, in the final analysis, more a conventional war best understood in terms of classic military theories and principles. Among these are the principles of the *Objective*, and of *Mass*, *Maneuver*, and *Economy of Force*.<sup>12</sup>

### THE OBJECTIVE

"No one starts a war," wrote Clausewitz, "or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so—without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it."<sup>13</sup> Since 1921 this warning has been incorporated into the Army's doctrine as the first Principle of War—the principle of the Objective.<sup>14</sup> In the words of the current Army doctrinal manual

As a derivative of the political aim, the *strategic military objective* of a nation at war must be to apply whatever degree of force is necessary to allow attainment of the political purpose or aim for which the war is being fought . . . . It is essential . . . that the political purpose be clearly defined *and* attainable by the considered application of the various elements of the nation's power. Not until the political purpose has been determined and defined by the President and the Congress can strategic and tactical objectives be clearly identified and developed. Once developed, the strategic objectives must constantly be subjected to rigorous analysis and review to insure that they continue to reflect accurately not only the ultimate political end desired, but also any political constraints imposed on the application of military force.<sup>15</sup>

As with our failure to determine accurately the nature of the war in Vietnam, the application of this strategic principle seems never to have been one marked by precision and consistency—as the actual events of American participation amply illustrate. Examining the *official* justifications most often cited from 1949 through 1967 for

America's involvement in Indochina, Professor Hugh M. Arnold found that, compared to the *one* North Vietnamese objective of total control over all of Indochina, there were some 22 separate American rationales.<sup>16</sup> None of them focused on how the war was to be ended. When Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford took office in 1968, he complained that no one in the Defense Department could tell him what constituted victory. No one could tell him of a plan to win the war.<sup>17</sup> This confusion over objectives had a devastating effect on our ability to conduct the war. As Brigadier General Douglas Kinnard found in a 1974 survey of Army generals who had commanded in Vietnam, "Almost 70 percent of the Army generals who managed the war were uncertain of its objectives." Kinnard went on to say that such uncertainty "mirrors a deep-seated strategic failure: the inability of policy-makers to frame tangible, obtainable goals."<sup>18</sup>

Vietnam-era military theorists not only failed to set objectives, they also deliberately excluded the American public from the strategic equation. Theorists went so far as to say that military strategies ought to be pursued even when they are opposed by the American people.<sup>19</sup> This approach not only violated our American political and military heritage and both the intent and letter of the Constitution, it also violated a fundamental precept of war. Modern warfare, Clausewitz emphasized, consists of "a remarkable trinity" of the people, the army, and the government. "A theory that ignores any one of them . . . would conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone it would be totally useless."<sup>20</sup> As he would have predicted, the effect of the deliberate exclusion of the American people as a prime consideration in strategic planning was deadly. In the Vietnam War, unlike previous American conflicts, the American people were being asked to bear the cost of a war whose "value" had neither been fixed nor adequately justified by their government. One hundred fifty years earlier Clausewitz had warned:

Since war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object, the value of this object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in *magnitude* and also in *duration*.<sup>21</sup>

In words that seem to have been written to explain Vietnam, he went on to say, "Once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced."<sup>22</sup> Our failure to understand and apply the principle of the objective and the other fundamentals of war created a strategic vulnerability that was to prove fatal to American war efforts.

### MASS, MANEUVER, AND ECONOMY OF FORCE

Faulty strategic thinking, not surprisingly, led to faulty military operations in the field. The primary principles that govern battlefield operations are *Mass* (the concentration of combat power at the decisive place and time), *Economy of Force* (the allocation of minimum essential combat power to secondary efforts), and *Maneuver* (the placing of the enemy in a position of disadvantage through the flexible application of combat power).<sup>23</sup> In theory, these three principles operate in concert against what Clausewitz called the enemy's center of gravity—"the hub of all power and movement on which everything depends." The center of gravity can be a tangible, such as the enemy's army, its territory, or its capital, but it also can be something abstract, such as the community of interests of an alliance, the personality of a leader, or public opinion. Once identified, the center of gravity becomes the focal point against which all military energies should be directed.<sup>24</sup>

Because we failed to correctly identify the nature of the war, we also failed to identify the center of gravity for that war. Because we misperceived the Vietnam War as a revolutionary war, we saw the Viet Cong as the center of gravity. Our efforts were massed against this guerrilla enemy in search-and-destroy and pacification efforts, while we

used an economy of force against the North Vietnamese regular forces. Contrary to popular opinion, these efforts against the Viet Cong had considerable military success. This was especially true during the Tet Offensive of 1968 in which the Viet Cong guerrillas surfaced, led the attacks on South Vietnamese cities, and were virtually destroyed in the process. Former NLF member Truong Nhu Tang called it "a military debacle." "The truth was," he said, "that Tet cost us half of our forces. Our losses were so immense that we were simply unable to replace them with new recruits."<sup>25</sup> But even after the Viet Cong were virtually eliminated, the war continued unabated for another seven years.

We had selected the wrong center of gravity. The key was not the Viet Cong or the allegiance of the South Vietnamese people. "Like us, Hanoi failed to win the 'hearts and minds' of the South Vietnamese peasantry," Colonel Stuart Herrington wrote in his account of counterinsurgency operations. "Unlike us, Hanoi's leaders were able to compensate for this failure by playing their trump card—they overwhelmed South Vietnam with a twenty-two division force."<sup>26</sup> The results of the war clearly demonstrate that the primary enemy was the North Vietnamese regular army; the Viet Cong were never more than a secondary force. As Norman Hannah, the former State Department political advisor to the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Command, (the war's strategic commander) put it, "We responded mainly to Hanoi's simulated insurgency rather than to its real, but controlled aggression, as a bull charges the toreador's cape, not the toreador."<sup>27</sup> Our concentration on a secondary enemy frittered away our military resources on inconclusive military and social operations that ultimately exhausted the patience of the American people. Because we did not properly define our terms at the outset, we ended up defeating ourselves.

### CONCLUSION

Through Clausewitzian "critical analysis"—i.e., by testing classic military theory

against the actual events of the Vietnam War—one is left with a strategic perception of the Vietnam War that reveals, among other things, that much of the existing historical perception is faulty. This is not surprising, for scholars have always rightly been suspicious of works written in the heat of passion, which too often mirror the prejudices of the times.

But, ten years after the American withdrawal from Vietnam, passions are beginning to cool. In his examination of "The New Vietnam Scholarship," Asian scholar and former Vietnam War correspondent Fox Butterfield called attention to

the emergence of a small group of scholars, journalists and military specialists who have started to look afresh at the war . . . . For most of these scholars, their re-examination is not to prove whether Vietnam was or was not a 'noble cause,' in President Reagan's phrase, but to find out what really happened and why.<sup>28</sup>

As noted earlier, military historians and military strategists share a common interest in finding out "what really happened and why." To this end, the study of the military history of not only the Vietnam War but all past wars has been reintroduced into the entire Army educational system. But the study of military history is not an end in itself, only a means to the further end of "providing a thinking man with a frame of reference." If it is to accomplish this task, military history must be subjected to what Clausewitz called "an analytical investigation leading to a close acquaintance with the subject." As he said, "It is precisely that inquiry which is the most essential part of any *theory*." And it is only after such inquiry, he said, that theory "becomes a guide to anyone who wants to learn about war from books; it will light his way, ease his progress, train his judgment, and help him to avoid pitfalls."<sup>29</sup>

Strategic analysis of the war in Vietnam cannot change the tragic results of our involvement there. But if it can train our judgment and help us avoid such pitfalls in the future, our experience there will not have been totally in vain.

## NOTES

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24. Clausewitz, pp. 595-97.
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