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# Vietnam Postmortem: A Senseless Strategy

JOHN M. COLLINS

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American strategists struck out in Vietnam. Our forces won every battle, but this country lost the war. That scandal, contrary to conventional wisdom, had little to do with our ally's lack of spirit or President Thieu's poor leadership. It had little to do with disciplinary problems that deviled American troops during the later stages. It had little to do with constraints on US air power or privileged sanctuaries. It had little to do with outside logistic support for our opposition until the fracas was almost finished.

The cause was a senseless strategy that foiled us for 14 straight years. It turned this so-called superpower into a sorry giant like George Foreman, who lost his heavyweight championship in Zaire because he couldn't cope with Ali's strange style. The pity of it is that, unlike Foreman, we fashioned winning concepts in the final stages of that fiasco, but failed to stay the course.

That subject has been summarily dismissed in US decision-making circles, where conventional concepts still hold sway. Military men especially are convinced that unfettered firepower could cure an established insurgency. This critique says it can't.

## ***The Legacy of Earlier Wars***

Top-level US leadership has never been very subtle when it comes to war. Strategy takes a back seat to physical strength and tactics in the White House, the Pentagon, and the State Department. When the "chips are down," we've always poured on the power until opponents were crushed. Our ruling

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councils, whose members were schooled in conventional combat before the showdown in Vietnam, subscribed to that approach.

Threats in earlier US wars were classically military. Direct strategies on both sides featured force, not fraud or finesse. Political, economic, social, and psychological pressures were strictly secondary once the shooting started. US force predominated. We were prime movers in World War II, and although UN units fought in Korea, ours was the prime contingent, and we were in command.

Technology, not strategic theory, was this country's trump card. Masses of materiel from the military-industrial complex turned most every trick. Atom bombs stopped the Japanese during World War II, and they restarted stalled talks in Korea. Our whole approach to conflict coupled the theories of Clausewitz with the bombing concepts of Douhet. One stressed killing combatants, the other blasting civilians.

Military victory was our major conscious aim. We achieved it in World War II (at the cost of later agony), but inconclusive Korea left a sour taste, convincing men like MacArthur that there is no suitable substitute. He featured that theme—"There is no substitute for victory"—in a fervid farewell address to Congress in 1951, and he echoed it at West Point 12 years later. "Your mission," he told the cadets, "is to win" in armed combat.

### ***Revolutionary Challenges***

US leaders learned those lessons too well. They forgot that winning combinations cannot be switched from one time period to another without very precise appreciation for changes that transpire in the interim. Concepts are just as tough to transplant from place to place, unless the problems peculiar to one locale are pertinent in the others.

Certainly, there was clear evidence as early as Eisenhower's era that insurgency of the sort in southeast Asia bore little resemblance to conflicts this country experienced in Korea or Europe. The threat faced was ambiguous, as opposed to the clear-cut threat of a conventional conflict. Further, the decisive strategy was indirect rather than direct; the decisive force was political rather than military; the decisive participant was not an outside force, but the local people; the impact of technological advantage was trivial rather than telling; and, the desired culmination was political, rather than military, victory.

There was no overt military threat at the onset. Frontal assaults were out. Insinuation was in. Initial intrusions all were low key. Armed actions were highlighted in the press, but successful insurgents counted first and foremost on connivance. Foreign firepower was not winning revolutions anywhere. French forces found that out at dismal Dien Bien Phu. Tides turned in Malaya and the Philippines when common people made personal choices between imperfect but free societies and closed Communist states.

Technology never figured. General Sir Gerald Templer, the British High Commissioner in Malaya, used no air power to root out rebels in the jungles. Not one bomb was dropped. Magsaysay never massed artillery or napalm against hamlets held by Huks.

Matthew Ridgway, my airborne idol, thus was right for all the wrong reasons when he advised against US intervention on the Asian land mass in the

mid-1950s. It wasn't that our Army lacked military capabilities—US force was simply inconsistent with successful counterinsurgency.

### ***Conventional Responses***

Eradicating rebel *causes* should have been our key goal in Vietnam. Instead, we wrestled with symptoms.

From the very beginning, US objectives were mainly military, with economic overtones. Consequently, supporting operations were tactically offensive, but strategically defensive and negative in nature, because the true aim was social change, not military victory.

There was always a sense of US urgency—the typical American proclivity to solve present problems quickly, then get on with others. Communist campaigns, in contrast, took time, but Ho Chi Minh could afford to wait because South Vietnam, steered by this country's advisors, was put in a “can't win” position.

Since the real name of the game was *controlling* people, not killing them, subversive insurgents in South Vietnam centered their efforts on policy machines and the grass-roots populace. Regular armed forces and paramilitary people were the *least* effective Free World instruments for stemming such activities. Popular forces, police, and civil officials were better suited; but our State Department, lacking inclination and cadres, was in no shape to take charge.

US leaders therefore passed primary responsibility for a political war to the Central Intelligence Agency's hard chargers and our action-starved Army, which confused tactics with strategy. Every service college conducted required courses in counterinsurgency throughout the 1960s, all rooted in the least relevant aspects of revolutionary war. School solutions stressed the proper employment of air power, armor, and artillery against insurgents in swamps, while civic programs got short shrift—small wonder, therefore, that deterrent measures failed to forestall the spread of Vietcong influence.

Deterrence depends on three ingredients: a threat, the capability to carry it out, and the intention to do so if compelled. However, threats, capabilities, and intentions that are credible in conventional environments are inappropriate for counterrevolutionaries. In a conventional setting, the emphasis is on armed force, military means, and a will to serve people. Force controls resistance only in closed societies, where a security octopus operated at block level, but even there it is not always a successful method of control. Police states can come under siege by their own people.

US politicians put proper combinations to work at home in 1968, when incipient insurgency seized the United States. No one suggested search and destroy sweeps against the Black Panthers or Weathermen, who were busy bombing key buildings and battling police. Instead, civil rights programs reduced racial unrest, and lessening US participation in an unpopular war left the New Left without a power base in the general populace.

Political, economic, and social initiatives could have created a credible deterrent during Diem's days in Indochina, but our leaders didn't demand and Diem didn't deliver on his own. Given that unsatisfactory strategic climate, the United States could have terminated its association any time before 1965

without losing credibility because, like the Soviet Union and China, its commitments could still have been considered casual. When we chose to stand and fight—the only alternative seen at the time—this country's sacred honor was squarely on the line.

### **Misguided Military Actions**

“Win in Vietnam” posters plastered the walls at Fort Benning, home of the Infantry, Queen of Battles, but we still backed a loser by banking on force to combat ideas, while civic actions went begging. Even military efforts that might have bought time were mainly misdirected.

Body counts on the battlefield never meant as much as the battle for men's minds. Feckless firepower does not win many friends, and friends win revolutions.

Seventh Air Force bombs never scratched the rebel's cause. Indiscriminate firepower actually strengthened insurgency in South Vietnam by enraging innocent people whose homes were incinerated on the off chance that a few Vietcong might be killed. Bombing North Vietnam back to the Stone Age would in no way have assured our side a conclusive victory. Remember that Castro quickly conquered Cuba without outside support. Algeria's rabbles were completely suppressed by French armed forces but finally won their war.

Search and destroy tactics took priority over clear and hold operations, creating a series of spectacular sweeps that boosted casualties on both sides, but also convinced common people that neither American nor ARVN (South Vietnamese Army) troops would stay to protect them. Indeed, protecting big US base camps became a more prominent task.

The war initially was an insurgency, aided by infiltration. It was not an invasion aided by insurgency until much later. Dissidents therefore depended almost entirely on underground organs for support. Unfortunately, US and allied intelligence specialists focused on enemy main force units, nearly ignoring the Communist infrastructure. The upshot was predictable. Unchecked subversive cells, which continued to expand, replenished logistic losses and replaced guerrilla casualties.

Insurgencies are total war from the perpetrator's standpoint, without any “stupid scruples,” as Mao once said. Uncle Ho therefore strained to expand the conflict, while Uncle Sam strained to limit it. Our watchword, which was a good one, was “We want no wider war.” That prudent policy, however, prompted some strange constraints.

Take the matter of privileged sanctuaries. Only one, Northern North Vietnam, was *strategically* significant. Posting that locale “off limits,” instead of investing Hanoi and Haiphong, may have helped inhibit counterintervention by China, although equal credit likely goes to other considerations. Neither North Vietnam or the Soviets, for example, favored Chinese forces in the Red River Delta, and in any case, the Cultural Revolution attracted most of Mao's attention from 1966 through 1969.

Nevertheless, there was no excuse for *tactical* sanctuaries along our ally's frontier, where enemy forces routinely rested, regrouped, reinforced, and retrained without interference, then renewed their efforts. That practice

persisted for several years, even though the probable penalties for disturbing such sites were always slight, and potential benefits sizable.

### ***Winning the Lost War***

US forces would never have been needed for counterinsurgency purposes if our strategy had been solid to start, but with frontal assaults and attrition as the only substitute for sensible concepts, we were rapidly losing the war by 1968. All Communist channels to victory were open, short of military conquest. Indicators included the strength of the Vietcong, the open-ended escalation of the war and concurrent open-ended nature of US force requirements, a weakening US will, plus political instability and socioeconomic chaos in South Vietnam. Note that this list of indicators excludes body counts.

Still, the Old Conventional Guard never wavered: Its motto was “More of the Same.” An exception was Robert McNamara, who was sacked as Secretary of Defense. Clark Clifford, his successor, encouraged disengagement, but—like Ridgway a few years earlier—he was right for the wrong reasons. He chose to cut and run because he believed the war was unwinnable after our traumatic Tet experience, which was an incorrect appraisal. Reducing the US profile was politic precisely because our armed forces prevented real progress as long as they stayed in place.

All we needed to win were fresh concepts, which were forthcoming from a few seers who saw that David didn’t drop Goliath with “more of the same.” He used a slingshot instead of a sword, and thereby seized the initiative.

Step one of our new initiative produced a strategic objectives plan that stressed counterinsurgency for a change, instead of conventional combat.

Step two reassessed cogent threats. General Creighton D. Abrams, as commander of the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, often advised his commanders that 4 out of 10 obstacles facing US objectives were colored blue, not red. The crucial arrow on his situation map was labelled “US Domestic and Free World Attitudes.” A corollary concern was “Political, Social, Economic Conditions.”

Step three stressed local security procedures, some of them long suggested by low-ranking US specialists but spurned by their superiors.

Step four put South Vietnam in the picture with combined objectives and campaign plans, so that supporters and supportees at long last were pointed in the same direction at the same time.

Step five started to practice what steps one through four clearly preached. Vietnamization came into vogue, not just in a military sense, but *in toto*. Pacification was paid more than lip service. Nation-building took top priority, despite the sentiments of some disgruntled generals who did not understand.

Progress seemed slow to impatient Americans. War costs increased in terms of body counts and budgets before they finally subsided. One-third of all US fatalities, for example, befell in 1969 and 1970. Prisoner lists lengthened. Pilots stood in line for space at the “Hanoi Hilton.”

All the same, a spectacular shift in strategic balance occurred by 1972, even though an arbitrary timetable transferred power to our ally too quickly.

Insurgency was inert, for all practical purposes. Its causes were *kaput*. Pacification programs, including Operation Phoenix, took care of hard-core Vietcong who were spared by the Tet offensive.

US ground combat operations ceased. Air and naval support for the ARVN continued, but on a low-key basis.

Antiwar demonstrations in the United States were sporadic after the Vietnam Moratorium in October 1969 and massive rallies one month later. The Cambodian incursion caused a very brief revival in the spring of 1970.

South Vietnam was politically stable, compared with the previous 10 years. President Thieu was scarcely a Jeffersonian democrat—the tiger cage scandal and charges of corruption cost him dearly in this country—but he sat still for several social changes that solidified his constituency and undercut the Communists.

Socioeconomic woes, such as rampant inflation and a rash of refugees, were never really controlled. However, major roads reopened; resettlement began; land reforms took root; and rice bowls were filled.

Our side had won at counterinsurgency and could cope with conventional conflict, which is what it then came down to.

Giap, striving to re seize initiative, struck in great strength at Eastertime in 1972, ignoring all rules of revolutionary war. Some commentators in the United States compared that surge with the Tet offensive four years earlier, but Tet had been a Vietcong show. This was a naked invasion, and the Communists “crapped out” because they had lost their strength in the South. The popular uprising they expected didn’t come. There were no Dien Bien Phu’s.

### ***Losing the Won War***

Bled white, blocked on the battlefield, and battered at home, Ho’s successors sued for peace, and unskilled US statesmen gullibly snapped at the bait.

Willingness to compromise is a pillar of American foreign policy, but our side was strictly amateur when compared with Communist spokesmen. The Marquis of Queensbury was our model; theirs was Machiavelli.

Our aims were exposed and stressed compromise and conciliation, but their aims were concealed and stressed consistency and US concessions. Our tactics were straightforward; theirs were deceptive. While our armed forces were separated from the negotiations, theirs were supportive. Finally, time was important to US negotiators, but it was immaterial to the Communists.

They applied obstruction, procrastination, legal monkey wrenches, and *Roberts Rules of Order* as weapons systems. We took the pressure off, while they kept pouring it on. Their mission was *never* to meet in the middle, but to seduce America and break Saigon’s stubborn spirit.

Kissinger signalled “Peace is at hand” in October 1972, but frustration replaced euphoria after fruitless palavering without a pittance of progress. B-52s finally broke the deadlock, but in fact the bombers “bombed out.” Ridiculous terms rid the region of US power, while leaving Red power in place. There was no political settlement in that highly political war. Accords were signed, yet armed combat went on, with Communists in the catbird seat and Saigon’s survival at stake.

In short, we lost a game of intellectual judo, in which conceptual leverage was more potent than lethal power.

Thereafter, defeat for this country and South Vietnam was destined. North Vietnam spent no money or manpower on home defense after our air power departed. Soviet support sustained operations where soft spots appeared along our late ally's frontier. Unfortunate friendlies, cut adrift spiritually and logistically by the United States, lacked counteroffensive capabilities of any kind and found too few fingers to plug leaky dikes.

There was enough equipment. We dumped a billion dollars' worth when we left, but left Saigon's forces little means to maintain it. Know-how was never developed.

US aid cuts crippled Thieu's ability to fight a conventional war during the final debate. Fighter pilots averaged just seven flying hours a month in 1974. Helicopter pilots averaged just twice that. Light artillery tubes fired eight rounds a day on the average, mediums even fewer—a far cry from lavish outlays in less trying times. Incoming shipments of ammunition, petroleum products, and repair parts were not equal to expenditures, despite conservation, and the enemy knew it.

There was no way for South Vietnam to supplement its stocks from other sources. Drastic drops in US donations during the last two years of the war equalled half of that country's gross national product. Piasters, consequently, were in short supply. The Arab oil embargo, which put the pinch on everyone, pushed prices out of sight in Japan and Europe. Thus, the open market was closed to Saigon from a practical standpoint.

The ARVN, accustomed to American ways of war, simply could not adjust. Even if President Thieu had played his cards perfectly, there wasn't much question what was going to happen. The only question was when.

### ***The Cost of Short-Sighted Strategy***

What were the long-term consequences to the United States? This country took up the torch from France in 1955, 20 years before the fatal collapse. Failure to formulate and then follow a sound strategy during that fateful period still cripples our President's ability to shape foreign policy and sculpt a solid defense. The legacy includes isolationist sentiment, antimilitarism, foreign aid coming under fire, controversy over war powers, cracks in the US alliance system, decreased conventional deterrent powers, and the spread of subversive insurgencies.

Every liability on that list reflects losing the Vietnam War. Some consequences are less severe than they were a year ago, some are still taking shape, but all will cramp US style in the foreseeable future.

### ***The Seeds of Future Failure***

It would be nice to announce that US leaders have learned hard lessons, but they haven't. The Old Conventional Guard still sets standards for contingency plans and conducts classes on counterinsurgency. A new generation is ingesting the same stale ideas.

One senior service college course taught in 1976 provides a first-class example. Its syllabus zeroed in on military matters that missed the main target. The speakers list featured men who fought a losing war, not men who might have won it. Required readings were badly unbalanced. Mao, Giap, and David Galula were not even in the bibliography. Neither was Robert Thompson, whose *No Exit From Vietnam* beat any book that class read. Most surprisingly, Sun Tzu's terse treatise on *The Art of War* was missing, although it served as the Communist model. It could have served us too, as some of his quotes indicate:

- For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.
- Generally in war the best policy is to take a state intact; to ruin it is inferior to this.
- Thus, what is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy's strategy.
- If ignorant both of your enemy and of yourself, you are certain in every battle to be in peril.
- In war, numbers alone confer no advantage. Do not advance relying on sheer military power.<sup>1</sup>

Violence in his view was the court of last resort, not because he was squeamish, but because he believed it stupid to destroy property and disaffect people who could serve friendly causes. Alexander the Great, the grandfather of all grand strategists, concurred with that sentiment. There *is* a substitute for tactical victories, if they court strategic defeat.

We oriented on opposing armed forces, not opposing strategies, a fatal *faux pas* in that war. We overrated ourselves and underrated opponents. Technological strengths and superior numbers consequently conferred no advantage on the United States. Finally, we forgot that armies are not the only weapons in the counterinsurgent's arsenal, nor even the most important.

## Coda

In sum, this country suffered from a shortage of competent strategists. An Army general, while Superintendent at West Point, once was asked why the United States, after 200 years of nationhood, has never produced a classic theorist.<sup>2</sup> His answer allegedly was "We're not interested in thinkers. We're interested in doers."

Doers, however, don't do very well unless skilled strategists think.

## NOTES

1. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 77-122, *passim*.

2. Actually, there are a few candidates for this distinction, but almost all are in the nuclear field and almost all are civilians. The sole military exception may be Alfred Thayer Mahan.