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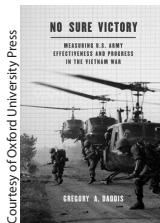
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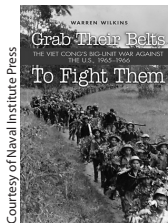
Review Essay

Vietnam—One War, Two Accounts

ROBERT PREVIDI



No Sure Victory: Measuring US Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War
by Gregory A. Daddis
New York: Oxford University Press, 2011
334 Pages
\$34.95



Grab Their Belts to Fight Them: The Viet Cong's Big-Unit War Against the US, 1965-1966
by Warren Wilkins
Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011
312 pages
\$35.95

What these two books make clear is that we were fighting a limited war in Vietnam while our enemy was fighting an unconditional war; therefore, their will to win was stronger than ours. Americans thought we could scare the North Vietnamese into defeat. They, however, focused their strategy on the best way to defeat such a great power. Smart thinking and persistence drove their actions. The North Vietnamese and the Vietcong were united around the idea of nationalism; and time was clearly on their side.

In *No Sure Victory*, Gregory Daddis, a history professor at West Point, explains that numbers ended up dominating US policy decisions. It all starts with the false logic of Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, a man who thought he would prove himself the smartest man in the world by using systems analysis to win a war. Daddis ascertains the United States never had a rational overall strategy for winning. McNamara filled the vacuum with the misguided idea that by compiling numbers, we would win. System analysis became an ill-considered strategy to defeat the North Vietnamese.

Unfortunately, the US Army followed McNamara off the cliff. The author soundly opines that America did not understand the nature of the war. Without a well-thought strategy, we fought a war on the enemy's terms. We failed to realize that the only possible way to change the situation to our advantage would have been a massive intervention from the beginning. The lesson learned—you cannot give your enemy unfair advantages and still expect to win. This strategic challenge should have been a warning to our policymakers.

The reality was the North Vietnamese were free to conduct the conflict in South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The United States placed political restrictions on itself to limit the fighting to South Vietnam. How could one expect to win? We made it a war of statistics, which limited our thinking and ability to create options. The author makes this point with devastating clarity.

Robert Previdi writes extensively on military, constitutional, and public policy issues. He wrote the first book on the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols legislation called Civilian Control versus Military Rule.

According to Daddis, General Westmoreland accepted McNamara's philosophy that if we killed enough of the enemy, the war could be won. So body counts and search and destroy became the prime American strategy and tactic. Daddis writes: "Preoccupied with searching and destroying enemy formations, the Americans overlooked that much of [Vietcong]'s power derived from its political organization in the rural villages and hamlets outside Saigon."

In his first-rate book *None So Blind*, George W. Allen writes: "By ignoring this political dimension of the war, the [United States] and the Saigon government effectively abandoned the ideological and psychological initiative to the enemy." Game over. The war of attrition was at the detriment of the United States.

McNamara's numbers strategy and Westmoreland's big war search and destroy tactic were doomed to failure. The reality is that the enemy could commit more forces than the United States, and their soldiers could fight indefinitely without any political consequences. Marine General Victor Krulak summed it up in a memorandum to Secretary McNamara:

We must not engage in an attritional contest with the hardcore just for the sake of attrition; nor should we react to [Vietcong] initiatives or seek them out just to do battle. The attritional ratio under these circumstances is not going to favor us, and this form of competition has little to do with who ultimately wins anyhow.

Westmoreland believed that the key to victory was to kill the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese faster than the enemy could replace their losses. This objective had to be achieved before other strategies could be implemented, such as dealing with the political problems in Saigon, and getting the South Vietnamese people to believe in their government.

McNamara and the officers at Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) were compiling more and more useless numbers. (The US Army produced 14,000 pounds of reports every day.) The numbers only proved the United States policymakers and military had lost their ability to think rationally. President Johnson, McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, Dean Rusk, General Wheeler, and Westmoreland were clearly unqualified to deal with this conflict. The totality of Daddis's book makes this point clear.

What never crossed the mind of these civilian and military leaders is that this war was not winnable. We could help the South Vietnamese, but the United States could not fight a possibly protracted war without public support. Instead of Congress and the President developing national objectives along with a strategy for achieving them with the support of the American public, we ended up fighting a political conflict.

President Johnson and Secretary McNamara decided what policy the United States would follow in Vietnam. The author writes: "In January 1961, newly appointed Secretary of Defense McNamara found an 'absence of the essential management tools needed to make sound decisions on the really crucial issues of national security.'" This assessment was the beginning of our downfall in Vietnam. As he points out, even Charles J. Hitch, one of McNamara's whiz kids, understood the illogic of what McNamara was trying to do. Hitch warned,

“Systems analysis studies offered no panacea for the more difficult problems. Reliable quantitative data are often not available. And even when such data are available, there is usually no common standard of measurement.” This quote captures why the war in Vietnam could not be quantified.

Daddis writes, “For the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) statistics became a substitute for a fuller comprehension of the war’s larger political-military problem.” Consequently, McNamara’s focus on numbers was not only useless but actually prevented an objective evaluation of the situation. The US Army was not in control of its own destiny. It mistakenly counted on Congress to protect it from the decisions being made by the executive branch.

The question then becomes: What should happen when the executive branch does not know what they are doing? The answer is Congress needs to get involved. The former Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee Carl Vinson wrote, “Congress must assume its proper authority if we are to have really good government in this country Too broad and unreviewed responsibility has been delegated to the executive branch.”

Daddis highlights another critically important issue when he writes, “Westmoreland waged war in 1966 without oversight from Washington high command.” Can anyone imagine Admiral King and General Marshall allowing their field commanders to go unsupervised during the Second World War? The Joint Chiefs were the critically important link between civilian policy and military execution. In his book *Dereliction of Duty*, H.R. McMaster points out that because the Chiefs were taken out of the chain of command no one took them seriously.

Daddis does an excellent job of making his case in the first half of the book, but his analysis and conclusions are not as strong. For example, the United States and South Vietnam did much better in the final years of the war than Daddis gives them credit. Consider this—according to recent historians, in the year of Tet 1968 alone, over 160,000 enemy forces were killed. It would have been interesting to see what would have resulted if the US Congress had not shut off funding to South Vietnam in 1973-74. Additionally, many believe that General Creighton W. Abrams had a broader vision for winning the war than General Westmoreland.

Grab Their Belts To Fight Them is Warren Wilkins’s attempt to prove that the Vietcong fought a big-unit war during the 1965-66 period. Wilkins, who is affiliated with the Center for Threat Awareness, writes, “Regrettably, few armed forces have ever been so woefully misunderstood, and aspects of their military campaign so neglected.”

The author details precisely what the Vietcong were attempting to accomplish in South Vietnam. He explains the Vietcong’s tactics and objectives in each confrontation with American forces. The author’s depth of research is beyond imagination. The reader gets to understand what the Vietcong were trying to achieve tactically.

The Vietcong understood that it was wise in any engagement with the Americans to get in as close as possible. That's where the line "Grab their belts to fight them" comes from. Wilkins writes:

Since the opposing forces were reasonable well matched in terms of basic soldierly competence and courage, Communist units would invariably find the odds of defeating American infantry that had been cut off from their fire support more favorable than the odds of defeating those that were able to harness the frighteningly destructive power of American support arms.

Clearly, the North Vietnamese were having a difficult time wining the war in South Vietnam primarily relying on the Vietcong. The author writes, "The ever increasing burden shouldered by the NVA resulted in a severe hemorrhaging of Hanoi's military forces and ultimately a diminution of [Vietcong] contribution to the 'liberation' of South Vietnam." Wilkins goes on to explain that "the North worried that if the limited war was lost in the South—the enemy might expand the war to include North Vietnam."

Obviously, our policy of gradualism, escalating the war slowly, was ill-conceived. If America was not prepared to fight a total war, we should have limited our involvement to simply helping the South fight their own battle. The basic truth was the South Vietnamese would not fight with the same courage, skill, and dedication as the North Vietnamese; the war was never winnable. Most interesting is the fact that Le Duan, First Secretary of the Central Committee, was asking as early as 1965 "Can we defeat the Americans before they have time to change their strategy?"

Wilkins draws the reader's attention to the fact that the North Vietnamese did escalate the war:

At this critical junction, the North Vietnamese Politburo had recommended, and the Central Committee had approved, a strategy of investing North Vietnam more heavily in the war down south—North Vietnam would henceforth match the American buildup and, strategically speaking, escalate in kind.

We were already being placed in a defensive position, but our leaders failed to recognize this fact.

The author provides incredible insight into the strategic situation: "The [Vietcong] as a military adversary could dictate the battle tempo of the big-unit war against the Americans." In fact, the United States could not hope to accomplish its many missions of pacification, stabilizing the Saigon government, defeating the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese, all while trying to build a strong South Vietnamese Army.

To make things worse, General Thanh, the North Vietnamese commander responsible for the war in the South, knew he had the advantage when, according to the author, he said, "The United States was constrained strategically and could not expand the war without risking trouble with North Vietnam's allies."

It is interesting that Wilkins writes that 150,000 Vietcong defected to South Vietnam between 1963 and November 1969. (Daddis's book would have benefited by including this important fact.) It appears the South Vietnamese

leader, President Thieu, was correct when he referred to the great number of Vietcong who were changing sides. Many, including the US press, refused to accept these facts as truth.

This book is loaded with interesting information and insight. In this reviewer's opinion, however, the battles, although excellently portrayed, had an excess of detail that ultimately hurt the book's readability.

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