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Strategic Lost Lessons of the Vietnam Counter-Insurgency War - Four Views

In the late 1970s, the Commandant of the U.S. Army War College arranged for Colonel Harry G. Summers to be assigned there. The Commandant assigned him to write a book on Vietnam and to apply and to incorporate the findings of a previously documented report, a BDM Corporation study which had found that the U.S. Army never learned how to prosecute counterinsurgency and that it learned from Vietnam, only, the notion to avoid such interventions. Instead of applying the BDM report, however, Summers employed for his theoretical framework Karl von Clausewitz's On War. Consequently, the argument which Summers put forth in his book, On Strategy: a Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War, proffered conclusions that were absolutely converse to the conclusions of the BDM study. Summers concluded that the Army failed in Vietnam because it had not sufficiently focused on conventional warfare. In other words, the U.S. Army's problems in Vietnam stemmed from its deviation from the big-war approach and its temporary and very incomplete experiment with counterinsurgency. Not surprisingly, Summers' book was readily embraced by the Army culture while the BDM report drifted into obscurity.

LTC Robert Cassidy in *Counterinsurgency and Military Culture: State Regulars versus Non-State Irregulars*, Baltic Defense Review, Volume 10, 2008, page 60
http://www.bdcol.ee/files/files/documents/Research/3_%20%20Robert%20Cassidy-Military%20Culture%20State%20Regulars%20and%20Non-State%20Irregulars.pdf

Basically, as far as Vietnam is concerned, we won practically all the battles but, by any sensible definition of strategic objectives, we lost the war. This is a new experience--harrowing, sorrowful, but true. Thus it's absolutely imperative that we study how it is that you can win so frequently, and so well, in a war-fighting sense, and yet lose a war in a strategic or political sense. It's unique; and it's not something that we want to duplicate!

Maj. Gen. DeWitt Smith, July 1977 - Opening quote to the BDM study - A
Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam
<http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/1980bdmstudy.pdf>

In the post Vietnam War era lesson learned studies were commissioned by the U.S. Army and other participants reflected on the war. Strategic lessons learned became lessons lost or ignored. This paper is a review of several strategic lessons learned and lost. This paper is in four sections and four extracts: General Depuy on Vietnam, the BDM Executive Summary on Vietnam, Colonel Harry Summers/On Strategy and The Unchangeable War by Captain Jenkins at Rand.

[After a martial arts battle, one on one, between the two]

Seraph (Guardian of the Oracle): *The Oracle has many enemies, I had to be sure.*

Neo: *Of what?*

Seraph : *That you were The One.*

Neo: *You could've just asked.*

Seraph: *You do not truly know someone until you fight them.*

From the movie, *Matrix Reloaded*, 2003

Strategic aim: Diminish adversary's capacity while improving our capacity to adapt as an organic whole, so that our adversary cannot cope – while we can cope – with events/efforts as they unfold.

Colonel John Boyd, *Patterns of Conflict*, slide 135

<http://globalguerrillas.typepad.com/JohnBoyd/Patterns%20of%20Conflit%20Original%20Format.pdf>

Part One - General Depuy on Vietnam – excerpts from *General William DePuy, Excerpt from An Oral History of Americans in Vietnam 1945-1975, New York: Avon Books, 1989.*

http://carl.army.mil/download/csipubs/swain3/swain3_pt6.pdf

General Depuy who saw extensive combat in WWII and first deployed to Vietnam in 1964, as Chief of Staff of Operations for Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, and in March 1966 he assumed command of the 1st Infantry Division ("the Big Red One"). Combat medals include: Silver Star with two Oak Leaf Clusters, Bronze Star Medal, and the Purple Heart with Oak Leaf Cluster.

It seems to me there were two driving circumstances in the war. The first was that the minute you bring in American troops, you concede to the other side a tremendous political advantage. And the Communists exploited that to the hilt. They were very clever at it. Along with that, we were slow in realizing that the North Vietnamese simply intended to win that war no matter what it cost. They'd send their whole army down if it was necessary, and as a matter of fact that's what they finally did.

They sent seventeen divisions against Saigon in 1975. Whereas we went through a self-inflicted period of confusion, starting with counterinsurgency. We convinced ourselves that if we did that right, the war wouldn't get any bigger. Well, it did get bigger. We didn't know how to do counterinsurgency very well, and we had white faces. Plus the North Vietnamese looked at Indochina as a whole. They didn't hesitate to use Laos and Cambodia. They looked at the whole mountain chain and the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Mekong River as a single theater of war. We tried to keep Laos as a separate problem, Cambodia as another separate problem- South Vietnam as one theater and North Vietnam as another. Disastrous.

However, we continued to hope that we could inflict such losses on the VC or the NVA that it would be more than they would be able to take. ... That's an attrition war. It's a dirty word now in military circles. I think the concept of attrition was an outgrowth of counterinsurgency-which, after all, is a form of attrition. So we fell into that trap. We thought, and I guess Mr. McNamara thought, and Mr. Rostow thought, and probably the President thought, and the JCS thought we were beating the hell out of 'em, and they couldn't take it forever. It turned out they controlled the tempo of the war better than we would admit.

We also didn't know about the redoubtable nature of the North Vietnamese regime. We didn't know what steadfast, stubborn, dedicated people they were. Their willingness to absorb losses compared with ours wasn't even in the same ball park. Way back at the beginning, when they attacked the destroyers in the Tonkin Gulf, we were doing what I call carefully controlled retaliation. Everybody thought, Oh, boy, we're sending American airplanes up and they'll bomb a couple of targets and the other side will be terrified.

It was the notion of gradualism and retaliation, one more turn of the screw. I personally thought it would be a token of U.S. resolve, and a sample of what we could do. I really thought it would impress them. I now think it just infuriated them. And we just kept doing it. We did more and more and more and more, up until the Cambodia invasion and the mining of the harbors and the B-52s over Hanoi, and it was never enough. We never quite grasped the fact that the North Vietnamese intended to win. Regardless.

I figured out recently that if the North Vietnamese put up a memorial like the one we have on the Mall, and it was adjusted for the relative populations of our country and theirs, the one in Hanoi would have 7 million names on it. Just soldiers. Interesting, isn't it? The North Vietnamese lost about 500,000 dead, and the VC 300,000. That's 800,000. And we lost 58,000.

Of course, the ARVN lost a lot, too. But the North Vietnamese main forces lost up to 40 percent of their troops every year. That's enormous. It's unbelievable. I didn't think they'd be able to keep their soldiers fighting, given the casualties we were inflicting. I should have known better. In World War II I fought in a unit with casualties like that. The 90th Division had 25,000 casualties in just eleven months, so I should have known.

When you step back-and I didn't have these thoughts while I was there - you see the difference between a country that's fighting on its own terrain for its survival, and a country that's sending its forces halfway around the world to "contain" Communism. We asked a lot of sophistication from our public and our troops-maybe more than the country was able to give. I don't think Americans can be expected to support a long, inconclusive war.

The reason I think about these things is that I wonder what would happen if we went to war in Iran. There are a lot of parallels to Vietnam. It's a long way away. There's no threat to our homeland.

Or take El Salvador. I think we have been pretty smart there. I'm impressed by the fact that we keep only fifty advisers in the country. I don't think there's anything wrong with giving them support with money and training and communications and intelligence and engineering and all

that, as long as we don't Americanize the war. As long as we stay below that magic threshold. Nobody knows exactly where it is. The point is that it's very low. And it's easy to step over it in the eyes of the natives. If they [local population] look around and see Americans everywhere, it's an American war. If you have GIs going into villages or barrios and trying to sort out friend from foe, that's a disaster. It gives the other side a precious asset-call it patriotism, xenophobia, or nationalism. And once that happens, God help you.

You fool! You fell victim to one of the classic blunders - The most famous of which is "never get involved in a land war in Asia"

Vizzini, from the movie *Princess Bride*, 1987

Part Two - BDM - A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned from Vietnam, Excerpts from the Summary. <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/1980bdmstudy.pdf>

The American "Way of War" is a natural by-product of the interaction of our history, wealth, Industrial and scientific strength, way of life, military experiences, and of our national character or psyche. Its basic philosophy is to substitute massive amounts of monies and materiel to save US lives (i.e., to help the enemy to die for his country). In many respects this philosophy makes eminent sense for the richest and most hardware oriented society in the world, one in which the individual has become increasingly potent and protected emotionally and politically. Despite theorists and idealists who deplore the vast expenditures and inevitable destruction inherent in our way of fighting, any US commander who would substitute his men's skill and bravery (and thus lives) for firepower would not last long; nor would he be admired or mourned in or out of the military.

There were fundamental problems with the American "Way of War" as it was applied in Indochina. Although it was generally quite efficient (if not always effective), awesome and usually overpowering, it was also extremely expensive and getting more so daily. Furthermore, despite its marvelous mechanical mobility, it was ponderous once afoot because of the huge logistics tail and the inbred life style. It also was handicapped in the diplomatic, political and psychological arenas since it inevitably invoked, at home and abroad, the mental (and TV) picture of a huge Goliath unfairly bullying a small but heroic David.

Counterinsurgency was, and still is, seldom mentioned and study of any low intensity or unconventional war was relegated to the environs of limbo.

Most of the lessons derived in this study are actually old lessons forgotten or at least sadly neglected. An example: "Know your enemy, your ally, and yourself." That maxim is so elementary and self-evident that one is hesitant to cite it as a major lesson of Vietnam. Yet a number of knowledgeable and reflective thinkers, such as Maxwell Taylor, have cited its neglect as a major factor in our failure. But why such a significant lapse? Most likely it was because American armed might has become so powerful and sophisticated, and, in the past, so successful that, on balance, it was inconceivable that a "9th rate power"--as the DRV/NLF have been called--could endure even gradually applied portions of US power.

Only in a small minority of the battles in Vietnam were the US forces outfought, but they were often out thought and out maneuvered. Despite almost constant movement by US forces on and over the battlefield, the enemy usually retained the initiative as to where and when, and

often how, to fight; until late 1969, roughly 85% of the ground contacts were initiated by the enemy. Our side pinned its hopes on the science of war; his--on the art. We concentrated on the materiel and physical end of the spectrum and, until late, he on the mental and psychological. Our approach was generally direct and his more often indirect.

It could be argued that the US did not lose the war, but rather that it was lost by the South Vietnamese, or even that the North Vietnamese won it. Although there is some validity in each of those viewpoints, they tend to cloud the main issue facing the United States: why could not our overwhelming military power be translated into equivalent political and diplomatic advantages in Indochina?

Modern wars tend to be fought to gain political or economic objectives. (In the past some wars have been initiated primarily to salve the pride of an autocratic ruler.) Battles and campaigns are among the means employed to gain the desired end. Unnecessary and costly battles, even though "won" in the traditional military sense, often amount to "defeats" in a larger sense. Conversely, a series of military defeats, even near disasters, can advance a determined and clever opponent yet closer to his ultimate aim.

A primary ingredient in the alchemy of war is the relative value which the opponents place on their respective aims, and thus the price each is willing to pay to achieve his ultimate object. In large measure this fact explains why the US was able to win both Its Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 even while losing most of the major battles. The situation in Vietnam was somewhat similar, but with the roles reversed. The US was fighting a distant, limited war, on the periphery of our "vital interests" and for a cause initially thought to be clear, but which became increasingly clouded and questioned over time. The enemy fought a total war, at home, for aims absolutely central to his ideology, political system, and regional ambitions. The US goal was essentially negative and thus defensive while that of the Dang Lao Dong, or Communist Worker's Party, was a positive and offensive one; thus, for the most part, the political, psychological and military initiative lay with the enemy.

Incomplete, inaccurate, or untimely knowledge of one's enemies (his history, goals, organization, leadership, habits, strengths and weaknesses, and above all, his character and will) results in inferior policies and strategies; raises the cost in time, treasure, anguish and blood; and increases the possibility of the ultimate defeat on one's initial objectives. KNOW YOUR ENEMEY!!!!

In the absence of a leadership that can command broad popular support, a Western-style democracy is likely to be inappropriate for an emerging agrarian-based society, especially what that society is vulnerable to heavy internal and external pressures; if the major ally of such a country insists on this type of political structure as an inflexible requirement for support, the chances for success decrease sharply.

Decision makers - civilian and military - must listen to a spectrum of those who do have the time and ability to think, and must require their overworked staffs to do their homework. The enemy in Vietnam worked harder and better at analyzing our significant strengths and weaknesses than did we concerning his.

It is doubtful if the US has yet learned how to defeat – in a reasonable time and at an acceptable cost – a well-organized and led “People’s War”; the institutional knowledge and experience gained in Indochina have been discarded or degraded, as have been the interest and incentives.

External aid and advice, especially when based on misconceptions, cannot provide a client state with the requisite leadership, determination, and cohesion to defeat a pervasive and sophisticated insurgency.

Do make it clear that generalship, at least in my case, came of understanding, of hard study and brain-work and concentration. Had it come easy to me, I should not have done [command] so well. If your book could persuade some of our new soldiers to read and mark and learn things outside drill manuals and tactical diagrams, it would do a good work. I feel a fundamental crippling in curiosity about our officers. Too much body and too little head. The perfect general would know everything in heaven and earth.

So please, if you see me that way and agree with me, do use me as a text to preach for more study of books and history, a greater seriousness in military art. With two thousand years of example behind us, we have no excuse, when fighting, for not fighting well...

T.E. Lawrence to B.H. Liddell Hart, As quoted in Robert B. Asprey, *War in the Shadows, The Guerrilla in History*, vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1975), p. 270.

Part Three – Excerpts from *On Strategy – A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* by Harry G. Summers, Jr., Colonel of Infantry, 1982

<http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=87077194>

For the military, counterinsurgency appeared to give us a whole new mission – civil affairs activities, establishment of schools, and public health systems, assistance to the police, and other forms of “civic action.” According to Blaufarb, “ There was a brief period in the late 1960s when military intellectuals were advancing the notion that the U.S. Army was the arm of the government best equipped to carry out in the field the entire range of activities associated with ‘nation-building’.

[General Westmoreland] believed that “success would eventually be ours”. But it was not. Why not? General Westmoreland does not directly answer the question but the answer emerges without being stated. We ran out of time. This is the tragedy of Vietnam – we were fighting for time rather than space. And time ran out.

The 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 goes on to say that this “mirrors a deep-seated strategic failure of policy-makers to frame tangible, obtainable goals.”

In Vietnam we also did what we knew. As was said in the introduction to this book, in “logistics and in tactics ... we succeeded in everything we set out to do. But as we have seen, our failure in strategy made these skills irrelevant.

We must also understand the nature of military forces themselves. They are designed, equipped, and trained for a specific task: to fight and win on the battlefield. They are, in effect, a battle-ax. In the past we have tried to use them to accomplish task for which they were not designed – nation building in Vietnam being the most recent case in point.

[Colonial Marine] Hudson: *I'm ready, man, check it out. I am the ultimate badass! State of the badass art! You do NOT wanna f--k with me. Check it out! Hey Ripley, don't worry. Me and my squad of ultimate badasses will protect you! Check it out! Independently targeting particle beam phalanx. Vwap! Fry half a city with this puppy. We got tactical smart missiles, phase-plasma pulse rifles, RPGs, we got sonic electronic ball breakers! We got nukes, we got knives, sharp sticks...*

Private Hudson prior to meeting the Aliens in combat, from the Movie *Aliens*, 1986

Part Four – Excerpts from *The Unchangeable War* by Brian M. Jenkins, Rand, November 1970

<http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/jenkinsrand.pdf>

This report is the text of a talk first presented by the author, a consultant to the Rand Corporation, in July 1969. At the time, he had just returned from his third trip to Vietnam, where he had served as a captain in Special Forces from December 1966 to December 1967.

The Army's doctrine, its tactics, its organization, its weapons -- its entire repertoire of warfare -- was designed for conventional war in Europe. In Vietnam, the Army simply performed its repertoire. Some recognized the fact that there was little relationship between what the Army could do and what needed to be done in Vietnam. As one general observed, “A conventional military force, no matter how bent, twisted, malformed or otherwise ‘reorganized’ is still one hell of a poor instrument with which to engage insurgents”.

The lack of a clear, attainable, or decisive objective and adequate measures of success in reaching that objective make it difficult to assess the progress of the war in Vietnam.

Firepower and mobility are icons in our doctrine of warfare. .. As a result of technological advances we have more firepower and mobility in Vietnam now than we had four years ago, and theoretically we have always had more firepower and mobility than the Viet Cong. Considering our apparent lack of success, however, the case can be made that superior firepower and mobility have been perhaps irrelevant in this war...

Our present concept of warfare has not been altered by four years of experience in Vietnam...In Vietnam instead of series of large conventional battles, we have fought myriad little battles, but many still believe that the side that loses the most men must lose the war. Other notions, such as “winning hearts and minds,” have been added, but these other notions are considered incidental. Our army remains enemy-oriented and casualty-oriented. War, then, is assumed to

be a battlefield where tactics rather than strategy are important, hence good tacticians are necessary and are promoted. ..

The defects that make this concept [of attrition] inoperable in Vietnam are obvious. Most importantly, it has been demonstrated statistically that the enemy initiates contact most of the time and avoids it when he desires. He thereby controls his own rate of casualties, negating any strategy based upon attrition. ... We are winning, but we must keep on winning. Indefinitely. The most damaging indictment of our concept of warfare is that our military superiority and successes on the battlefield do not challenge the enemy's political control of the people, which he maintains by his promises of a better society and, when that fails, by intimidation and terror. Our military strategy may be, as I believe, irrelevant to the situation.

Within the military institution, however, there is a growing feeling that something has gone wrong – that although we have won the battles, we somehow have been deprived of our final victory.

There is the danger that, because of our institutional rigidity, we will fail in Vietnam... And there is the danger that as we "Vietnamize" the war, our institutional rigidity will cause us to impose our doctrine, our organization, and our technology on the Vietnamese armed forces to the point that they might be rendered incapable of successfully continuing the war after our withdrawal. We will have transferred to them our repertoire.

For additional references on Vietnam Lessons Learned see: *Vietnamese Conflict Lessons Learned*, December 1990, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/aul/bibs/vietnam/viet.pdf>