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ADAPTIVE FAILURE AT THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL:

ATTRITION IN VIETNAM

By

Lieutenant-Colonel R.G. Davis, RCA

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ABSTRACT

ADAPTIVE FAILURE AT THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL:

ATTRITION IN VIETNAM

By LCol R.G. Davis, RCA

This essay analyzes the failure of the operational strategy of attrition applied in Vietnam during the American 'Intervention Years' from 1965 to 1968. It focuses on the weaknesses of attrition as applied by the U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) during those years while commanded by General William Westmoreland.

The essay is organized into six parts:

The first part is the introduction, which briefly discusses 'learning from failure' and poses the thesis that the MACV (American) failure in Vietnam was a failure of the attrition strategy to adapt to the threat strategy. The scope of American national failure versus tactical success in Vietnam is also discussed.

The second part briefly discusses the American military strategy, doctrine, and direction to General Westmoreland at the operational level in MACV in 1965. His mission is stated and its focus discussed.

The third part discusses the North Vietnamese (NV) strategy of revolutionary warfare. It highlights the dual nature of the 'popular struggle' as being 'political' and 'armed'. This duality was a major oversight by MACV in the application of its operational strategy.

The fourth part is a discussion of 'attrition' as an errant operational strategy. It highlights some MACV beliefs on how conventional forces would defeat the perceived enemy threat. Six key weaknesses in the attrition approach are discussed: the U.S. 'conventional' wisdom, a failure to understand the nature of the war, the strategy of passive defence, the low priority accorded to developing the ARVN, the disunity in the intelligence effort, and the disunity in the pacification effort. Each weakness ultimately had roots in MACV's failure to understand the true nature of the war - the NV 'popular struggle'.

The fifth part is a brief discussion on 'alternative to attrition'. It opines that a 'balanced' approach by MACV toward 'attrition' and 'pacification' would have countered the NV threat on both axes of 'armed' and 'political' struggle.

The sixth part is the conclusion. The essay finds that 'attrition' as pursued by MACV was not adapted to the enemy strategy. The dual nature of the NV 'popular struggle' was not understood by the Americans, and was countered by MACV on only one axis – the 'military' one. MACV's sole focus on search and destroy missions with large conventional forces was misplaced and inadequate. The gap between the people and government of South Vietnam only widened.

Awareness by MACV of the need for orientation, balance and focus toward both pacification support and ARVN development dawned too late. The three years prior to the February 1968 Tet Offensive reflected that the 'attrition' strategy was 'adaptive failure' at the operational level.

INTRODUCTION

“...because of this mindset – that more bombs, guns, and troops could lead to victory – the war was lost before the Army had a chance to fight it.”¹

Learning from Failure

Not since the poorly planned U.S. land invasion of Upper Canada in 1812 has the American military been sent home reeling in strategic defeat.² Following the Vietnam War, which divided Americans and struck a blow to the credibility of American military might, the late 1970s and 1980s were a period of serious introspection for the US Armed Services. The Army, in particular, underwent enormous soul-searching and review within major pillars of institutional activity such as training, doctrine, professional education (including ethics), recruiting and personnel policies, and equipment.

American military successes since the early 1980s (eg., Panama and the Gulf War) had their genesis in the humiliating defeat suffered in Vietnam...a signal that great strides under all ‘pillars’ were made. As well, since Vietnam, success has been more predicated on the military’s ability (the Army in particular) to “campaign plan” and wage war at the operational level across the spectrum of conflict.

Success in future wars will not hinge on analyzing only the successes of the past. As the Germans demonstrated between the wars, progress can be made by having the humility to analyze one’s failures and the successes of others.

As analyzed by Cohen and Gooch in their book *Military Misfortunes*, military organizations have usually incurred defeat because of failure to learn from a rigorous study of the defeats of others, failure to anticipate, or failure to adapt to new or unexpected circumstances. As for the latter category, “the requirement to adapt to unexpected circumstances tests both organization and system, revealing weaknesses that are partly structural and partly functional, whose full potential for disaster may not have previously have been noticed”.³

This essay will argue that despite the successes of American forces at the tactical level during the Vietnam War, the warfighting strategy of attrition (Krepnevich, 164) pursued by the Military Assistance Command in Vietnam (MACV) during the Intervention Years (1965 to 1968) was not adapted to the enemy strategy. Attrition represented “adaptive failure”.

Vietnam – National Failure

The U.S. first entered Vietnam in 1950 in small numbers, providing logistical support to French Indochina, while the French Army fought the Viet Minh insurgency. This assistance worked

¹ Andrew F. Krepnevich, *The Army And Vietnam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986) Book Jacket.

² Trevor N. Dupuy, *The Harper Encyclopedia of Military History*, 4th ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1992) 871.

³ Eliot Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes* (New York: The Free Press, 1990) 161-162.

toward the U.S. strategic aim of containing the spread of communism. Twenty-five years later, in 1975, Saigon fell to the communist regime of North Vietnam.

During the period from 1950 to 1968, American participation grew from advisory role to full military intervention. A zenith of American commitment was reached during the years 1965 to 1968 with over 500,000 servicemen in South Vietnam as U.S. forces assumed the lead role in protecting the South. Throughout the Vietnam War the U.S. military, with its Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) counterpart, remained on the strategic defensive. US forces were restrained from taking the war into North Vietnam, other than by air.⁴

Despite ‘Americanization’ of the war from 1965 to 1968, there was no noticeable dent in the will and persistence of the communist North. The scale of the 1968 Tet Offensive compelled the United States to transition the war responsibility back to the government of South Vietnam. American withdrawal was complete by 1975. The ‘25 Year War’ ended the longest conflict in American history – a bitter strategic defeat in which over 50,000 American lives were lost, and billions of dollars had been expended

Many reasons are touted for American failure: failure of President Johnson to convince the American people that the war in Vietnam was in their vital interest; failure to understand the nature of the war, the Vietnamese people, their language and culture; failure to learn from the French experience; and the political unwillingness to take the ground attack into North Vietnam.

Vietnam - Tactical Success

Despite national failure, the US Army experienced many successes at the tactical level during the Intervention Years (1965 to 1968). For example, in November 1965 three Regiments of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) clashed with the US 1st Cavalry Division in central Vietnam. It was an attempt to divide South Vietnam into two. After ten days of fighting the NVA were in full retreat. However the US could not take up the offensive in pursuit because of the strategic policy of ‘containment’.⁵ America remained on the strategic defensive in Vietnam.

As for other major battles, the three operations of ATTELBORO (1966), CEDAR FALLS (1967) and JUNCTION CITY (1967) were multi-divisional ‘search and destroy’ operations that aimed to attrit enemy forces with U.S. firepower. These operations were explicit tasks directed by MACV as part of a combined campaign of defeating NVA/VC forces and extending government control throughout South Vietnam.⁶ The U.S. employed different types of combat forces, including paratroopers, air cavalry, and armoured and mechanized battalions. They attacked NVA and Viet Cong (VC) strong-points or base areas, capturing weapons and supplies.⁷

⁴ General Bruce Palmer, 25 Year War: America’s Military Role in Vietnam (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989) Preface and Prologue.

⁵ USMC Command and Staff College (Vietnam Case Study – October 1991). Extract on U.S. Strategy in Vietnam. 326 (principle source unknown)

⁶ Major J. Pattison. Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue: The Marriage of Strategy and Tactics in Vietnam (Fort Leavenworth: SAMS, 1989) 28

⁷ Krepinevich, The Army And Vietnam, 190-191

From 1965-72 the NVA and VC were defeated in every major military battle.⁸ However, tactical successes (battles won) did not necessarily contribute to operational level success. The NVA and VC learned from defeat. In contrast, one could argue that the operational level (MACV) did not learn or benefit from tactical successes, as they did not understand the complete picture. A brief analysis follows on the evolution of the American attrition strategy used during the Intervention years.

AMERICAN MILITARY STRATEGY

“The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgement that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish....the kind of war on which they are embarking...”⁹

From 1954 to 1963, U.S. military advisory and logistical support aimed to assist South Vietnam to become a viable nation state, and prepare the ARVN for conventional delaying operations against what was considered the most serious threat - a conventional Korean-style NVA attack across the de-militarized zone dividing North and South.¹⁰

In 1962 U.S. military assistance shifted from the external enemy to ‘counter-insurgency’ (CI) within. Basic missions performed by ARVN troops in support of CI ranged from search and destroy to clearing operations, then security operations to protect pacification teams. Pacification, as stated by General Westmoreland, was a

complex task involving military, psychological, political, and economic factors. Its aim was to achieve an economic and politically viable society in which the people could live without constant fear of death or other physical harm. It was an effort to improve the quality of life, to improve sanitation, drainage, roads, pagodas, schools, teachers, dispensaries, communications, administrative offices; and to enable the people to pursue their occupations. Fundamental to the pacification was security....as long as insurgents were raiding, robbing, molesting, and killing in South Vietnam, the government forces would have to spend their time keeping the enemy out of hamlets and villages, rather than improving the welfare of the people.¹¹

In December 1963 the nature of the war began to change. In 1964 the security situation in South Vietnam continued to deteriorate. There was evidence that the NVA and VC were moving into phase 3 of the insurgency, the general counter-offensive, committing regiments and divisions to seize and retain territory, to destroy ARVN troops, and eliminate any vestige of government control. Concurrently VC guerrillas, local forces, and political cadres at hamlet and village level continued their small war of seeking to control and terrorize the population. Hence, the war had two facets, both aimed at gaining control of the countryside and strangling the towns and cities. In 1965 it appeared that South Vietnam would not be able to hold without the direct assistance of US forces.¹²

⁸ USMC Command and Staff College extract. 324

⁹ M. Howard and P. Paret, eds. *Carl Von Clausewitz: On War* (Princeton: University Press, 1989) 88

¹⁰ H. Summers, *On Strategy: The Vietnam War In Context* (Carlyle: US Army War College, 1983) 55

¹¹ General William C. Westmoreland. *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1976) 68

¹² *Ibid*, 145

OPERATIONAL CONSTRUCT, DOCTRINE AND STRATEGIC DIRECTION

The Commander US MACV - General Westmoreland, was the operational level commander in Vietnam from 1965 to 1968. He transcribed the strategic direction of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and/or Commander-in-Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) into operational direction. MACV was a sub-unified command subordinate to CINCPAC, who was both a unified commander and the strategic commander for the Vietnam War. General Westmoreland was a joint commander, commanding all Army and Air Force operations in South Vietnam.¹³

From a doctrinal perspective the 1962 edition of FM 100-5, Field Service Regulations-Operations, expressed the U.S. doctrine for the Vietnam War. Terms such as ‘operational level of war’ and ‘operational art’ were not specifically defined in that FM. However, as one Leavenworth paper (Pattison) on this subject relates: “a thorough reading of the manual can certainly leave one with the impression that our [U.S.] doctrine did not ignore linking tactical and strategic actions.”¹⁴ In covering the employment of field forces, there is no discussion of the linkage of ‘ends, ways and means’ between corps and army level (as represented by MACV), nor is there explicit reference to how the military means support the political end. A positive point was that entire chapters of the FM were devoted to unconventional warfare, military operations against irregular forces, and situations short of war.¹⁵

An insightful comment in the 1962 FM 100-5 portends the MACV experience in Vietnam a few years later:

The hallmark of an effective military force is the ability to *adapt* to the environment in which it operates, to the enemy it faces, and to the national policy it serves.¹⁶

Strategic direction to the operational level:

Four U.S. strategic objectives guided policy in Vietnam from 1965 to 1968:

- First: contain the spread of communism to current geographical boundaries, by preventing non-communist countries from falling to communism by either internal or external threats;
- Second: build and maintain confidence in the ability and willingness of the U.S. to protect her allies in the Asian-Pacific regions and world-wide;
- Third: avoid general war with the Soviet Union and/or Communist China; and
- Fourth: advance South Vietnam as a politically and economically stable autonomous nation state, capable of defending herself from external military threats.¹⁷

The military instrument of power under MACV had a role in all four objectives. MACV was to provide a secure environment so that the other instruments of national power (diplomacy, economic support and information support) would have a chance to work, buying time until South Vietnam could stand on its own.

¹³ Palmer, 25 Year War, 29-30

¹⁴ Pattison. Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue, 2-5

¹⁵ Ibid., 5-8

¹⁶ Ibid., 12-13 (Cited from the 1962 FM 100-5, p.11)

¹⁷ Major D. Miller. Vietnam: A Hiatus for the Operational Art? (Fort Leavenworth: SAMS, 1995) 13-14

MACV's derived mission was to "assist the Government of Vietnam and its armed forces to defeat externally directed and supported communist subversion and aggression, and attain an independent South Vietnam functioning in a secure environment."¹⁸ Despite the fourth strategic objective and MACV's mission, support to the ARVN was all but overlooked in the resultant MACV operational strategy.

To support his mission General Westmoreland required more forces. In his June 1965 request to the Secretary of Defense for an additional 44 battalions, one analyst noted that the request reflected "a faithful representation of the Army's attitude on counter-insurgency warfare: give lip service to the classical doctrine (counter-insurgency) while focusing primary attention on standard operations." General Westmoreland had stated:

"there is no doubt whatsoever that the insurgency in South Vietnam must eventually be defeated among the people in the hamlets and towns; however, in order to defeat the insurgency among the people they must be provided security of two kinds:

- (1) security of the country from large well-organized and equipped forces that may come from outside...; and
- (2) security from the guerrilla, the assassin, the terrorist and the informer.

MACV is convinced that U.S. troops can contribute heavily in the first category of security...Therefore, the MACV concept is basically to employ U.S. forces...against the hardcore DRV/VC forces in reaction and search and destroy operations..."¹⁹

The above MACV priority toward the first security task reveals a penchant for what became known post-Korea as the "American Way of War", or the US Army comfort for engaging in standard conventional operations. Down-playing the importance of local 'security' against the guerrilla, terrorist, etc., in the towns and villages would be to the undoing of the American effort. In contrast, 'among the masses' was where the NV strategy was focused. The NV strategy was 'people's war'. Hence immediate security of the citizens, and adequately preparing the ARVN for this role, should have received equal MACV attention and priority compared to 'security from large forces'.

Therefore the MACV objective was to defeat major enemy units, relying primarily on US troops. These actions gave the impression that the U.S. lacked confidence in the South Vietnamese government and the ARVN, and that the U.S. intended to win the war on its own. As well, the U.S. Army remained convinced for at least two years (1965 to 1967) that the essence of the conflict was military...not political, and that the NVA/VC would remain at phase 3 of their struggle, the general counter-offensive. This belief reflected a MACV failing to understand the bi-focal nature of the North Vietnamese 'struggle movement' (ie, 'political' and 'armed').²⁰ A brief explanation follows.

¹⁸ Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 57

¹⁹ Krepinevich, *The Army And Vietnam* , 155

²⁰ USMC Command and Staff College extract on North Vietnamese Strategy taken from: Douglas Pike, *History of the Vietnamese and Communist Party.* (Stanford: Hoover Institute, 1978) 323-324

NORTH VIETNAMESE STRATEGY

“Know the enemy, know yourself; your victory will never be endangered.”²¹
Sun Tzu

Ho Chi Minh’s strategy of revolutionary warfare was a stage-by-stage ‘social process’ aimed at pre-empting the South Vietnamese government’s contact with the people. Gaining access to the ‘masses’ was the enemy source of strength. This approach of social mobilization and organization-building emphasized participation, voluntary *or coerced*, of peasants, labourers and soldiers into the party’s programs. The aim was to ‘communize’ from the bottom up.²²

The insurgency ‘struggle’ was conducted methodically to obtain specific intermediate objectives leading to the ‘liberation’ of South Vietnam. The version used by the North Vietnamese was initially developed by Mao Tse-tung, then adapted for use by Ho Chi Minh and General Giap for both ‘political’ and ‘armed’ struggle. There were three broad phases of the insurgency, which involved political and armed struggle concurrently:

Phase 1 (the phase of contention while on the strategic defensive). This entails insurgent agitation (low-level violence) and “conversion” among the masses, including creation of a party at local levels and recruiting members. The political struggle is most prominent during this phase;

Phase 2 (the equilibrium phase or strategic stalemate.) This is generally the longest phase and entails the establishment of bases of support, attacks on local government leadership, and efforts to gain control over villages. Maintaining access to and control of the population is critical; and,

Phase 3 (the strategic offensive phase.) This is marked by open warfare between insurgent and government forces to topple the existing order, by forming main-force units for conventional operations. This is also coordinated with a massive popular uprising.

Notes:

1. Activities during phases 1 and 2 did not cease during phase 3. In contrast to the Maoist strategy, the Vietnamese added an accompanying “general uprising” (ie, mass popular urban revolt) to the phase 3 general counter-offensive.
2. Theoretically, the concurrent employment of unconventional and conventional capabilities would wear down the opponent to the point where a ‘general counter offensive’ could be launched to overwhelm remaining opposition.
3. The objective was to draw American forces away from pacification security and engage them in inconclusive battles along the frontier, inflicting casualties and sapping their will to continue.²³

By 1965 the VC strength in South Vietnam had grown to 150,000 from 30,000 in 1963. Also in 1965 North Vietnam began to infiltrate south regular Army battalions of 400-500 men. In response, from 1965 to 1968 U.S. troop commitments rose from 75,000 to 510,000, fighting

²¹ Samuel B. Griffith, Sun Tzu: The Art of War. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) 129

²² L. Grinter and P. Dunn. The American War In Vietnam: Lessons, Legacies, and Implications for Future Conflicts. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1987) 31-37

²³ Krepinevich, The Army And Vietnam, 7-8, 192

beside some 600,000 regulars of the ARVN. By end 1968 the MACV Army component had seven Army and two Marine divisions, and six Brigade size elements - four army and two Marine. In total there were approximately 57 battalions worth of troops. As well there were two divisions of Free World Forces. Air forces included six tactical fighter wings, four tactical fighter squadrons, and a recon and airlift wing.²⁴

The North Vietnamese decision to confront American military power head-on (conventionally) was usually disastrous on the battlefield. Although defeated in every major tactical battle from 1965 to 1972, their 'political struggle' during the same period – which also involved the manipulation of public perceptions in the US – was decisive in undermining American persistence in the war.

AN ERRANT OPERATIONAL STRATEGY?

Little consideration was given to the prospective use of conventional forces in the event of an insurgent reversion to phase 2. Denying the insurgents victory in phase 3 was not the same as victory"; rather it would signal a return to phase 2 ...where protraction would be as important as military power, if not more important.²⁵

With General Westmoreland's priority toward providing "security of the country from large, well-equipped forces from outside", there was a corresponding build-up of U.S. conventional forces. The MACV approach to the war was simply going to be 'attrition' of NVA or VC units by overwhelming conventional force, coupled with manoeuvre and massed firepower. As defined by James Fellows in National Defence, "attrition is a toe-to-toe slugging match in which each side assumes that the other will abide by 'predictable rules' and that the sheer weight of numbers and material will determine the outcome. It was the approach which all sides took during the trench warfare in World War I, and which the Allies followed to victory at the end of World War II, when the arsenal of democracy crushed its adversaries".²⁶ General Westmoreland believed that by attacking organized forces in the South he could destroy troops, equipment and supplies faster than replacement. Combined with aerial bombing in the North, this would eventually drive the North out of the war. Both MACV and the JCS believed that superior firepower and mobility would bring the war to an end in about three years (by 1968).²⁷

Another expectation was that if U.S. conventional forces were introduced, then the conflict should develop along conventional lines. It was unwittingly surmised that the NVA and VC would simply comply with this American expectation, and place their major units on the battlefield for a show-down ...*quid pro quo*. It was as if some American expectation of gentleman's warfare should prevail. After all, the U.S. had used the attrition approach for the past 100 years in the American Civil War, and subsequently in World War I, World War II and Korea.

²⁴ Miller. Vietnam: A Hiatus for the Operational Art? 20-23

²⁵ Krepinevich, The Army And Vietnam, 140

²⁶ James Fellows, National Defence. (New York: Random House, 1981) 26

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 139, 165

The main role for conventional forces was ‘search and destroy’ missions. Search and destroy was a tactic geared at maximizing the superior firepower and mobility of U.S. forces to find large NVA and VC units and to destroy them. This role was priority over providing security to pacification efforts, in part, because it was believed the former would afford the U.S. the battlefield initiative. The latter would not. Attrition offered the chance to win quickly, vice pacification and CI operations which would draw the U.S. into further protraction.²⁸

By their nature search and destroy missions were rarely centrally planned or controlled by MACV; nor were they were part of any larger integrated MACV campaign plan. They were engagements planned and executed within the four U.S. corps zones. They were essentially a “strategy of tactics” to attrit the enemy wherever found.²⁹ The search and destroy successes did generally contribute to defeating ‘large forces’ where found. However, being Corps level or lesser size operations, they were conducted in a disparate fashion and not synchronized or integrated into a larger plan.

By late 1967 and early 1968 it appeared to American leaders in Washington that little progress had been made. The Army under MACV had achieved neither significant victory nor defeat. The scale of the Tet Offensive (February 1968) was indicative that the attrition strategy of the past few years had produced minimal results at great cost. The offensive was marked by some 50,000 NVA and VC launching well-planned and simultaneous attacks on allied bases and major South Vietnamese cities and towns. Combat had even reached inside the U.S. embassy grounds in Saigon!³⁰ Tet would be the final straw to sap the will of Americans and politicians regarding further sustainment of the war effort.

So what was wrong with the MACV attrition approach?

Weaknesses in the Attritional approach:

Firstly, **there was the U.S. “Conventional” Wisdom:**

MACV was overconfident that superior technology, and modern military organizations and tactics, would bring success where French efforts in Indo-China had failed. It was as if an American “can-do” attitude would find a way out.

The conventional warfare approach also incorrectly assumed that there was a communist breaking point within reach of U.S. firepower, and that the U.S. could kill more NVA and VC than the north could provide. Attrition is dependent on the presence of large detectable and attackable targets, whose destruction will render the enemy defenceless, or eager to end hostilities. However, the essence of revolutionary warfare is to avoid presenting decisive targets, to avoid pitched battles, to use camouflage and hit and run tactics

As well, it was incorrectly assumed that attrition’s progress could be measured by a count of VC casualties. However, these ‘body count’ results were often skewed and kills were often

²⁸ Jeffrey Record, The Wrong War: Why We Lost In Vietnam.(Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1998) 81

²⁹ Krepinevich, The Army And Vietnam, 164-166

³⁰ Dupuy, The Harper Encyclopedia of Military History, 1328

unaccounted for. The extensive firepower employed never came close to competing with either the North Vietnamese force generation potential and birth rates, nor Hanoi's willingness to expend entire generations of young men on behalf of forcible reunification. The North Vietnamese could endure levels of sacrifice beyond what the Americans were willing to. General Giap once mentioned, "...every minute, hundreds of thousands of people die all over the world. The life or death of a hundred, a thousand, or tens of thousands of human beings, even if they are our own compatriots, represents really very little."³¹ This mindset was in extreme contrast to the mounting American aversion to casualties, especially within a conscripted Army.

Attrition produced favourable kill-ratios against communist forces if they chose to fight. However, it also contributed to hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese civilian casualties, and the uprooting of millions of people – the very refugee 'proletariat' whose misery the communists wished to exploit. To add complexity, many innocent South Vietnamese casualties were counted in the VNA/VC kills. Who was friend or foe?

As well, many South Vietnamese civilians were frequently caught in the crossfire, or suffered (collaterally) the indiscriminate application of massed fires. The NVA/VC frequently goaded American and South Vietnamese forces into overreaction. Communist forces were cynical in making civilians take the brunt of allied reactions. Of hundreds of hamlets destroyed by firepower, the majority failed to yield sufficient evidence of damage to the enemy to justify their destruction. The result of such inadequate target discrimination was to disrupt the political linkage (for good) between the Saigon government and many of its affected people. It was the nature of the civilians not to forgive the destruction of their hamlet, nor the death of innocent relatives. This lack of government discernment, concern and recompense was what the VC could exploit. Other exploited grievances were refugee generation through compulsory relocations, and crop destruction and defoliation.³²

Attrition worked against the creation of a politically viable non-communist South Vietnam – which was a prominent American strategic objective. Attrition was counter to winning 'hearts and minds' and gaining control of the peasantry as it drew attention away from pacification and CI efforts. Indiscriminate firepower bred anger and hostility among rural peasants toward U.S. forces in the field, and against the South Vietnamese government.³³

Few Americans understood the true nature of the war:

Time is the ally of the insurgent³⁴

Vietnam reflected a mixture of conventional warfare fought unconventionally, and guerrilla warfare fought in the classical manner. North Vietnam never lost sight of its political objectives. Each action (military or non-military) furthered their goal of unifying the country. It was North Vietnamese 'total war' versus American fought 'limited war'.

³¹ Paul F. Wynnyk, "*Vo Nguyen Giap: A Strategy for Protracted Revolutionary War*," The Changing Face of War, ed., Allan English (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998) 142

³² Grinter and Dunn. The American War In Vietnam, 37-39

³³ Record. The Wrong War, 85

³⁴ Krepinevich, The Army And Vietnam, 8

The VC force structure and tactics were not well understood by MACV or the ARVN. Initially perceiving the major threat to be an overt, across the border invasion by North Vietnamese and Chinese forces, U.S. and South Vietnamese leaders were slow to recognize the more serious threat posed by subversion, infiltration, and guerrilla warfare. Knowledge of this type of warfare and tactics existed.³⁵ It was similar to the methodology used by the Communist Chinese under Mao during the Chinese Civil War that ended in 1949. As well, in 1960 General Giap had published his own collation of essays on revolutionary war to serve as an insurrection manual for underdeveloped countries.³⁶ Therefore a better knowledge of people's war or popular struggle would have been expected. "Giap placed no limits on his pursuit of a unified and independent Vietnam".³⁷

The Americans could not understand that the Communists were willing to retreat to a previous phase in the popular struggle as necessary. Many military and civilian leaders believed that if the enemy had entered phase 3, then that was where he would remain, and hence could be defeated conventionally over time. However, for the North Vietnamese, deliberate de-escalation was essential to regaining control over their loss rates and prolonging activities. The political part of their struggle in phases 1 and 2 would continue, although the armed struggle may temporarily be on hold.³⁸

MACV's mis-read of the enemy strategy was not lost on all voices in Washington. It was just that those voices did not prevail. The Under Secretary of State (George Ball) was one of the few to question the Army's fixation with phase 3 of insurgency warfare, stating that the Army's approach ignored the possibility that *the VC might retire to phase 2 operations*. "We have no basis for assuming the Viet Cong will fight a war on our terms when they can continue to fight the kind of war they fought so well against the French and Government of Vietnam". The State Department could not see the North "resorting to a strategy that would substantially increase their vulnerability to U.S. power".³⁹

Ultimately it was to MACV's undoing, through poor intelligence, that little thought was given to use of Army forces if the enemy reverted to phase 2 operations. There was little appreciation of the fact that denying the insurgents victory in phase 3 was not the same as U.S. victory. It would simply signal a return to phase 2 where the political and social elements, and the protracted nature of the conflict, were as, if not more important, than military power. It was a situation the U.S. Army was not equipped to handle.⁴⁰

The passive defence:

Passive defence dictated that American forces be deployed throughout much of South Vietnam – into Corps zones for local operations. The unlimited mission of defending all of South Vietnam and defeating the enemy wherever he could be brought to battle had a cumulative demand on U.S. manpower and resources.⁴¹ The U.S. Army was focused everywhere while the enemy,

³⁵ Palmer, *25 Year War*, 9

³⁶ Wynnyk, "Vo Nguyen Giap: A Strategy for Protracted Revolutionary War", 142

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 147

³⁸ Record. *The Wrong War*, 70

³⁹ Krepinevich, *The Army And Vietnam*, 156, 161

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 140

⁴¹ Palmer, *25 Year War*, 177-180

facilitated by geography, could readily attack vulnerable population centres then withdraw to the countryside. However, this was a part of their strategy, to draw U.S. forces away from the protection of towns and cities, and to pursue a not-too-well-defined threat. This tactic in turn provided insurgent access to the 'masses', many who had been displaced by the effects of attrition warfare and would provide substance support to the guerrillas. The entry of insurgents 'among the masses' was critical to the social-mobilization, recruiting, and cell building (phase 1 activities), and establishing bases of support for phase 2 guerrilla operations.

ARVN Development was low priority from 1965 to 1967:

Until 1954 the French had run all facets of the South Vietnamese government, both military and civilian. Despite some American military assistance in the decade following the French departure, by 1964 the ARVN still lacked sufficient training and experience for their national defence role. Their units were being destroyed faster than they could be reconstituted.

In 1964 the former US Military Assistance and Advisory Group (MAAG) to South Vietnam was abolished, and its advisory functions splintered between the separate staffs of HQ MACV. Thereafter MACV did not create a separate military assistance and advisory group dedicated solely to training the ARVN. This short-changing of the advisory and training assistance was to ignore the successful American KMAG experience (in Korea) of the early 1950s. The strengthening of the ARVN had been relegated to a secondary role or task for MACV, vice the principal task it was meant to be.⁴²

From 1965 to 1968, the American-led war effort again did little to prepare the ARVN. By mid-1967 over 85 percent of MACV's battalion operations were dedicated to conventional-style search and destroy missions. ARVN forces were primarily employed in pacification roles for reasons of language, legitimacy and capability. The U.S. did assist the ARVN in pacification tasks. However, this support was very limited and later deemed insufficient by many reflecting on the war. As well, it did not help that the Americans had been training the ARVN for pacification security (CI) tasks by teaching inadequate U.S. Korea-style conventional doctrine and tactics. Coupled with inappropriate training, the ARVN also had developmental and competency problems at all levels. Many in the ARVN were turning a 'blind eye' to local VC activities and VC sympathizers. As well, within the military culture of the ARVN many feared the fighting spirit of the NVA and VC. A sense of military (and cultural) inferiority prevailed.⁴³

Disunity in the intelligence effort:

In a wartime theatre the theatre commander normally assumes control of all intelligence assets, including the CIA's. The Vietnam War was a unique case as wartime takeover was not invoked. MACV did not have coordination authority over CIA and ARVN intelligence activities. The CIA station chief in Saigon continued his peacetime function as senior intelligence advisor to the U.S. ambassador. Unity of US intelligence effort was not achieved. Despite some coordination between MACV and the CIA, duplication of effort and competition occurred.⁴⁴

⁴² Ibid., 30-49

⁴³ Krepinevich, The Army And Vietnam, 190

⁴⁴ Palmer, 25 Year War, 161-165

One complex and contentious problem plagued the intelligence community throughout the war – estimating enemy strength and determining the composition of units, ie, the order of battle. This was particularly difficult in a ‘peoples war’ wherein regular troops, their administrative and support forces, part time guerrillas and militias, and political cadres were often intermixed.

As well, MACV was fixated with the statistics of body counts as indicators of success or failure. Between the CIA, MACV and the ARVN, there was a lack of consensus over who the enemy was: the MACV enemy order of battle excluded local VC self-defence militia, yet the VC had main force regulars and irregulars. The irregulars provided intelligence and laid minefields and booby traps.⁴⁵ The communists worked hard to blur the distinction between combatants and non-combatants in the countryside. Innocents caught in the crossfire were often wrongly counted among the fallen enemy.

Even when heavy enemy losses were sustained, the U.S. was careful not to judge their ‘psychological effect’ on the NVA/VC by western or occidental values. Korea taught the Americans that there were differing oriental values toward human life. The U.S. knew the pitfalls of placing too much stock in the impact of heavy casualties on the morale of a determined foe, or the will of a totalitarian regime.

Disunity in the pacification effort:

Pacification was the primary approach to defeating the insurgency. Its aim was to assert government control throughout the country, and to separate insurgents from their support base – the population. It was a complex task of securing geographic areas, searching and clearing insurgents from them, and establishing effective local government. Key to this was winning the ‘hearts and minds’ so the people would support the new government.⁴⁶

Pacification was also a complex inter-agency mission that involved U.S. and South Vietnamese government agencies. MACV was not responsible for the actions of non-military agencies. The American Ambassador was responsible to develop an integrated approach using all instruments of power. However, since pacification was the ultimate goal of the American and South Vietnamese governments – to connect citizens to government - it should have been the primary focus in Vietnam. However, it was plagued by a disjointed focus and fractured U.S. led effort.

Between 1965-67, the US ambassador and General Westmoreland disagreed over who should control the pacification effort. Ambassador Lodge felt that the embassy should control it as pacification integrated all elements of national power. General Westmoreland felt the MACV should control it as the military could coordinate the various functions better than civilian leadership. Ambassador Lodge felt that pacification was not progressing because General Westmoreland was too busy chasing large units and forsaking the protection of the people. This intransigence hurt the U.S. effort. Westmoreland prosecuted his own independent operations despite repeated requests to integrate and synchronize with other government departments. By

⁴⁵ Record, The Wrong War, 62

⁴⁶ Summers, On Strategy: The Vietnam War In Context, 88-89

mid-1967 President Johnson had granted Westmoreland (and MACV) all responsibility for pacification.⁴⁷

Despite the U.S. Army's focus on attrition (close to 90 percent of U.S. forces committed to this role), it did funnel some resources into traditional CI operations. MACV was the primary agent for the pacification security program, the development of local security forces, and intelligence activities. However the resources and forces allocated for were insufficient. As well, the MACV units deployed in 1965 did not include Special Forces units that the Army had formed for CI operations. General Westmoreland rejected the break down of his line units into smaller groups to support pacification. In support of his stance, he cited the VC operations of November 1964 when two VC regiments defeated a number of smaller ARVN units supporting pacification operations. This incident was to be an example of what would happen if U.S. forces were to be broken down to support pacification. They could suffer the same fate. However, critics of Westmoreland's argument suggested that he was rationalizing 'big unit operations', vice placing air-mobile quick reaction units on standby to support units which he could designate for pacification.⁴⁸

While the government of South Vietnam and the ARVN had many shortcomings that compromised their ability to carry out a pacification program, the U.S. Army through its predominant role could not help but have a major impact on the success or failure of pacification. The 'winning of hearts and minds' requires a physically secure environment, civic action, land reforms, and some political participation. Whether or not MACV should have led the pacification effort, vice the U.S. Embassy, is moot compared to the fact that inadequate pacification security existed from 1965 to 1967.

ALTERNATIVE TO ATTRITION ?

Attritionists sought a conventional solution to what they viewed as a military problem that only the US forces could handle. Pacificationists sought an unconventional solution to a problem they believed was as much political as military.⁴⁹

Within the confines of South Vietnam, many critics argue that an alternative to attrition could have been for MACV to pursue population protection and pacification support with greater vigour. This approach would have countered the second axis of the North Vietnamese strategy – the 'political struggle'. It would also have mended some bridges with the ambassador (1965 to 1967), responsible initially for the inter-agency coordination. In the bureaucratic infighting, the NV 'political struggle' was forgotten.

Given the corruption and absence of leadership displayed by the government of South Vietnam and the ARVN, it is doubtful that greater MACV participation in the pacification program would have cured the problems involved in achieving population control and security. However, had MACV adopted a more flexible approach and instituted a CI strategy, then the human and financial costs of the war would have been lower, and to some extent would have assisted to

⁴⁷ Miller, Vietnam: A Hiatus for the Operational Art? 27-30

⁴⁸ Krepinevich, The Army And Vietnam. 165-166, 215

⁴⁹ Record, The Wrong War. 77-78

maintain U.S. popular support. However the trade-off would undoubtedly have been further *protraction* of the war.⁵⁰

Pacification would not entail the use of armoured and mechanized formations, nor extensive air and firepower. Such means went against the principles of classical CI doctrine. In contrast to the enemy, the U.S. Army was not as mobile on foot, which was necessary to counter the insurgency, operate at night on the ground, and remain an on-ground presence in the villages. Again, this was seemingly not 'the American way'.

A more 'balanced' approach by MACV would have rejected the sole pursuit of 'attrition' as being politically counter-productive, and unnecessarily bloody. However, it would have required a change of mindset in the Army. The designation or creation of more units for CI operations would have been a distraction from 'conventional' wisdom, and an anathema to the 'American Way' in war. Few Special Force trained teams were employed in the CI role in Vietnam. Those that had been employed in the Central Highlands were notably successful. During the Americanization years, it would have taken many more such units to defeat the guerrilla influence in the villages and hamlets. The subversive organization behind each level of insurgency would have to be destroyed before viable local government could be achieved. Vietnam was a civil conflict contesting political control, or vying for the 'hearts and minds' of the South Vietnamese inhabitants.⁵¹

CONCLUSION

The 'attrition' strategy pursued by MACV during the years 1965 to 1968 was not appropriate to the enemy strategy. The dual nature of the 'popular struggle' of the communist North was not understood by the Americans, and was countered by MACV on only one axis – the 'military' one. As subsequent events demonstrated, the MACV sole focus (1965 to 1967) on large scale military operations and search and destroy missions, facing off against the enemy with large conventional forces, was misplaced and inadequate. The large scale U.S. intervention assumed the war effort from the host government, but only widened the gap between the people and their government.

There were many weaknesses within the MACV approach that contributed to the overall failure of the attrition. These were the U.S. 'conventional' wisdom, a failure to understand the true nature of the war, the strategy of passive defence, the low priority accorded to developing the ARVN, disunity in the intelligence effort, and disunity in the pacification effort. However, each weakness ultimately had its roots in the failure to understand the true nature of the war - the NV strategy.

Awareness by MACV of the need for orientation, balance and focus toward both pacification support and ARVN development dawned too late. By late 1967 the seeds of VC or communist 'political' struggle had been widely sown in the southern villages and towns. The fruits of these labours would be later borne during the Tet Offensive in February 1968. Hence, the three years prior to Tet reflected that the MACV strategy was 'adaptive failure' at the operational level .

⁵⁰ Krepinevich, The Army And Vietnam, 233

⁵¹ Record, The Wrong War, 76-78

In retrospect it is hard to imagine if success would have been within reach for MACV, even if a more balanced approach had been adopted. It is unlikely that protraction of the war effort, as a greater pacification focus would require, would maintain popular support in the U.S. On the enemy side, General Giap was willing to play a waiting game.

Although different by nature, it is odd that the United States, a country founded in revolutionary warfare some 200 years ago, would succumb to defeat at the hands of a less advanced society in the modern era.

Remember only the lessons to be learned from defeat – they are more than from victory⁵²
Filed Marshall Sir William Slim

⁵² Cohen and Gooch, Military Misfortunes, 245. (The quote from Field Marshall Slim was a part of his reflections on the rout of British forces in Burma in 1942)

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