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INTELLIGENCE FAILURES OF THE VIETNAM WAR: LESSONS FOR THE CONTEMPORARY OPERATING ENVIRONMENT

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INTELLIGENCE FAILURES OF THE VIETNAM WAR: LESSONS FOR THE CONTEMPORARY OPERATING ENVIRONMENT

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Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril.

-   Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

The Vietnam War was the United States' (US) longest and one of its most costly conflicts.[1] From 1 November 1955 to 30 April 1975, the US fought a series of evolving campaigns to counter North Vietnamese Army (NVA) aggression, supported by Viet Cong (VC) insurgents, against South Vietnam. Beginning first with an advisory role before escalating into a conventional then counter-insurgency conflict, the US employed the latest technological advancements to support its campaign, with emerging technologies utilized to great tactical effect. Yet despite possessing the most technologically advanced weaponry and sensors available, and having "never suffered a tactical defeat during the Vietnam War,"[2] the withdrawal of US ground combat forces in 1973 and the eventual collapse of the South Vietnamese regime in 1975 resulted in an embarrassing strategic defeat for the US. This paper will demonstrate that the failure of operational military intelligence to fulfil its doctrinal mandate to provide situational awareness and support decision-making was a critical factor in the US defeat in Vietnam.

Throughout the course of the Vietnam War, the US intelligence apparatus employed some of the most sophisticated sensor technologies available to locate, identify and template NVA and VC forces, enabling US intelligence to achieve great success at the tactical level.[3] However, the primary purpose of military intelligence is to enlighten

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[1] William C. Westmorland, "The Military Attrition", *The Lessons of Vietnam,* eds. W. Scott Thompson & Donaldson D. Frizzel, (New York: Crane, Russak & Co), p. 71.
[2] Robert K. Brigham, "An Unwinnable War", *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War,* ed. Robert j. McMahon, (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co, 2008), p. 219.
[3] Michael Warner, "US Intelligence and Vietnam; The Official Version(s)", *Intelligence and National Security,* Vol. 25, No. 5, (October 2010), p. 631.

and inform planners and decision-makers. The failure of US intelligence to fulfill this

mandate at the operational level was critical to its defeat in Vietnam.[4] As argued by

Michael Warner, "[US] intelligence miscues did not lose the Vietnam War for the

Americans and South Vietnamese, but it now seems clear that they made victory less

likely."[5] Initial intelligence estimates failed to recognize that North Vietnamese

aggression as early as 1963 was essentially support provided to the National Liberation

Front's (NLF) insurgent campaign conducted through the VC. This failure led the US to

adopt conventional military solutions for an unconventional problem. US intelligence

focused on the employment of advanced technological sensors, at the expense of Human

Intelligence (HUMINT). This resulted in the inability to penetrate into the

"infrastructure" of both the NVA and the VC to determine accurate assessments of their

intent. Finally the 'stove-piped' nature of US intelligence resulted in a disconnect that

prevented the integration and fusing of information to achieve efficient, accurate

intelligence assessments.

METHODOLOGY

This paper will first address the US Intelligence Warfighting Function as the

doctrinal imperative under which military intelligence operates. While US doctrine has

changed in the years following the Vietnam War, using current doctrine provides a

common point of reference from which to extrapolate lessons applicable to contemporary

conflicts. This paper will then discuss the critical points of failure in US intelligence

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[4] George W. Allen, *None So Blind: A Personal Account of Intelligence Failure in Vietnam,* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Press, 2001), 282.
[5] Warner, 611.

during the Vietnam War. Using the analytical framework of the Intelligence Function, it

will address how the inability to effectively provide operational commanders with

sufficient situational awareness to support their decision-making was a critical

component in the failure of the US Campaign in Vietnam. Finally this paper will

extrapolate key lessons learned about the use of intelligence during the Vietnam War and

offer conclusions to how these lessons are applicable to Western militaries conducting

operations in the face of the complexities of the contemporary operating environment

(COE).

The analysis will focus on US intelligence efforts in Vietnam during the

timeframe of the major land force deployments, beginning in 1963 with the dramatic

surge in U.S. involvement from 600 personnel to 16,000 personnel, until the 1973 cease-

fire. [6] The analysis will allow for a thorough examination of military intelligence during

all phases of the conflict, focusing on the operational level of war. The US Army defines

the operational level as that "at which campaigns and major operations are conducted and

sustained to accomplish strategic objectives within theatres or areas of operations."[7]

Therefore, this paper will focus on intelligence in Vietnam at the corps and theatre of

operations levels. While there were undoubtedly intelligence failures at the tactical and

strategic levels, these are beyond the scope of this paper. As intelligence from the four

US Military Services (Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps), the Defence Intelligence

Agency (DIA) and US Civilian Agencies (CIA, NSA) was indelibly linked at the

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[6] David Kaiser, "Kennedy's Prudent and Cautious Policy", in *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War,* ed. Robert J. McMahon, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008), 136.
[7] Department of the Army, FM 3-0 *Operations,* (Washington: Department of the Army, 2001), 2-2.

operational level of the campaign, for the purposes of this paper they will all be considered as military intelligence. Lastly, while US intelligence certainly achieved many successes at all levels of war during the Vietnam campaign, the weight of this paper will focus on the failures, with a view to identifying lessons learned that can be applied in the COE.

INTELLIGENCE WARFIGHTING FUNCTION

To fully analyze the failures of US intelligence in Vietnam, one must understand the doctrinal construct under which it operated. While Vietnam featured predominant ground and air campaigns, supported by naval and SOF elements, for consistency purposes the US Army's intelligence doctrine will be used for this analysis. US Army doctrine details six Warfighting Functions; Mission Command, Movement and Maneuver, Intelligence, Fires, Sustainment and Protection which describe the functional capabilities used by a military force to accomplish their mission. The US Army's *Operations* manual describes the Intelligence Warfighting Function as "the related tasks and systems that facilitate understanding of the operational environment."[8] The role of intelligence function is to "drive operations by supporting the commander's decision making" through the provision of timely and relevant intelligence about one's enemy and the influences of the various other actors; political, economic, military, infrastructure, social, and information that exist within an operational area.[9]

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[8] Department of the Army, FM 3-0 *Operations* (Washington: Headquarters Department of the Army, 2008), 4-7.
[9] Department of the Army, FM 2-0 *Intelligence* (Washington: Headquarters Department of the Army, 2010), 1-4, 1-5.

The intelligence function includes not only the collection, but also the processing and integrated analysis of information from all available sources to achieve the following objectives: warning, informing decision-makers, contributing to situation awareness, and counter-intelligence efforts.[10] This concept speaks to the requirement for intelligence to overcome the sensor and informational stovepipes to achieve a comprehensive fusion of data and information into relevant, actionable knowledge.[11] The success of intelligence activities is dependent not only on the fidelity of the information provided, but also its ability to enable commanders in making timely, relevant decisions. In this respect the intelligence function should seek to not only provide information and advice to decision-makers, but also to create a 'decision advantage' over ones adversaries.[12]

Understanding the doctrinal basis of the Intelligence Warfighting Function provides a means to analyze the failures of US intelligence in Vietnam. In addition it provides a baseline from which to analyse the applicability of the key lessons in the COE. Arguably in Vietnam, the US intelligence operated along four broad lines of operation;

> "[1] working to increasing political and military support from allies, [2] protect US personnel from harm and plans from compromise, [3] support US commander determine the enemies intent and capability and, [4] ensure decision makers at the Strategic level had the most accurate information for determining progress."[13]

Within the scope of these lines of operation four major deficiencies contributed to the US defeat in Vietnam. These failures will now be discussed in detail.

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[10] Department of National Defence, *B-GJ-005-200/FP-002 CFJP 2-0 Intelligence* (Ottawa: Joint Doctrine Branch, 2011), p. 2-4 - 2-5.
[11] J.A.E.K. Dowell, Lieutenant-Colonel, *Intelligence For the Canadian Army In The 21st Century,*(Kingston, ON: Canadian Army Directorate of Land Concepts and Design, 2011), 18.
[12] Warner, 636.
[13] *Ibid*, 616.

FAILURE TO RECOGNIZE AND ADAPT TO THE INSURGENCY

A fundamental failing of US Intelligence in Vietnam was the inability to recognize in the early 1960s that the conflict in South Vietnam was essentially a North Vietnamese-supported communist insurgency. Initial intelligence estimates incorrectly understood the conflict to be a conventional civil war between the two Vietnamese states, leading military commanders to develop conventional military solutions to what was essentially a counter-insurgency problem.[14] Furthermore, once this insurgency was recognized, US intelligence failed to effectively adapt to address the imperatives of this new operational context.

US intelligence failed to clearly identify the nature of the conflict in Vietnam, assessing the problem to be the invasion of South Vietnam by Northern Communist. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) analysts focused on understanding the order-of-battle of enemy main force units, leading planners and commanders to concentrate on large scale conventional operations.[15] Beginning with the first major escalation of combat power in 1963, the US military sought to fight a conventional war, exploiting their overwhelming dominance in mobility and firepower to defeat the VC in South Vietnam through so-called 'Search and Destroy operations.'[16] In a 1966 correspondence with President Johnson, General Westmorland outlines the two principle tasks of US forces in Vietnam:

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[14] Nancy E. Bird, "Vietnam: Lessons for Intelligence in Wartime," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence,* 20:2 (February 2007), 319.

[15] Allen, 173.

[16] William C. Westmorland, "Tactical Employment of US Forces and Defensive Action, dated 10 Dec 1965," published in John M. Carland, " Winning the Vietnam War: Westmoreland's Approach in Two Documents," *The Journal of Military History,* Vol. 68, No. 2 (April 2004), 571.

"[1] We must defeat the enemy through offensive operations against his main forces and bases….[2] We must assist the Government to gain control of the people by providing direct military support"[17]

Despite thoroughly understanding the principles of counter-insurgency, Westmorland clearly prioritized the conduct of offensive, arguably conventional, military operations to destroy the VC over the requirement to win the support of the local population. The conduct of counter-insurgency operations was deemed to be a secondary effort, referred to as the "other war", with MACV Operations Officer, Major General Tillson confessing, "we never did pay any attention to the COIN area, [we were] fighting nothing but a conventional war."[18]

In 1965, McNamara justified the deployment of only 75,000 soldiers on the belief that a conventional war was evolving in Vietnam, where it would be "easier to identify, locate and attack the enemy."[19] While this was certainly true later in the war, in 1965 the conflict was essentially a civil war with the NLF pitted against the Republic of Vietnam, each side supported by an external power (US and North Vietnam). That the Secretary of Defence would fundamentally misunderstand the situation in Vietnam, speaks to the inability of US operational intelligence to support timely and relevant decision making. This failure to recognize the insurgency in South Vietnam adversely influenced US

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[17] William C. Westmorland, "William C. Westmorland Reviews Military Operations in South Vietnam, 1966", in *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War,* ed. Robert J. McMahon, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008), 205.

[18] John Nagl, "The Failure of Counterinsurgency Warfare", in *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, ed. Robert J. McMahon, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2008), 229.

[19] Robert McNamara, "Memo to Johnson, June 26, 1965" in *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, ed. Robert J. McMahon, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2008), 165, 167.

commanders to fight a conventionally focused campaign.[20] Furthermore, the focus on conventional orders of battle led to an "underestimation of the enemy strength…[which] subsequently led to the intelligence communities' failure to predict the scope and timing of the Tet offensive."[21]

Eric Ouellet and Pierre Pahlavi argue that success in counter-insurgency warfare is "in part dependant on the….capability to adapt to the new [operational] context."[22] Upon assuming command of MACV in 1968, General Creighton Abrams clearly sought to redirect the focus of US operations from search and destroy towards counter-insurgency, stating that "[the] mission is not to seek out and destroy the enemy. The mission is to provide protection from the people of Vietnam."[23] This about-face began in 1967 under McNamara's directed 'Pacification' and nation-building programs to expand the control of the South Vietnamese Government. In contrast to Westmorland's search and destroy strategy, 'Pacification' sought to recruit local population to assist in rooting out "the Viet Cong infrastructure."[24]

While undoubtedly a significant adjustment in the campaign, US intelligence was still hampered by the delayed recognition of the insurgency, possessing a relatively

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[20] Robert K. Brighman, "An Unwinnable War", in *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, ed. Robert J. McMahon, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2008), 218-19.

[21] Bird, 321.

[22] Eric Ouellet & Pierre C. Pahlavi, "Institutional Analysis and Irregular Warfare: A Case Study of the French Army in Algeria 1954-1960," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* Vol. 34, No. 6 (December 2011), 799.

[23] General Creighton Abrams, as quoted in John Nagl, "The Failure of Counterinsurgency Warfare", in *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, ed. Robert J. McMahon, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2008), 233.

[24] David Hunt, "Dirty Wars: Counterinsurgency in Vietnam and Today," *Politics & Society* 38(1) (2010), 40.

limited database of country information to work with, and an insufficient number of trained intelligence specialists.[25] A telling statistic demonstrates that in 1965 the MACV G2 consisted of only 300 personnel, with another 300 CIA agents posted to the Saigon station, despite troops strength in theatre increasing to 120,000 personnel.[26] This was clearly insufficient to handle the enormous intelligence responsibilities of this vast, complex theatre of operations, including the management of 54,000 Vietnamese civilians employed to support their intelligence efforts.[27] By way of comparison, the CIA's West German and Taiwan stations each had in excess of 1000 agents. In 1967, intelligence personnel strength would rapidly increase, ultimately exceeding 10,000 operators, however this build-up of capability came too late in the campaign, with insufficient analysis conducted into the role of the NVA in supporting the insurgency in the south.[28] This delay allowed sufficient time and freedom of manoeuver for the NLF to "become entrenched before the allied [intelligence community] managed to build their capability against it."[29] Given the requirement for vast intelligence capability to support counter-insurgency operations, the early ineffectiveness of the relatively understrength US intelligence apparatus is perhaps not surprising.

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[25] Stephan C. Conrad, Lieutenant Colonel, "The History of Military Intelligence," U.S. Army War College individual study paper intended for publication, U.S. Army War College, 1989), 14.

[26] John Prados, "Impatience, Illusion and Asymmetry: Intelligence in Vietnam," in *Why The North Won The Vietnam War* , ed. Marc Jason Gilbert, (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 147.

[27] Austin Long, "The Quiet Americans? CIA, NSA, and Counterinsurgency," *Journal of Cold War Studies,* Vol. 13, No. 3 (Summer 2011), 164.

[28] Allen, 101.

[29] John Prados, 148.

FOCUS ON TECHNOLOGICAL SENSORS

During the Vietnam War, intelligence was the product of a highly sophisticated and technologically advanced system for acquiring knowledge about the enemy. Exploiting the advanced technological prowess of the Military Industrial Complex, US intelligence fielded some of the most sophisticated resources available. Advanced sensors including radio interception and direction finding, aerial photography, wiretaps, electronic and even urine sensors, gave the US military a decisive advantage in high technology information gathering. [30] The importance placed on the employment of these advanced sensors was emphasised by then Army Chief of Staff, General Palmer;

> "field commanders in Vietnam, continue to say that signals intelligence is the backbone of their intelligence effort. They can't live or fight without it. I want to stress…just how important this effort is…I can't think of anything more important because they are just blind over there without this effort."[31]

US intelligence was oriented towards employing the latest technologies to find and attack the enemy, implementing innovative ideas to solve operational intelligence problems. One such problem was the ever increasing movement of North Vietnamese soldiers, equipment and support personnel along the so called 'Ho Chi Minh Trail.' This network of multiple trails, roads and pathways carved 5600 km through the jungle canopy of the Laotian Trong Son Mountain Range, provided a relatively high speed, concealed route from Hanoi into South Vietnam.[32] The scope of this sustainment network made detection nearly impossible for US conventional sensor capabilities, requiring the

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[30] Prados, 137, 146.
[31] Warner, 627.
[32] Anthony J. Tambini, *Wiring Vietnam: The Electronic Wall,* (Toronto: The Scarecrow Press, 2007), vii.

innovative employment of a vast 'barrier' of air delivered and monitored sensors to interdict movement along the trail.[33]

Highly adept at collecting information against a conventional enemy, the advanced technological capabilities of US intelligence were relatively ineffective against non-linear, non-contiguous insurgent activities in South Vietnam.[34] Vietnamese communists became adept at mitigating US technology, using alternating transmitters to shield the location of command posts against Signals Intelligence (SIGINT), and camouflaging entire roads and water crossing points to overcome the US dominance of aerial imagery (IMINT). Moreover the cost, in funds and resources, of these technological innovations was in many cases prohibitive. The sensors barrier required a vast commitment of aerial resources to be on station to monitor and strike targets, a commitment that was never fully achieved limiting the effectiveness of the system, while, with costs exceeding $1.7 billion (US) over the course of the program (1966-71).[35]

Furthermore, the wealth of enablers available led US intelligence to focus on targets that could easily be measured, such as numbers of vehicles in a garrison, or numbers of soldiers moving along a trail. General Colin Powell reflecting on his experience in Vietnam summarized the intelligence war quite well, "we were deluded by technology. The enemy was primitive, and we were the most technologically advanced

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[33] Deitchman, 1-3.
[34] Prados, 139.
[35] Deitchman, 879. This cost is equivalent to $10.02 billion (US) 2015 dollars. Inflation calculation conducted at http://www.dollartimes.com/inflation/inflation.php?amount=2000&year=1971 Last accessed 05 May 2015.

nation on earth. It therefore should be no contest."[36] This came at the expense of those less tangible, but arguably more important during counter-insurgency operations, aspects of intelligence such as the will of the population or intent of the enemy senior leadership.[37] The exploitation of HUMINT may have provided some insight into these questions, which were indeterminable by technological sensors alone.

FAILURE TO EXPLOIT HUMINT

Military affairs scholar James Wirtz argues that US intelligence in Vietnam experienced a so-called "Ultra Syndrome"; the propensity to depend on sources deemed to provide the most accurate and timely information. This focus on technology came at the expense of HUMINT operations, with intelligence analysts fixated on the patterns generated by the latest technological sensors. With VC formations emitting limited radio traffic and employing advanced concealment techniques, analysts could not employ SIGINT or IMINT to corroborate much of the information gleaned and therefore downplayed the importance of HUMINT gained from prisoners and captured documents.[38]

Despite the preponderance of resources available to the US and its allies, they were relatively ineffective in employing HUMINT to penetrate into the infrastructure of the VC, NVA or North Vietnamese Government senior leadership. By contrast, the agents within the NLF were able to not only penetrate infrastructure of the South

[36] Colin Powell, "Colin Powell Remembers His Two Tours of Duty in Vietnam, 1995," in *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War,* ed. Robert J. McMahon, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008), 249.
[37] Prados*, 146, 149.*
[38] Wirtz, 274.

Vietnamese government and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), but also

civilians who worked with the US military.[39] By 1960, Army intelligence had identified

the need for indigenous and clandestine intelligence operation to target the growing

insurgency in South Vietnam. These efforts were stymied by the CIA who feared that

Army intelligence may jeopardize their own clandestine operations. Likewise, Army

efforts to develop a Vietnamese clandestine capability, to build-upon the vast network

started by the Colonial French Sureté, were rejected by ARVN leadership in favour of

developing convention-style forces.[40] The resulting operational imperative saw

"unrestrained and uncontrolled firepower substituted for patient work developing

intelligence sources in the local population."[41]

The argument can be made that US intelligence understood the importance of

employing HUMINT in a counter-insurgency operation in order to mitigate the

deficiencies of its technological sensors. In his 1965 directive to all US forces in

Vietnam, General Westmorland clearly identified three methods to be used

simultaneously if possible, to locate the VC: aerial surveillance and target acquisition;

combat reconnaissance; and locally available intelligence.[42] While acknowledging the

successes of technological sensors, Westmoreland recognized that;

> "the early stages of a [counter-insurgency] campaign must be
> devoted to the acquisition of intelligence and this will require in almost

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[39] Prados, 139, 146.
[40] Allen, 112-116.
[41] John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam,* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002), 199.
[42] William C. Westmorland, "Headquarters United States MACV Directive Number 525-4 dated 17 September 1965: Tactics and Techniques For Employment of US Forces in the Republic of Vietnam," in "Winning the Vietnam War: Westmoreland's Approach in Two Documents", John M. Carland, *The Journal of Military History,* 68:2 (April 2004), 561-562.

every case, aggressive ground reconnaissance….Vietnamese soldiers should be incorporated into these teams."[43]

As early, as 1955 CIA operatives were actively integrated into Vietnamese 'Civil Action' teams, built to identify and counter communist activities, demonstrating an emerging HUMINT capacity in theatre. By 1967, this program had expanded into the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), an inter-agency, HUMINT heavy organization purpose built to support counter-insurgency operations through combined military and political problem solving. Further, the counter-intelligence efforts under the CIA's Phoenix Program achieved some success particularly while employing local Vietnamese Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs) to locate VC leaders. [44] Yet by this stage in the war, it may have been too late to develop an effective HUMINT capability, especially since the US had been active in Vietnam since the early 1950s. [45] This slow build-up of US and Vietnamese HUMINT capability provided the operational space for the NLF to become entrenched in South Vietnam. As John Prados said, "the US-South Vietnamese [intelligence] effort was too little, too late, oriented at the wrong collection targets."[46]

Moreover, sporadic attempts by MACV and CIA agents and sources to penetrate the NVA security apparatus were met with futility in the face of overwhelming security efforts by the North Vietnamese, resulting in the US having no human sources with

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[43] William C. Westmorland, "Tactical Employment of US Forces and Defensive Action Dated 10 December 1965," in "Winning the Vietnam War: Westmoreland's Approach in Two Documents", John M. Carland, *The Journal of Military History,* 68:2 (April 2004), 571-572.
[44] Warner, 617, 624.
[45] John Nagl, "The Failure of Counterinsurgency Warfare", in *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, ed. Robert J. McMahon, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2008), 232.
[46] Prados, 148.

knowledge of Hanoi's strategic plans.[47] This inability to penetrate VC and NVA

infrastructure forced them to conventional warfare style predictive analysis to determine

their adversary's intent. One such example was the belief that Hanoi would not launch an

attack into South Vietnam with its NVA regulars, fearing massive US reprisals. This

intelligence miscalculation seriously hindered the US war effort, as undoubtedly

additional combat power would have been committed to Vietnam if the US understood

that an attack from NVA regulars was likely.[48] Furthermore, the Army's HUMINT

capability, once finally established in theatre, was plagued by bureaucratic rules,

improper training and deficient operational funding. This served to continually inhibit

the recruiting, training and equipping of sources, leading commanders to "neglect the

human intelligence needs of battlefield formations, relying primarily on technological

sensors.[49] The failure to effectively employ HUMINT was a contributing factor in the

surprise of the Tet Offensive, with known sources in Hue having knowledge of the

impending attack, but unable to communicate with their US handlers.[50]

FAILURE OF INTEGRATION

The effective integration of all intelligence and operational functions is

recognized as a critical component to the success of counter-insurgency operations.[51]

The success of the British counter-insurgency campaign in Malaya proved the value of a

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[47] Mark Moyar, "Hanoi's Strategic Surprise, 1964-65", *Intelligence and National Security, Vol 18, No. 1 (Spring 2003), 160.*
[48] *Ibid*, 167.
[49] Warner, 626.
[50] Robert Annenberg, "Intelligence Team Under Siege", *Vietnam,* 13.5 (February 2001), 36, 51.
[51] Allen, 104.

unified chain of command, with combined intelligence fusion centers at every echelon to meet the vast intelligence needs of this type of conflict.[52] During the Vietnam War, the 'stove-piped' approach to intelligence that prevented the integration of information to produce a fused operational intelligence picture proved to be a fundamental failing of the US campaign.

Recognising the need for fused intelligence, attempts were made as early as 1962 to establish a formalized integration of intelligence under the MACV controlled Joint Evaluation Center (JEC). Tasked to report directly to the US Ambassador in Saigon, the JEC sought to unify intelligence staff from all four services, the CIA and the US Embassy. However, with military command under MACV divided amongst several Army formations, III Marine Amphibious Force, Naval Forces Vietnam, 7th Air Force, and 5th Special Forces Group, the JEC faced divergent priorities causing integration problems between the respective branches. Furthermore, neither the CIA nor the Embassy provided the necessary staff, and ultimately the JEC concept was never formalized and was eventually subsumed by MACV G2.[53]

Counter-insurgency scholar, John Nagl, argues: "the inability or unwillingness of the many organizations involved in the counter-insurgency effort to coordinate their programs…. [resulted in a war] being run by all sorts of different agencies."[54] The ineffectiveness of divergent intelligence priorities was demonstrated during the

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[52] Allen, 108-109.
[53] *Ibid,* 132-134.
[54] John Nagl, "The Failure of Counterinsurgency Warfare", in *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, ed. Robert J. McMahon, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2008), 233.

implementation of the sensor barrier system on the 'Ho Chi Minh Trail.' This warning

system relied heavily on the 7th Air Force for the delivery and monitoring of ground

based sensors, requiring a vast commitment of aerial resources, contrary to the Air Force

doctrinal concept of retaining the flexibility of all aircraft.[55] Never fully implemented

due to service rivalries, the loss of this valuable intelligence tool limited the US ability to

interdict movement through Laos into South Vietnam, representing a significant failure of

operational intelligence in Vietnam.

The US and their ARVN counterparts lacked effective mechanisms to coordinate

intelligence at the national level, with cultural, language and technological disparities

preventing an effective integration of intelligence. MACV staff considered their ARVN

counterparts as being incapable of producing important intelligence on their own, despite

possessing a depth of knowledge into the Vietnamese culture and HUMINT capabilities

far exceeding those of the US.[56] That US intelligence was unable or unwilling to

integrate with their host nation partners represented a significant weakness of the

intelligence function in a counter-insurgency conflict.

In places where the sharing of intelligence did occur, the compartmentalized

access to sources often led to misleading conclusions, as was demonstrated by a 1963 Air

Force assessment of aerial imagery of the NVA garrison at Dien Bien Phu. Working in

isolation from the CIA, Air Force analysts determined a massive build-up of NVA forces

was occurring at the garrison, when contemporary CIA imagery in fact demonstrated that

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[55] Seymour, J. Deitchman, "The 'Electronic Battlefield' in the Vietnam War," *The Journal of Military History,* 72.3 (July 2008), 872-873.
[56] Prados, 144.

this build up had occurred in 1954, immediately following the French defeat. The

dangers of this compartmentalization of information was a lesson the US had learned in

1941 at Pearl Harbour, yet this would continue to hamper the US for the duration of the

campaign, particularly regarding an accurate assessment of the communist order of

battle.[57] That it took CIA and MACV analysts until 1970 to agree upon a consensus

order of battle estimate for the NVA and VC forces, demonstrated the failure to integrate

the intelligence function in Vietnam.[58]

Integration was further hampered by continued in-fighting between the military

and the CIA. US foreign policy mandated the CIA as the lead agency for the

coordination of intelligence in a foreign country during peacetime, with the

understanding that these responsibilities would be transferred to the military during times

of war. However, in Vietnam with no formalized declaration of war, MACV and other

service headquarters operated under the nominal leadership of the US ambassador.[59]

This gave the CIA relative autonomy for intelligence operations leading to continual

friction, particularly with regards to their Phoenix Program.[60] This program, which

targeted VC infrastructure by exploiting the coordination of provincial and district level

security files, employed CIA, military advisors and Vietnamese civilians grouped into

PRUs. While ostensibly an integration success at the tactical level, the Phoenix Program

was an operational failure with the PRUs evolving into assassination squads estimated to

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[57] Allen, 129.
[58] Warner, 635.
[59] *Ibid, 172.*
[60] John A. Gentry, "Intelligence Learning and Adaptation: Lessons from Counterinsurgency Wars", *Intelligence and National Security* Vol 25, no. 1 (March 2000), 65.

have killed in excess of 20,000 suspected VC, most of whom were never interrogated for intelligence purposes.[61] Not only was this a public relations disaster for the US and Vietnamese governments, but most of those targeted under this program proved to be of little intelligence value to the overall counter-insurgency campaign.[62]

Continued distrust between intelligence services resulted in the uncoordinated analysis of intelligence, hindering the effective application of forces at the operational level. One noted example was the CIA's analysis of the Air Force's 1967 Op ROLLING THUNDER bombing campaign, which indicated that the campaign had relatively little substantive impact on the North's ability to wage war in South Vietnam, despite causing substantial damage to North Vietnam infrastructure.[63] That this analysis was not readily shared through an integrated intelligence network may have resulted in major bombing campaigns against North Vietnam in an inefficient attempt to attrite NVA combat power.

A counter-argument can be made that the establishment of the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) in 1961 represented a major shift towards the integration of intelligence. The DIA's mandate was to integrate the intelligence functions of all four services into one Current Intelligence and Indications Center. However, in practice this agency was not a balanced provider of intelligence, but focused entirely on the predominant operational imperative, which in the early 1960s was the threat of a Soviet

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[61] Hunt, 44.
[62] Prados, 142.
[63] Central Intelligence Agency, "CIA Intelligence Memo, dated May 12 1967" in *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, ed. Robert J. McMahon, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2008), 205-206.

nuclear strike. With its focus oriented elsewhere, the DIA proved to be of little value to operational commanders in Vietnam.[64]

By 1968, U.S. intelligence had sufficiently integrated to allow the rapid sharing of operational intelligence; however the compartmentalized nature of intelligence services made it difficult for analysts to gain credibility within other agencies.[65] CIA analyst Joseph Hovey's report, accurately predicting the Tet Offensive two months prior to its occurrence, was widely circulated amongst intelligence agencies and military headquarters. Despite being corroborated by a vast array of intelligence produced in the subsequent months, this report was dismissed by the Army as not a "realistic estimate of future enemy behaviour by either the intelligence community or senior officers."[66] With no one commander having the authority or responsibility to coordinate all intelligence efforts, by the time MACV finally accepted indicators of the scope and targets of the Tet Offensive on 30 January 1968, it was too late to successfully exploit this information.[67] As argued by James Wirtz, "US intelligence agencies ultimately failed….in the process of producing and responding to intelligence."[68]

Throughout the war, the US never fully integrated its intelligence structure throughout Vietnam. Former US Army and CIA analyst George W. Allen argues that the US Intelligence agencies never achieved the level of integration or effectives that their

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[64] *Ibid*, 130
[65] Allen, 43.
[66] James J. Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War,* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 258-259.
[67] Warner, 634.
[68] *Ibid.*

British counterparts did in Malaya.[69] The inability to achieve an early integration

contributed to the defeat in Vietnam, as ultimately US intelligence failed in its principle

role; to provide timely and relevant intelligence to enable operational commanders to

make effective decisions to influence the course of the campaign.

LESSONS FOR THE CONTEMPORARY OPERATING ENVIRONMENT

This paper has identified four fundamental failings of US intelligence that

contributed to their defeat in Vietnam: the failure to recognize insurgency as the

predominant problem in South Vietnam, a reliance on the employment of technological

sensors despite known weaknesses, the inability to effectively determine their adversaries

intent through the exploitation of HUMINT, and the failure to integrate all US

intelligence to enable the effective sharing and fusing of intelligence assessments.

Although drawing historical parallels between the Vietnam War and

contemporary conflicts is not without its flaws, the asymmetry in military power between

the US and its Vietnamese adversaries in many ways mirrors the asymmetric nature of

contemporary conflicts. The type of warfare that most western militaries trained to fight

during the Cold War, conventional force on force engagements within the confines of a

well-defined campaign, are now less likely to occur than irregular conflicts.[70] In this

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[69] Allen, 173.

[70] James Clancy & Chuck Crossett, "Measuring Effectiveness in Irregular Warfare," *Parameters* (Summer 2007), 88.

respect many of the lessons learned by US intelligence during the Vietnam War remain applicable today.[71]

A fundamental issue facing Western intelligence analysts in the COE is the ability to properly identify the central operational imperative of a given campaign. This capacity to 'frame the problem' remains essentially the same paradigm confronted by US intelligence in Vietnam. In both post- 9/11 conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, Western militaries faced a conflict was originally conventional warfare (against the Baathist regime in Iraq, and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan) before evolving into essentially counter-insurgency operations.[72] The defeat of the ruling regimes in these campaigns resulted in a fundamental shift of the operational imperative towards insurgency, which was not readily predicted or identified by coalition intelligence. As early as 2004, the US in Afghanistan sought to hand responsibilities to its NATO allies, followed by a drawdown of US forces in 2005 Afghanistan that occurred just as the Taliban insurgency in Southern and Eastern Afghanistan began to increase in intensity.[73] That the combined intelligence might of the US and their NATO allies were unable to recognize the emergence of the insurgency demonstrates the challenges faced in recognizing and adapting accordingly to the fundamental operational imperative.

The reliance on technological sensors in Vietnam provides a pertinent lesson for Western militaries facing the complexities of the COE. Technological advances have

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[71] Warner, 612.

[72] Carland, 556.

[73] David P. Auerswald & Stephen M. Saideman, *NATO in Afghanistan: Fighting Together, Fighting Alone,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 95-96.

exponentially increased data transfer, storage and manipulation capacity, while improvements in digitization have allowed for the unprecedented deployment of strategic intelligence assets to support tactical commanders.[74] Western militaries have "leveraged the perceived advantages of emerging sensor and information technologies,"[75] to achieve unprecedented situational awareness, that has enabled near real-time decision making. Yet, comparable to the situation in Vietnam, these advanced sensors have proven to be fallible against unconventional forces operating within complexities of the COE. In both Afghanistan and the recent conflict against ISIS in Iraq/Syria, insurgent forces have been able to 'hide' within relatively homogenous populations and to continually penetrate across borders despite the omnipresence of vast networks of advanced sensors.[76] Further, advances in SIGINT have enabled Western militaries to intercept vast amounts of data, providing a level of insight into an adversary's intent that was not available in Vietnam. However, this reliance on technology can still fixate military intelligence on only 'what can be seen', while often flooding the intelligence system with vast amounts of irrelevant information. In this respect, the Western militaries must be weary of establishing a reliance solely on technological sensors to provide information to support command decisions.

The value of HUMINT in support of counter-insurgency operations was a valuable lesson learned by US intelligence in Vietnam. Western militaries appear to have

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[74] L.H. Remillard, Major, "The All-Source Way of Doing Business – The Evolution of Intelligence in Modern Military Operations", in *Canadian Military Journal* (Autumn 2007), p. 21.

[75] J.A.E.K. Dowell, Lieutenant-Colonel, *Intelligence For the Canadian Army In The 21st Century,* (Kingston, ON: Canadian Army Directorate of Land Concepts and Design, 2011), 15.

[76] John Barry, "Obama's Vietnam: The Analogy Isn't Exact: But the war in Afghanistan is starting look disturbingly familiar," *Newsweek, 153:6* (February 9, 2009), 1.

retained this lesson, seeking to employ HUMINT in Afghanistan and Iraq as an important tool to augment technological sensors to develop a thorough understanding of the operational environment. The importance of HUMINT within counter-insurgency operations is recognized by US Army doctrine for its role in gaining information not readily collected by technological sensors such as emotions, perceptions and intents of a target population.[77][78] Unlike their counterparts in Vietnam, Western military intelligence appear to have a firm understanding that the asymmetric nature of modern conflict has the potential to significantly degrade the capability of technological sensors, making the "effective collection and use of HUMINT critical to operational success."[79]

A key lesson learned by the US in Vietnam was the requirement for an integrated intelligence apparatus to support the decision making of operational commanders.[80] US Army Counter-Insurgency doctrine underscores the importance of a unified chain of command, with integrated partners at the operational level to "provide timely, usable information and advice from an interagency perspective to the commander."[81] This structure must seek to integrate all available intelligence capabilities and agencies to achieve a fused intelligence picture to "generate intelligence synergy to [the] greatest

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[77] Department of the Army, FM 3-24 *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies (*Washington: Headquarters Department of the Army, 2014), 8-14.

[78] "HUMINT During Peace Support Operations*"* in *Dispatches: Lessons Learned for Soldiers*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (June 2001), 3.

[79] Lisa Elliot, *Finding a Balance: A Study of the Canadian Army's Approach to Human Intelligence in an Asymmetric Environment, (Masters of Defence and Management Policy Thesis, RMC, 2005),* 2, 40.

[80] Robert, J. Covalucci, "Protect our Future by Knowing the Past," *Military Intelligence, Vol. 19, No. 2 (April-June 1993), 16.*

[81] Department of the Army, FM 3-24, MCWP 3-33.5*, Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies* (Washington: Department of the Army, 2014), 1-14.

operational advantage."[82] This lesson remains applicable in the COE, where the Western militaries have sought to establish Joint, Multinational, All Source Intelligence Centers at all echelons during the recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Exploiting technology to enable digital integration, these centers have achieved an unprecedented level of integration, going beyond a purely military nexus to include civilian departments within a truly comprehensive approach to intelligence analysis, fusion and production.[83] Yet barriers remain to full integration of military intelligence. During the Afghanistan conflict, two parallel yet independent operations, the U.S. led Operation Enduring Freedom and the NATO led International Security Assistance Force, occurred concurrently within the same theatre of operations. These divergent chains of command often stifled the integrated sharing of intelligence.[84] Furthermore, national and NATO security classification presented a hurdle to the full integration of indigenous intelligence forces within allied intelligence infrastructure. As was learned in Vietnam, the integration of these host-nation forces can provide an indispensable baseline of cultural knowledge and HUMINT capabilities that represent a valuable force multiplier, particularly when dealing with the complexities of counter-insurgency operations in the COE.

While one must be careful drawing direct parallels to contemporary conflicts, the failings of US intelligence in Vietnam provide valuable lessons for the employment of the Intelligence Warfighting Function in contemporary conflicts.

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[82] David A. Charters, "The Future of Military Intelligence Within The Canadian Forces", *Canadian Military Journal* (Winter 2001-2002), 52.
[83] Charters, 483.
[84] Auerswald & Saideman, 93.

CONCLUSION

This paper has addressed the failings of US operational intelligence during the Vietnam War. Using the US Army's Intelligence Warfighting Function as an analytical framework, this paper analyzed four critical intelligence failures during the campaign: the failure early in the campaign to recognize the insurgency in South Vietnam leading to a focus on conventional warfare; an over reliance on technological sensors to identify enemy forces; the ineffective exploitation of US and Vietnamese HUMINT capabilities; and the failure to achieve an effective integration of the US intelligence apparatus to support the decision making by commanders. Finally, this paper suggested that the lessons learned by US intelligence in Vietnam continue to have applicability in the conduct of operations by Western militaries in the COE. This paper has demonstrated that the failure of operational military intelligence to fulfil its doctrinal mandate to provide situational awareness and support decision making was a critical factor in the US defeat in Vietnam.

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