

JOHN M. GATES, THE U.S. ARMY AND IRREGULAR WARFARE, CHAPTER SEVEN

VIETNAM: THE DEBATE GOES ON

In 1982 I moderated a session on the Vietnam War at a history symposium on "The Impact of Unsuccessful Military Campaigns on Military Institutions," held at the U. S. Army War College. Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr. gave a paper entitled "The US Army Institutional Response to Viet Nam." That was my first encounter with the Colonel and his work. Following the conference I proceeded to read both his book and an article he had just published in *The New Republic*. Being particularly troubled by some of his interpretive comments in the article, I wrote him a long letter, which he never answered. To this day I have often wondered if my reaction to his work might have been different had he responded.

Although I was convinced that on some very important points Summers' analysis was wrong, I noticed with increasing frustration that not only were his views gaining in popularity, but they were also going virtually uncontested. Finally, upon reading an article of his in the June 1983 issue of *Parameters*, I decided that I could not remain quiet any longer.

Concluding that someone had to make an attempt to rectify the errors that I found so blatant, I wrote an article of my own that was published in *Parameters* the following year.^[1] It forms the basis for the chapter that follows. Printed here is a revised version given as a lecture in the 1986 series at Obirin College. This selection would seem to highlight at least two lessons. First, an argument such as that of Colonel Summers is only as good as the research upon which it is based. Second, authors should not ignore their mail, particularly when it involves a critique of their work.

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If the Philippine-American War that began in 1899 was one of America's least studied wars, the war in Vietnam that took place over a half century later is surely one of its most studied ones. The amount of published material on the war in Vietnam is truly amazing, with scores of new books and articles being published every year. In the spring of 1985, a decade after the fall of Saigon, the United States had what is certainly one of the most unusual phenomena in the history of warfare, a commemoration of defeat, and the resulting symposia and publications added to the growing list of material on the war. Unfortunately, even with all of the attention it has received, the war is no better understood in some of its aspects than the earlier conflict in the Philippines.

Most surprising, perhaps, is the fundamental nature of many of the current disagreements over the war. A number of very basic questions are hotly debated, and students of the war disagree over its very nature, debating whether it was a revolutionary civil war or a conventional one. The nature of American objectives in Vietnam has also been a subject for debate, as has the strategy used to obtain whatever objectives might have been in mind. In fact, one can hardly discuss the war without becoming involved in some kind of controversy.

The debate over the war has made ordinary discourse about it very difficult. One's thinking about the war is often a function of one's political views and biases rather than the factual information available. Particularly apparent in much of the writing is the unwillingness of many Americans, both those who served in the government and those having served in the military, to admit error. Thus, much of what is said about the war is more apology than analysis, more myth than history, and some insight into the ongoing debate over the war is captured, I think, in a scholarly exchange that I have had with Colonel Harry Summers, Jr., one of the leading military authors on the subject in the 1980s.

At the start of 1983, veteran correspondent Fox Butterfield surveyed what he termed "the New Vietnam scholarship" in the *New York Times Magazine*. Examining the work of "a small group of scholars, journalists and military specialists who have started to look afresh at the war," he noted

their challenge to "some of the most cherished beliefs of both the right and the left."^[2] One member of the group identified by Butterfield was Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., then a research analyst at the army's Strategic Studies Institute and an instructor at the United States Army War College. *Parade Magazine*, not to be accused of understatement, claimed that "in military circles" Colonel Summers was "the man of the hour," saying that "in the upper echelons of the Pentagon" his book, *On Strategy*, "is considered 'must reading.'"^[3] Rarely has a military intellectual received such widespread publicity, and no one engaged in the study of the Vietnam conflict can ignore his critique of American wartime strategy.

Summers has presented his argument in a variety of published works.^[4] According to Summers, Americans were misled by "the fashionable new model of Communist revolutionary war."^[5] The work of such "counterinsurgency experts" as Sir Robert Thompson "channeled our attentions toward the internal affairs of the South Vietnamese government rather than toward the external threat" posed by the regular military forces of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV).^[6] In addition to misperceiving the conflict as a revolutionary war, American leaders also failed to establish clear objectives to guide their country's military commanders in Vietnam. As a result of these errors in strategic analysis, American military forces in Southeast Asia engaged in "faulty military operations in the field."^[7] Failing to identify the true center of gravity in the war, the Americans used the bulk of their power to attack a "secondary enemy," the Viet Cong guerrillas, leaving the enemy's real power untouched. Summers claimed that the guerrilla war in South Vietnam was a diversion. The significant Communist threat was the army of the DRV, particularly the units of that army held in strategic reserve north of the 17th parallel. Victory came for the DRV in 1975 when those regulars moved south to mount a successful conventional attack on the Republic of Vietnam (RVN).

Colonel Summers has argued his case persuasively, and his innovative use of Clausewitz to analyze the war in Vietnam broadens our understanding of the conflict. Unfortunately, two of the basic premises underlying his argument appear to be flawed. First, considerable evidence supports the conclusion that the conflict in Vietnam was always a revolutionary civil war and never a conventional one. Second, a survey of the internal documents produced by the United States government demonstrates that the American objective in Vietnam was much clearer than Summers would have one believe. One must thus look elsewhere for an explanation of the faulty military operations that took place there.

According to Clausewitz, "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; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature." Determining the nature of a conflict is thus "the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive."^[8] Using these injunctions of Clausewitz as the starting point for his own argument, Colonel Summers asserted that the Vietnam War was not a revolutionary one. "If we apply the theoretical truths of revolutionary war to the actual events of the Vietnam war," wrote Summers, "we find that they do not fit. The Viet Cong did not achieve decisive results on their own."^[9] He presented the view that the DRV achieved victory in 1975 by a conventional attack on the forces of the RVN as evidence that the revolutionary war model was an improper one. In reality, however, what many Americans call the "conventional" outcome of the war in Vietnam was anticipated in the major writing of both Asian theorists of revolutionary war and Western "counterinsurgency experts." The fit between "actual events" and the "theoretical truths" was really very close.

Mao Zedong, Vo Nguyen Giap, and Truong Chinh all commented upon the need for revolutionaries to move from guerrilla to mobile warfare, and they also identified mobile or conventional warfare as the more important and necessary element for success. Mao, for example, wrote that regular forces were of "primary importance" and mobile warfare "essential." He called guerrilla warfare "supplementary" because it could not "shoulder the main responsibility in deciding the

outcome."^[10] In 1961, Giap had noted the progression in the Vietnamese "Resistance War" from guerrilla warfare to "mobile warfare combined with partial entrenched camp warfare," and his compatriot Troung Ching had written even earlier that in the final stage of revolutionary conflict "positional warfare" would play "a paramount role."^[11] In theoretical terms, the conventional attacks by DRV regulars in 1975 represented the revolution moving into its "final stage."^[12] According to Thompson, the defeat of government force by "*the regular forces of the insurgents . . . in conventional battle*" constituted "a classical ending in accordance with the orthodox theory."^[13] Summers erred in concluding that the conventional DRV offensive in 1975 demonstrated the inapplicability of the revolutionary war paradigm to the Vietnam War. Revolutionary war theory never implied that the Viet Cong guerrillas would "achieve decisive results on their own."

More important than evidence of the close fit between revolutionary war theory and the war's end in a conventional military attack is the revolutionary nature of Communist goals in Vietnam and their consistency. "The aim," as General Giap so cogently summarized it in 1961, "was to realize the political goals of the national democratic revolution as in China, to recover national independence and bring land to the peasants, creating conditions for the advance of the revolution of our country to socialism."^[14] Most important, the goals were to be achieved throughout the entire area of Vietnam, not only in the North, and Communist leadership of the Vietnamese revolution consistently sought the overthrow of any government standing in their way: the French, Ngo Dinh Diem, the American supported regimes that followed him.

From Ho Chi Minh's 1946 assurance that he considered the people of Nam Bo "citizens of Viet Nam" to the Vietnamese Workers Party call to "advance to the peaceful reunification of the Fatherland" in 1973,^[15] the Communist leaders in Vietnam neither swayed from their commitment to unification nor effectively hid that commitment. One thus wonders how non-Communist leaders of the National Liberation Front (NLF) such as Troung Nhu Tang could have believed they "were working for Southern self-determination and independence--from Hanoi as well as from Washington," as Summers assumed.^[16] The ten-point program of the NLF, distributed throughout the world in February 1961, called for "peaceful reunification of the fatherland," and the Communist dominated front reaffirmed its goal of a unified Vietnam in subsequent statements. On March 22, 1965, for example, it spoke of "national unification," in strong, unambiguous language: "Vietnam is one, the Vietnamese people are one, north and south are one." A very long statement of the NLF political program broadcast in September 1967 observed that "Vietnam must be reunified," calling reunification "the sacred aspiration of our entire people," and a 1969 statement called "unity" one of "the Vietnamese people's fundamental national rights."^[17] The NLF consistently spoke of self-determination for the South. The Communist commitment to a unified Vietnam could only have remained hidden from people such as Troung Nhu Tang because of their own naiveté, self-deception, or wishful thinking.

Similarly, if Americans were deceived as to the "true intentions" of Vietnam's Communist leaders, they too were primarily victims of their own, not Communist dissembling. As Wallace J. Thies observed, "DRV leaders such as Le Duan and Nguyen Chi Thanh were deeply and passionately committed to the goal of completing the revolution in South Vietnam. It was a goal they had been pursuing for virtually all of their adult lives."^[18] Pham Van Dong attempted to convey the importance of national unification to the United States when he met with Canadian diplomat Blair Seaborn in June 1964, using the French *drame* (signifying an intense unresolved crisis) in an attempt to capture the critical nature of such a "fundamental" issue.^[19]

Rather than viewing North Vietnam as a complete nation, Vietnamese Communists such as General Giap saw it as "a large rear echelon" of the army. It was "the revolutionary base for the whole country," and it would eventually supply the forces necessary for its reunification.^[20] American reports indicating the depth of the Communist commitment to a truly national revolution were ignored in the Johnson years,^[21] but the truth of that commitment kept emerging. The special

assessment of the situation in Vietnam prepared for President-elect Richard Nixon at the start of 1969 noted that "Hanoi's ultimate goal of a unified Vietnam under its control has not changed,"^[22] nor would it change. Like Troung Nhu Tang, Americans have little excuse for their ignorance of the Vietnamese Communists' "true intentions."

The key to understanding the nature of a particular war lies not only in an analysis of the way in which it is fought, but also in a study of the people involved and their reasons for fighting. If, as Summers recognized, the First Indochina War "*was* a revolutionary war,"^[23] then the claim that the Second Indochina War was not is illogical. The Communist goal was the same in both wars: *revolution*, the overthrow of whatever non-Communist government might exist in any part of Vietnam and its replacement by the Communist one headquartered in Hanoi. In the First Indochina War a Vietnamese movement (led by Ho Chi Minh) fought throughout Vietnam and elsewhere in Indochina to create an independent, unified, Communist state. Attempting to prevent the attainment of that goal were the French colonialists and their Vietnamese allies, some of whom hoped that they might eventually achieve independence under a non-Communist government. In the Second Indochina War, the parties on one side of the conflict had hardly changed at all.

After 1954 the movement led by Ho Chi Minh continued its attempt to achieve an independent Communist state in a united Vietnam, having failed to achieve that goal in the First Indochina War. The United States and its Vietnamese allies, grouped in the South, sought to contain the Communist revolution in the area north of the 17th parallel and create an independent, non-Communist state in the South. In Clausewitzian terms, the nature of the two wars was identical: a group seeking Communist revolutionary ends was fighting against a group trying to prevent the spread of the revolution.

The Communist goal in the Second Indochina War was clearly political, but the means used to implement it varied to fit the situation. Early in the conflict, when communist military power in the South was relatively meager, agitation, propaganda, and small guerrilla action predominated. As weakness appeared in the RVN, the Communists used infiltration from their northern base to strengthen their military capability south of the 17th parallel, moving more than once toward mobile warfare. Later, as the war became stalemated, there was a lull in the fighting after unsuccessful Communist offensives in 1968 and again in 1972, although Communist cadres continued their work to undermine the South Vietnamese government. Finally, with the RVN left unsupported by the United States, the Communists moved in for the kill in their final offensive, using everything available to them--what remained of their infrastructure in the South, guerrillas, and regular army units from the North.

Facing dedicated Communist guerrillas and cadres determined to overthrow them, the leaders of the non-Communist government in Saigon found themselves involved in a struggle for survival. To counter the Communist-led revolution, they had to build widespread support for their government, and that could not be done without pacifying the countryside. A conventional war response that would have contained the major elements of a Communist military power within the confines of the northern base was necessary, but alone it was not sufficient to secure the RVN. Behind whatever shield might have been created to protect it, the Saigon government would need to engage in effective pacification operations to prevent the internal collapse of the RVN. One cannot abandon the paradigm of revolutionary war without seriously distorting the nature of the conflict taking place in Vietnam.^[24]

By the mid-1960s, however, many Americans, including Lyndon Johnson and his advisors, seemed to have abandoned the revolutionary war model. In a study of "Official Justifications for America's Role in Indochina," Professor Hugh M. Arnold found that the image of the United States engaged in "a simple response to aggression" was "overwhelmingly the most important justification used during the Johnson Administration." According to Arnold, the Johnson government sought to make clear to the American people that the war "was not a civil war or an indigenous rebellion, but an

attempt to take over a nation by force of arms."[\[25\]](#) This view of the war is basic to Summers' argument also, but the conflict in Vietnam was not a contest between two sovereign states.

After the August Revolution of 1945, the Viet Minh established their revolutionary government throughout Vietnam, although the combined action of the British and French, using Japanese forces in addition to their own, soon reestablished a French presence in the South. Nevertheless, as the Declaration of Independence of the DRV made clear, Ho Chi Minh saw himself and his government as representing "the entire people of Viet Nam," and that claim was confirmed by foreign observers at the time.[\[26\]](#) A year later, the Chief of the Division of Southeast Asian Affairs of the State Department, Abbot L. Moffat, affirmed the view that the DRV was a government for all Vietnam and not just the North.[\[27\]](#) The unity of Vietnam would be reasserted again and again throughout the war. From before the Geneva agreement, which stated clearly that the "military demarcation line" at the 17th parallel was "provisional and should not in any way be interpreted as constituting a political or territorial boundary," to after the Paris agreement of 1973, which reaffirmed that the parallel was "only provisional and not a political or territorial boundary," leaders of the DRV repeatedly claimed that there was only one, not two Vietnams. Initially that was also the view of the non-Communist leaders of the RVN.[\[28\]](#)

Believing a partitioned Vietnam to be preferable to an entirely Communist one, Americans and many of their Vietnamese allies soon came to view the 17th parallel as a border between two sovereign states. As a result, American leaders created an illusory picture of the war, portraying the conflict as the result of the aggression of one sovereign state against another. In reality, it was a civil war between two Vietnamese parties, both of whom had originally claimed sovereignty over all of Vietnam. Although the United States often envisioned a Korean-like solution to the Vietnam problem, it could not create two sovereign states in Vietnam by rhetoric alone. Until the Americans and their allies in the RVN forced the DRV to abandon its goal of creating a revolutionary Communist state in all Vietnam, the civil war would continue. From the Communist point of view, what Americans called North Vietnamese "aggression" was nothing more than the attempt to complete the process of unifying Vietnam under a revolutionary government begun at the end of World War II.

Since the Communist victory in 1975, a number of people have spoken of the conquest of South Vietnam by "North" Vietnamese,[\[29\]](#) but that too is a distortion. Leaders in the governments of both the RVN and the DRV came from all over Vietnam, not only from the region in which their capital resided. The Diem government, for example, contained many Catholics who had migrated from the North in 1954, and later Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky provided a highly visible "northern" presence in the Saigon government. More important, however, was the "southern" presence in the highest ranks of the DRV leadership. Le Duan, the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Workers Party was born in Quang Tri, just south of the 17th parallel. Pham Van Dong, the Prime Minister of the DRV, was born in Quang Ngai. Pham Hung, a Vice-Premier of the DRV and member of the Political Bureau since the late 1950s, was from Vinh Long, and Ton Duc Thang, who succeeded Ho Chi Minh as President of the DRV, was born in the Mekong Delta. Nguyen Chi Thanh, the DRV military commander in the South until his death in 1967, was also a southerner. Such biographical information led one author to conclude that "in terms of the birthplace of opposing leaders, it is evident that the Second Indochina War was more of a civil war than was America's war of 1860-1865."[\[30\]](#) However much Americans would like to believe it, the war did not end with a conquest of the RVN by alien "northerners" alone. It ended when the non-Communist Saigon government was destroyed by forces of the revolutionary Communist government in Hanoi.

In a number of critiques of American strategy in Vietnam, one finds the statement that American objectives were not presented clearly. As evidence for that conclusion Summers cited "some 22 separate American rationales" categorized by Professor Arnold compared to "the *one* North Vietnamese objective of total control over all of Indochina." Summers also quoted General Douglas

Kinnard's conclusion that "almost 70 percent of the generals who managed the war were uncertain of its objectives."^[31] The survey data reported by Kinnard, however, do not indicate so great a problem as Summers would have one believe. Although 35% of the respondents to Kinnard's questionnaire classified American objectives in Vietnam as "rather fuzzy," 29% found them to be "clear and understandable."^[32] The interpretation of the meaning of the statement "not as clear as they might have been," the response selected by 33%, is open to debate. To say that goals could be stated more clearly is not the same as saying one is "uncertain" regarding the objective.

The article by Professor Arnold is also not particularly supportive of the argument that American objectives were unclear. Although Arnold noted "22 separate rationales," he made clear that some of the "themes" he identified were "more concerned with means than ends." More important, a "rationale" is not necessarily an objective. One constant Arnold identified was "the Communism theme," stressed in both public and private contexts, "in every Administration, and in every year covered by this study." He concluded that "if one single reason for United States involvement in Indochina can be derived from the analysis, it would have to be the perceived threat of Communism."^[33] That is particularly true when one separates statements that deal with the American objective in Vietnam from those which attempt to rationalize or explain that objective.

One sees the clarity of American objectives in the similarity of official statements made during different administrations at widely varying times during the war. In 1948, for example, the September 27 statement on Indochina by the Department of State presented the "long-term" objective of "a self-governing nationalist state which will be friendly to the United States and which, commensurate with the capacity of the peoples involved, will be patterned upon our conception of a democratic state as opposed to the totalitarian state which would evolve inevitably from Communist domination."^[34] In 1951, the American goal for "the nations and peoples of Asia," as outlined in a May 17 annex to NSC 28/4, remained the same: "stable and self-sustaining non-Communist governments, oriented toward the United States."^[35] A decade later, as the United States became more involved in the Vietnamese situation, statements of the United States objective remained unchanged: "to prevent Communist domination of South Vietnam; to create in that country a viable and increasingly democratic society."^[36] By 1964, with an even greater American commitment, the statement of goals had not altered; the United States still sought "an independent non-Communist South Vietnam."^[37] Such statements, made throughout the war by the people involved with setting policy, should leave no doubt that any ignorance of the American goal in Vietnam did not result from a failure to set clear objectives.

As evidence of a lack of clarity in American policy, Summers observed that "when Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford took office in 1968, he complained that no one in the Defense Department could tell him what constituted victory."^[38] In fact, in the source cited by Summers, Clifford made no such claim. What he did say was that he was startled "to find out that we had no military plan to win the war."^[39] The difference is not unimportant. American leaders knew what would constitute victory--forcing the leaders of the DRV to accept the existence of "an independent non-Communist South Vietnam"--the problem was how to achieve that goal.

Clifford himself was even exaggerating when he stated that the United States lacked a plan to "win the war," as seen by his own summary of the Pentagon's answers to his questions. Clifford was told that "the enemy will ultimately be worn down so severely by attrition that the enemy will eventually capitulate,"^[40] a view that had been prevalent at least since 1965, when Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara reported to President Johnson on his conversations in Honolulu with Ambassador Taylor, General Wheeler, Admiral Sharp, and General Westmoreland. "Their strategy for 'victory,' over time," said McNamara, "is to break the will of the DRV/VC by denying them victory."^[41] Clifford was not really reacting to the absence of a plan, but to what he perceived to be its inadequacies. Since the war, the dissection of those inadequacies and the search for better alternatives has been an important focus of many works, but one should not make the mistake of assuming that flaws in execution resulted from an absence of clear goals.

"Because we failed to correctly identify the nature of the war," argued Summers, "we also failed to identify the center of gravity." Seeing the conflict as a revolutionary war, Americans "saw the Viet Cong as the center of gravity" and "massed against this guerrilla enemy in search-and-destroy and pacification efforts." As a result, "our concentration on a secondary enemy frittered away our military resources on inconclusive military and social operations that ultimately exhausted the patience of the American people."[\[42\]](#) Critics of the American approach to the war who take what may be termed a counterinsurgency view would disagree. They have argued that the response of General Westmoreland and other military leaders was not the proper one for a revolutionary war. They have been particularly critical of the military deemphasis of pacification, relegating it to the category of "the other war" and engaging in counterproductive search-and-destroy operations instead. If the critics are correct, then a number of the faulty operations Summers and others deplore could not possibly have resulted from the military becoming overly involved in a campaign of counterinsurgency.[\[43\]](#)

Actually two vital centers existed. One was the Viet Cong guerrillas and Communist cadres in the South; the other was the Communist military power in the North. Success in attacking one would not assure the destruction of the other, and either could prevent the United States from achieving its goal. In the early 1960s, for example, the revolutionaries in the South had achieved considerable success without a high level of material aid from the North. In fact, the Communists might well have achieved their aim without moving from guerrilla war to regular mobile warfare had it not been for the significant increase in American aid to the RVN. Although Summers was correct to argue that pacification and the fight against the Viet Cong guerrillas were tasks that properly belonged to the South Vietnamese, the situation in the 1960s was such that the job could not be done without considerable help from the United States. The evidence that the RVN approached the point of collapse more than once before the commitment of DRV regulars to the war highlights the importance of the American contribution to pacification and nation-building. Without these efforts, the RVN might have fallen into Communist hands much earlier.

By the 1970s the situation had changed. Then, despite some progress in pacification and the virtual destruction of Viet Cong military power in 1968 and after, the government of South Vietnam was still challenged by the Communist military forces in North Vietnam. Containment of North Vietnamese military power, if not its outright destruction, was thus also necessary, and Summers was correct when he identified that mission as a logical one for the American forces in the region. Neutralization of the Communists' regular forces and their will to use them to force the unification of Vietnam was essential if the American objective was to be achieved, but nothing in the revolutionary civil war model or the frequently stated American objective of establishing a secure non-Communist state in South Vietnam precluded the acceptance of the strategy advocated by Summers. Instead, it was prevented by the President's desire to keep the war limited, a desire shared by many other Americans during the course of the war.

Although Clausewitz believed that "no matter what the central feature of the enemy's power may be . . . the defeat and destruction of his fighting force remains the best way to begin," he also recognized that in a civil conflict such as that in Vietnam the center of gravity might not be the enemy's military forces, but "the personalities of the leaders and public opinion."[\[44\]](#) In the RVN, the crucial element, in addition to the Viet Cong guerrillas, was the population at large, and of particular importance were the people in a position to give support and shelter to the guerrillas. Also important were the non-Communists in the NLF and other opposition groups. Detaching them from the Communists was essential if the RVN was to emerge as a viable and secure state, and the pacification program was crucial to that end. No strictly military approach would suffice.

The will of the Communists throughout Vietnam was very strong, although a majority of the generals surveyed by General Kinnard admitted that it was "not sufficiently considered" by the Americans.[\[45\]](#) In retrospect, knowing the tremendous casualties taken by the Communists in the course of their resistance since 1945, one cannot even assume that the destruction of the DRV's

conventional military power would have ended the war. The history of conflict in Indochina and the continuation of the fighting long after the United States withdrawal indicates that the physical conquest of the DRV base in the North might have been needed to destroy the Communist will to continue the war. From the perspective of many Americans, Communist determination in the face of such high costs may appear irrational, but people throughout the world, particularly revolutionaries, have demonstrated a capacity for such fanatical behavior too frequently for it to be ignored.

During and after the war, a number of people have argued against the limitations placed on the use of American forces in Vietnam, chiding civilian leaders for having taken counsel of their fears. Particularly committed to this point of view are members of the U. S. Air Force, and one Air Force officer, Colonel Alan Gropman, has argued that the war in Vietnam "need not have been a defeat at all." American objectives in Vietnam could have been achieved, said Gropman, had the United States used its air power, the "major unplayed trump card."[\[46\]](#) He also argued that the United States leaders never sought "more than a stalemate."[\[47\]](#) Such a statement, however, provides evidence that Gropman and his Air Force colleagues still do not understand the nature of the war in Vietnam.

The war was a limited conflict in which American leaders did not wish to run the risks of a larger war inherent in a more forceful use of air power. As General Kinnard noted in his survey, the desire to limit the use of American power to avoid widening the conflict to include China, the Soviet Union, or both was one specific objective that the United States achieved.[\[48\]](#) Although Colonel Gropman recognized that fear of a wider war led to the limitations he deplored, he refused to recognize the wisdom of those fears. Instead he argued that the fears "should have been dissolved by the lack of Chinese or Soviet overt moves during times of relatively intense bombing activity."[\[49\]](#) It is possible, however, that the Soviet and Chinese limitations he noted were themselves a result of restraint on the part of the United States

The critics provide no specific evidence that in the mid-1960s the limitations they deplore were unnecessary, while the Chinese commitment of some 30-50,000 "support troops" to the aid of the DRV after 1965 provides some evidence of the wisdom of the decision to limit the American response in Indochina.[\[50\]](#)

If Colonel Gropman and those who make similar arguments had been wrong about the Chinese and/or Soviet response, what then? Their apologies to the American people for involving the nation in a wider war would have provided little consolation. Even in retrospect, the worst case planning that led to caution instead of more extensive bombing would seem to be wise in a nuclear world in which miscalculation could mean the end of civilization as we know it. Gropman dismissed the well-based fears of American leaders and the high risks of his bombing strategy too lightly. Nothing was at stake in Vietnam that sanctioned the risk of World War III. To pretend that bombing on a large scale in the 1960s could have won the war in Vietnam for the United States one must ignore the probable Chinese response. It is also not a valid historical argument to claim that the level of bombing possible in the 1970s would have been equally possible five or six years earlier.

Judging the degree of risk inherent in any strategy after the fact is difficult, and one cannot know with certainty how China or the Soviet Union might have reacted in the 1960s to such forceful actions as the Linebacker bombing campaigns or the Cambodian incursion. In the 1950s and '60s, when American leaders, including some military leaders, asked themselves whether the potential risks of a less restricted war were worth the possible gains in Vietnam, they invariably answered no. Only after the international environment had changed significantly did the answer to the question also change. The diplomatic world in which Richard Nixon functioned appeared very different from that facing Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson. In a nuclear world, caution is an important survival mechanism, and critics should think twice before advocating that American leaders act more boldly.

Just as Colonel Gropman and some other Air Force officers still believe that the war could have been won by their branch had it been free to use all its power, some army officers have claimed that

their branch also left Vietnam unsullied. But the myth of American military success has been challenged recently in two important ways.

Edward Luttwak, in *The Pentagon and the Art of War* argued in 1984 that the United States military in Vietnam was, among other things, incredibly inefficient. What he called "bureaucratic deformation" was responsible for reducing "the true number of combat troops in the country to a fraction of the ostensible troop level." As he noted, "at the end of 1968, with 536,000 American servicemen in South Vietnam, fewer than 80,000 served in infantry battalions, and the rest of all American troops in close-combat--the Army's Air Cavalry flight crew and airborne troops, the Marines, Special Forces, and more--would not double that number."^[51] No matter how generously one defines combat, the number of troops in the army's supporting tail always outnumbered those actually doing the fighting.

Luttwak chided the military for "the self-indulgence that allowed the many desk-bound officers who found employment in the war zone, though far from combat, to live in surprising comfort, even outright luxury . . . Personal staffs of aides, valets, drivers, and assorted flunkies became notoriously large." The impact on the morale of the combat soldiers was "devastating."^[52] Luttwak described what he termed "the officers' highly visible misconduct," viewing it as "the breakdown of elementary professional craft," a failure of leadership in the extreme.^[53]

Luttwak, however, argued that "all this was trivial compared with the tactical self-indulgence that became routine: the jet fighter bombing raids against flimsy huts that might contain a handful of guerrillas or perhaps none; the fair-sized artillery barrages that silenced lone snipers"--in sum, the self-indulgence of a "grossly disproportionate use of firepower" that "became the very theme of the war."^[54] At its peak, (1966-1971) the helicopter gunships of the army were flying almost 4,000 attack sorties a day. Such lavish use of firepower was "the most visible symptom of the inability of the American military institution to formulate a coherent strategy that would focus and control the means of war. No failure of military competence could be more complete."^[55]

Tragically, many individuals in the American military seemed to learn very little from the disaster in Vietnam. Instead of acknowledging failure, many people have placed the blame for the nation's failure upon civilian leaders, antiwar protesters, journalists--anyone but the leaders of the military themselves. But civilian leaders, protesters, and journalists did not tell the military services how to use the power allotted to them within the limitations set down. The mistakes made in that arena were the mistakes of the military alone, and officers such as Gropman and Summers were engaged in myth-making of the worst kind when they attempted to obscure the military responsibility for the outcome in Vietnam. As Luttwak observed, "it was not the civilians who willed the hundreds of daily sorties of the fighter-bombers and the almost 4 million helicopter-gunship sorties of 1966-1971."^[56]

Given the willingness of military leaders to fight a limited war in Vietnam rather than resign, despite their misgivings, the important question remains a military one. *Within the limitations set down*, what strategy was best to achieve the goal of destroying the enemy's will? Many authors have joined in a condemnation of the choices made during the war. In particular they have objected to controlled escalation, limited bombing of the North, counterinsurgency and a war of attrition in the South. But the course of action often suggested, using American military power to isolate the Communist base above the 17th parallel, was not really possible within the context of the specific limitations set down by civilian leaders in Washington. Without a change of parameters, the approach advocated did not represent an alternative to the flawed operations that took place.

The supreme irony of the war in Vietnam may be that despite all of the flaws in the American approach noted by a wide variety of critics, by 1969 the United States and the RVN were as well positioned to attain their objectives as they had ever been. The forces of the United States and its allies had found and destroyed thousands of Communist troops, both guerrillas and regulars, and the reorganized pacification program appeared to be making progress in the countryside. The

leaders of the RVN may not have won the hearts and minds of the populace, but Communist progress in that endeavor had been slowed or stopped. As American aid improved the economic situation in the countryside, the tolerance of people for the Saigon government also increased. Thus, even after all of the perceived failures of American policy and strategy in Vietnam, the war was not lost prior to 1973, nor was it being lost, except in the crucial American center of gravity, popular opinion. In the United States, on mainstreet and on Capitol Hill, ending the war had become more important than winning it.

Although many critics have deemed the American approach to the war strategically bankrupt, by 1968 the Communists had adopted essentially the same approach: to keep fighting until the enemy became frustrated and quit. The critical difference was that the American plan failed while that of the enemy succeeded. The United States hurt the Communists, but not enough. In material terms the Communists damaged the United States far less. More important was the psychological and political damage done by astute Communist propaganda, American errors in applying force (particularly the highly visible reliance on firepower in the South), and specific events such as the Tet offensive. American will proved insufficient to sustain the nation in a protracted war. But the problem was not a faulty perception of the war's nature or unclear objectives. In fact, the major problem may not even have been flawed operations, given the absence in the United States of the kind of commitment to the war that sustained the Communists.

The final outcome of the war was primarily the result of historical events outside the realm of strategic thinking. In the United States the antiwar movement created sufficient turmoil that the functioning of government was altered if not impaired, and the Watergate scandal, which must be seen as a war-related event to be understood fully, created an environment that doomed the President's Vietnam policy to failure.^[57] Political weakness in the face of an assertive Congress and a population grown tired of the war prevented Richard Nixon from implementing a program for the protection of Vietnam based on the use of American firepower instead of manpower. The impact of Watergate could not be calculated in advance, but in the end it was decisive. Although clearly in the realm of speculation, the argument that, without Watergate, President Nixon might have successfully defended the RVN through the continued use of American air power and aid cannot be easily dismissed.

The possibility that without Watergate the United States might have muddled through to a more favorable outcome in Vietnam should not prevent one from subjecting the wartime strategy to searching criticism. The revisionist critique represented by the work of Summers and others has found a wide audience, but it does not provide an adequate model for future action. By stressing the need for a conventional military response, it diverts attention from the importance of the unconventional elements that remain primary in revolutionary struggles such as that in Vietnam. In the RVN, the problems of pacification and national development would have remained even if the United States had succeeded in containing the regular forces of the DRV above the 17th parallel. If those problems went unresolved, then internal collapse behind the American shield would have prevented the attainment of the United States' objective of creating a secure, non-Communist state in South Vietnam. At the very least, as happened more than once in the war, the threat of a collapse in the American rear would necessitate further American commitment and prolong the war, heightening the risk of a collapse of American will.

Any analysis that denies the important revolutionary dimension of the Vietnam conflict is misleading, leaving the American people, their leaders, and their military professionals inadequately prepared to deal with similar situations arising in the future. The argument that faulty strategic assessment and poorly articulated goals doomed the American military to faulty operations in Vietnam only encourages military officers to avoid the kind of full-scale reassessment that failures such as that in Southeast Asia ought to stimulate. Instead of forcing the military to come to grips with the problems of revolutionary warfare in nations such as Guatemala or Peru, the revisionist views of Summers and others led officers back into the conventional war model that had provided

so little preparation for solving the problems faced in Indochina by the French, the Americans, and their Vietnamese allies. Such a business-as-usual approach is much too complacent in a world plagued by irregular warfare.

When Fox Butterfield surveyed the authors of the "new" Vietnam scholarship he implied that somehow they had managed to place themselves above the battle and were engaged in a truly objective analysis of the war. Building upon Butterfield's work, Summers implied that his contribution to scholarship is closer to the truth than previous accounts "written in the heat of passion which too often mirror the prejudices of the times."^[58] One should be wary, however, of any author's claim to objectivity. Although Summers' analysis may lack passion, it was certainly what many people in the army and the nation wanted to hear. With the responsibility for failure in Vietnam placed squarely on "academic counterinsurgency experts" and overly timid leaders in Washington, significant military errors become a function of strategic or perceptual errors made at a higher, usually civilian level. In short, the military was absolved of virtually all responsibility for failure. A different analytical framework would make such a shirking of responsibility much more difficult, and readers should be wary of any military or other insider whose seemingly objective scholarship fits so well with what many other members of the military or the government want to hear.

[1] John M. Gates, "Vietnam: The Debate Goes On," *Parameters*, 14 (1984), 43-56.

[2] Fox Butterfield, "The New Vietnam Scholarship," *The New York Times Magazine* (February 13, 1983), 26-27.

[3] "Man of the Hour," *Parade Magazine* (August 14, 1983), 9.

[4] Harry G. Summers, Jr., "A Strategic Perception of the Vietnam War," *Parameters*, 13 (June 1983), 41-46 contains an excellent summary of Summers' argument, as does "Vietnam Reconsidered," *The New Republic* (July 12, 1982), 25-31. A more extensive and detailed presentation is contained in Summers' book *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, Calif., 1982).

[5] "Vietnam Reconsidered," 25.

[6] "A Strategic Perception of the Vietnam War," 42.

[7] *Ibid.*, 44.

[8] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, 1976), 88-89.

[9] "A Strategic Perception of the Vietnam War," 42.

[10] *Mao Tse-Tung on Guerrilla Warfare*, Trans. by Samuel B. Griffith (New York, 1961), 56 and 113; *Mao Tse-Tung on Revolution and War*, ed. by M. Rejai (New York 1970), 288.

[11] Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War, People's Army* (New York, 1962), 103-104; Truong Chinh, *The Resistance Will Win in Primer for Revolt* (New York, 1963), 116.

[12] Van Tien Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory*, trans. by John Spragens, Jr. (New York, 1977), 12.

[13] Sir Robert Thompson, *Revolutionary War in World Strategy, 1945-1969* (New York, 1970), 11. Italics in original. By the time of Saigon's fall, however, Thompson appeared to have changed his mind. See the quotation from Thompson at the beginning of the next chapter. For an overview of revolutionary war strategy and a summary of its strategic phases including mobile warfare see

John J. McCuen, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War* (Harrisburg, 1966), ch. 2, 37-44 in particular.

[14] *People's War, People's Army*, 69.

[15] "Letter from Ho Chi Minh to Compatriots in Nam Bo, May 31, 1946" in Gareth Porter, ed., *Vietnam: A History in Documents* (New York, 1981), 45 and extract of article in *Hoc Tap* (April 1973) in Gareth Porter, ed., *Vietnam: The Definitive History of Human Decisions* (New York, 1979), 626.

[16] Troung Nhu Tang, "The Myth of a Liberation," *New York Review of Books* (October 21, 1982), 32.

[17] The 1961, '65 and '67 statements are from "NFLSV Position Statements" in Part VI B, Negotiations 1965-1967, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*, Book 12 (Washington, 1971), 189, 197, and 233. The 1969 statement is from Appendix 17 of George McTurnan Kahin and John W. Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam* (revised ed., New York, 1969), 513.

[18] Wallace J. Thies, *When Governments Collide: Coercion and Diplomacy in the Vietnam Conflict, 1964-1968* (Berkeley, 1980), 400.

[19] George C. Herring, ed., *The Secret Diplomacy of the Vietnam War: The Negotiating Volumes of the Pentagon Papers* (Austin, 1983), 31.

[20] *The Senator Gravel Edition: The Pentagon Papers* (Boston, 1971), I, 264.

[21] Thies, *When Governments Collide*, 418.

[22] *Congressional Record* (May 1, 1972), 16751.

[23] "Vietnam Reconsidered," 26. Italics in original.

[24] Harry G. Summers, Jr., "An *On Strategy* Rejoinder," *Air University Review*, 34 (July-August 1983), 93, indicates that the author did not "intend to imply that counterinsurgency tasks like pacification and nation-building were unimportant." Unfortunately the structure, style and force of his argument lead readers to that erroneous conclusion despite his professed intentions.

[25] Hugh M. Arnold, "Official Justifications for America's Role in Indochina, 1949-1967," *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 3 (September-October 1975), 42.

[26] Porter, ed., *Vietnam: A History in Documents*, 30 and 34-35. See also, Harold R. Isaacs, *No Peace for Asia* (New York, 1947), ch. 6.

[27] Porter, ed., *Vietnam: A History in Documents*, 47.

[28] A copy of the Geneva agreement is in *Ibid.*, 160. For the 1973 Paris agreement see Gareth Porter, *A Peace Denied: The United States, Vietnam, and the Paris Agreement* (Bloomington, 1975), 322. RVN views appear in Porter, ed., *Vietnam: The Definitive Documentation of Human Decisions*, I, 581 and 656.

[29] See, for example, Summers, "Vietnam Reconsidered," 26.

[30] James Pickney Harrison, *The Endless War: Fifty Years of Struggle in Vietnam* (New York, 1982), 30.

[31] "A Strategic Perception of the Vietnam War," 44.

- [32] Douglas Kinnard, *The War Managers* (Hanover, New Hampshire, 1977), 169.
- [33] Arnold, "Official Justifications for America's Role in Indochina," 48.
- [34] Porter, ed., *Vietnam: A History in Documents*, 73.
- [35] *Ibid.*, 105.
- [36] *The Senator Gravel Edition: The Pentagon Papers*, II, 642.
- [37] *Ibid.*, 412.
- [38] "A Strategic Perception of the Vietnam War," 44.
- [39] Michael Maclear, *The Ten Thousand Day War--Vietnam: 1945-1975* (New York, 1981), 216.
- [40] *Ibid.*
- [41] Porter, ed., *Vietnam: A History in Documents*, 310.
- [42] "A Strategic Perception of the Vietnam War," 44-45.
- [43] Richard A. Hunt and Richard H. Shultz, Jr., eds., *Lessons from an Unconventional War: Reassessing U.S. Strategies for Future Conflicts* (New York, 1982) makes clear that the American approach in Vietnam was not in harmony with counterinsurgency theory. See also Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance, 1950 to the Present* (New York, 1977), 288 in particular. For a survey of the debate between "The Counterinsurgency School" and "The Hawks" see George C. Herring, "American Strategy in Vietnam: The Postwar Debate," *Military Affairs*, 45 (April 1982), 57-63.
- [44] Clausewitz, *On War*, 596.
- [45] Kinnard, *The War Managers*, 172.
- [46] Alan L. Gropman, "The Air War in Vietnam, 1961-1973" (Paper given at the annual meeting of the Southeast Conference Association for Asian Studies, Raleigh, 1986).
- [47] *Ibid.*, 3.
- [48] Kinnard, *The War Managers*, 161.
- [49] Gropman, "The Air War in Vietnam," 5.
- [50] *The Senator Gravel Edition: The Pentagon Papers*, IV, 231.
- [51] Edward N. Luttwak, *The Pentagon and the Art of War* (New York, 1985), 32
- [52] *Ibid.*, 33.
- [53] *Ibid.*, 34.
- [54] *Ibid.*, 36.
- [55] *Ibid.*, 38.
- [56] *Ibid.*, 41.

[57] Seymour M. Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (New York, 1983), 130, 195, and 637-638. See also P. Edward Haley, *Congress and the Fall of South Vietnam and Cambodia* (Rutherford, New Jersey, 1982).

[58] "A Strategic Perception of the Vietnam War," 45.