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THE VIETNAM WAR

The US suffered its most humiliating military defeat in 1975, when it was driven out of Vietnam by the Viet Cong/ National Liberation Front and North Vietnamese forces. A total of 58,000 Americans were killed in the war, with 2,500 still unaccounted for. The US had got involved in Vietnamese affairs without thinking through the full risks involved. It took over the French role, thinking it could do better.

Vietnam was part of the French Indochinese Empire (along with Laos and Cambodia). They tried to retain control over it after World War II but Ho Chi Minh (1880-1969) led a successful guerrilla army: the Vietminh. Ho Chi Minh warned a French diplomat in 1946 on the eve of the war: “You can kill 10 of my men for everyone I kill of yours, but in the end I will win and you will lose”.

The French complained that the Vietminh would not stay in one location to fight a conventional battle. In 1954, the French deployed their forces Dien Bien Phu, in a valley. When a senior officer was told this was risky, he replied, that Ho Chi Minh had no artillery, if he did his guerrillas would not be able to get it over the mountains to threaten the camp, and if they could, they would not be able to use it. Ho Chi Minh’s forces acquired artillery, disassembled it into small parts and carried it over the mountains on their bicycles. As soon as that officer heard the first salvo he committed suicide. He knew that the French were finished.

The French were driven out of Vietnam in 1954. At the 1954 Geneva Peace Conference, Vietnam was divided temporarily to permit the French to leave the south. But the US refused to have the country reunited. It feared that the war hero Ho Chi Minh would come to power in a reunited country in a free election. In 1955 the US created the Republic of South Vietnam, headed by the anti-communist Ngo Dinh Diem. The “temporary” division of the country had become permanent – at least for two decades.

In 1957 the insurgency began in the South. Hanoi and Washington DC fought two different types of “wars”. Hanoi fought a protracted guerrilla struggle (like its victorious one against France). Washington DC fought a “limited” conventional one, in which it expected that technology would win the day. This would require the minimum possible disruption to American civilian life. There would not be a World War II-type full-scale American mobilization of personnel or finance. The US financed the war through printing extra dollars (rather than through increased taxation) and so it debased its own currency.

Throughout the 1950s, the US got gradually drawn deeper into the Vietnam quagmire. In the early 1960s, US President John Kennedy increased US aid to the South. He was convinced that nationalist guerrillas could be beaten in their “wars of national liberation” and he wanted to use Vietnam as the test case. In November 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated. There is no agreement on how he would have fought the war had he lived. His admirers say that he would have looked for a way out of the war, while his critics claim that he would have been sucked deeper into it just like his successor.

He was replaced by Lyndon Johnson, who had had no foreign affairs experience. He was determined not to be the first US president ever to lose a war. On August 2 1964 came the Gulf of Tonkin “incident” by which the US destroyer the “Maddox” was attacked while spying off the North Vietnamese coast. The ship returned on August 4 with the “Turner Joy” and they apparently got attacked. An outraged media, public and Congress wanted immediate action. On August 7 1964 the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution gave the President the Congressional authorization to use force. This was the closest the US ever came to a formal declaration of war.

We now know that the August 4 1964 incident never took place. The nervous crews on the two US warships mistook the sounds of their own propellers for the sounds of enemy boats. The alarm was given and the firing commenced. After four hours of “activity” both ships left the area unharmed. Robert McNamara was Defence Secretary at the time. Though he publicly supported the war, he privately thought it was a mistake and that the US could not win.

In 1995 he went back to Vietnam as an honoured guest and met with some of his ex-enemies. He asked military hero Vo Nguyen Giap why he did not issue a media statement back in August 1964 explaining that there had been no second attack. Easy, he replied in effect, the North Vietnamese were being credited with driving off two US warships – why not take the credit?

In mid-1965 came the major US build up, with an additional 200,000 troops deployed. The Tet Offensive occurred in January 1968. It was supposed to be the last offensive to drive the US out. In fact Hanoi failed to drive the US out in one go - but the US lost the media battle. For a few hours, the US Embassy in Saigon was overrun. This was not a major military event but it was a public relations disaster. If the US could not protect its own embassy then what hope was there for the rest of the country? In March 1968 Johnson announced that he would not seek re-election in the following November. Richard Nixon won that election

In January 23 1973 there came the “Peace with Honour” Paris Agreement negotiated by US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Most American personnel were removed. The US hoped that the South Vietnamese could fight off the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. They survived throughout 1974. But in January 1975 there was a renewed offensive in the northern part of South Vietnam. The South Vietnamese decided to withdraw from that region. What was supposed to be a tactical withdrawal to regroup further south became a headlong retreat. The South Vietnamese and the remaining US forces just kept fleeing south towards Saigon – and the US’s first defeat in war.

✓ What Went Wrong?

Why did the Americans misjudge the war? First, the Americans knew little about the country in which they were fighting. Young Americans went to Vietnam expecting to be welcomed as liberators (as in John Wayne World War II movies) but in many cases they were presented as foreigners interfering in another country. In the late 1950s/ early 1960s, there were few American specialists in Vietnamese history and culture. Some of these advised against American involvement because of the Vietnamese record of fighting off foreign invaders, not least the Chinese (with whom they still to this day have border tensions). As we now know, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was always doubtful that the Americans could win.

If the Americans had paid more attention to history and culture, then possibly they could have guessed that although China and North Vietnam were both communist, their thousands of years of mutual hatred would hinder any long-term co-operation. This has in fact turned out to be case, with all three communist countries (China, Vietnam and Cambodia) feuding with each other since the US left the region in 1975.

Robert McNamara, who was the Defence Secretary for the period of the expansion of the American commitment admitted, two decades after the Americans were driven out of Saigon, that the war was a mistake. He said that a major mistake was a lack of information on the enemy.

Second, Ho Chi Minh used guerrilla warfare. The American defence system was geared up for conventional warfare and so it was not able to engage the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong on American terms. The war had no front lines; it went on anywhere and everywhere. An apparently innocent Vietnamese farmer working in a field could have spent the night laying the mines over which you were about to travel. Rice fields could conceal various booby traps. The Vietnamese workers in the barracks could be planting bombs – or putting poison in the food they were preparing for your next meal. Guerrilla warfare meant that Ho Chi Minh could lose battle after battle, and still win the war - because the Americans would become worn down by the loss of American life. This is what happened, with American opinion turning against the war.

Third, all the members of Johnson's Administration had been influenced by the October 1962 Cuban missile crisis. President Kennedy had forced the Soviet Union to withdraw its missiles from Cuba by gradually increasing the pressure on the Soviet Union. He avoided a head-on clash with the Soviet Union. They thought that the same formula of gradually increasing the pressure on North Vietnam could work. Thus, step-by-step they increased the pressure. But at each point, the American pressure was matched increased efforts by the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong.

Finally, the Americans could not believe that they could lose a war. They had won all the wars in which they had fought since their War of Independence against the British (1776-83). They were the richest and most technologically advanced country on earth. There was also an

undertone of racial superiority. The Americans thought that they were the best people. Lyndon Johnson said that he was not going to be defeated by a group of Asians wearing black pyjamas.

✓ **How Do You Know if You are Winning or Losing a Guerrilla War?**

The insurgents' violence continues in Iraq. Is this the last gasp of the insurgents making one final desperate push against the US? Or is the US being sucked deeper into a quagmire that (as in Vietnam) will lead to another humiliating defeat? No one knows for sure.

This was a problem for General William Westmoreland, the most controversial soldier in America's recent history. He oversaw the US military build-up in Vietnam in the 1960s and he predicted that the US could win the war. There were around 15,000 American troops in the country when he arrived and over half a million troops when he left. He was convinced that the US could win the war. His strategy was one of attrition: wearing down the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces. He wanted the enemy killed faster than they could be replaced. This was to be done by "search and destroy" missions.

The war was the world's first in which air mobility, via helicopters, played such a key role. The US had an unprecedented ability to move soldiers and equipment across the country. The US thought that superior technology and a large military budget could win the war.

In fact, the strategy was a failure. The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong were able to maintain their numbers. Large numbers of people (fighters and civilians) were killed but people were so resentful of the American presence that others came forward to take their places. Killing each Viet Cong was estimated to cost US\$375,000 per person.

The US may have had air superiority but the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong had superiority where it counted – on the ground at village level. The US failed to "win the hearts and minds" of the people. A guerrilla war is not necessarily a war for territory. It is different from a conventional war, with its emphasis on gaining territory and eventually capturing the other side's capital city. In a guerrilla war, the enemy moves back and forth across the country. The front line is everywhere.

The Americans in Vietnam had to devise a new way of assessing how well they were doing. American soldiers were therefore asked to count the number of dead enemy: the "body count". But dead civilians and dead farm animals were often also included to boost the numbers. The "body count" numbers were not a reliable indicator of the war's progress.

Ironically, in Iraq the US has said explicitly that it does not do "body counts". This has given rise to fresh complaints that there is no record kept of the total number of Iraqis killed in the war. The figure could be as high as 100,000. (The Americans do know how many of their own

soldiers have been – over 2,000 – and a six-month enquiry is being held into the death of the first Australian soldier killed)

The Americans in Vietnam never did develop a coherent set of performance indicators to assess their progress (or otherwise) towards victory. Even something as basic as what to make of captured enemy weapons was problematic. If a large cache of weapons were located, did this mean that the area was swarming with Viet Cong and so the war was going badly? Did the Viet Cong feel so confident about victory that they did not mind losing weapons because they knew they could always get more?

Alternatively, if a large cache were located did this mean that the war was going well for the US because the Viet Cong were losing their precious weapons and so were gradually being disarmed? Did their loss of weapons suggest that they were dispirited and walking away from the war and wanting to return home?

The US never did work out how to assess the significance of captured weapons. This dilemma was symptomatic of much of the US military effort in Vietnam: it had difficulty coping with the new era of warfare. The military were much better prepared for a conventional struggle in Europe between NATO and the Warsaw Pact countries controlled from Moscow. That final clash never came (and in recent years some of the ex-enemy countries have now joined the expanded NATO). Instead, the US military remains unclear as to how to conduct operations in a guerrilla war.

The Vietnam conflict was unlike anything the US had been involved in the 20th century. It was more like the Indian Wars in the middle of the 19th century. Westmoreland was a brave and gifted soldier (he was the top of his year at West Point). But he was unprepared for this new type of guerrilla warfare. Much the same could now be said about the Americans in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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