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*Small Wars and the
Rise of American Power*

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LESSONS UNLEARNED

Vietnam, 1959–1975

The marines landed on Monday morning, March 8, 1965, splashing ashore through the heavy surf of the South China Sea onto the hot beaches just north of Danang, South Vietnam's second-largest city. They were part of a contingent of 3,500 men assigned to provide security for an American airbase being used to stage bombing raids against North Vietnam. The troops, in full battle rig, accompanied by M-48 medium tanks and self-propelled artillery, were ready for trouble. "We thought there was a gook behind every tree and a land mine every three feet," a private recalled. Instead, they were met by the mayor of Danang, who delivered a brief speech, and some schoolgirls who placed flowered wreaths around their necks and held up a sign proclaiming: "Welcome to the Gallant Marines."

As with most landings of marines abroad, the public back home barely noticed. It might as well have been Haiti, 1916, or Nicaragua, 1912. The *New York Times* ran a front-page photo of marines rushing off a landing craft—an image that could have been taken straight from the John Wayne classic *Sands of Iwo Jima*—but it only warranted a small story on an inside page. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s planned march on Selma, Alabama, was much bigger news that day, as was a new crime control package proposed by President Lyndon Johnson. The landing at Danang has acquired great significance in retrospect. Those marines were part of the first U.S. combat unit—the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade—to land in Vietnam. The first of almost 3 million men

(though never more than 540,000 at one time) who would fight and bleed and, 58,000 of them, die, in the jungles and mountains and paddies of South Vietnam in a futile crusade to keep a communist dictatorship from extending its grip from Hanoi to Saigon.

The conflict in Vietnam—the longest in American history and one of the costliest—might seem a curious candidate for inclusion in a book about "small wars." But a discussion of what occurred in Indochina between 1959 and 1975 is unavoidable. "Small wars" refers more to a style of warfare—clashes with guerrilla or irregular forces—than to the scale of combat. For the American armed forces, Vietnam would be the ultimate test of their ability to fight this kind of unconventional conflict. Their failure to rise to the challenge would have profound consequences for U.S. military policy in the decades to come, shaping the armed forces' approach to future small wars. One cannot understand what followed—the small wars of the 1990s, for instance—without understanding what happened in Southeast Asia. Nor can one gain a proper appreciation for the achievements of America's small war soldiers of the past—the Butlers and Hannekens and Pullers—without seeing what happened when all their hard-won experience, their painfully accumulated battle lore, was tossed away as casually as a spent bullet casing.

Bad Advice

The origins of America's involvement in Vietnam continue to spark debate, and no doubt will for generations to come. That is not our primary concern here. Suffice it to say that after the French pulled out in 1954, having lost the pivotal battle of Dienbienphu, Vietnam was split between a Communist government in Hanoi led by Ho Chi Minh and a non-Communist one in Saigon led by Ngo Dinh Diem. The former aligned with Moscow and Peking, the latter with Washington. Ho Chi Minh and his colleagues in the North Vietnamese Politburo spent a few years consolidating their rule over the North—which involved a reign of terror against "enemies of the people"—before undertaking the task of "liberating" the South and reunifying the country. On May 13, 1959, the 15th Plenum of the Party Central Committee voted to resume *dau tranh vu trang* (armed struggle) in the South. But it did not launch an outright invasion, as North Korea had invaded South Korea in 1950. Instead, trained cadres—southerners who had gone north in 1954—began infiltrating South Vietnam to organize a secret Communist infrastructure, building a political base for guerrilla war. The following year, Hanoi announced the formation of the National

Liberation Front, a front group for the Communist effort to conquer the South. The People's Liberation Armed Forces—popularly known as the Vietcong—launched a campaign of assassination and intimidation aimed at officials of the Saigon government. Before long they were making inroads in the Mekong Delta, the Highlands, the coastal plains—almost everywhere in the South outside the major cities.

President John F. Kennedy had come to office pledging “to bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend and oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty.” The front line of the battle appeared to be in Southeast Asia. But Kennedy and his advisers, remembering the unhappy, bloody stalemate on the Korean Peninsula, were afraid of getting embroiled in another land war in Asia. Instead of sending combat troops, Kennedy sent more aid to the Diem government, along with an increasing number of military advisers. The advisers, some piloting U.S.-supplied helicopters, found themselves drawn into combat operations against the Vietcong, and the U.S. began suffering its first casualties; 32 Americans died in combat in 1961 and 1962.

By 1963 there were 12,000 U.S. military advisers in the South; a year later the figure had almost doubled, to 23,000. Superficially the advisers' work resembled that of the Americans who trained native constabularies in the Philippines, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and elsewhere. But there were crucial differences that would have important long-term ramifications. The marines who had served as advisers in the Caribbean had created constabularies—part army, part police force—that emphasized internal defense. In Vietnam, by contrast, U.S. advisers organized a miniature version of their own armed forces, complete with heavy armor, artillery, air force, navy, marines, rangers. The goal was to create a force capable of fighting a conventional conflict, because the advisers figured that the most likely threat to the South would come from a Korean War-style invasion. In the late 1950s this was not an unreasonable bet, but it turned out to be wrong. Disastrously wrong. The main challenge to Saigon would come not from regular armies but from guerrillas. Their American advisers did not prepare the South Vietnamese soldiers for this challenge.

What made things worse was another major difference between the U.S. role in the Banana Wars and in Vietnam. In the Caribbean, and in the Philippines, U.S. officers had been in direct command of locally recruited soldiers. Likewise, during the Korean War, South Korean forces reported to U.S. commanders, who had the power to remove incompetent or corrupt officers. In Vietnam that was not in the cards. Washington did not want to ask for American field command, and Saigon would not grant it, because to do so would have given cre-

dence to the communist claim that the Americans were “neocolonialists” come to replace the French. As a result, command of the South Vietnamese armed forces was turned over to officers usually chosen less for their professional competence than for their political allegiance to, and often family links with, the ruling oligarchy.

The combination of inappropriate training and poor leadership severely hobbled the South Vietnamese armed forces. When the South Vietnamese army mounted big-unit operations in pursuit of the Vietcong, the guerrillas usually gave them the slip as easily as ants evading elephants. On those few occasions when they did manage to bring the Vietcong to battle, the South Vietnamese army suffered humiliating defeats. The major effect of these operations was to expend a great deal of firepower, killing innocent civilians and making fresh converts to the Communist cause. “Guerrilla warfare requires the utmost discrimination in killing,” Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann, an outspoken American adviser, wrote in a 1963 briefing intended for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. “Every time we killed an innocent person we lost ground in our battle to win the people.” But Vann's army superiors refused to listen; his briefing to the Joint Chiefs was canceled.

Ngo Dinh Diem knew that more had to be done. At the urging of the local CIA station and Sir Robert Thompson, a British counterinsurgency expert, he attempted to implement a political agenda to deny the Communists control of the countryside. The centerpiece of his efforts was a program designed to fortify local villages for self-defense, called Strategic Hamlets. A promising idea, it did not get far, in part because the bulk of the South Vietnamese army was diverted to conventional operations, in part because of the ineffectiveness of the Saigon regime. Still, it is possible that Diem's initiatives might have shown greater success over time, were time not running out for Diem himself.

The Kennedy administration increasingly viewed Diem as a liability in the struggle against the communists. It did not help that Buddhist monks were immolating themselves in the streets of Saigon to protest against the Catholic-led regime. Such heavily publicized embarrassments reinforced American officials' tendency to accentuate the negative about Diem—he was an authoritarian ruler with a penchant for rigging elections and squelching dissent—while ignoring his strong nationalist credentials and the lack of credible alternatives. In early November 1963 South Vietnamese army officers, acting with the tacit encouragement of the U.S. government, overthrew and murdered Diem and his brother. Three weeks later Kennedy, too, would lie dead, felled by an assassin's

bullet in Dallas. Although Lyndon Baines Johnson quickly emerged as a strong—if often insecure, bombastic, and deceitful—successor in Washington, the Saigon government was left rudderless. One president succeeded another with dizzying rapidity, each worried more about holding onto power than about stopping the Communists. It took three long years before Nguyen Van Thieu finally emerged as the next strongman of the South.

Hanoi was delighted. A National Liberation Front official history calls the coups “gifts from heaven for us.” The communists took advantage of the situation, infiltrating more men south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a network of trails and roads that ran parallel to South Vietnam through the adjoining nations of Laos and Cambodia. Starting in April 1964, those transiting the trail included regular North Vietnamese soldiers armed with mortars, rocket launchers, automatic rifles, and machine guns. Working in close cooperation with the Vietcong they stepped up their attacks, including terrorist strikes in Saigon aimed at American targets. The South Vietnamese armed forces seemed powerless before this onslaught. Some of his advisers urged Johnson to introduce U.S. combat troops. But he had an election to win, and a Great Society to run, so he hesitated—until a curious incident gave him an excuse to act.

On August 2, 1964, North Vietnamese patrol boats attacked the *Maddox*, a U.S. destroyer operating in the Gulf of Tonkin on a mission to gather intelligence and support South Vietnamese commando raids against the North. The next day the *Maddox* and another destroyer, the *C. Turner Joy*, reported being attacked again. The *Maddox's* skipper concluded afterward that the second attack was probably a phantom, which he attributed to “freak weather” and an “overeager” young sonar technician. Nevertheless the president seized on this incident to seek from Congress authorization to use whatever force he deemed necessary to protect South Vietnam and America’s other allies in Southeast Asia.

The Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which was approved unanimously by the House and with only two dissenting votes in the Senate, has since been attacked by numerous commentators on two somewhat contradictory grounds. First, it is alleged, Johnson tricked Congress, luring America into Vietnam by a deception. Second, it is charged, he did not go far enough; he should have asked for a full-fledged declaration of war. Neither accusation stands up to close scrutiny. While the second Gulf of Tonkin attack probably did not occur, the larger reason why Congress approved the resolution was very real: Communist fighters controlled by Hanoi were indeed trying to conquer a U.S. ally, South Vietnam. Did this require a declaration of war? Not if history is any guide. As we have seen, numerous American presidents had committed U.S. armed forces

to battle in the past without even this much congressional authorization. Declarations of war—voted against Britain in 1812, Mexico in 1846, Spain in 1898, the Central Powers in 1917, the Axis in 1941—were the exception, not the norm, when the U.S. committed its armed forces to combat overseas.

In retaliation for the Gulf of Tonkin incident, Johnson ordered limited air strikes against North Vietnam. But with an election looming, he was in no hurry to get any more deeply involved in Vietnam. Once he had won a landslide victory over Barry Goldwater in November 1964, the gloves could come off. An initial series of bombing strikes called Flaming Dart soon turned into a prolonged air campaign, known as Rolling Thunder, aimed at North Vietnam and at infiltration routes in Laos.

Rolling Thunder lasted for three and a half years—March 1965 to November 1968. But its duration was the only resemblance between it and the strategic bombing that had devastated German and Japanese cities in World War II. Rolling Thunder was a limited bombing campaign of “slowly ascending” escalation designed to bring the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table. Johnson and his secretary of defense, Robert McNamara, personally decided what targets would be hit and what munitions would be dropped. “They can’t even bomb an outhouse without my approval,” the president bragged.

The most important targets were placed off-limits. Johnson refused to strike Hanoi, North Vietnam’s capital; Haiphong, its most important harbor; the overland supply routes from China; or the Red River dikes, destruction of which could have flooded the area around Hanoi and killed hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, of civilians. (By contrast, U.S. warplanes in the Korean War had destroyed North Korea’s dike system, with devastating results.) The bombing was punctuated by numerous pauses designed to signal to North Vietnam, and the world, Washington’s goodwill. Instead, Hanoi read this (rightly) as a sign of the Johnson administration’s weakness and irresolution. The North Vietnamese used bombing pauses to rebuild and to improve their air defenses, which took a growing toll on American fliers as the years went by. It is a sign of Rolling Thunder’s futility that—although the operation dropped roughly 800 tons of bombs a day for three and a half years—imports reaching North Vietnam by sea more than doubled during this period. Henry Kissinger’s verdict rings true: The bombing campaign was “powerful enough to mobilize world opinion against us but too half-hearted and gradual to be decisive.”

Limited as it was, Rolling Thunder could not be carried out by jets operating from aircraft carriers alone. The U.S. Air Force needed bases in South

Vietnam—bases that would be vulnerable to enemy attack. The danger was vividly demonstrated on February 7, 1965, when the Vietcong struck a U.S. airfield in the Highlands, in Pleiku, destroying 10 aircraft, wounding more than 100 Americans, and killing eight. This led President Johnson to land marines to protect the largest U.S. airbase, at Danang.

General William Westmoreland, head of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, wasted little time in asking for more troops—and for expanding their mission beyond base security. By June 1965, he wanted 44 “maneuver” battalions—200,000 men—available for offensive operations. The Joint Chiefs of Staff eagerly backed him up, and President Johnson approved the request at the end of July. The alternative, he feared, was a communist victory, and he was not about to go down in history as another president who had “lost” an Asian country to communism, as Truman had “lost” China. Not even a “damn little pissant country,” as he called Vietnam.

Now that U.S. combat troops were being introduced, the question was, How would they be used? The answer rested in large part with a tall, handsome, thick-browed officer who sported six rows of decorations on his chest and radiated a “can-do” attitude.

A Clash of Strategies

It is hard not to sympathize just a bit with William Childs Westmoreland, one of the great tragic figures in American military history. A southern aristocrat, born into a wealthy South Carolina family, he went on to West Point where, like Robert E. Lee, John J. Pershing, and Douglas MacArthur before him, he attained the honor of becoming first captain of cadets. Westy entered World War II a first lieutenant and emerged a colonel, having fought with the 9th Infantry Division in North Africa, Sicily, Normandy, the Bulge, Remagen. Identified as one of the army’s brightest young officers, he won his first star in Korea. In 1958 came command of the 101st Airborne Division, followed by the prestigious post of superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point (again following in MacArthur’s footsteps). It was at West Point that he suffered the first blot on his heretofore spotless record: He failed to sign up Vince Lombardi as the head football coach. The candidate whom he hired produced a losing record, much to the chagrin of such West Point alumni as Dwight Eisenhower and Douglas MacArthur. But that was his only slip-up. Westy was the army’s Golden Boy, and so he was sent to the scene of the action. If the action had been a replay of World War II or Korea he would no doubt have emerged a hero, perhaps even one of the all-time greats. Instead he

was sent to fight a war for which nothing in his training or experience had prepared him.

Initially assigned as deputy commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Westmoreland, by now nearly 50 years old, took over in 1964 as the senior U.S. officer in the country. It was his job to figure out how to defeat the Vietnamese Communists. No easy task, that. The obvious solution, from the Pentagon’s perspective, would have been to invade the North and make Ho Chi Minh cry “uncle.” But that was off the table. Johnson was afraid that an invasion of the North would divert attention from his Great Society programs and might even spark a war with China—a concern that, as newly released documents reveal, was well-founded. For similar reasons, the president ruled out cutting the Ho Chi Minh Trail by occupying Laos, or even inflicting unlimited punishment from the air against North Vietnam. Westmoreland was discouraged by these limitations but undaunted. He simply resolved to fight the war his way within the parameters laid down for him. And his way was the army way, the American way, the World War II way: Find the enemy, fix him in place, and annihilate him with withering firepower.

John F. Kennedy had been a great enthusiast for low-intensity conflict. He changed the nation’s official military strategy from Massive Retaliation to Flexible Response, pledging to meet aggression at any level without instantly hauling out nuclear weapons. As part of this policy (and over the objections of the brass), he bestowed the green beret on the Special Forces and expanded their budget. The army was happy to have more funding, but it adamantly resisted attempts to move its focus away from preparing for a conventional conflict in Europe. The generals had no intention of letting a bunch of Harvard whiz kids tamper with the formula that had won World War II. Kennedy tried to overcome this resistance, but he was unable to effect any fundamental reform before his death, and Johnson did not share his interest in the subject.

Westmoreland was one of the pillars of the army establishment that had successfully resisted fundamental change. He was a by-the-book man—and his book was not the *Small Wars Manual*. The army’s *Field Manual of Operations* preached that “wars can be won only by offensive action,” and that was precisely what Westmoreland set out to do. He organized his forces for large-unit “search and destroy” missions designed to root out and annihilate the enemy in the spooky terrain of the Highlands, “a run of erratic mountain ranges, gnarled valleys, jungled ravines and abrupt plains” that stretched across the spine of Vietnam. Westmoreland wanted “a well-balanced, hard-hitting force designed to fight in sustained combat and just grind away against the enemy on a sustained basis.” The task of pacification—of preventing the Communists from gaining control of

the South's people—he relegated to the South Vietnamese army, which, being created in the U.S. Army's own image, had no enthusiasm for the job either. Thus the really hard, vital work of keeping the Vietcong out of the South's population centers was left for the most part to the ill-equipped, ill-trained South Vietnamese militia, who did not even have access to modern rifles.

Never mind that search-and-destroy tactics had been attempted by the South Vietnamese armed forces for years on the advice of their American trainers—with scant success. Westmoreland and other American generals convinced themselves that the problem lay with the South Vietnamese army, not with its doctrine and force structure. If only the Americans could implement the same strategy with more firepower, more mobility, more gusto, victory would be theirs. At a press conference, Westmoreland was asked what the answer to counterinsurgency was. His one-word reply: "Firepower."

That would have been the right answer if South Vietnam were facing a conventional invasion, but it was not. "People's war," as preached by Mao Tse-tung and waged by General Vo Nguyen Giap, commander of the North Vietnamese armed forces, was designed to avoid a test of the enemy's strength. The struggle of "national liberation" progressed through three phases. Phase 1: send out loyal cadres to propagandize the peasants and create in the countryside "a protective belt of sympathizers willing to supply food, recruits, and information." Phase 2: launch a protracted guerrilla struggle, during which "collaborationists and 'reactionary elements' are liquidated" and "vulnerable military and police outposts" are ambushed. Once the government has been sufficiently weakened, it is time for phase 3: the formation of conventional armies (main forces) that, in conjunction with a general popular uprising, will finish off the enemy and create a "people's republic."

Westmoreland was well aware of all this; his bedside reading included Mao Tse-tung's Little Red Book on guerrilla warfare. But with the clarity of hindsight, it is obvious that he misjudged the situation in 1965. He thought the Communists were progressing to phase 3—conventional war—whereas in reality Hanoi was still for the most part in phase 2—guerrilla war. (The North did escalate to phase 3 in 1968, 1972, and 1975.) His mistake was understandable because starting in 1965, North Vietnamese army units *were* infiltrating the South. But the communists were placing the bulk of their efforts elsewhere. In 1966 there were only 38,000 People's Army of North Vietnam soldiers in the South, while the Vietcong, most of them southerners, numbered at least 220,000. (North Vietnamese did not dominate the ranks of Communist forces in the South until after 1968.) Moreover, most Communist main force units used essentially guerrilla-style, hit-and-run tactics. U.S. military studies showed

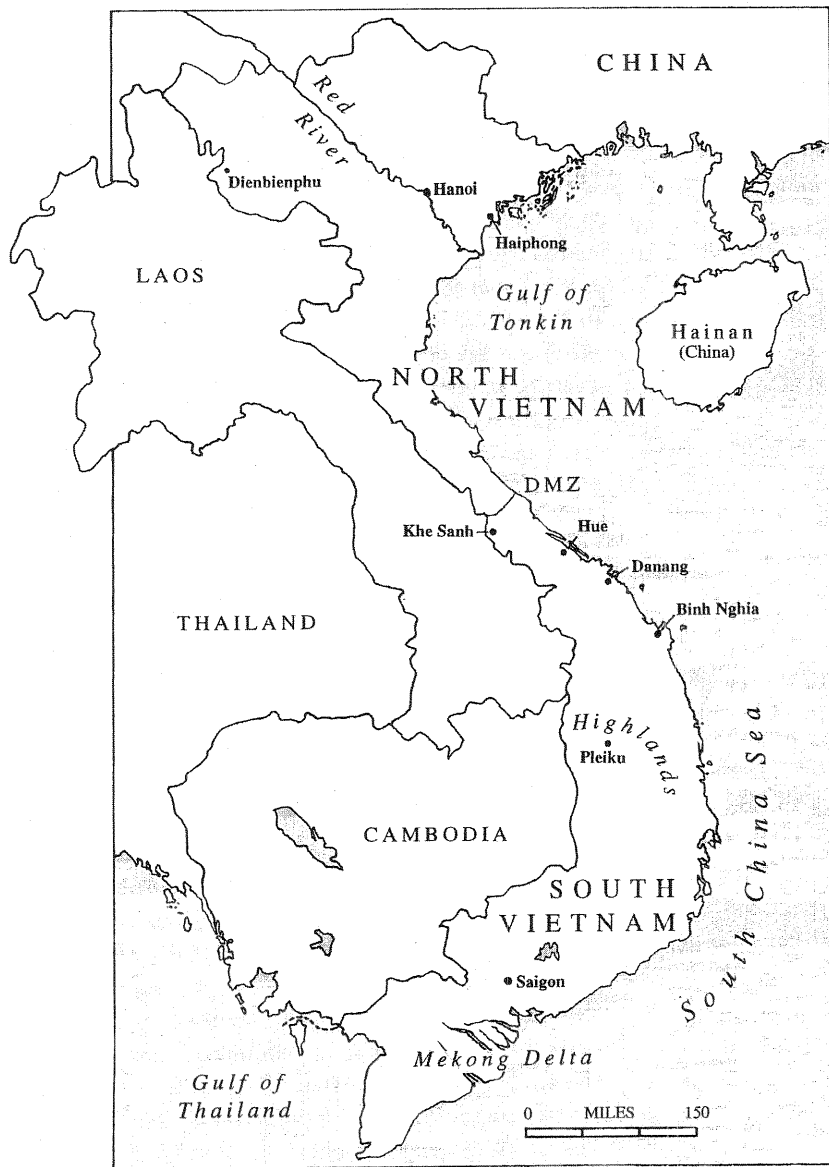
that the number of Communist attacks in battalion size or greater actually *decreased* between 1965 and 1966—from an average of 9.7 per month in the final quarter of 1965 to 1.3 per month in the final quarter of 1966. The number of small-scale attacks jumped 150 percent during this period.

Because the Communists were still in phase 2, the Ho Chi Minh Trail did not loom as large in reality as it did in Westmoreland's calculations. He was desperate to close this supply conduit, and U.S. forces expended vast amounts of munitions in a futile attempt to achieve this goal. But the Vietcong did not need much aid from the North; most of their supplies and manpower were appropriated from peasants in the South. A 1965 CIA study estimated that the Vietcong needed no more than 12 tons a day of supplies from outside—an amount that, in U.S. terms, could be carried in one tractor-trailer rig or 15 pickup trucks.

There was little hope that Westmoreland's conventional strategy could stop this guerrilla threat. More likely his approach would simply wear down the U.S. forces—just what General Giap was counting on.

From the start, this strategy had a number of critics, primarily officials from the CIA, the marines, and the State Department, along with guerrilla warfare experts such as Air Force General Edward Lansdale and Sir Robert Thompson, as well as a handful of renegade army officers such as John Paul Vann. They urged Washington to adopt the methods employed by the Marine Corps in the past, the tactics immortalized in the *Small Wars Manual*, but they did not get very far.

Marine Major General Victor H. Krulak later recalled his frustrations in lobbying for a "spreading inkblot" strategy—expanding American control slowly from the seacoast by pacifying one hamlet after another, as the U.S. had done in the Philippines six decades before. Although not physically imposing (he was just five feet five, 138 pounds, so small that he needed an exemption from physical requirements to obtain his commission), "Brute" Krulak was a first-rate fighter and thinker. His nickname derived from his days at the Naval Academy, when he had been a ferocious wrestler despite his diminutive size. In the late 1930s, he served with the 4th Marines in Shanghai, where he helped develop a type of landing craft that was widely employed during World War II. Then he won a Navy Cross, the service's second-highest decoration, fighting the Japanese in the Pacific. Along the way, he had been steeped in the Corps' small wars tradition, learning from, and serving alongside, many of the veterans of Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua. The plan he developed for winning in Vietnam drew on those experiences.



MAP 13.I Indochina, circa 1965

Under his scheme, which was similar to that of other counterinsurgency experts, U.S. forces would concentrate on cutting off the Vietcong from the population centers along the Mekong Delta and the coastal plain, where most of the South Vietnamese population was located. Eighty percent of the people, he observed, lived in 10 percent of the country, the bulk of them in small farming communities. The key to winning the war was to provide security for these villagers, to reassure them that it was safe to side with the government and to resist the Vietcong's attempts to "tax" them, seek information from them, and enlist their young men to carry arms against the government. It would be virtually impossible to hunt down and eliminate the communist forces in their jungle lairs, but if the U.S. could cut them off from the civilian population, they would wither away. Krulak liked to quote General Giap: "Without the people we have no information. . . . They hide us, protect us, feed us and tend our wounded."

Denying the Vietcong access to the people would call for few big-unit operations. It would take aggressive small-unit foot patrolling, especially at night, to gather intelligence and disrupt guerrilla operation. Above all, it would mean training local people to defend themselves. That was the only way to ensure the long-term security of the country. U.S. forces could not totally forgo big-unit operations; they would sometimes be necessary to expel enemy main forces from a region and prevent them from coming back. But the chief thrust had to be on pacification, not search-and-destroy. Krulak wanted to combine this pacification strategy with the bombing and mining of Haiphong harbor, the entry point for much of the North's war materiel.

In December 1965, less than a year after the first U.S. combat troops had landed in South Vietnam, Krulak sat down in his office, situated on a mountain overlooking Pearl Harbor, and wrote a 17-page "strategic appraisal" in which he pointed out the futility of pursuing a conventional strategy. Gaining possession of the Highlands—where Westmoreland was focusing his efforts—was pointless, Krulak argued, because the people and the food in South Vietnam were located on the coastal plain. "A key point is this:" he wrote, "the conflict between the North Vietnamese/hard core Vietcong, on the one hand, and the U.S. on the other, could move to another planet today and we would not have won the war. On the other hand, if the subversion and guerrilla efforts were to disappear, the war would soon collapse, as the enemy would be denied food, sanctuary and intelligence."

Krulak, then the commander of the Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, and the third-ranking general in the entire Corps, took his memo to Washington in an attempt to win over the U.S. government to his view. Brute was no naïf when

it came to Beltway politics. He had known John F. Kennedy from World War II and had become friendly with Bobby Kennedy during a previous assignment as special assistant to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the secretary of defense for counterinsurgency. He instantly got in to see Robert McNamara, but the defense secretary was not very receptive to his views. "Why don't you talk to Governor Harriman?" he suggested, palming him off on the assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs.

They met for lunch at W. Averell Harriman's Georgetown mansion. Over the soup course, Krulak complained about all the munitions being wasted in fruitless bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Then he got around to his plan of action, beginning with a proposal to "destroy the port areas, mine the ports, destroy the rail lines, destroy power, fuel and heavy industry." Harriman wrinkled his forehead, waved a sterling silver soup spoon at him, and demanded, "Do you want a war with the Soviet Union or the Chinese?" End of conversation. (In fact, when the kind of bombing Krulak advocated was undertaken seven years later, no war with either the Soviet Union or China resulted.)

Krulak found the army establishment no more receptive. "Many people applauded the idea, among them army generals Maxwell Taylor and James Gavin," Brute recalled. "General Westmoreland told me, however, that while the ink blot idea seemed to be effective, we just didn't have time to do it that way. I suggested to him that we didn't have time to do it any other way; if we left the people to the enemy, glorious victories in the hinterland would be little more than blows in the air—and we would end up losing the war."

Which is exactly what happened.

The Big-Unit War

By 1968, the Free World forces (as they were known) consisted of 536,000 soldiers from the U.S., 66,000 from allied countries (Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines), and 670,000 men in the armed forces and militia of South Vietnam. And still it was not enough.

Westmoreland sent his forces thrashing through the rainforests and mountains on big-unit search-and-destroy missions with fancy code names like Cedar Falls and Junction City. But "Charlie" would not cooperate. The Vietcong refused to play the *Wehrmacht* to Westmoreland's Patton. Even with extensive use of "vertical envelopment" by helicopter, the American forces seldom managed to pin down enough of the Vietcong to bring their overwhelming firepower to bear. Thanks to their agents and informants, the communists usually knew when the Americans were coming. The U.S. forces, on the other

hand, were usually ignorant of enemy strengths and locations. On those rare occasions when the Vietcong were caught off guard, the Americans would helpfully announce their presence with the roar of helicopters arriving and the thump of artillery shells crashing down. Suitably alerted, the enemy would disappear, only to return a few days later, by which time they knew the G.I.'s would be gone. The official report on Junction City and Cedar Falls—two attempts to destroy communist base camps in 1967—concluded, "It was a sheer physical impossibility to keep him [the enemy] from slipping away whenever he wished if he were in terrain with which he was familiar—generally the case. The jungle was just too thick and too widespread to keep him from getting away."

U.S. soldiers never lost a battle, but neither did they manage to pin down enough of the enemy so that a victory meant something. The Vietcong had the initiative. They could either accept battle or not, carefully calculating how many casualties they could afford to lose. The U.S. military estimated in 1967 that 88 percent of all engagements were initiated by the enemy, clearly implying that the U.S. was fighting on the enemy's terms.

A large part of the problem was that the Pentagon did not field a force designed for counterinsurgency operations. Anti-guerrilla operations place a premium on highly skilled light infantry with a flair for dealing with civilians. The U.S. once had plenty of such soldiers, men like Smedley Butler and Chesty Puller who spent decades in the bush. By the 1960s, Butler was dead, Puller was in retirement, and such skills had been all but lost. Young American draftees in Vietnam had little training in counterinsurgency. By the time they learned the ropes they had departed, since soldiers rotated "in country" on one-year tours. As John Paul Vann quipped, "The United States has not been in Vietnam for nine years, but for one year nine times."

The situation was even worse among officers above the platoon level. Most of them served no more than six months with a field unit—a system designed to allow as many ambitious career officers as possible to "punch their ticket" in combat. In late June 1966, Colonel Harold Moore's tour as commander of the 1st Cavalry Division's 3rd Brigade ended while his men were engaged with the enemy. "It would have been criminal, in those circumstances, to relinquish command to a man who was still pissing Stateside water, and I flatly refused to do so," Moore recalled. But the change of command was delayed by only 10 days. A month later his successor made a mistake that the more battle-hardened Moore might have avoided. A mistake that cost 25 men their lives.

It was not that American soldiers in Vietnam were inferior to those in previous U.S. wars; many were just as dedicated, just as heroic as the G.I.s immor-

talized in *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Longest Day*. What they lacked was experience—experience that the army's perverse personnel policies ensured that they did not acquire. A Vietcong guerrilla, on the other hand, did not fight for six months or one year and then go home. Like U.S. servicemen in World War II, he served "for the duration"—or until he was killed.

The U.S. high command tried to make up for its shortcomings in jungle fighting by flexing America's industrial muscles. The disparity in technology between the two sides was so vast that it almost seemed as if the Jetsons were fighting the Flintstones. On the communist side were guerrillas in black "pajamas" and tire-tread sandals armed with homemade booby traps and perhaps AK-47 assault rifles or mortars. The U.S. side had sensors, ground radar, infrared equipment, defoliants, herbicides, cluster bombs, missiles of various varieties, tanks, armored personnel carriers, artillery of various calibers, naval vessels ranging from small patrol boats to giant nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, and of course all the aircraft—everything from B-52 bombers to UH-1 Huey helicopters to specially fitted C-47 airplanes known as Puff the Magic Dragon equipped with automatic machine guns capable of spitting out 6,000 rounds a minute. To say nothing of the infantryman's tools—M-16 and M-14 assault rifles, mortars, machine guns, flame throwers, grenade launchers, claymore mines, C-4 plastic explosives, rocket launchers.

Sometimes the search for a technological solution reached comic proportions. U.S. soldiers can't track down the Vietcong in the jungle? No problem. The XM-2 Personnel Detector will do the job. An electrochemical device carried on a helicopter, the XM-2 was supposed to detect the presence of human urine, on the assumption that where there's urine there must be Vietcong. But the Vietcong quickly learned how to "spoof" this device by hanging buckets of urine in trees. Another, equally futile idea was Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's proposal, borrowed from a Harvard law professor, to build an electronic fence to seal off South Vietnam from infiltration. The military nicknamed this plan the McNamara Line, in homage to another series of fortifications—the Maginot Line which had failed to protect France from German invasion in 1940. The McNamara Line, which was supposed to consist of barbed wire, mines, and acoustic and seismic detection devices, did not get very far.

But by and large the Pentagon's concepts of high-tech warfare *were* implemented. Much of what the military accomplished was simply miraculous. Deep-water ports and airfields, roads and supply depots, base camps and head-

quarters buildings, telephone networks and post exchanges (PXs)—all sprang into existence virtually overnight, thanks to the ingenuity and hard work of military engineers and civilian contractors. When not in the field, U.S. soldiers had access to hamburgers and ice cream, air conditioning and cold beer, movie theaters and bowling alleys. All this logistical effort tied down vast numbers of American personnel, however, leaving relatively few available for field service. "For every man who lived in a grubby bunker on a remote firebase," wrote one Vietnam veteran, "four or five slept between sheets and, likely as not, in air conditioned rooms."

Nothing was more impressive (or depressing, depending on one's perspective) than the sheer amount of firepower expended by U.S. forces. The U.S. dropped more than 8 million tons of bombs over Vietnam—twice the amount dropped by British and American bombers during all of World War II. This statistic is amazing enough, but more startling still is that at least half of these bombs, and almost all of the millions of tons of artillery shells fired by U.S. forces, were expended not over the enemy, North Vietnam, but over America's ally, South Vietnam.

Most air strikes and artillery bombardments were not conducted in support of U.S. ground forces in combat but were designed to interdict enemy supplies and personnel. U.S. artillery batteries were in the habit of routinely unleashing "harassment and interdiction" fire, just blazing away with no real target, in the hope of hitting some unseen enemy. H&I fire—which was supposed to be limited to "free-fire zones" devoid of civilians—accounted for nearly two-thirds of all artillery shells fired and bombs dropped in 1966. "The batteries fired their allotments every opportunity they had," said one U.S. artillery officer, "whether there was actually anything to shoot at or not."

All this firepower took a growing toll on the enemy and (though it was not usually intended) on civilians too. But it did little to draw the U.S. closer to victory. The Vietcong became expert at dodging American firepower, often by tunneling underground or hiding in the forest, sometimes by "hugging" U.S. troop formations so tightly that air strikes could not be called in without risking "friendly" casualties. The Vietcong even learned to turn American munitions against their makers, converting artillery shells into lethal mines and booby traps.

The courage of the American fighting man could not be doubted. But as the war progressed, it dawned on the grunts that their heroism was for naught. The war's glorious futility was exemplified by one senseless siege.

Khe Sanh was located in the far northwest corner of South Vietnam, near the border with Laos, a rugged, isolated wilderness of dark green mountains and dense jungle frequently soaked by heavy rainfall and often enshrouded by thick fog. The French had established a dirt airstrip on a plateau here, an outpost that was reachable from the coast only by a single narrow road. Westmoreland insisted on garrisoning Khe Sanh over the vociferous objections of Brute Krulak and other marine commanders, who pointed out that adequately defending it would require a commitment of manpower out of all proportion to its importance. No matter how large the U.S. garrison became, it would not cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail; Communist infiltrators could always bypass Khe Sanh to the south. While Westmoreland gave a number of reasons for garrisoning Khe Sanh, some marines began to suspect that his primary motive was this: He hoped that sticking a battalion of marines in the middle of the wilderness would draw large numbers of North Vietnamese troops, who could then be slaughtered by U.S. firepower.

Giap was happy to oblige, for he saw an opportunity to catch the Americans at a disadvantage. In April 1967 North Vietnamese units occupied the hills surrounding Khe Sanh, giving them direct line-of-sight into the U.S. base. The marines had no choice but to root them out, assaulting uphill straight into withering fire delivered from a cunningly constructed network of bunkers and trenches. To marine commanders this was distressingly similar to the bloodlettings they had suffered on one Pacific atoll after another two decades earlier. As in World War II, the marines took their objectives but at high cost—155 dead, 425 wounded in two and a half weeks of battles. Worse was to come.

Giap did not give up on Khe Sanh after his men were pushed off those hills. He simply moved in more regulars, 30,000 to 40,000 men in all. On January 20–21, 1968, they opened fire on the Khe Sanh base with their mortars and field pieces, signaling the start of a siege that would last 77 days. Westmoreland was delighted; he had his climactic battle at last. He airlifted in reinforcements—more than 6,000 U.S. Marines and 600 South Vietnamese Rangers were now defending this grimy fire base miles from anywhere. The outnumbered defenders had one advantage: virtually unlimited firepower from field artillery and airplanes, including the all-mighty B-52s, which would unleash more than 75,000 tons of explosives during the siege. Standing in Khe Sanh, “you could watch mortar bursts, orange and gray-smoking, over the tops of trees three and four kilometers away, and the heavier shelling from support bases further east along the DMZ, from Camp Carroll and the Rockpile, directed against suspected troop movements or NVA [North Vietnamese army] rocket and mortar positions. . . . And at night it was beautiful.” Less beautiful

were the shells the North Vietnamese sent in return. Downright ugly, from the marines' standpoint, was the fact that no amount of U.S. shelling could drive the communists off the nearby hills.

The marines had no choice but to burrow into their foxholes and hastily constructed bunkers to await relief. If it came in time. As January 1965 turned into February and February into March, the American press worked itself into a lather comparing Khe Sanh with Dien Bien Phu—another fortified garrison whose fall could drive another foreign army out of Vietnam. Losing Khe Sanh therefore became unthinkable. Westmoreland organized a 30,000-man expedition—Operation Pegasus—to relieve the marines. But by the time the cavalry arrived—in this case, the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile)—there was nothing left for them to do. The North Vietnamese attackers, having suffered heavy losses, simply disappeared back into the vast jungles whence they came.

It was a glorious victory, but to what end? Having held Khe Sanh, at an official cost of 205 American lives and 852 wounded, the marines promptly abandoned it, dynamiting their bunkers before they left. The entire battle had been simply a diversion from the real job—gaining control of the Vietnamese population centers. It eventually dawned on some American officers that Communist attacks in the Highlands were designed expressly to lure American troops away from the coastal areas. Giap later acknowledged this: “The primary emphasis,” he said, is “to draw American units into remote areas and thereby facilitate control of the population of the lowlands.” Westmoreland's strategy meshed perfectly with Giap's.

Desperate to come up with some measure of progress, Westmoreland turned to the infamous body counts. He thought that killing the enemy in great numbers would force them to give up the struggle, just as soon as he reached the “crossover point” when the enemy could no longer replace its casualties. It did not work out that way. North Vietnam was ruled by a dictatorship impervious to the pressure of popular opinion. Its leaders could tolerate staggering casualties with equanimity; after the war, Hanoi admitted losing 1.1 million dead and 300,000 missing, out of a population base of 20 million (North Vietnam and areas of the South controlled by the Communists in 1965). “The communist side in Indochina during the Vietnam War suffered proportional military losses equivalent for the United States in the mid-1990s of 13 million Americans killed and 3.9 million missing in action,” a historian writes. “Put another way, in terms of military dead, the communist side sacrificed thirty-six times more of their own soldiers to unify Vietnam than did the Federal government to defeat the secessionist Confederate states.” By contrast, American casualties of 58,000—roughly equal to the death toll on America's highways during one year, 1970—were enough to help drive the U.S. out of the war.

Westmoreland's "attrition" strategy worked, but in the wrong country. It broke the will not of North Vietnam but of America.

The Small War

The American war in Vietnam was not exclusively a big-unit, conventional boxing match. There was also "the other war," the pacification struggle, waged, on the American side, by an alphabet soup of agencies: the Central Intelligence Agency, the Agency for International Development, the U.S. Information Agency, the State Department. In 1967 the Johnson administration unified all these programs under CORDS (Civil Operations and Rural Development Support), a joint civil-military office headed by a pugnacious bureaucrat named Robert Komer. Many of the pacification programs concentrated on the struggle for "hearts and minds," spending millions of dollars to build schools and hospitals, resettle refugees, improve rice production, electrify rural areas, spread pro-government propaganda. As in the Philippines six decades before, it soon became obvious that, while development aid could make the people more friendly to the U.S. side, that was a long-range project. The most immediate need was to provide villagers with security against the guerrillas who came around demanding food, shelter, intelligence, draftees. This was a job for soldiers, and the precious few of them who were assigned this task achieved impressive results. The most notable example was the Combined Action Program begun in 1965.

This was a marine initiative modeled on the constabularies the Corps had founded in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua. There was a direct line of descent, for after chasing Sandinistas around the wilds of Nicaragua in the 1930s Chesty Puller had become an instructor at the marines' Basic School, where one of his pupils was 2nd Lieutenant Lewis Walt, who as a general in Vietnam would go on to create CAP. "The Caribbean campaigns had many lessons applicable to Vietnam forty five years later," Walt wrote. Trying to apply those lessons, the marines organized CAP in 1965. Each Combined Action Platoon consisted of a marine rifle squad under the command of a sergeant—all volunteers chosen for their ability to work with the locals. The 12-15 marines were paired with a platoon from South Vietnam's Popular Forces militia, about 30 men from the local community. Together, the marines and militiamen worked on securing a village from the Vietcong, the Americans providing military know-how, the Vietnamese invaluable knowledge of local conditions.

The classic account of CAP in action remains "The Village," published by a marine captain named Francis J. West Jr. in 1972. It recounts the efforts of a

dozen marine volunteers who worked side by side with Popular Forces militiamen to pacify the coastal village of Binh Nghia, located 300 miles north of Saigon and 400 miles south of Hanoi. When the marines first arrived in June 1966, Binh Nghia's seven hamlets, with their 5,000 inhabitants, were virtually run by the Vietcong. The guerrillas could come and go at will, taxing the inhabitants to support themselves and killing any South Vietnamese officials who got in their way. The Popular Forces who were supposed to be protecting the villagers were too scared to do anything.

The marines quickly changed that. A dozen of them—from Company C, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines—arrived on June 10, 1966. They "left behind an American base camp with its thick barbed wire and canvas cots, solid bunkers, soupy ice cream and endless guard rosters." In Binh Nghia they lived no better and no worse than the Popular Forces. The Americans and the Vietnamese slept side by side in a ramshackle fort, ate the same food, smoked the same cigarettes, drew the same patrol assignments.

By day the marines and Popular Forces interacted in a friendly manner with the villagers, winning their trust and confidence. By night, they patrolled aggressively, often clashing with the Vietcong—70 firefights in their first couple of months. As they continued patrolling night after night, the marines' jungle-warfare skills rapidly improved. Before long they were moving as stealthily, and becoming as adept at setting ambushes, as their enemies. The Popular Forces also experienced a rapid improvement in their skills and confidence, thanks to the training they received from the marines. Together, their efforts drove the Vietcong out of Binh Nghia.

Army critics worried that CAP's small marine outposts would be vulnerable to annihilation by Communist main forces, which could throw hundreds of attackers against a couple of dozen defenders. A valid concern. The Vietcong, seeing the success the marines were having in Binh Nghia, decided that if they did not want to be pushed out of the area altogether they would have to wipe out the Americans. To achieve this task, the local guerrillas were reinforced by a company from the 409th North Vietnamese Battalion—about 140 men in all.

On the night of September 14-15, 1965, the Communists struck the combined forces compound at Binh Nghia, known as Fort Page. After midnight, North Vietnamese sappers expertly cut through a single strand of barbed wire and plucked out sharpened wooden stakes designed to discourage unwelcome visitors. Six of the marines were not home that night; they were out patrolling. That left only six Americans and 12 PFs to hold the fort. The defenders, grown complacent, were caught completely by surprise. Almost before they had time to react, the Communist soldiers were inside the compound. Amid the din of

explosives and the chatter of automatic weapons fire, the marines were cut down, one by one. Their desperate resistance gave some of the PFs just enough time to huddle together and prevent the attackers from overrunning them too. Stymied, the Communist commander gave the order to retreat about an hour after the attack began. It was only then that a marine squad from a nearby base—supposed to act as Fort Page's emergency reserve—arrived, too late to do anything but succor the wounded and bury the dead. Six Vietnamese defenders and five Americans, including Sergeant Joseph Sullivan, the squad commander, were killed on that grim night. Only one American survived the attack, and he was badly wounded. (The attackers lost at least 15 men.)

"At first light," writes West, "General Lowell English, commander of the 1st Marine Division, entered the smoldering fort and called aside the six surviving marines who had been out on patrol that night. Speaking softly, he said they had a choice. They could stay or they could go." Given the chance to evacuate, the remaining marines refused. "We couldn't leave," one of the marine privates said. "What would we have said to the PFs after the way we pushed them to fight the Cong? We had to stay. There wasn't one of us who wanted to leave. The only people we wanted out was that worthless reaction squad that didn't get to the fort until after it was overrun."

How many other American soldiers would have volunteered to remain in a dangerous post in Vietnam if given the chance to leave? That the combined action marines wanted to stay was a testament to their morale and esprit de corps. Their close involvement with the daily life of Binh Nghia gave them a stake in the war; by contrast, most American soldiers had little friendly interaction with ordinary Vietnamese other than prostitutes, taxi drivers, and bartenders.

The CAP unit continued its mission at Binh Nghia with six replacements, volunteers all, and they enjoyed increasing success. The 409th North Vietnamese Battalion went back to the hills, and the local Vietcong had been too badly hurt in the attack on Fort Page to present much of a menace. As the dozen Americans continued with their efforts to integrate into village life, they came to feel "that the five thousand villagers accepted them. They ate in their houses, went to their parties, and to their funerals." No doubt their welcome was improved by the fact that no air or artillery strikes were called in on Binh Nghia. The combined action platoon skirmished at night with the Vietcong in the nearby rice paddies, but the villagers were largely spared the horrors of war.

Good relations with the villagers paid off. By the time another main force attack was organized on Fort Page, in March 1967, the defenders were ready, thanks to intelligence supplied by their informants. Knowing that an attack was

on the way, their battalion commander ordered the combined action marines to evacuate before they were hit by some 300 enemy soldiers. The dozen marines gathered together and decided that they would not go—even if this meant risking a court-martial for disobeying orders. "I'm going to stay here and blast them," vowed one private. "They're not getting *this* fort. They're not getting *this* ville." And they did not. After one of the Communist scouts was detected and killed by an alert Popular Forces militiaman, the rest of the main force scuttled away, knowing that the defenders were on their guard.

The Communists never again seriously threatened Binh Nghia. By the time the marines pulled out in October 1967, the village, once a Vietcong haven, was so secure that "the PFs were patrolling . . . in teams of two, like cops on a beat." There were some setbacks after the marines left, but the Popular Forces were for the most part able to keep the Vietcong out. A few years later even the PF were no longer necessary. "By 1970 Binh Nghia was so peaceful that the new American district adviser had termed it a 'R&R' (Rest and Recreation) center."

This success—achieved with assault rifles, not tanks or warplanes or artillery—was not unique. Despite (or, more likely, because of) its lack of firepower, CAP produced results. "No village protected by a Combined Action Platoon was ever repossessed by the Vietcong," Brute Krulak wrote, "and 60 percent of the marines serving in Combined Action units volunteered to stay on with their marine and Vietnamese companions for an additional six months when they could have returned to the United States." Moreover, contrary to the army's fears that the program was too dangerous, CAP casualties were 50 percent lower than in search-and-destroy operations. "The use of CAPS is quite the best idea I have seen in Vietnam, and it worked superbly," said Sir Robert Thompson, the British counterinsurgency expert.

Although successful, the Combined Action Program was never more than a sideshow to the army's conventional campaign. At its peak the program involved fewer than 2,500 marines. General Westmoreland claimed in his memoirs that "I simply had not enough numbers to put a squad of Americans in every village and hamlet." Actually it would not have been necessary to put a squad in every village, only in those not yet pacified. But even putting a squad "in every village and hamlet" would have required no more than 167,000 U.S. troops—a fraction of the 540,000 eventually deployed.

Westmoreland's big war stymied pacification efforts not only by sapping much needed manpower, but also in other, more insidious ways. If you're trying to win the hearts and minds of the peasants, you don't want to napalm their

huts. Yet that is what was happening as the search-and-destroy missions proceeded. This is not to suggest that the U.S. armed forces were routinely and deliberately killing civilians, as some critics claimed. In fact they often took great care to avoid non-combatant casualties, despite Vietcong attempts to lure U.S. forces into firing into occupied villages. But there is little doubt that the emphasis on body counts encouraged commanders to shoot first, ask questions later. Whether deliberately or not, all this firing caused a large number of civilian casualties. It also left an ugly, indelible scar on the landscape. Parts of South Vietnam began to resemble pictures of Verdun in World War I. General Harold K. Johnson, army chief of staff, later acknowledged that firepower was applied "on a relatively random basis" and that the U.S. "just sort of devastated the countryside."

Vast seas of refugees were sent pouring into Saigon and other major cities where they took up residence in hastily erected shantytowns. By 1968, 5 million of the South's 17 million people had been forced to flee their villages. Many of them no doubt would have been surprised to learn that the *Small Wars Manual* counseled U.S. soldiers that "tolerance, sympathy and kindness should be the keynote to our relationship with the mass of the population."

Westmoreland and the army doggedly stuck with their big-unit strategy. Then came the Tet Offensive.

On January 30–31, 1968, in violation of a truce called during the lunar New Year (Tet) celebrations, the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese army assaulted most of the major towns and cities in the South simultaneously. The defenders were caught by surprise, and the attackers, perhaps 100,000 strong, scored some initial successes. Commandos penetrated the grounds of the U.S. embassy in Saigon. The North Vietnamese army occupied the ancient city of Hue. But these gains were fleeting; the Communists were quickly pushed back. By February 24, following three weeks of bloody street fighting, even Hue was retaken. The Communists lost an estimated 50,000 men killed. (The U.S. losses amounted to about 2,000 men.) The Vietcong were virtually wiped out as an effective fighting force. No popular uprising ever occurred. Instead, the barbarous behavior of the Communists during the brief period they occupied Hue (at least 3,000 people, classified as "reactionary elements," were executed) helped turn many South Vietnamese more firmly against their cause.

By any objective measure, the Tet Offensive was a disaster for the Communists. But that was not how it was perceived in the United States. Americans were shocked by the Vietcong's ability to mount such an extensive

offensive. For months they had been assured by their leaders that there was "light at the end of the tunnel." Now they perceived nothing but darkness—an impression reinforced by misleading news coverage that portrayed Tet as a defeat for the United States. CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite concluded a post-Tet broadcast by declaring, "It seems now more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate." Johnson reportedly turned to an aide and exclaimed, "that it was a turning point, if he had lost Walter Cronkite he had lost Mr. Average Citizen."

In the months that followed, Johnson refused a request from Westmoreland for an additional 200,000 troops and then relieved Westy of command, kicking him upstairs into the job of army chief of staff. Nine days later, on March 31, 1968, Johnson stunned America by announcing that he would not seek reelection. The public impression, right or wrong, was that both Westmoreland and Johnson had been driven from office by their failures in Vietnam. Their departure set the stage for a shift of strategy that brought the U.S. to the brink of an improbable success.

One War

Lyndon Johnson was succeeded by Richard M. Nixon, William Westmoreland by his deputy, General Creighton Abrams. Abrams, like Westmoreland, had a conventional army background: He graduated from West Point and commanded an armored battalion in World War II under Patton. Among other achievements, he led the breakout from Normandy after D-Day and commanded the joint tank-infantry force that relieved the embattled paratroopers at Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge. Along the way, "Abe" Abrams developed a reputation as one of the smartest officers in the army, not an intellectual exactly, but an officer who knew how to get at the heart of a problem and could present his conclusions with a disarming wit and sly humor—unless he was provoked, in which case his temper was terrible to behold.

By the time he took over in Vietnam, there was plenty for this cigar-chomping general to be furious about. The failure of the big-war strategy had become glaringly obvious, antiwar protests were mushrooming back home, and U.S. troops levels were falling—along with morale. After it became clear that victory was no longer the U.S. objective in Vietnam, that support on the home front was dwindling, and that a slow-motion pullout was beginning, unit discipline and cohesion crumbled. (Much the same thing happened on a smaller scale among Allied troops in north Russia in the winter of 1918–1919.) Hardened professionals might be able to soldier on under such desperate circumstances,

but it was asking too much of young draftees led by equally inexperienced junior officers and NCOs. Drug use, racial tension, insubordination, and even fragging—enlisted men murdering their officers or NCOs—all skyrocketed. It was obvious to Abrams, and his new superiors in the White House, that the military could not continue to do business as usual.

Much to the annoyance of some of his subordinates, Abrams shifted the emphasis from big-unit “search-and-destroy” missions to population control. He refused to see pacification as “the other war.” Under his new approach, which he called the “one-war” strategy, he broke up divisional forces and sent them on extensive patrol and night operations in platoon and company strength. Big-unit operations continued after 1968—for instance, the bloody, futile battle of Hamburger Hill in May 1969—but the dominant U.S. strategy, dubbed “clear and hold,” was now more in line with what the marines and some army mavericks like John Paul Vann had advocated all along. “The strategy of search and destroy was officially dead,” wrote one high-ranking army officer.

Working alongside Abrams was William Colby, a CIA veteran who took over pacification operations in late 1968. Having operated as a guerrilla himself in World War II, working for the OSS in occupied France and Norway, Colby understood the nature of the problem; and having been CIA station chief in Saigon in the early 1960s (he had argued against toppling Diem), he understood the country too. Under his direction, the Phoenix program, working with South Vietnamese security forces, helped identify and eradicate the Communist political apparatus in the South’s villages. Phoenix has often been caricatured as a program of organized assassination, but in fact the bulk of cadres that it “neutralized” were captured or induced to defect, not killed. The program is credited with killing roughly 26,000 Vietcong cadres, capturing 33,000, “turning” 22,000. General Tran Do, Communist deputy commander in the South, later admitted that Phoenix was “extremely destructive.”

Another, equally important part of the pacification effort was the added support given by the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments to local militias—the Regional Forces, Popular Forces, and People’s Self-Defense Forces—on the front lines of village protection. In the past they had often operated with ancient weapons left over from the French. For the first time, Colby ensured that most of them at least had surplus M-16s.

The final piece of the pacification puzzle was land reform undertaken by President Nguyen Van Thieu—giving farmers legal title to the fields they tilled, in order to give them a bigger stake in Southern society. Ironically, Thieu was implementing some of the programs that had originally been started by Diem, only now he was doing it with U.S. support.

The Vietcong, already hard hit in the failed Tet Offensive of 1968, never recovered. “For practical purposes the PLAF [Vietcong] had been destroyed,” writes a leading expert on the Vietnamese communists. By 1970, more than 90 percent of the South’s population was under Saigon’s control. Sir Robert Thompson, the British counterinsurgency expert, wrote in 1970 that he was “able to visit areas and walk through villages which had been under Viet Cong control for years. There was a much greater feeling of security, and the people were ready to take up arms for the government because they sensed that the Viet Cong were weaker. . . . Existing roads are kept open, and more are being repaired and opened monthly.”

At the same time, the U.S. military targeted North Vietnamese sanctuaries that had previously been off-limits. In 1970 President Nixon authorized the “secret invasion” of Cambodia by U.S. and South Vietnamese units—actually an incursion that wiped out key Communist base camps. This had the disadvantage of sparking fresh antiwar protests back home, including the infamous shooting at Kent State that left four students dead, but it struck an effective blow against the enemy infrastructure. In addition to killing or capturing 13,000 enemy soldiers, this operation captured 23,000 individual weapons, more than 16 million rounds of small arms ammunition, 14 million pounds of rice, and so on.

A 1971 incursion designed to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos was less successful, in no small part because this raid, near the village of Lam Son, was undertaken by the South Vietnamese with only American air and artillery support. (By this time, Congress had forbidden participation by U.S. ground troops.) The poor showing by South Vietnamese forces at Lam Son, coupled with the increasing success of the pacification campaign, led Hanoi to abandon guerrilla warfare for the time being. The North would now move to phase 3: conventional war.

Starting on March 30, 1972, 125,000 North Vietnamese regulars, backed by hundreds of Russian-supplied tanks and howitzers, slashed into the South from bases in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. General Giap’s goal was nothing less than the military conquest of the South—or failing that, to at least embarrass Richard Nixon badly enough to drive him out of office in the 1972 election and end American support for Saigon. The Philippine *insurrectos* had tried a similar stratagem in an attempt to defeat McKinley in 1900. Giap’s ploy worked no better than Aguinaldo’s had.

The South Vietnamese army fell back but would not break. Once they stopped retreating, the southerners counterattacked with the help of American air support, including B-52 raids that pulverized the advancing northern

columns. (Finally U.S. warplanes had a target in the open!) The air force was also given permission to blast the area around Hanoi, and the navy to mine Haiphong harbor. The North wound up gaining some territory from the Easter Offensive, but in most respects it was a failure, costing Hanoi perhaps 50,000 dead and 450 tanks destroyed. The North's defeat may be ascribed to a combination of Giap's mistakes (he had never tried an armored blitzkrieg before), U.S. air supremacy, and South Vietnamese fighting prowess. The only missing element: U.S. combat troops. By now there were virtually none left in Vietnam (though southern units still had American advisers). "By God," General Abrams marveled, "the South Vietnamese can hack it!"

Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, skillfully exploited the failure of the Easter Offensive. Using their openings to Moscow and Beijing, they convinced Hanoi's key allies to apply pressure for a diplomatic solution. The Politburo had no choice but to return to the negotiating table. When negotiations again stalled, Nixon ordered Operation Linebacker II, the "Christmas bombing" of the North in 1972. (The U.S. did not actually bomb on Christmas Day.) This was not a repeat of Rolling Thunder, the highly restricted bombing campaigns of the Johnson administration. This time B-52s were unleashed against Haiphong and Hanoi, though they were careful to avoid civilian targets. The 12 days of raids caused major damage to North Vietnamese industry and infrastructure—and lifted the spirits of American POWs imprisoned in Hanoi, who cheered as bombs burst near their compound.

Prodded by the Christmas bombing, the North Vietnamese came to terms. On January 27, 1973, Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho signed the Paris Peace Accord. Although the Nixon administration, beset by domestic difficulties, was so desperate for an agreement that it allowed some North Vietnamese troops to remain in the South, nevertheless this should have signaled a conditional U.S. victory. True, South Vietnam was incapable of defending itself alone. But so was South Korea after the Korean War, or West Germany after World War II. Only the continuing presence of U.S. troops saved Seoul and Bonn. There would be no more U.S. troops, or even supplies, for South Vietnam. Fed up with the war in Indochina, Congress drastically reduced aid to the South and prohibited any U.S. combat action, direct or indirect, in Indochina.

When the final northern offensive started in 1975, the South Vietnamese armed forces were critically short of supplies; even bandages had to be taken off corpses and reused. Much has been written about the failures of the southern forces, about low morale, poor leadership, cowardice, corruption, incompetence. Much of it true. But it is important to remember that, when properly supplied

and backed by air power, as in 1972, the South Vietnamese showed they could fight and fight well. No army, by contrast, can operate effectively if it is critically short of vital materiel, as South Vietnam was in 1975. Only U.S. aid could have saved the day. Because it was not forthcoming, North Vietnamese T-54 tanks soon rumbled into Saigon.

Military and CIA helicopters evacuated all the remaining Americans and many of their Vietnamese friends. But there was not enough room to take everyone who wanted to leave. The pictures of Vietnamese fighting in vain to squeeze onto overcrowded helicopters are among the saddest images in U.S. history, a tragic coda to America's longest and least successful war.

Why America Lost

The only subject more contentious than why America got into Vietnam is why it lost. Some, of course, deny that America lost at all, claiming, as Richard Nixon did, that the U.S. won on the battlefield and went home. It was South Vietnam, not America, that was defeated. This view—and its rebuttal—may be summarized in a famous exchange that the late Colonel Harry Summers had with a North Vietnamese colonel after the war. "You know you never defeated us on the battlefield," Summers said. "That may be so," the North Vietnamese colonel replied, "but it is also irrelevant." The North Vietnamese colonel was right. Whatever happened on the battlefield, there is no denying that Saigon wound up falling. Hanoi achieved its strategic objectives; Washington did not.

Roughly speaking, there are three schools of thought about why this happened.

The first holds that the war was unwinnable. The North was too dedicated to victory, the South too weak. There was nothing America could have done to prevail at a reasonable cost. Even some who believe the war was a noble effort subscribe to the unwinnable hypothesis, though mostly it is held by those who think that U.S. involvement was disgraceful. During the war, some in the West even hailed the Vietcong as "liberators" whose takeover of the South would be welcomed by its people. Given unified Vietnam's long, dreary record of economic stagnation and political repression, few would make such claims today. Although glamorization of the Communists has faded, many still demonize the Saigon government. Without a more popular government in place, they assert, the struggle was unwinnable.

This view may be right, but it has several shortcomings. Admittedly, the parade of southern strongmen who succeeded Ngo Dinh Diem—overthrown and killed in a U.S.-backed coup in 1963—suffered a certain lack of legitima-

cy. And the quality of leadership within the South Vietnamese army was often appallingly low. Still, most South Vietnamese evidenced little desire to be ruled from Hanoi. There was never a popular communist uprising in the South; instead more than a million "boat people" fled the North's advance in 1975. And when properly supplied, as it was in 1972, the South Vietnamese army fought reasonably well. In short, there was no evidence that South Vietnam was not a viable state absent conquest from the North. In all likelihood, if left alone it would have evolved into a prosperous democracy, as Taiwan and South Korea have done under U.S. military protection.

Moreover, it is simply hard to believe that the U.S.—which in cooperation with its allies had defeated the combined might of Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and Imperial Japan a scant two decades earlier—could not defeat a tiny, preindustrial society on the edge of Asia. Advocates of the unwinnable-war school reply that the North Vietnamese were masters of guerrilla tactics, a type of warfare that is virtually impossible to defeat. Indeed, thanks to Mao Tse-tung, Ho Chi Minh, Che Guevara, and other famed leaders of "national liberation" struggles, the word *guerrilla* has acquired an almost mystical connotation. It is all too easy to overlook the fact that most guerrilla campaigns do not succeed. Since World War II, guerrillas have been stymied in Northern Ireland, Israel, Italy, Germany, Spain, Greece, the Philippines, Malaya, Turkey, Kenya, El Salvador, Peru, Guatemala, Mexico, and numerous other countries. Even the famous Che Guevara was hunted down and killed in 1967 by a Bolivian unit assisted by American Special Forces advisers. And as we have seen, the U.S. in the past had considerable success against guerrillas in the Philippines, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Nicaragua, and elsewhere. It is quite possible that Vietnam was sufficiently different from all these prior instances that the U.S. could not have won. But at the very least, this assumption needs to be treated skeptically, especially since the U.S., despite all the mistakes made along the way, came tantalizingly close to winning at least a conditional victory.

The second school of thought holds that only a conventional war against North Vietnam could have delivered victory. According to advocates of this approach, pacification was a diversion. The real threat came from North Vietnamese troops, not Vietcong guerrillas. As Air Force General Curtis LeMay put it, memorably if crudely, "We should stop swatting flies and go after the manure pile." Ignoring the teaching of the *Small Wars Manual* that armed forces often have to limit their operations because of political necessities, this school blames President Johnson's restrictions for costing America victory. No invasion of the North. No occupation of Laos to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Not even any bombing of Hanoi or Haiphong, the harbor through which the

North received supplies from the Soviet Union. Instead, Johnson pursued an ineffectual bombing campaign punctuated by pauses that gave the North time to rebuild. No wonder America lost! Advocates of this view, including Westmoreland himself, also sharply criticize Johnson for not calling up the reserves and for failing to rally the American people behind the war effort. One influential army historian blames the Joint Chiefs of Staff for not confronting Johnson and threatening to resign en masse unless he allowed the use of "the *total force* they believed would ultimately be required in Vietnam" (*italics added*).

This view calcified into something of an orthodoxy throughout much of the U.S. armed forces, especially in the army, in the years after 1975. As we will see, the notion that America erred by not waging total war against North Vietnam would shape the strategic approach of the U.S. armed forces for decades to come.

The conventional critique has much to recommend it. If the U.S. armed forces were going to pursue an orthodox strategy, they should have invaded the North or at least Laos; otherwise the big-war approach had no chance of working. Yet the conventional school overlooks some important facts. First, Johnson's concern that an invasion of the North would have triggered a Chinese response is quite plausible; as noted earlier, Mao Tse-tung was apparently willing to send the People's Liberation Army into battle if U.S. ground troops crossed the DMZ. Second, the conventional critique overstates the importance of outside support to the Communist insurgency in the South—a misconception fueled by Hanoi's official accounts. Whereas during the war itself, the North downplayed its involvement in the revolutionary struggle in the South, in the years after the war, Communist historians have exaggerated the role of the North Vietnamese army, seeking to deny the southern guerrillas any credit for the final victory. "The fact is that at least until 1968," writes the leading American historian of the North Vietnamese army, "the burden of combat was carried by the PLAF. It comprised chiefly southern recruits." Thus cutting the Ho Chi Minh Trail probably was not the "silver bullet" needed to end the war. Even occupying North Vietnam might not have sufficed to guarantee an American victory. The French had done that and had nevertheless been defeated by Ho Chi Minh's guerrillas.

The third and final approach can be called the "small war" school. Its proponents hold that the neglect of pacification by the army high command was a fatal error. The conventional school replies that pacification was irrelevant because, even though the South was ultimately pacified, it made no difference. The North simply staged an armored invasion, showing that the conventional

war was the most important one all along. But why was the North able to win a conventional conflict in 1975, whereas previous attempts in 1968 and 1972 had failed? The obvious answer was the absence of U.S. troops. And why were U.S. troops absent? Because the American people and their congressional representatives had become fed up with the war, forcing the executive branch to pull out. And why did the American people tire of the war? Because of the futility and high cost of the attrition strategy employed by Westmoreland from 1965 to 1968.

In short, the Communist insurgency really did win the war. Not by defeating U.S. forces on the battlefield—but that was never its goal. As General Giap later explained, “We were not strong enough to drive out a half-million American troops, but that wasn’t our aim. Our intention was to break the will of the American Government to continue the war.” Westmoreland’s attrition strategy helped Giap achieve this goal by wearing out the U.S. armed forces on all those fruitless “search-and-destroy” missions, generating heavy casualties and squandering public support for the war. Hanoi had accurately concluded that the war’s center of gravity was American public opinion; Washington did not come to the same realization until it was too late. “The fundamental truth,” writes one retired American general, “is that the United States had won the irrelevant war in Vietnam, and had lost the real one—the war for the ‘hearts and minds’ of the American people.”

A small-war approach, if pursued from the beginning, might have retained popular support for a longer, lower-intensity commitment. Such an approach should have utilized volunteers, as the U.S. did in almost all its previous small wars, instead of the draftees sent to Vietnam. The American people are naturally impatient to see victory in any conflict fought by half a million conscriptees who suffer heavy casualties; in smaller skirmishes of the past, they were more patient if only a relatively small number of professional soldiers were sent overseas, and if they did not suffer crippling losses. These troops could have concentrated on protecting South Vietnam’s population centers and building up indigenous security structures modeled on the constabularies of Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and so on. They could not have ignored Communist main forces altogether, but they could have put their emphasis on cutting off the guerrillas from their population base instead of chasing the main forces all over the Highlands.

The success this approach might have had should not be exaggerated. Vietnam was far bigger than any previous “small war” in U.S. history. The Vietnamese Communists were far better armed, trained, organized, and motivated than any previous guerrillas fought by American soldiers. And they

enjoyed an invaluable advantage: safe havens in neighboring countries. No one can know if a small-war approach, pursued from the beginning, would have resulted in a U.S. victory. But it probably would not have produced results any worse than the big-war strategy the army employed. Even if America had still lost the war, the defeat would have been considerably less costly and less painful. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the American armed forces paid a high price in Vietnam for neglecting to study the *Small Wars Manual*.