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On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War.

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PROFESSIONAL READING

“While Summers does not appear to have it as a purpose to fix individual or corporate blame for our loss of the war, the villains of the war virtually jump off the page.”

by

Rear Admiral S.A. Swarztrauber, US Navy*

Summers, Harry G., Jr. *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*.
Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1982. 225pp. \$12.95

Colonel Harry Summers has done us a great service. He has lucidly laid out the lessons of the Vietnam war and has given us good advice for the future.

For this reviewer it was bitter-sweet nostalgia: bitter for reliving the Vietnam deliberations in the “Tank” and NSC and the frustrating memory of lost opportunities; and sweet for recalling the heroic actions of American fighting men in the rivers, jungles, mountains, and deserts of Vietnam. Sweet, too, for being able to agree so fully with what is written so well in this book.

If there is any fault with this book, it is that Summers has relied almost exclusively, within the Armed Forces, on Army sources and advice. There are many in the other services who would have eagerly assisted and endorsed his efforts. I, for one, would like to be counted.

Summers masterfully amasses and arranges overwhelming evidence that—despite great tactical and logistical successes in moving millions of men half way around the world—the United States was always on the strategic defensive; that the United States never developed a real strategy for the war—only tactics, grand tactics, at best.

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In the context of the Vietnam experience, Summers reviews the teachings of Clausewitz—still valid today—and the Principles of War. The United States ignored or violated, at one time or another, every one: The Objective; The Offensive; Mass; Economy of Force; Maneuver; Unity of Command; Security; Surprise; and Simplicity. The North Vietnamese, on the other hand, followed those teachings and principles—and won.

While Summers does not appear to have it as a purpose to fix individual or corporate blame for our loss of the war, the villains of the war virtually jump off the page. President Johnson is documented as a man who had contempt for his military establishment. He made a conscious decision not to mobilize the American national will for fear it would jeopardize his “Great Society” programs. He did not seek a declaration of war which would have clarified and focused our political and military objectives. As a result we fought Vietnam in “cold blood”—without the enthusiasm and passion of earlier American wars: it was “Business as usual.”

Congress also plays “villain”—albeit to a lesser degree—in that it abdicated its constitutional responsibility to declare war.

The DoD bureaucracy, preoccupied with the USSR, China, and management of the strategic deterrent, dominated US strategic thinking during the Vietnam war with Systems Analysis and PPBS—systems suitable for “preparing for war” but not for “war proper,” using Clausewitzian terminology.

Summers, by comparison, exonerates the press, draft dodgers, and antiwar groups, showing that they operated quite predictably and comfortably in the political vacuum conveniently created for them by the President and the Congress. There was no “collapse” of the American national will, because it had never been mobilized—that which doesn’t exist, doesn’t collapse.

So much for “The Environment” as Summers calls it. What must be read by men in uniform is Part Two, “The Engagement,” which analyzes the role of the military. The military side emerges every bit as guilty as the political side, not so much by commission, but by omission. It was the military, more than any other institution, that should have been acutely aware that the United States was in constant violation of Clausewitz’s teachings and the Principles of War. But the JCS Chairman did not use his direct access to the President to insist on declaring war and mobilizing the national will. ComUSMACV resisted the experience-proven idea of a combined command. Our military leaders did not demand, under threat of resignation, that their own strategies be adopted. Instead, and intimidated by the bureaucracy, they let civilians dominate strategy. They accepted *political* tasking (nation building in the south) rather than insisting on military tasking against the real enemy in the north. They succumbed to the prevailing “wisdom” that nuclear weapons had changed things so much that Clausewitz, the lessons of history, and the Principles of War had become

largely irrelevant in the Vietnam situation. Summers details the agonizing process of how the Army's manuals evolved. Terms such as "victory" disappeared and in their place appeared "counterinsurgency," "limited objectives," "limited means," and such.

We lost our focus on the traditional primary objective: destroying the enemy's forces and his will to fight. We concentrated our efforts on the war's symptoms—the guerrilla in the south—rather than on the central threat—North Vietnam.

Summers points out that there was no "stab-in-the-back" attitude on the part of the military after Vietnam. Fairly, or unfairly, General Westmoreland shouldered much of the blame. This reviewer suggests that this reflects either a conscious or subconscious recognition on the part of the military as a whole that there was plenty of guilt to go around.

For the future, Summers warns that the military must regain the trust of its civilian leaders.

Colonel Summers has done us a great service. But will his advice be heeded? Chances not, because his book is but another articulate exposition of the lamentable fact that we are unwilling to learn from history. It shows once again what happens when another generation of leaders becomes convinced that their generation's problems are "different." It proves how unwise it is to place disproportionate emphasis on technological advances at the expense of a comprehensive consideration of human nature—the most important constant in international politics. Talleyrand's "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose" is often quoted but seldom heeded.

Best, Geoffrey, *Honour Among Men and Nations*. The 1981 Joanne Goodman Lectures. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982. 108pp. \$13.50 paper \$7.50

According to the legendary Irishman, a lone woman could walk the length and breadth of Ireland in the old days without losing her honor even once. Historian Geoffrey Best (he is dean of the School of European Studies at the University of Sussex) adds, "Honour thy father and mother," "On my honour as a Scout," and "Love, honour, and obey," to illustrate the protean character of the word, its several uses having no common meaning. But, as Wittgenstein would

say, are all related to one another in many different ways.

Best is concerned with the concept of military and national honor and in this small book, a write-up of his Goodman Lectures at Toronto, he traces the waxing and waning of the idea from the 18th century to the present. He notes the prominent place of honor among the ideals of the *ancien régime* where he sees it as the strictly guarded treasure of the warrior nobility, an absolute, an end in itself. With the rise of nationalism (which is Best's *bête noire*), the value of honor was kept alive by the elite military officer class in Europe who held themselves apart both from the common soldiery and from