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In My View

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IN MY VIEW . . .



Ian Oliver

Vietnam Lessons

Professor Pappas's discussion on "The Academic Strategist and the Vietnam War" makes good points and is most suitable for seminar and classroom . . . His quotes from Clausewitz are right on target: strategy that leads to armed conflict must at least try to envisage fighting's bloodshed, destruction, terror, battlefield stench, and watery graves.

Professor Pappas correctly sees the North Vietnamese divisions as the prime factor, not any counterinsurgency concern, another misconception by the academics. He demonstrates a clear insight into the trends and influence of civilian strategists, political considerations, and the *ex post facto* perceptions of various analysts. Here again, this reader notes that most, if not all, such approaches were undertaken without first-hand battle experience.

He does not overlook the post-World War II concept of "gradualism"—a restriction which embittered the "troops" and is rejected as conflict doctrine by responsible senior military men. Robert McNamara has been credited—or accused—of being the author of that concept, but it is not fair to put the blame solely on his shoulders as many others obviously were involved. Gradualism was and remains an anathema to any military fighting man, for it *automatically concedes the initiative to the enemy*. That left our fighting men only to *react* to unpredictable enemy initiatives, defensively adjusting defenses as best they could.

And the media harping on the *no-win* theme played its part in the shameful wind-up of what began as a decent and noble objective.

Any assertion that the war was "un-winnable" is preposterous. With the fire power available on call, North Vietnam's economy could have been bombed and shelled to shreds, its ports could be closed (as they were, by aerial mining), its fields could have been flooded by dam and dike destruction and its people reduced to misery and hunger. With a devastated and isolated country behind them, the regular North Vietnamese divisions most certainly would have been ineffective.

There are many lessons to be learned from study of our Vietnam experience, but, in my opinion, the most important conviction which emerges is this: **If national decision commits the armed forces to active combat, then the armed forces must be given the mandate, the personnel, the arms, and the support needed to win in furtherance of a stated national objective.**

Robert B. Carney
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