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## Strategy for Defeat, Vietnam in Retrospect

R Crayton

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too hastily draw conclusions about intent from the outcomes of merchant marine policy.

ROGER DINGMAN  
University of Southern California

Sharp, U.S. Grant. *Strategy for Defeat, Vietnam in Retrospect*. San Raphael: Presidio Press, 1978. 324pp.

*Strategy For Defeat* is Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp's personal account of the war in Southeast Asia during the four years (1964-1968) he directed the Pacific Command as its Commander in Chief. He arrived well-equipped for the job: he had worked both at sea and ashore in the Pacific and had served in Washington as Deputy CNO for Plans and Policy. His most recent assignment had been Commander of the Pacific Fleet. Although he exercised supervision over all military actions in South Vietnam, Sharp has limited his discussion to the air war over North Vietnam, the conduct of which "had a tremendous influence on the outcome of this conflict and was an especially revealing example of near flagrant misuse of air power."

Beginning with a brief but comprehensive history of military involvement in Vietnam, Sharp records the natural hesitancy that accompanied initial American policies in Southeast Asia and documents the evolution of the ideological schism that existed between the military (JCS, CINCPAC) and the Administration (President, SECDEF, SECSTATE). This initial difference of perspective became an ever-widening gulf separating the civilian leadership from professional military advice. His chronicle draws heavily from messages he sent to the JCS that repeatedly advised vigorous prosecution of specific targets, strikes against Hanoi, destruction of known supply routes, and the mining of Haiphong Harbor. In general, his advice and counsel were largely ignored and his recommendations were stripped of their effectiveness.

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From the time he assumed the leadership of the unified Pacific Command, Sharp strongly opposed the Administration's policy of "gradualism." He insists that airpower, unfettered with target restrictions and pauses, would have concluded the war in short order. While many will challenge this assertion, Sharp emphatically states that airpower was misused by the Administration, that restrictions amounted to fighting the war with one hand tied behind our backs. The contrasting views, I am sure, will define the fulcrum of future debates on the effectiveness of airpower in modern conflicts.

Gradualism was the adopted policy of the Administration, articulated and canonized by Secretary of Defense McNamara. This policy was based in part on the prospects of Soviet or Chinese entanglement and the political sensitivity to growing public concern, both domestic and international. It held that "carefully calculated doses of force could bring about predictable and desirable responses from Hanoi, the threat implicit in minimum but slowly increasing force . . . would, it was held by some, ultimately bring Hanoi to the (negotiating) table on terms favorable to the U.S." Sharp argues that a strategy derived from such a policy was doomed to disaster on the basis of both history and common military sense.

Because of a bureaucratic distinction between the ground war in the south and Rolling Thunder, the air war in the north, Sharp could never reconcile his views with the prevailing civilian attitude that somehow the air war was a lesser included case to which the strategy of gradualism was equally applicable.

Despite the modest expansion of the air war in 1966-1967, it remained medicinal; Sharp contends that the results of these measured doses were hardened resolve, stronger commitment, and increased military strength on the part of

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the enemy. In Sharp's view, bombing pauses were used by them for resupply, stockpiling munitions and POL in the streets of "restricted areas," building bridges and extending supply lines with each hour of each extension. Bombing restrictions underscore the crucial failure of the strategy in realizing that the air war in the north was inextricably connected to the ground war in the south. Sharp continually pressed for decisive force to be applied to the north, not only to *influence* but to *decide* the outcome in the south. While his proposed strategy and specific tactics are presented in a convincing fashion, Admiral Sharp tends to discount the possibility that real international pressures of which he was not nor could not be aware would have modified his concept of the proper strategy.

Military men who served during this most unpopular and troubling military action will recognize the frustrations and understandable bitterness of Admiral Sharp. More than anything else, his conclusions are repetitions of the lessons of history: military strategy and tactics cannot be orchestrated by rational concepts and limitations; that once committed, military force must be applied swiftly and with all the assets available; and that the civilian leaders "have no business ignoring or overriding the counsel of experienced military professionals in presuming to direct the day-to-day conduct of military strategy and tactics from their desks in Washington . . ."

Though I sat out most of the war in the prison camps of Hanoi, I did have a front row center seat during the LINEBACKER II strikes of 1972. This vantage point gave me some perspective of what airpower can do. The ashen faces of the guards, the absence of the usual chatter and laughter of the townspeople and the cessation of patriotic music and political harangues from the street corner loudspeakers were powerful evidence that the North Vietnamese

had finally recognized *commitment*. Whether the unleashing of this power many years earlier would have brought about a speedier, more favorable end to the war will be debated in the seminars of war colleges for years. I can only say that after seven years of witnessing all the on and off again, limited, airstrikes, I was back in the United States shortly after our first real show of will.

The last chapter of the book may prove disturbing to those who view Vietnam as some incomprehensible mixture of fate and circumstance in U.S. history that could not possibly be repeated. The author is hopeful that his analysis will stimulate thinking, for he fears that "we are already well on the way to our distressing, if quite human, national tendency to bury yesterday's mistakes under today's obsessions, not stopping even to mark the grave in our rush to do so."

*Strategy For Defeat* is an important piece in the puzzle of one of this country's most controversial periods. Admiral Sharp's studied assessment of waging war is very much the same as the great strategic thinkers have articulated countless times throughout history: "Once the decision has been made to wage war, that leadership must permit the war to be engaged expeditiously and full bore, not halfway. The marine who steps on a land mine that was not interdicted at the enemy's supply port does not die halfway. And the pilot hit by a surface-to-air missile whose site he was not permitted to bomb does not fall halfway out of the sky or spend seven years as a limited prisoner of war." The book is limited in scope and clearly biased in its military perspective but, when interlocked with all the other pieces of the puzzle, it will help future generations see the picture and never forget the vision of a strategy for defeat.

R. CRAYTON  
Captain, U.S. Navy