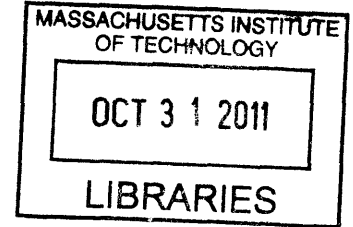


Explaining Military Effectiveness:
Political Intervention and Battlefield Performance

by

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INTRODUCTION

Explaining Military Effectiveness

The Puzzle

Why do states display such remarkable variation in their military effectiveness? This question is different from asking why states win or lose wars, because military effectiveness is not synonymous with victory. States can fight very well on the battlefield but still lose: consider the Germans in both world wars. Or they can fight very poorly but still win: consider the Soviets in the Winter War against Finland in 1939-40.

These discrepancies exist because war outcomes hinge on all sorts of factors besides battlefield performance. The political goals for which a war is fought, the terrain, third-party involvement, the balance of material capabilities—all can influence ultimate victory and defeat. Military effectiveness bears on these outcomes but remains distinct. It pertains to the fighting power that each side is able to generate from the resources that it possesses, separate from the question of whether that fighting power is enough to bring ultimate triumph.

In thinking about the challenges of U.S. foreign policy, the distinction between victory and effectiveness is especially striking. Given its overwhelming material power, the United States is almost sure to eke out some type of conventional “victory” from whatever military operations it chooses to launch in the contemporary international environment. But the price it pays for doing so is likely to vary dramatically depending on the military effectiveness of opponents. Historically, some of the poor, weak states that America has encountered have fought much better than anticipated, such as Serbia in 1999. Others, such as Iraq in 2003, have collapsed much more rapidly than expected, despite their large armies. These sorts of startling differences in effectiveness can also be found in the militaries of U.S. coalition partners and allies, even though many are rich or have received large infusions of U.S. aid and weapons.

In considering these realities, it seems evident that states vary widely in their military effectiveness and that this variation drives differences in the costs, length, and settlement of wars. In particular, states seem to display puzzling differences in their ability to generate operational- and tactical-level fighting power from their resources, a type of power that I refer to in this study as battlefield effectiveness. Battlefield effectiveness requires states to perform three key tasks: to generate cohesive military units, to train those units in the performance of basic tactics, and to endow them with the initiative and coordination needed to conduct the complex operations crucial to effectiveness in modern battle.

Beyond the dilemmas of current U.S. foreign policy, even a cursory examination of the last century of warfare suggests that there is significant variation in states’ abilities to perform these tasks and therefore to impose costs upon their adversaries in war. Three particular types of such variation stand out. The first is cross-national variation, that is, instances in which some national armies seem to consistently perform better than others—for example, the outnumbered Israeli army consistently performing better on the battlefield than its Arab opponents in the series of conflicts between 1948 and 1973. The second type of variation is over-time within the same country—for instance, the Chinese army’s excellent performances against the United States in 1950 and India in 1962, followed by a rather poor showing its smaller, weaker neighbor Vietnam in 1979. The third type of variation is across different units within the same military even in the same war—for instance, the 1991 Gulf War, in which some Iraqi units surrendered immediately upon contact with coalition forces, while others stood and fought. What can account for these differences?

In trying to answer this question, the study of military effectiveness has generally focused on large structural factors such as wealth, demography, culture, and regime type. But this approach is problematic, because these variables actually behave more like constants, changing very little if at all in individual states over time. As a result, they are poorly suited to explaining much of the variation just described. For example, none of these variables could explain the over-time shifts just mentioned in Chinese performance, or the cross-unit differences in Iraqi performance in 1991, because large structural factors did not change over time or vary across different military units in these individual states.

Large structural variables are important, of course, and certainly condition the overall military power one would expect a state to be able to generate. They do constitute a plausible explanation for at least some cross-national variation in battlefield effectiveness. To continue the Arab-Israeli contrast mentioned above, for example, it is probably significant that Israel was a democratic, increasingly wealthy, highly unified society facing fractious, authoritarian, and economically underdeveloped Arab opponents.

Nevertheless, the mechanisms that undergird the causal power of these sorts of sweeping structural forces remain poorly understood. While there may be good reasons to think that wealth, democracy, western culture, or societal unity somehow enhance military performance, it is not entirely clear what it is about these factors that actually matters. One might just as easily suspect that authoritarian regimes should have military advantages instead, with the examples of Nazi and Wilhelmine Germany, the Soviet Union, and North Vietnam immediately springing to mind, among others. What, then, can help account for the full range of variation in states' battlefield effectiveness?

The Argument

This study proposes an explanation for variation in military effectiveness focused on the forms of intervention that political leaders adopt toward their military organizations. There is a long-standing intuition that states' civil-military relations do shape their performance in war. Perhaps no book on this subject has been more influential than Samuel Huntington's *The Soldier and the State*.¹ Huntington argued that the complete separation of the military from politics was the linchpin of both civilian control and military effectiveness. Insulating the military from politics, he contended, was the only way to foster a professional military ethos that would ensure both deference to civilian authority and fighting prowess on the battlefield.

Huntington's thesis has not gone unchallenged, with a great many scholars demonstrating that, in fact, excessive military autonomy can hinder military effectiveness, especially at the strategic level. While put differently in different contexts, the general argument is that close civilian involvement in military affairs is necessary for optimal performance in war. Still, a large literature has continued to expound the essentially Huntingtonian proposition that civilian intervention, often derided as "politicization," reduces military effectiveness in various ways.

This study contends that the debate between these views—rooted fundamentally in the distinction between Huntington's favored "objective" control of the military and the "subjective," politicized control he rejected—is a false one. Beginning from the premise that the complete insulation of the military from politics is empirically rare, this study focuses instead on differing *forms* of political intervention into the military and the ways in which these forms influence performance on the battlefield.

¹ Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957).

Here, the term “political intervention” refers simply to intervention by political leaders into military affairs; the word “political” specifies the actor who intervenes, not the purpose of the intervention. The study uses this term rather than the more common “civilian intervention” because in many instances the political actors of interest are not civilians. Although military dictators may wield civil authority, for example, it seems hard to describe their interventions as “civilian.”

Furthermore, the term “civilian intervention” naturally leads to a focus on the trade-off between civilian control and military autonomy, and the impact that differing equilibria have on military performance. Yet empirically there seems to be no determinate relationship between military autonomy and military performance. To be sure, some highly autonomous militaries do follow the pathway to effectiveness outlined by Huntington: namely, they professionalize when left alone and gravitate on their own toward practices that enhance military effectiveness. Many analysts would put the pre-1914 German army and the U.S. army in this category, for example, and it is not a coincidence that these were two of the fighting organizations that Huntington studied in developing his theory. Certainly, other modern militaries, such as the Pakistani army, lend continued credence to the notion that high levels of autonomy from civilian control can inculcate professionalism and relatively good fighting effectiveness.

Nevertheless, other highly autonomous militaries seem to go the opposite direction: consider the Argentine military under the junta, for example, surely a case where civilian meddling was not the obstacle to effectiveness. At the other extreme, some militaries subjected to highly intrusive civilian control perform poorly, such as Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in 1991 or 2003. But intrusive civilian control has also correlated with very effective fighting forces under other circumstances: consider the Nazis under Adolf Hitler or the Israelis under David Ben-Gurion, both instances in which leaders exerted intense personal control over their officer corps. Indeed, the German military went from extreme autonomy in World War I to extreme civilian intervention in World War II but is generally acknowledged to have fought very well at the tactical and operational levels under both circumstances. Meanwhile, armies subject to communist control in China and the Soviet Union had or have had consistently low military autonomy for decades but have varied significantly in their battlefield effectiveness in different wars.

In short, Huntington’s “objective control” may have led to effectiveness in the sorts of cases he examined, but it does not seem to produce this outcome in all cases. Just as important, there seem to be many varieties of “subjective control,” not all of which are detrimental to effectiveness, and some of which may actually improve it. What seems to matter in these cases, then, is not the level or amount of political intervention in the military, because such intervention or “politicization” is so persistently present that it cannot possibly explain all the observed variation in military performance. Indeed, even in military dictatorships, the leading generals quickly become political actors who face the same dilemmas encountered by their civilian predecessors. Rather, what may matter are the *forms* of political intervention that leaders choose to employ. By examining these forms closely, this study seeks to discern when political intervention will decimate or enhance military performance.

In some sense, all forms of intervention are attempts at political control—the attempt to ensure that military is used for politically acceptable ends. The key question is the nature of those ends. Virtually all forms of political intervention generate militaries that are “effective” at doing something, even if that activity has little to do with external conventional combat. Depending on their perceptions—correct or not—of the nature and

severity of internal and external threats, political leaders can intervene to make militaries good at state-building, at coup prevention, at suppression of domestic dissidents, at counterinsurgency, or at a host of other tasks.

But they can also intervene in ways that expressly improve conventional military performance. These forms of political intervention constitute a series of what I call “best practices,” which I contrast with another approach to political intervention that I call “worst practices.” These two extremes are ideal types, with several varieties of “mixed practices” being possible between them. It is important to add, though, that none of these practices involve ceding civilian or political control to the military. The key question is not whether political leaders intervene, but how.

Taking leaders’ threat perceptions as exogenous—and, as will be shown, highly contingent—the study focuses squarely on forms of political intervention in four key areas of military activity that are tightly tied to success on the modern battlefield: promotions, training, command arrangements, and information management. In brief, political leaders who employ best practices intervene to ensure that military promotions are based on competence and battlefield performance; they actively encourage rigorous, frequent, and realistic military training at both the small- and large-unit levels; they ensure that command authority is decentralized to those in the field rather than concentrated at higher echelons; and they strongly encourage vertical and horizontal information sharing, as well as frequent political-military communication. In combination, these policies ensure the generation of cohesive military units capable of basic tactics as well as the ability to conduct more complex modern military operations, such as combined arms maneuver.

By contrast, political leaders under worst practices intervene in the same areas of military activity, but with very different policies. They ensure that military promotion is based entirely on political loyalty, and they actively select against battlefield prowess in making decisions about whom to hire and fire in the officer corps; they restrict training; they both centralize and fracture command structures, concentrating in their own hands decision-making authority while also circumscribing the range of whatever authority commanders are given. Lastly, political leaders who adopt worst practices also heavily restrict both vertical and horizontal communication within the military and engage in little substantive political-military communication. Together these policies decimate battlefield effectiveness, leading to militaries that are unable to forge together cohesive units, much less endow them with tactical skill or the ability to conduct complex operations.

Between these two extremes lie a range of mixed practices that will be discussed in more detail in the pages that follow. Other things being equal, however, the closer a state moves toward best practices, the better its military performance in conventional interstate war will be. Absent these practices, it is virtually impossible for a state to develop a cohesive, tactically proficient army capable of displaying the coordination and initiative necessary for complex modern military operations—even if that state has significant material advantages such as economic power or a large population. Indeed, the closer a state moves toward worst practices, the more its military performance can be expected to deteriorate. By contrast, states that adopt best practices are likely to “punch above their weight,” generating maximum fighting power from the resources they possess, however meager.

The Evidence

The study tests these arguments through two controlled, paired comparisons of states at war: North and South Vietnam (1961-1975), and Iran and Iraq (1980-1988). The methodology relies on case studies because they enable the most precise measurement of

both the independent and dependent variables. In particular, case studies allow close tracking of the causal processes at the core of the argument. For both pairs of cases, I utilize extensive primary source documents, often ones not examined in existing work on these wars.

Case studies also help avoid a critical inferential problem that plagues many quantitative measures of military effectiveness: namely, that battle deaths or casualties alone tell us little about military performance. Low casualties can be a sign of highly skilled militaries (think of the United States in the 1991 Gulf War), but they can also result from militaries that surrender, retreat, or simply collapse when attacked (think of South Korea in 1950). Similarly, high casualties can be a sign of poorly led militaries repeating the same failed tactics again and again (think of the Western Front in World War I), or they can be a sign of well trained militaries willing to fight to the death (think of the Wehrmacht in the winter of 1944-45). By analyzing casualty data in context, and in conjunction with close examination of whether a given military has proved able to perform those three key tasks listed above, case studies enable a much more accurate assessment of battlefield effectiveness.

The study relies on the particular cases of North versus South Vietnam and Iran versus Iraq because they offer the strongest possible controls for alternative explanations and therefore the cleanest test of the argument. The universe of cases and the case selection procedure are discussed in more detail in the pages that follow, but the general objective was to identify “fair” fights—that is, instances in which dyads were evenly matched along the major dimensions said to matter for military effectiveness. These possible independent variables include wealth; population; regime type; external threat, or the “stakes” involved in losing the war; culture and society; and civil-military relations as generally conceived in the existing literature, that is, as a political environment characterized by either high or low military autonomy. Another way to put this is that the study sought to avoid examining cases whose value of the dependent variable, battlefield effectiveness, was over-determined.

The Vietnam and Iran-Iraq cases are useful in this respect, because the two pairs of states were each closely matched along these dimensions. Most notably, all four states were non-democratic, and all experienced high levels of political intervention into their militaries as they fought large-scale ground wars. But there was substantial variation in each state’s battlefield effectiveness over the course of these wars, both cross-nationally and, in the South Vietnamese, Iranian, and Iraqi cases, sub-nationally. According to existing theories of effectiveness, there should have been very little variation of any type across or within these four states.

Instead, the evidence from the cases shows that differences in the nature of political intervention account for both the cross-national and sub-national variation in battlefield effectiveness. In the Vietnam cases, South Vietnamese leaders generally adopted worst practices in political intervention, which accounts for their poor performance against the North Vietnamese, despite the fact that the two countries had almost identical levels of economic development, the same size populations, similar colonial legacies, and very high stakes in the war. If anything, in fact, the stakes in the war were higher for South Vietnam, and it should have performed especially well given the massive infusion of American aid it received. But the empirical evidence reveals that the ways in which South Vietnamese leaders intervened in their military consistently foiled battlefield effectiveness. Meanwhile, the forms of North Vietnamese intervention, though no less extensive or “political,” had the opposite effect and maximized fighting power.

Interestingly, however, where South Vietnamese political leaders varied their forms of intervention—notably, with respect to the 1st Division, which was consistently subjected to mixed or best practices rather than worst practices—battlefield effectiveness was much better. Indeed, an analysis of the major battles of the war shows that the 1st Division's military performance proved to be virtually indistinguishable from that of North Vietnamese units. This convergence suggests just how differently the war could have turned out, and how much sooner it could have ended, had South Vietnamese leaders adopted best practices with respect to their entire military rather than a single division. It is open to question, of course, why South Vietnamese leaders did not believe that this alternative was open to them, and this question is discussed in more detail in the empirical chapters. Still, the excellent performance of the South Vietnamese 1st Division suggests some of the limits of traditional explanations of the war's outcome, including communist ideology, the benefits and disadvantages of fighting on one's own territory, and the role of outside powers. Even with these other factors in play, South Vietnamese forces could fight surprisingly well when political leaders adopted best practices.

In the Iran-Iraq cases, political leaders in both states initially adopted worst practices with respect to political intervention in the military. The result was that for most of the war neither side was able to capitalize on the advantages that it possessed—in Iran's case, superior economic wealth and a three-fold population edge, and in Iraq's case, far stronger allies and a far greater quantity and quality of weapons. Most of the first six years of the war were a bloody military stalemate.

That said, in the early years of the war Iran's regular forces do seem to have benefited from the slightly better practices in political intervention that the Shah had employed, not all of which Iran's revolutionary leaders had yet been able to dismantle. In particular, Iranian units drawn from the pre-revolutionary regular army, which had received American training during the 1970s, displayed noticeably better tactical proficiency in the initial battles than the revolutionary masses roused by Shia clerics to become martyrs.

Unfortunately for Iran, however, its leaders never successfully integrated pre-revolutionary and revolutionary armed forces, and in fact mistakenly credited the revolutionary forces rather than the legacy regular units with their country's early battlefield successes. As a result, Iran's leaders only deepened their imposition of worst practices as the war went on, decimating whatever legacy lingered from the Shah's era. They instead relied on soldiers who were ideologically motivated to be cohesive but who lacked any ability to convert that cohesion into tactical proficiency or complex operations.

With two belligerents both under the full grip of worst practices, the war devolved into deadlock from roughly 1982-1986. Finally, however, in 1986—several long years after the disastrous effects of worst practices had been evident, even to him—Saddam Hussein endeavored to shift the nature of his political intervention into the Iraqi armed forces. Specifically, he adopted something very close to best practices with respect to his Republican Guard units, even as he kept worst practices with respect to other units. The result of this shift was a relatively rapid improvement in the battlefield effectiveness of the Republican Guard.

Indeed, once subject to different forms of political intervention, these Iraqi units' effectiveness improved so significantly that they were able to beat their larger, wealthier, more populous neighbor in a succession of quick battles that ended the war in 1988. These victories occurred despite the fact that the Iraqi military experienced no great increase in its autonomy, and the fact that it obviously retained its Arab culture, a trait sometimes maligned in the effectiveness literature as hindering military performance.

Put simply, both Iran and Iraq performed poorly when their militaries were uniformly subject to worst practices: in the Iranian case, after about 1982, and in the Iraqi case, before about 1986. By contrast, in the period before these practices were fully imposed on the regular military in Iran and in the period after these practices were lifted on the Republican Guard units in Iraq, military performance by those forces was noticeably better compared both to the opponent's military and to other units drawn from the same state. The contrast was subtle in the Iranian case and dramatic in the Iraqi case. But these distinctions—similar to those seen in the Vietnam comparisons—suggest again the power of the political intervention variable in explaining battlefield effectiveness. Indeed, the cases show this variable to matter across a very diverse set of national institutions, ranging from one-party communist rule (North Vietnam) to military dictatorship (South Vietnam), and from revolutionary theocracy (Iran) to Ba'hist personalism (Iraq).

The Implications

The cases examined in this study show that non-democratic states exhibit significant variation in their patterns of political intervention and their battlefield effectiveness, not only cross-nationally, but also sub-nationally. This latter variation in particular suggests the importance of looking beyond structural factors to explain and predict military performance. Indeed, the findings illuminate an important, more agile mechanism—forms of political intervention in the armed forces—that may actually be doing much of the casual work often attributed to regime type. The empirical evidence shows that when autocratic regimes adopt best practices in political intervention, they can perform with surprisingly high levels of effectiveness, certainly comparable to that often attributed to democratic regimes.

Although such instances may indeed be outliers, they constitute a particularly important set of cases. First, from a theoretical perspective, understanding instances of autocratic effectiveness sheds light on what it is about democracies that may enable them to generally perform better. For a variety of reasons, democracies may be more likely to adopt best practices in political intervention, but where they fail to do so, or where autocracies choose to embrace best practices, the performances of the two regime types may be nearly indistinguishable. Although existing studies would not deny that autocracies sometimes perform well in war, this study provides the first systematic explanation for when, why, and how this should occur. Furthermore, the similarity in Iraqi, Iranian, and South Vietnamese military performance under worst practices, as well as the improvements in Iraqi and South Vietnamese performance under best practices, should cast strong doubt on the role of any particular type of culture in determining battlefield effectiveness.

The study also helps differentiate between the concepts of autocracy and civil-military pathology, which are so conflated that one sometimes seems to serve interchangeably as a proxy for the other. By intentionally excluding democracies from the empirical analysis, the research strategy employed here shows that regime type and civil-military relations are two related but very distinct variables that can move independently of each other. So while the cases here do not dispute the finding that democracies may have better overall battlefield effectiveness, they should make us very skeptical about the causal logic normally used to support this claim. At a minimum, the North Vietnamese and Iraqi cases suggest that the lack of a liberal political culture does not present any inherent bar to military performance.

The findings are important from a practical perspective, too. If the democratic peace theory is correct, then virtually all future conflicts will involve at least one non-democratic regime. It is therefore vital to understand how these states are likely to perform in war. The

study here suggests that a close examination of political intervention in these states' armed forces—and the threat perceptions that drive such interventions, a topic examined in more detail in the pages that follow—will shed powerful light on the likely fighting capabilities of potential adversaries. It will also be critical to an accurate assessment of the battlefield prowess of potential allies and coalition partners, many of whom may be non-democratic.

Ultimately, states that adopt best practices may not always win their wars, just as states adopting worst practices may not always lose their wars. As mentioned, many factors account for war outcomes. But the actual fighting effectiveness of the belligerents surely matters as well, and understanding the nature of political intervention in the militaries of the two sides goes a long way toward explaining not only war outcomes, but also why wars end when they do, with what costs, and with what settlements.

States that adopt best practices can be expected to fight harder, resist longer, and impose significantly higher costs on their adversaries than might otherwise be expected based on an assessment of their material resources. Conversely, states that adopt worst practices can be expected to collapse more quickly than traditional net assessments based on order of battle data might predict. As a result, understanding the varying forms of political intervention in the military and how these interventions shape effectiveness is crucial to both the academic study of war duration, cost, and termination, and also to the practical policymaking task of assessing fighting power.

The Plan of the Study

The study that follows appears in six parts. Chapter 1 elaborates on the sketch just given, detailing the puzzle of military performance and discussing how to define and measure battlefield effectiveness. It also presents the argument in more depth, contrasts it more tightly with the existing research, and fully explains the methodology.

The next four chapters then execute this methodology. Chapter 2 compares the values of the independent variable, political intervention in the armed forces, in North and South Vietnam during from the 1950s through 1975. It finds that the North Vietnamese generally adopted best practices, while the South Vietnamese adopted worst practices, with the important exception of the 1st Division.

Chapter 3 then compares the battlefield performance of the two states from 1962-1975 by examining a series of major ground battles in the war in which the United States played little or no role. The battlefield evidence generally bears out the predictions of the theory, with North Vietnamese forces proving to be much more effective than the South Vietnamese, with the exception of the 1st Division. These chapters draw for their evidence on a variety of documentary sources, including U.S. military and civilian archives, translated North Vietnamese histories and records, captured documents, contemporary news accounts, biographies, memoirs, and secondary material.

Chapters 4 and 5 repeat this general approach with respect to the Iran and Iraq cases. Chapter 4 compares political intervention in the armed forces of the two states, showing that both generally adopted worst practices. The two exceptions were the legacy Iranian regular army units from the time of the Shah, which had been subject to slightly better training practices, and the Iraqi Republican Guard units late in the war, which were subject to dramatically better practices starting around 1986.

Chapter 5 then compares the battlefield performance of the two states from 1980-1988 by examining the war's major ground battles in which third party involvement was minimal. Again, the battlefield evidence generally bears out the predictions of the theory. Iran enjoyed some early victories through reliance on its regular forces, but as Iranian leaders

accelerated their imposition of worst practices and sidelined regular units in favor of revolutionary forces, the war devolved into a stalemate. This deadlock lifted on after the rather dramatic shift in Iraq effectiveness during 1987-8. These chapters again draw for their evidence on documentary sources, including recently released and translated records and audio tapes captured from the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. They also examine a variety of declassified U.S. documents on the war, as well as secondary material.

The conclusion summarizes main findings, draws out the implications, and points the way toward future research.

CHAPTER 1

Political Intervention in the Military and Its Impact on Battlefield Effectiveness

Why do states generate different levels of battlefield effectiveness from similar economic, demographic, and technological endowments? Which sorts of states are likely to generate cohesive military units, to train them adequately in basic tactics, and to endow them with the ability to conduct the complex operations crucial to effectiveness in modern battle? Which sorts of states are likely to fail in these tasks, despite evidence that they have the material resources needed to perform them? In other words, what are the key factors that determine which states do—and don't—manage to turn their national assets into operational- and tactical-level fighting power?

This study proposes and tests an answer to these questions focused on the forms of political intervention that leaders adopt toward their militaries. Here, the term “political intervention” refers simply to intervention by political leaders into military affairs; the word “political” specifies the actor who intervenes, not the purpose of the intervention. The study uses this term rather than the more common “civilian intervention,” because in many instances the political actors of interest are not civilians.¹ Although military dictators may wield civil authority, for example, it seems more appropriate to describe them as “political” rather than “civilian” actors, even while remaining agnostic about the ends that motivate their intervention.

Debate about the relationship between civil-military relations and military performance is long-standing, but it has focused almost entirely on the causes and consequences of varying *levels* of civilian or political intervention in the military. It is certainly true that some militaries are so highly autonomous that the question of such intervention is moot, and it is worthwhile to understand why some militaries are autonomous while others are not, and the implications for effectiveness. This study, however, focuses on the large class of militaries in which political intervention is common, and asks and answers a different question: what *forms* can political intervention in the military take, and what impact do these varying forms have on the battlefield?

There are in fact many different ways for civilians or other political leaders to intervene in their military organizations, and such intervention seems more common than not. Even in military dictatorships, which in some sense represent the epitome of military autonomy, the desire among the reigning general to intervene or “politicize” military matters is almost always very high. What varies is the form that these and other attempts at political intervention take, which in turn depends on leaders’ motivations in adopting them. Some forms of intervention, adopted when leaders judge internal threats to be less pressing, are likely to maximize a state’s ability to turn its resources into fighting power on the battlefield. Other forms may provide excellent protection against serious internal threats, but they will reduce or even decimate the military’s ability to fight effectively against external threats posed by other states.

By elucidating and examining these configurations of intervention more closely, this study helps crack the puzzle of why there is so much variation in the battlefield power that states seem able to generate. The study focuses in particular on political intervention with respect to four key sets of military activities: promotion patterns, training regimens, command arrangements, and information management. Although there are other areas in

¹ For a study that uses the term “civilian intervention,” see Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

which political intervention surely occurs and is important—mobilization policies, for instance, or doctrinal formation—the study focuses on these core activities because, as we will see, they are very tightly linked to the requirements of tactical and operational military effectiveness on the modern battlefield.

By examining different forms of political intervention in these four areas of military activity, the study illuminates an important mechanism actually driving many observed differences in military performance—variation often attributed almost entirely to structural factors, such as economic development, regime type, culture and society, and civil-military relations writ large. It helps us better understand which aspects of domestic politics matter most for states' external conflict behavior. It makes sense of instances of military performance that are puzzling for the dominant theoretical explanations of military effectiveness, particularly instances of variation in the same military over time or across different units. And it produces a useful tool for those policymakers seeking to estimate the likely battlefield prowess of future adversaries, or seeking to build or assess the military capabilities of allies.

It is important to note that this study does not seek to generate an explanation of war outcomes—of why, at the end of the day, particular states win or lose wars. The study is concerned, rather, with the conduct of wars: why particular militaries subject to certain forms of political intervention seem able to resist longer, fight harder, and display more sophistication than their adversaries might predict, and why other militaries also subject to intervention seem to collapse on the battlefield even when they appear to possess the material capabilities needed to carry on. As we will see, these differences are behind much of the great variation seen in the length of wars, their human and economic costs, and their final settlements—aspects of warfare not captured in studies that focus solely on outcomes.

After all, fighting power is not synonymous with victory. Consider that in both world wars the Germans were considered the best fighting force, but they lost both conflicts—or that the Israelis are widely considered to have militarily smashed the Syrians in 1982 but their venture into Lebanon is still labeled a defeat, as was a similar expedition in 2006. War outcomes depend greatly on the political goals for which wars are fought, and as Clausewitz noted, the same military activities can lead to victory or defeat, depending on the context.²

Still, other things being equal, we would expect that states that fight better are more likely to win their wars. Battlefield triumph is, if not a sufficient condition for victory, almost always a necessary one.³ Even the best strategy brought forth by the best regime cannot succeed if it cannot be practically implemented. It is worth remembering, for example, that in World War I the British had a superior overall plan for besting the Germans by early 1915: hold the line on the Continent while fully mobilizing the British and American economies, cajole America into joining the war, buy time for the Allies' superior economic to wear down the Germans. If any state could coast to victory on the excellence of its strategic advantages alone, it would have been Britain. Yet, as Paul Kennedy has noted, “None of these factors would be enough if battles could not be won.”⁴ Even with the right strategy in place, the war boiled down to solving “a small but vital number of tactical

² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 87.

³ There are certainly exceptions, such as France in World War II, a state defeated on the battlefield in 1940 but later rescued by coalition partners on the winning side.

⁴ Paul Kennedy, “Military Effectiveness in the First World War,” in *Military Effectiveness, Vol. I: the First World War*, Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murrays, eds. (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1988), p. 345.

problems,” particularly how to counter U-boat attacks and break through the German trench system. Strategy mattered, but only when the British actually fought better could they prevail in the war.

For these reasons, this study focuses squarely on the determinants of “fighting better”—or worse. This chapter proceeds in four main parts. First, it describes in more detail what is meant by the phrase “fighting better,” presenting a definition of battlefield effectiveness focused on specific tasks that effective militaries must perform and explaining where this definition of the dependent variable concurs with and diverges from other definitions. Second, the chapter discusses the existing explanations for battlefield effectiveness, noting their contributions but drawing our attention to the empirical puzzles that they leave unresolved.

The third section of the chapter presents the theory, arguing that differing forms of political intervention cause variation in battlefield effectiveness. In contrast to much of the existing literature, my explanation focuses not on the degree of intervention—high or low—but on the content of that intervention where it occurs. To be sure, political intervention in the military is not universal, and among highly autonomous militaries, the factors explaining effectiveness could not, by definition, depend on variations in political intervention. Still, the theory here hypothesizes that political intervention is very common and that, where present, different forms of intervention exert systematic influence on standardized and observable aspects of military performance. The theory thus enables us to draw a clear causal chain from a variety of political-military patterns to what happens on the battlefield. But, to be clear, the theory does argue that political intervention is always necessary for battlefield effectiveness, only that such intervention is very common and that its differing forms matter greatly for effectiveness where intervention occurs.

Fourth, the chapter discusses the study’s methodology, explaining why I rely on a largely qualitative approach to measuring battlefield effectiveness. This section also discusses how to measure the independent variables of interest and the case selection procedure. It focuses in particular on the methodological value of the four case studies that comprise the bulk of the empirical research: North and South Vietnam in their war from 1961 to 1975 and of Iran and Iraq from 1980 to 1988. The section concludes with an overview of the method of structured, focused comparison that guides the case studies; the primary documents used in each; the approach used to address disconfirming evidence and alternative explanations; and a preliminary overview of the empirical findings and their theoretical implications.

I. The Dependent Variable: Battlefield Effectiveness

Running through most studies of military effectiveness is a basic distinction between political-strategic effectiveness, and operational-tactical effectiveness. Military activity at the political-strategic level is primarily about the selection of overall goals for which wars and campaigns are fought, whereas operational-tactical military activity takes those goals as givens and seeks to achieve them through the execution of actual campaigns and the application of combat techniques in battle.⁵ *Battlefield effectiveness*, the term I use in this study, refers to a state’s success at this latter level of military activity.

As mentioned, this sort of success is not synonymous with victory. As Martin van Creveld has noted, “Victory is by no means the sole criterion of military excellence. A small

⁵ Allan R. Millet and Williamson Murray, “The Effectiveness of Military Organizations,” in *Military Effectiveness, Vol. I: the First World War* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1988), pp. 6-7, 12, and 19.

army may be overwhelmed by a larger one. Confronted with impossible political and economic odds, a qualitatively superior force may go down to defeat through no fault of its own. Not the outcome alone, but intrinsic qualities as well must figure in an attempt to measure military (or any other) excellence.”⁶ Millet and Murray agree: “Victory is an outcome of battle; it is not what a military organization does in battle. Victory is not a characteristic of an organization but rather a result of organizational activity. Judgments of effectiveness should thus retain some sense of proportional cost and organizational process.”⁷

Effectiveness, in other words, is largely about a military organization’s own ability to perform key tasks efficiently, rather than about the ultimate outcome of those actions. Outcomes depend heavily on what transpires in the opponent’s military organization, the political and strategic objectives of each side, the terrain on which the war is fought, the balance of economic and military power, and many other external factors that will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Certainly, such factors are always in play and must be acknowledged in any thorough analysis, but it is more useful to think of them as constraints or opportunities facing one side or the other rather than as actually constituting one side’s effectiveness or not. The processes that go on inside wars, rather than simply the final outcome, provide the most precise reading of the “intrinsic qualities” of interest to Van Creveld or the “organizational activity” of interest to Millet and Murray.

Fortunately, there is some consensus about what qualities and activities actually matter most—the tasks in which a military must engage in order to be effective on the modern battlefield. Indeed, Ken Pollack and Stephen Biddle, among many others, have studied effectiveness essentially as a question of whether militaries can execute certain crucial activities or not.⁸ A military’s ability to conduct these activities might be more or less surprising given its political and strategic goals, or its material and human endowments, which gets to the efficiency aspect of effectiveness. But the actual activities that constitute operational- and tactical-level effectiveness are relatively clear, and it is hard to analyze battlefield performance without reference to them.

To be effective on the battlefield militaries have to be able to 1) generate military units that maintain *cohesion under fire*; 2) train those units to perform *basic tactics*; and 3) endow those units with the ability to conduct what I call *complex operations*. Together these three tasks comprise an escalating series of standards by which to judge battlefield effectiveness, with the best militaries able to do all three, the mediocre ones able to do just tasks 1 and perhaps 2, and the worst militaries struggling to do even task 1. Put another way, most of the variation in battlefield effectiveness is really about how well states acquire and integrate several increasingly challenging competencies in the performance of key tasks. But what is actually involved in these three sets of tasks?

⁶ Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939-1945* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), p. 3.

⁷ p. 3.

⁸ Ken Pollack, *Arabs at War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002); Pollack, “The Influence of Arab Culture on Arab Military Effectiveness,” Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Political Science, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1996; and Stephen Biddle, *Military Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). Risa Brooks also adopts this approach in her discussion of the “skill” component of military effectiveness in “Introduction: the Impact of Culture, Society, Institutions, and International Forces on Military Effectiveness,” in Elizabeth Stanley and Risa Brooks, eds., *Creating Military Power: The Sources of Military Effectiveness* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 12.

Unit cohesion under fire refers to the military's ability to remain intact in actual battlefield conditions.⁹ This aspect of the dependent variable is largely agnostic on the higher-order question of whether the units are highly trained, or whether the training they have received is well matched to the challenges posed by the adversary, topics about which more will be said below. The question is simply, do units stand and fight once they encounter the enemy, or do they collapse, desert, or engage in disorderly retreats? How difficult do conditions have to become, in terms of the enemy's attacks or the privations of the battlefield environment, before the bonds of the unit snap?

Basic tactics refers to whether coherent military units demonstrate proficiency in simple skills such as weapons handling and the use of terrain for cover and concealment. These are the sort of minimal capabilities required to conduct static defenses, ambushes, orderly retreats, or pre-planned attritional offensives—operations that certainly depend on a basic degree of training and unit cohesion but do not necessarily require significant initiative or improvisation during battle, or extensive coordination with other combat arms or larger units. This part of the dependent variable simply asks, if units remain coherent under fire, do they demonstrate basic military proficiency as they resist or attack the adversary?

Complex operations refers to whether coherent, tactically proficient units can engage in operations that require both significant low-level initiative and high-level coordination among different parts of the military. The specific content of complex operations will vary depending on the era under consideration (no one would dock Napoleon's armies for failing to conduct a blitzkrieg); the medium of warfare (air, land, or sea), the type of war (irregular or conventional); and the military's tactical orientation (offensive or defensive). But within a particular era, medium, type of warfare, and battlefield context, it is possible to point to some types of operations as more complex—and therefore a greater test of a military's operational sophistication—than others.

Within the realm of modern, conventional, interstate land warfare, combined arms action is a hallmark of complex operations. For example, armies that demonstrate the ability to combine different types of forces, such as infantry and armor, armor and artillery, or ground forces and air forces, would be conducting complex operations. On the defense, these operations could take the form of a mobile defense-in-depth, a fighting withdrawal, or the execution of counteroffensives. On the offensive, these operations would include combined-arms attacks, particularly maneuver operations.

What all of these operations have in common is the requirement that armies integrate the activities of multiple different parts of their military organization. Furthermore, even though this integration occurs in support of an overall high-level plan, it depends upon considerable initiative and battlefield responsiveness on the part of commanders and

⁹ Key works on cohesion include Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941-45: German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1985); Jasen Castillo, "The Will to Fight: Explaining an Army's Staying Power," Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Political Science, University of Chicago, June 2003; Darryl Henderson, *Cohesion, the Human Element in Combat: Leadership and Societal Influence in the Armies of the Soviet Union, the United States, North Vietnam, and Israel* (Washington, DC: NDU, 1985); Larry Ingraham and Frederick Manning, "Cohesion: Who Needs It, What Is It, and How Do We Get It to Them?" *Military Review*, vol. 61 (1981), pp. 3-12; Edward Shils and Morris Janowitz, "Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 12, no. 2 (summer 1948), pp. 280-315; and Christopher C. Straub, *The Unit First: Keeping the Promise of Cohesion* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 1985). More controversial is S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: the Problem of Battle Command in Future War* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1987), and the shortcomings of which are treated in David Hackworth and Julie Sherman, *About Face* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989). See also Roger J. Spiller, "S.L.A. Marshall and the Ratio of Fire," *RUSI Journal* (winter 1988), pp. 63-71.

soldiers. Units of any size, from the platoon to the corps, can conduct complex operations, although the coordination challenges grow considerably as armies attempt to integrate the activities of larger and larger groups of soldiers. One can debate these distinctions, of course, but it seems clear that within particular classes of warfare we can compare how well militaries perform such operations, how well a single military performs them across time, or how well different units within the same military perform them. The basis for coding the dependent variable is listed in the table below.

CODING THE DEPENDENT VARIABLE: BATTLEFIELD EFFECTIVENESS
Unit cohesion
Do units stand and fight when they encounter the enemy?
What are the rates of surrender? Desertion from the battlefield?
Do soldiers follow orders under fire?
Does the severity of enemy attacks or the privations of the battlefield environment affect the answers to the above?
Tactical proficiency
Do units demonstrate the ability to handle their weapons properly?
Are units familiar with their equipment?
Are soldiers able to use terrain for cover and concealment?
Can the unit execute an ambush? A static defense? Orderly retreats? A pre-planned attritional offensive?
Complex operations
Can the unit conduct combined arms operations? Inter-service operations? Division-size or larger operations?
Among defensive operations, is the unit able to conduct a defense-in-depth? Fighting withdrawals? Counter-attacks?
Among offensive operations, is it able to conduct maneuver operations? Small unit special forces operations?
To what extent does the unit demonstrate a capacity for both low-level initiative and high-level coordination?

It is important to note that these aspects of battlefield effectiveness can interact with one another in various ways, as will be discussed more below. But using this basic rubric, we can distinguish theoretically among four values of the dependent variable: 1) *excellent* militaries or military units, which are coherent, tactically proficient, and able to engage in complex operations; 2) *adequate* militaries or military units, which are coherent and demonstrate basic tactical proficiency, but lack the ability to engage in anything more sophisticated; 3) *mediocre* militaries or military units, which remain coherent and resist the enemy but without competently employing even very basic tactics; and 4) *poor* militaries or military units, which do not even remain coherent in battle, quickly collapsing or retreating upon encountering the enemy.

[SEE NEXT PAGE]

Coding the Values of the Dependent Variable, Battlefield Effectiveness				
	1. EXCELLENT	2. ADEQUATE	3. MEDIOCRE	4. POOR
Unit cohesion?	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Basic tactics?	Yes	Yes	No	No
Complex operations?	Yes	No	No	No

Because the components of the dependent variable are additive and synergistic, the best militaries or military units are those in the first category. But the distinctions between 1 and 2, 2 and 3, and 3 and 4 still seem relevant in explaining the length, costs, and outcomes of wars. Certainly, a military whose units can consistently perform all three sets of tasks will be able to sustain much greater resistance on the battlefield than one whose units can perform only a couple or only one or none at all. Performance of all three tasks is no guarantee of ultimate victory, but it does markedly change the costs that a state can impose on its opponent, other things being equal.

Of course, other things rarely are equal. There is always another aspect of battlefield effectiveness, which is the appropriateness of operations, complex or not, to the actual challenges posed by the adversary. For example, by the standards just listed, one could argue that the U.S. Army was basically “effective” in the Vietnam War: its units were usually cohesive (though not always, due to the short in-theater rotations and fragging incidents as the war went on); its soldiers showed up in theater proficient in basic military skills such as weapons handling; and many units also routinely performed combined arms and maneuver operations requiring a great deal of low-level initiative and high-level coordination. The problem was that the content of these operations did little to undermine an adversary that mostly avoided conventional fights, especially prior to 1968.¹⁰

Nevertheless, there is a clear distinction between the sorts of problems the U.S. Army experienced in Vietnam and those of, say, the Argentine army in the Falklands War. Argentina’s poorly trained, short-term conscripts easily crumbled under the pressure of British engagement, repeatedly demonstrated a lack of basic military skills, and never came close to any sort of operational sophistication (the air force being the one exception to this pattern).¹¹ One Argentine later described himself as “a civilian in the middle of war, dressed like a soldier.”¹² Whatever one can say about the U.S. Army’s problems in southeast Asia, no one could describe it as a force of “civilians dressed like soldiers,” especially not its officer and NCO corps, and especially not during the initial years of the war. The Army had clear deficits, but they stemmed primarily from a mismatch between its doctrine and the nature of the enemy, not from units that simply collapsed when asked to perform that doctrine or lacked training to perform it, including its most complex aspects.

Although this mismatch is important, it speaks to a different sort of variation in battlefield effectiveness than that examined in this study—primarily because the “mismatch”

¹⁰ Robert Cassidy, *Counterinsurgency and the Global War on Terror: Military Culture and Irregular War* (Stanford, CA: Greenwood Press, 2006); Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); and John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). For useful background, see Austin Long, *On “Other War”: Lessons from Five Decades of RAND Counterinsurgency Research* (Arlington, VA: RAND, 2006).

¹¹ Nora Kinzer Stewart, *Mates and Muchachos: Unit Cohesion in the Falklands/Malvinas War* (New York: Brassey’s, 1991).

¹² Daniel Kon, *Los Chicos de la Guerra* (Sevenoaks, UK: New English Library, 1983), p. 28.

problem is rare and because it has already been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry.¹³ It is generally the province of highly professional armies that find themselves having to prepare for and/or fight two kinds of wars at once. For example, the U.S. Army had to prepare for high-intensity conventional war in Europe at the same time it was engaged in Vietnam; one could provide a similar explanation for the problems the Soviets faced in Afghanistan, or the challenges the Israeli Defense Forces face today.

There is no doubt that this conundrum merits attention, but it is essentially a question about which kinds of complex operations a cohesive, tactically proficient military should perform. And indeed, recent U.S. experience in Iraq has hinted that, when properly motivated, this sort of military can at least partially transition from emphasizing one kind of complex operations (conventional high-intensity war) to another (population-centric counterinsurgency) relatively quickly, because there is an underlying core of cohesion and tactical competence that a new doctrine can re-direct toward new ends.¹⁴ It is not obvious, however, that the policies required to produce this sort of doctrinal shift in a highly professional military are the same ones that can rehabilitate a military suffering basic deficits in coherence and tactical skills. One can change the doctrine of this latter sort of military, but since inappropriate doctrine is not the main driver of its effectiveness problems, the change is unlikely to produce significant improvements on the battlefield.

As a result, this study focuses on the aforementioned three aspects of battlefield performance solely within a single type of conflict—interstate conventional warfare—in order to rule out the doctrinal mismatch problem as an explanation for variation in the dependent variable. I also focus on this realm of warfare because of its historical and continuing importance to the course of world politics. Despite the increasing prominence of irregular and “hybrid” conflicts, conventional high-intensity war, in which large units stand and fight each other over territory, remains a serious threat in many regions of the world, including the Middle East and much of Asia.¹⁵ It is also arguably still the U.S. military’s favored form of combat, one honed during the Cold War and heavily resourced in U.S. defense budgets to this day. Numerous other nations, notably Iran, Russia, and China, continue to raise large land armies and to acquire or maintain significant quantities of conventional weaponry, such as armor, artillery, and fighter-bombers. These indicators all suggest that the determinants of effectiveness within the realm of interstate conventional warfare merit continuing attention, even as awareness of and attention to other types of conflict grow. That said, there is every reason to believe that the basic findings of the argument presented here could be applied through further research to improve our understanding of the determinants of effectiveness in these other types of combat.

In summary, the key question of effectiveness is not just whether militaries can perform the three key tasks in conventional warfare, but how well they perform them given the resources that they possess. Indeed, as Risa Brooks argues, “Resources are important in

¹³ See footnote 10. Also, Robert Cassidy, *Russia in Afghanistan and Chechnya: Military Strategic Culture and the Paradoxes of Asymmetric Conflict* (Fort Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2003).

¹⁴ Brian Burton and John Nagl, “Learning as We Go: the U.S. Army Adapts to Counterinsurgency in Iraq, July 2004-December 2006,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (September 2008), pp. 303-327; and Colin Kahl, “COIN of the Realm: Is There a Future for Counterinsurgency?” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2007, available online.

¹⁵ On the notion of hybrid wars, see Frank G. Hoffman, “Hybrid Threats: Reconceptualizing the Evolving Character of Modern Conflict,” *Strategic Forum*, No. 240, April 2009, pp. 1-8; and Stephen Biddle and Jeffrey A. Friedman, *The 2006 Lebanon Campaign and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, September 2008).

assessing potential power, but effectiveness tells how well a state can translate those resources into actual power in war. Effectiveness is the difference between what a state's raw resources suggest it could potentially do, and what it is actually capable of doing in battle."¹⁶

If this is true, and effectiveness is about the efficient performance of key tasks, then we have to consider the role of resources as an important constraint, one that helps sharpen our understanding of which instances of military performance are actually puzzling. Examples would include instances in which militaries that rate similarly in resources demonstrate differing abilities to perform key tasks, or when the same military varies in its battlefield abilities over time without a change in its resources, or when different units from the same military perform differently at the same point in time, despite having access to similar national resources.

All of this implies, however, that we know which sorts of resources actually matter for fighting power. If effectiveness is about "what militaries do with what they have," then even if we can agree about what they should do, we have to know what things they might have that could matter, and we have to consider what scholars have already uncovered about variables that affect the conversion of what states have into fighting power. We even have to consider the possibility that what states do is entirely a function of what they have and that the notion of effectiveness itself, as the gap between resources and output, is illusory. The next section delves into these questions in more depth by exploring the existing literature on effectiveness, as well as some preliminary data.

II. Existing Explanations of Battlefield Effectiveness

In considering the existing literature on military effectiveness, it is important to distinguish between two sets of variables: variables said to constitute "what states have" and variables said to influence "what states *do* with what they have." This study is fundamentally concerned with the latter category, but it is only when we know the values of both sets of variables for a given military that we can 1) be confident in the concept of effectiveness described above, as efficient performance of key tasks, and 2) determine whether a particular military's level of effectiveness actually needs explaining or not.

The existing literature points to two major types of material resources that are relevant for the generation of military power: economic wealth and demography. It also points to four types of non-material variables that are said to be relevant to the conversion of material resources into fighting power on the battlefield: regime type, threat level, culture and society, and civil-military relations. This section will examine the theories that emphasize each of these material and non-material variables, paying particular attention to the sort of empirical evidence that would confirm or cast doubt on their explanatory value.

[SEE NEXT PAGE]

¹⁶ Brooks, "Introduction," p. 3.

Existing Explanations of Battlefield Effectiveness	
<i>RESOURCES</i> <i>(material variables, “what states have”)</i>	<i>FORCE MULTIPLIERS OR DIVIDERS</i> <i>(non-material variables, “what states do with what they have”)</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Economic wealth 2. Demography 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Regime type 2. Threat environment 3. Culture and society 4. Civil-military relations

Economic Wealth

Economic wealth is one of the most intuitive explanations of military power, although much of the literature in this area focuses on the question of victory rather than effectiveness per se. The argument has many versions: that wealth enables states to afford the training and technology needed to professionalize their militaries; that wealthy societies deliver a higher level of human capital to their militaries, producing soldiers who are easier to train, can understand more complex operations, or can operate modern technology; that wealth produces the industrial base needed to fight modern wars; or that wealth is a crucial precondition of democracy, one of the potential “force multipliers” that will be addressed below.¹⁷ Ultimately, however, all the versions predict that states with greater economic wealth should perform better in wars and that, between two opponents, the state with greater economic wealth is more likely to win.

Other studies argue that economic wealth is an important resource but that it alone can explain neither war outcomes nor, more importantly for our purposes, all the variation in battlefield performance within wars. For example, Stephen Biddle has shown that states’ GNP is a weak predictor of their odds of victory, leaving nearly half of war outcomes unexplained. He and others also point to instances in which poor, “low-tech,” less economically developed states seem to have fought better on the battlefield than wealthy, economically advanced states fielding the most advanced weaponry.¹⁸ A commonly cited example of this phenomenon is the People’s Liberation Army in the opening phases of the Korean War.¹⁹ Other puzzles for the wealth explanation include states with similar levels of wealth that have generated very different levels of battlefield performance, or instances in which poor states such as Serbia in 1999 still seem to have to generated highly competent

¹⁷ Michael Desch, *Power and Military Effectiveness: the Fallacy of Democratic Triumphalism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2008); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987); Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); David Lake, “Powerful Pacifists: Democratic States and War,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 86, No. 1 (1992), pp. 24-37; and Michael Beckley, “Economic Development and Military Effectiveness,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 33, no. 1 (February 2010), pp. 43-79. Scholars who do not endorse the wealth argument, but provide useful discussions of it, include Stephen Biddle and Stephen Long, “Democracy and Military Effectiveness,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (2004), pp. 535-546, and Pollack, “The Influence of...,” chapter 5.

¹⁸ *Military Power*, “Explaining Military Outcomes,” in Brooks and Stanley, pp. 207-227.

¹⁹ For background on the Korean War, see Roy Appleman, *Disaster in Korea: the Chinese Confront MacArthur* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1989); Edwin Hoyt, *The Day the Chinese Attacked: Korea, 1950* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990); and Allen Whiting, *China Crosses the Yalu: the Decision to Enter the Korean War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968).

militaries.²⁰ These anomalies would seem to constitute true effectiveness puzzles and require examination of additional, possibly non-material, variables.

Demography

A second material explanation of battlefield effectiveness focuses on demography and its implications for force sizing. The larger a state's supply of fighting-age males, the larger an army it can mobilize (and replenish), giving it an advantage in force ratios in the field, a particularly relevant consideration when conducting offensives.²¹ Larger armies are also more likely to have manpower to spare for the formation of more specialized units, suggesting that such militaries might be more able to conduct complex operations. Finally, states with larger populations probably have a greater capacity for wealth generation, triggering the causal mechanisms tied to economic power. For all of these reasons, some scholars believe demography to strongly predict both battlefield performance and war outcomes.

Others are less convinced, treating population size much the way they treat economic wealth—as a critical resource on which states draw but far from satisfying as a single explanation for variation in the performance of key battlefield tasks. Many observers point to instances in which states or coalitions with very large populations have fought poorly against those with much smaller ones, the classic examples being the outnumbered Israelis in their wars against the Arabs, and the Finns against the Soviets in the Winter War.²² The great variation in Chinese military performance across its wars in Korea, on the Indian border, and with Vietnam similarly would suggest that there is more to explaining variation in battlefield performance than manpower availability.²³ Indeed, China arguably performed the worst in the war in which it had the greatest overall superiority in numbers, against Vietnam. What often is said to matter, of course, is not overall numbers, but rather local ratios of field forces. Stephen Biddle has cut to the heart of this matter, though, showing statistically that such ratios also do not predict battle outcomes.²⁴

The Limitations of Material Explanations: Preliminary Data

Beyond the anomalies just mentioned, my own quantitative examination of all states that have fought interstate wars since 1945 reveals that differences in material power do not account for much of the variation in battlefield performance as measured by the ratio of battle deaths.²⁵ Contrary to what material explanations might predict, ratios of battle deaths suffered by each side are not inversely proportional to the ratios of their Composite Index of National Capabilities (CINC) scores, which measure states' total population, urban population, iron and steel production, energy consumption, military personnel, and military

²⁰ Ivo Daalder and Michael O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly: NATO's War to Save Kosovo* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000); and Barry R. Posen, "The War for Kosovo: Serbia's Political-Military Strategy," *International Security*, vol. 24, no. 4 (spring 2000), pp. 39-84.

²¹ Marko Djuranovic, "Democracy or Demography: Regime Type and the Determinants of War Outcomes," Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Political Science, Columbia University, 2008.

²² Chaim Herzog, *The Arab-Israeli Wars: War and Peace in the Middle East* (New York: Random House, 1982); and Edward Roberts, *Winter War: Russia's Invasion of Finland, 1939-1940* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2008).

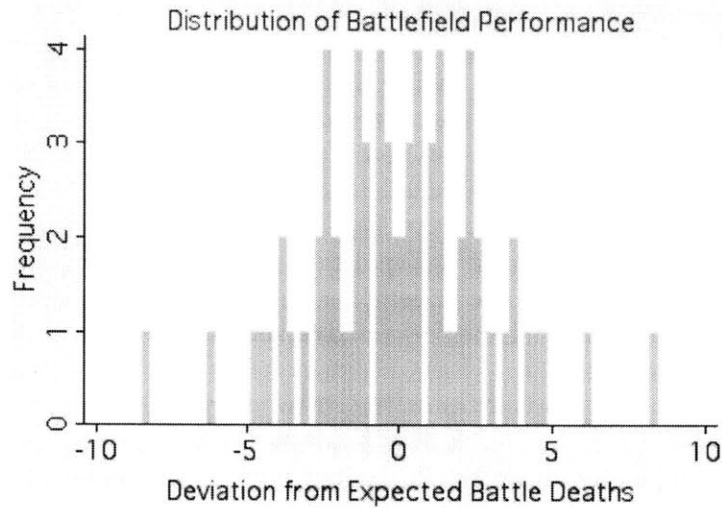
²³ Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

²⁴ *Military Power*, chapter 8.

²⁵ Battle deaths are the basis of a variety of quantitative measures of military effectiveness used in the literature. These measures will be discussed in much more detail later in the chapter. Here I employ this measure simply as a heuristic.

expenditures.²⁶ In other words, we would expect CINC scores to be inversely proportional to battlefield deaths if having greater material power translated linearly into a greater ability to inflict losses on an opponent.

Instead, the histogram below reveals a surprising number of both over- and under-performing militaries, that is, militaries that suffered either more or fewer battlefield deaths than the balance of material capabilities suggested they should have.²⁷



While there are good reasons to be skeptical about the use of battle deaths as a measure of effectiveness—reasons that will be discussed later in the chapter—the distribution above is nevertheless striking. To be sure, the data cluster around the zero point, suggesting that material factors matter significantly. But combined with our qualitative observations about puzzling differences in battlefield performance, the large number of outlying observations should make us skeptical of the view that everything that happens on the battlefield is a function of material power. What states have does not seem to determine what they do, at least not entirely. Material power matters, but there still seem to be differences in the efficiency with which militaries use that power, and therefore real differences in effectiveness of the type Brooks describes.

Precisely because of these sorts of differences, a second group of theories focuses on non-material variables that might influence how states actually utilize resources such as

²⁶ CINC scores are taken from the National Military Capabilities dataset, v. 3.02, originally published as Singer, J. David, Stuart Bremer, and John Stuckey, “Capability Distribution, Uncertainty, and Major Power War, 1820-1965,” in Bruce Russett, ed., *Peace, War, and Numbers* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1972), pp. 19-48. Battle death data are available from the author upon request and gathered from a variety of sources, most notably Michael Clodfelter, *Warfare and Armed Conflicts: a Statistical Reference to Casualty and Other Figures, 1500-2000* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001).

²⁷ This histogram shows the log of $(\text{Battle Deaths}_A / \text{Battle Deaths}_B) * (\text{CINC}_B / \text{CINC}_A)$. I induced the logarithmic transformation to reduce skew, making the data easier to view on a graph, and also to normalize the data around the zero point, making it easier to interpret. Each datapoint represents one side (side A) of a directed dyad (side A vs. side B) that fought a war. As the datapoints move closer to zero, that means that the ratio of battle deaths between side A and side B was almost exactly the inverse of their CINC scores, suggesting there was little apparent gap between resources and performance. But the datapoints farther from the mean represent increasingly larger gaps between the ratio of battle deaths we would expect based on the ratio of CINC scores, and the actual battle deaths suffered by the two sides.

economic wealth and demography. These explanations emphasize the roles of regime type, external threat, culture, and civil-military relations as intervening factors that can explain why states with similar resources may fight differently or why a state whose resources remain constant may vary in its fighting abilities over time or across units.

Regime Type

The first of the non-material explanations focuses on regime type as the key determinant of battlefield effectiveness. Without taking a position on where democracy comes from, this school of thought simply notes that democracies have won most of the wars they have fought since 1815.²⁸ Scholars posit different explanations for this empirical regularity. For example, David Lake argues that the constraints on rent-seeking in democratic societies enable the devotion of more resources to security, that democracies generally enjoy greater public support for their wars, and that democracies are better able to form coalitions against aggressors—all of which lead to a higher win rate for democracies in wars.²⁹

Dan Reiter and Allan Stam attribute democratic victory to two different mechanisms: selection effects and fighting prowess. First, they argue, democratic societies produce better strategic assessment, leading democratic states to pick only those “unfair fights” in which they are likely to prevail. Second, the liberal values of democratic societies imbue their armies with better leadership and initiative at the tactical level, enabling them to fight better on the battlefield.³⁰

Despite its prominence, the regime type theory leaves some puzzling anomalies in its wake. What, for example, are we to make of cases of effective battlefield performance by autocratic states such as Wilhelmine or Nazi Germany, or of instances of ineffective battlefield performance by democratic states, such as India in its 1962 war against China?³¹ The democracy school does not contend that such cases should never exist, as the regime

²⁸ Lake, “Powerful Pacifists”; Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Randolph Siverson, “War and the Survival of Political Leaders: a Comparative Study of Regime Types and Political Accountability,” *American Political Science Association*, Vol. 89, No. 4 (December 1995), pp. 841-855; and Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002). Additional literature exploring the conflict behavior of non-democratic regimes includes Jessica L. Weeks, “Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve,” *International Organization*, Vol. 62 (winter 2008), pp. 35-64; Mark Peceny and Caroline C. Beer, “Peaceful Parties and Puzzling Personalists,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, No. 2 (May 2003), pp. 339-342; Mark Peceny, Caroline C. Beer, and Shannon Sanchez-Terry, “Dictatorial Peace?” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 96, No. 1 (March 2002), pp. 15-26; and Brian Lai and Dan Slater, “Institutions of the Offensive: Domestic Sources of Dispute Initiation in Authoritarian Regimes, 1950-1992,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (January 2006), pp. 113-136. A precursor to some of these claims is Stanislav Andreski, “On the Peaceful Disposition of Military Dictatorships,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 3-10.

²⁹ Lake, “Powerful Pacifists.”

³⁰ Reiter and Stam, *Democracies at War*.

³¹ On the Germans, see van Creveld, *Fighting Power*; Holger H. Herwig, “The Dynamics of Necessity: German Military Policy during the First World War,” in Murray and Millet, Vol. I, pp. 80-115; Manfred Messerschmidt, “German Military Effectiveness between 1919 and 1939,” in Murray and Millet, Vol. II, pp. 218-255; Jurgen E. Forster, “The Dynamics of Volksgemeinschaft: the Effectiveness of the German Military Establishment in the Second World War,” in Murray and Millet, Vol. III, pp. 180-220. On India in 1962, the literature is voluminous, but for an overview see Srinath Raghavan, “Civil-Military Relations in India: the China Crisis and After,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (February 2009), pp. 149-175; Stephen P. Cohen, *The Indian Army: Its Contribution to the Development of a Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), especially pp. 175-6; V. Longer, *Red Coats to Olive Green: a History of the Indian Army, 1600-1974* (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1974), pp. 277-398; K.C. Praval, *Indian Army after Independence* (New Delhi: Lancer International, 1990), pp. 137-240; and Raju Thomas, *Indian Security Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), chapter 5.

type argument is probabilistic. But it provides no logically compelling, theoretically consistent explanation for when these anomalies should arise. Rather than somehow “proving the rule,” these exceptions seem to cast doubt on it. Indeed, many scholars question the causal mechanisms of this theory—whether the evidence shows that democracies actually are any better at picking and fighting wars.³² Even the actual record of democratic victories has come under question, as the finding does not appear to be robust in the face of reasonable alternative codings and the inclusion of “draws” in the dataset.³³

External Threat Environment

A second family of theories focuses on the external threat environment, arguing that high levels of danger to the state should produce strong pressures for the military to perform all three of the tasks listed above.³⁴ As external threats intensify, militaries should be more and more likely to move up the spectrum of performance. Different versions of this argument posit different mechanisms by which threats translate into greater efforts to produce military power from the states’ resources. States that are seeking independence, for example, or fighting in defense of their homelands, may be more likely to mobilize and remain cohesive under fire because the stakes are higher for the soldiers involved.³⁵ Indeed, some scholars argue that nationalism is the key pathway by which intense external threats translate into better military performance.³⁶ Other explanations point to the role of military organizations in independently detecting and responding to such threats, while still others emphasize the importance of civilian direction of such efforts.³⁷

Whatever the posited mechanism, what is hard for theories focused on external threats to explain are instances in which obvious and grave external dangers do not prompt increased attention to the tasks relevant to battlefield effectiveness. Particularly puzzling are

³² Risa Brooks, “Making Military Might: Why Do States Fail and Succeed?” *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (2003), pp. 149-191; Risa Brooks, *Shaping Strategy: the Civil-Military Politics of Strategic Assessment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Ajin Choi, “The Power of Democratic Cooperation,” *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (summer 2003), pp. 142-153; Michael Desch, “Democracy and Victory: Why Regime Type Hardly Matters,” *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2002), pp. 5-47; Desch, *Power and Military Effectiveness*. For Reiter and Stam’s response, see “Understanding Victory: Why Political Institutions Matter,” *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (summer 2003), pp. 168-179.

³³ Specifically, Reiter and Stam code all states that do not initiate wars as targets even if these states eventually join the war on the side of the initiator. So, for example, they code Turkey as a target in World War I even though it allied with Germany and Austria, whom they code as having initiated the war. Reiter and Stam also exclude from their dataset instances of stalemate, including cases like Vietnam in which the United States, a democracy, initiated a war resulting in a draw. Alexander B. Downes, “How Smart and Tough Are Democracies? Reassessing Theories of Democratic Victory in War,” *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (Spring 2009), pp. 9-51.

³⁴ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1979); and Posen, *Sources*, chapters 1 and 2.

³⁵ Ivan Arreguin-Toft, “How the Weak Win Wars: a Theory of Asymmetric Conflict,” *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 193-128; Eliot Cohen, “Constraints on America’s Conduct of Small Wars,” *International Security*, Vol. 9 (1984), pp. 151-81; Andrew Mack, “Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars,” *World Politics*, Vol. 27 (1975), pp. 175-200; and Gil Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

³⁶ Barry Posen, “Nationalism, the Mass Army, and Military Power,” *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1993), pp. 80-124; and Daniel Reiter, “Nationalism and Military Effectiveness: Post-Meiji Japan,” in Brooks and Stanley, pp. 27-54.

³⁷ On militaries, see Stephen Peter Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); and Kimberly Marten Zisk, *Engaging the Enemy: Organization Theory and Soviet Military Innovation, 1955-1991* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). On civilians, see Posen, *Sources of Military Doctrine*.

instances in which militaries do not stand and fight in defense of their home territory as nationalism might predict they should. Anomalies often cited in this regard include the fall of South Vietnam in 1975 and the fall of France in 1940.³⁸ Even more strange are instances in which only some units of the same military seem willing to stand and fight, while others collapse or desert at the first opportunity. Coalition forces encountered this sort of inconsistent behavior among Iraqi military units in 1991, with some breaking and running while others stood and conducted valiant but doomed tank operations.³⁹

Culture and Society

A third type of explanation focuses on the roles of culture and society in battlefield effectiveness. Chief among these is Ken Pollack, who argues that Arab culture has consistently inhibited the military performance of Arab armies. While recognizing that claims about culture can be controversial and that factors besides culture do matter for effectiveness, Pollack nevertheless posits that there are direct links between certain traits common in Arab societies—such as extreme deference to authority and aversion to technology—and Arab states' repeated military losses to Israel.⁴⁰

Along different lines, Elizabeth Kier has suggested that militaries' organizational culture, stemming from broader societal beliefs about the role of the military, influences the formation of doctrine, which presumably then shapes fighting abilities.⁴¹ Stephen Rosen, too, has shown that a society's structure, particularly its level of internal divisiveness, has implications for its generation of fighting power. A military drawn from a divided society can either mimic its divisions, which risks internal military fractures (as seen in the Italian army in both world wars), or the military can divorce itself from society and become internally unified, but only at the risk of becoming so alien to the society it is supposed to defend that political leaders may be reluctant to employ it (as Rosen argues happened to the Indian army).⁴² Randall Schweller's theory of under-balancing has similar implications for military effectiveness: he posits that states lacking societal cohesion and government legitimacy will not balance as they should in response to external threats.⁴³

³⁸ Some also expected this sort of collapse in the Soviet satellite states in the event of NATO-Warsaw Pact conflict in Europe; see James D. Marchio, "U.S. Intelligence Assessments and the Reliability of Non-Soviet Warsaw Pact Armed Forces, 1946-1989," *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (December 2007), pp. 1-26. It is important to note, of course, that many argue nationalism did explain the outcome in South Vietnam—because nationalist sentiment favored the North Vietnamese. Similarly, it is important to remember that the French did not immediately collapse in 1940, and they imposed substantial losses on the Germans. The Vietnamese case is discussed in much more detail in chapters 2 and 3, but a useful starting point is Frederick Logevall, *The Origins of the Vietnam War* (New York: Longman, 2001). On the Battle for France, see Ernest May, *Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of France* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003).

³⁹ Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *The Generals' War: the Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1995), chapter 19.

⁴⁰ Pollack, "The Influence of...". Similar themes emerge in Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); and MacGregor Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies: Royal Armed Forces, Fascist Regime, and the War of 1940-43* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁴¹ Elizabeth Kier, *Imagining War: French and British Military Doctrine between the Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

⁴² Stephen Peter Rosen, *Societies and Military Power: India and Her Armies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

⁴³ Randall Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). Similar logic, applied more narrowly, appears in Aaron Belkin, et al, "When Is Strategic Bombing Effective? Domestic Legitimacy and Aerial Denial," *Security Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (2002), pp. 51-88.

Other studies focus on how particular societal traits actually improve military performance. Jasen Castillo's broad-ranging study argues that the best armies come from cohesive societies whose communitarian values infuse their soldiers with very high levels of staying power on the battlefield.⁴⁴ John Lynn has made similar claims about the combat power of the armies of revolutionary France, noting that the ideology of the revolution facilitated a whole series of improvements in French training and doctrine that would have been impossible in the *ancien régime*.⁴⁵

While differing in the specific claims, all of this research shares a basic echo of Morris Janowitz's observation that it is impossible to separate modern militaries from the civilian environment that incubates their soldiers.⁴⁶ Indeed, it seems difficult to deny that culture and social structure broadly condition military performance.⁴⁷ Still, much of the variation in battlefield effectiveness is hard for theories of this type to explain, because the independent variables of interest retain the same values in individual states over very long periods of time, making it difficult to use these variables account for instances of sub-national changes in battlefield effectiveness.

What, for instance, are we to make of the improvement in Egyptian military performance between 1967 and 1973?⁴⁸ What about those instances of very different battlefield performance by different units in the same military in the same war? For example, despite being drawn from the same national culture and society, some South Vietnamese army units actually had performed very well in battle prior to the country's collapse in 1975—indeed, their performance was a major reason the war had not ended at several earlier points, as the later empirical work of this project will demonstrate.

Also, how do we explain puzzling instances of nearly identical battlefield problems arising in states that have very different cultures and societies, such as the Iraqis in 1991 and the Argentines in 1982?⁴⁹ Or of very different battlefield performance by militaries that drawn from extremely similar cultures and societies, such as North and South Korea in 1950?⁵⁰ All this additional variation suggests that other factors matter in explaining military performance, even if culture and society are an important part of the story.

Civil-Military Relations

Lastly, there is a long-standing intuition that states' civil-military relations shape their performance in war.⁵¹ Perhaps no book on the subject has been more influential than Samuel

⁴⁴ Castillo, "The Will to Fight."

⁴⁵ John Lynn, *The Bayonets of the Republic: Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791-94* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984).

⁴⁶ *The Professional Soldier: a Social and Political Portrait* (New York: Free Press, 1960).

⁴⁷ For further discussion of this class of variables, see Adam Grissom, "The Future of Military Innovation Studies," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 5 (October 2006), pp. 905-934; and Williamson Murray, "Does Military Culture Matter?" *Orbis*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Winter 1999), pp. 27-42. A more critical view is Michael Desch, "Culture Clash: Assessing the Importance of Ideas in Security Studies," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (summer 1998), pp. 141-170.

⁴⁸ Risa Brooks explores this variation in *Shaping Strategy*, chapters 3 and 4; and Risa Brooks, "An Autocracy at War: Explaining Egypt's Military Effectiveness, 1967 and 1973," *Security Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (2006), pp. 396-430.

⁴⁹ On the Iraqis, see Bernard and Trainor, *The Generals' War*. On the Argentines, see Stewart, *Mates and Muchachos*.

⁵⁰ On the Korean War, see Appleman, *Disaster*; Hoyt, *The Day...*; Whiting, *China Crosses...*

⁵¹ A useful overview is Suzanne Nielsen, "Civil-Military Relations Theory and Military Effectiveness," *Public Administration and Management*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2005), pp. 61-84.

Huntington's *The Soldier and the State*.⁵² Huntington argued that the complete separation of the military from politics was the linchpin of both civilian control and military effectiveness. Insulating the military from politics, he contended, was the only way to foster a professional military ethos that would ensure both deference to civilian authority and fighting prowess on the battlefield.

Huntington's thesis has not gone unchallenged, with a great many scholars demonstrating that, in fact, excessive military autonomy can hinder military effectiveness, especially at the strategic level. While put differently in different contexts, the gist of the argument echoes Clausewitz: close civilian involvement in military affairs is necessary for optimal performance in war. Barry Posen, Jack Snyder, Deborah Avant, Eliot Cohen, Michael Desch, and Peter Feaver have all noted in different ways that military organizational behavior in the absence of civilian oversight can be counterproductive.⁵³

Still, a large literature has continued to expound the essentially Huntingtonian proposition that civilian intervention or "politicization" of the military reduces effectiveness in various ways. Scholars such as James Quinlivan, Risa Brooks, and Stephen Biddle and Robert Zirkle have noted that civilian intrusions into the military to guard against coups—often described as "coup-proofing" practices—are detrimental to battlefield effectiveness.⁵⁴ From this perspective, civilian intervention usually amounts meddling. A number of studies have also emphasized that militaries can improve their effectiveness even in the absence of direct civilian intervention.⁵⁵

Despite these disagreements, it seems safe to say that "bad" civil-military relations should somehow negatively influence battlefield performance, and that a state with such relations that had very high military effectiveness would constitute a puzzling anomaly for a civil-military explanation. But what actually distinguishes "good" civil-military practices from bad ones—what makes some kinds of political intervention efficacious and others counterproductive—is not obvious from the existing literature, for two reasons.⁵⁶

First, there is a methodological problem in approaches to the problem thus far. Many of the studies of the tactical- and operational-level effects of civil-military relations examine cases where the battlefield performance in question was heavily over-determined. For example, many of the case studies that demonstrate the negative effects of "coup-proofing" do not control for at least one obvious confounding variable from those listed

⁵² Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*.

⁵³ Posen, *Sources*; Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); Deborah Avant, *Political Institutions and Military Change: Lessons from Peripheral Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Eliot Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: The Free Press, 2002); Michael Desch, *Civilian Control of the Military: The Changing Security Environment* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); and Peter Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁵⁴ James Quinlivan, "Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (1999), pp. 131-165; Risa Brooks, *Political-Military Relations and the Stability of Arab Regimes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Stephen Biddle and Robert Zirkle, "Technology, Civil-Military Relations, and Warfare in the Developing World," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (1996), pp. 171-212.

⁵⁵ Suzanne C. Nielsen, "Preparing for War: the Dynamics of Peacetime Military Change," Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Government, Harvard University, 2003; Rosen, *Winning the Next War*; and Zisk, *Engaging the Enemy*.

⁵⁶ Brooks' *Shaping Strategy* does outline several types of civil-military strategic assessment processes, delineating which types lead to better or worse oversight of military activity and integration with grand strategy, although it does not examine the impact on actual war-fighting capabilities.

above, and there is an especially pronounced tendency to examine instances of poor, post-colonial Arab autocracies fighting economically advanced non-Arab democracies.⁵⁷

Although this research is extremely useful for some purposes, it has difficulty pinning down the independent impact of civil-military relations as separate from Arab culture, colonial legacies, autocracy, and wealth—because all of these independent variables make the same prediction about the value of the dependent variable. As a result, it is still difficult to define, much less isolate and measure, the independent effect of “civil-military dysfunction,” even if everyone can agree that such “dysfunction,” whatever it is, would be bad for military performance, while some other pattern of civil-military relations would presumably be beneficial.

Second, there is a substantive problem. In general, the civil-military relations literature focuses on the trade-off between military autonomy and civilian control, in many ways mirroring the distinctions Huntington established more than 50 years ago between his favored “objective” control and the “subjective,” politicized control he rejected. Again, though useful for some purposes, this framework misses the fact that, empirically, the choice is rarely between a “politicized” military and one free of politics, between an environment of intense political intervention and an environment completely devoid of it. Rather, there seem to be many different forms of political intervention, and it may be these forms, rather than simple variations in the level of military autonomy, that account for variations in battlefield effectiveness in many states.

As mentioned in the Introduction, for instance, there does not seem to be a deterministic relationship between military autonomy and military performance. Empirically, some very autonomous militaries become professional and relatively effective fighting forces, such as the Pakistani military.⁵⁸ But other highly autonomous militaries do not: consider the Argentine military under the junta, surely a case where civilian meddling was not the problem. At the other extreme, some militaries subjected to highly intrusive civilian policies perform poorly, such as Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.⁵⁹ But observers often forget that intrusive civilian policies have also produced very effective fighting forces at times: consider the Nazis under Adolf Hitler or the Israelis under David Ben-Gurion, both cases where

⁵⁷ In “Coup-Proofing,” Quinlivan examines the ineffectiveness of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Syria as they fought wars against Israel and the United States, two economically well developed democracies. Biddle and Zirkle examine Iraq as a case of ineffectiveness and North Vietnam as a case of effectiveness, a comparison that does control for regime type and economic development but whose outcome is not surprising from the perspective of cultural arguments (Iraq had an Arab culture, North Vietnam did not). In her monograph, *Political-Military Relations*, Brooks examines the ineffectiveness of Syria, Egypt, and Jordan, also in wars against Israel. In Brooks’ book, *Shaping Strategy*, the state found to have the best strategic assessment practices is a democracy, Britain 1902-1914), which was also the world’s reigning economic power at the time. Brooks does argue that Britain had extremely poor strategic assessment during World War I (although it managed to win the war), but the other instances of “poor” or “worst” assessment arguably could be explained by the fact that all had at least one major trait said to predict ineffectiveness: Egypt in the 1960s (Arab, economically weak, highly autocratic), Pakistan in the period just before the 1999 coup (not Arab, but economically weak and not a stable democracy), and Wilhelmine Germany (not Arab, not economically weak, but also not democratic). On the one hand, these cases give the study significant external validity, showing the range of Brooks’ theory across a wide variety of circumstances. On the other hand, they leave room for more focused comparisons that control more tightly for potentially confounding variables to ensure internal validity. Brooks’ own examination of the puzzling improvement in Egypt effectiveness in the 1970s is a superb example of such testing and a model for my own case studies.

⁵⁸ Stephen Cohen, *The Pakistan Army* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁵⁹ Biddle and Zirkle, “Technology, Civil-Military Relations...”.

leaders exerted intense personal control over their officer corps.⁶⁰ Indeed, the German military went from extreme autonomy in World War I to extreme civilian control in World War II but is generally acknowledged to have fought very well at the tactical and operational levels under both circumstances. Meanwhile, armies subject to communist control in China and the Soviet Union had or have had consistently low military autonomy for decades but have varied significantly in their battlefield effectiveness in different wars, and even in different campaigns in the same war.

These sorts of anomalies suggest that explaining effectiveness requires more than knowing whether military autonomy or civilian control are high or low. Even extreme values of those variables seem able to produce all manner of outcomes in terms of battlefield performance. In the next section I argue that often what really matter for battlefield effectiveness are the specific forms of political intervention that leaders—whether civilian or military—adopt toward the military. Indeed, in many societies the figure of political authority seeking to intervene is not a civilian at all, but some sort of uniformed officer. Even in military dictatorships, the leading generals quickly become political actors who face the same dilemmas of intervention faced by their civilian predecessors.

Furthermore, although the overall level of civilian control of the military may vary little in particular states over time, the specific forms of political intervention can shift much more rapidly, and can even vary across different parts of the same military at the same time. For this reason, the mechanisms of political intervention, as opposed to the general level of civilian control of the military, offer a promising avenue through which to explain the three types of variation in battlefield effectiveness that present recurring anomalies for the existing explanations: over-time variation in the performance of individual militaries; unit variation across a particular military at a particular time; and cross-national variation in the effectiveness of different militaries that have access to similar levels of resources.

III. Political Intervention in the Military and Its Impact on Battlefield Performance

Not all militaries are subject to political intervention, but among those that are, the ability to maintain unit cohesion under fire, perform basic tactics, and conduct complex operations depends fundamentally on the *forms* of political intervention that political leaders adopt. What is most important about these forms is not whether they produce high or low levels of intervention in the military—especially since political leaders will almost always choose to intervene more rather than less if they can—but rather the content of the intervention and its impact on four sets of key military activities: promotion patterns, training regimens, command arrangements, and information management. As different policies govern these four areas, different sorts of militaries or military units emerge with differing abilities to conduct the three tasks outlined in the dependent variable.

⁶⁰ On Hitler, see Knox, *Common Destiny*, chapter 5; and Seaton, *The German Army*. On Israel, see Cohen, *Supreme Command*, chapter 5; Moshe Lissak, “Paradoxes of Israel Civil-Military Relations: an Introduction,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3 (September 1983): 1-12; Yoram Peri, “Party-Military Relations in a Pluralist System,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3 (September 1983): 46-63; Amos Perlmutter, “The Israeli Army in Politics: The Persistence of the Civilian over the Military,” *World Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (1968), pp. 606-643

ARGUMENT		
Independent variable: Forms of political intervention in the military	→	Dependent variable: Battlefield Effectiveness
Adoption/adjustment of policies regarding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion patterns • Training regimens • Command arrangements • Information management 		Military's ability to use state resources to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain unit cohesion under fire • Perform basic tactics • Conduct complex operations

The remainder of this section will discuss the independent variable in more detail, explaining which political-military patterns (i.e., which forms of political intervention in the four areas of military activity) produce the four values of the dependent variable discussed earlier (i.e., excellent, adequate, mediocre, poor). I sketch four ideal-typical models of political intervention, describing them in terms of how a political leader might act toward a single military. In reality, political leaders may adopt distinct forms of intervention towards different units within the same military, or vary their use of these forms over time, two complications I discuss in more detail later in the chapter.

The section concludes by generating a series of hypotheses from the theory, comparing them to the hypotheses that emerge from the competing explanations. I focus on the implications of all the theories for armies, rather than navies or air forces, so as to make the implications as clear and consistent as possible.⁶¹ Additionally, most combat has occurred and will continue to occur on the ground, so armies are a logical place to start.

Excellent Militaries: Best Practices and Maximum Effectiveness

As discussed, the most effective armies in modern conventional warfare are those that maintain unit cohesion while executing not only basic tactics but also complex operations. Pulling off this feat requires an unusual combination of both low-level initiative and high-level coordination that only some forms of political intervention allow.

These forms usually begin with close political attention to *promotion patterns* in the military. Of course, such attention on the part of political leaders is not unusual. The key in the most effective militaries is the substantive basis upon which political leaders judge their military commanders: actual battlefield competence, as demonstrated by past performance in battle or, in peacetime, performance in training. As will be discussed in more detail below, combat leadership is just one among many criteria upon which political leaders can rely to promote or fire military leaders. Where political leaders actively ensure that experienced and successful commanders move up the chain rapidly, their armies are likely to develop a much higher base of human capital over time, reinforcing the ability to plan complex operations and to develop and maintain tactical proficiency. Officers selected on merit are also much more likely to be trusted by their soldiers, who know that their commanders will not waste their lives in pursuit of poorly planned campaigns.

Just as important, in the best armies political leaders actively fire officers who have shown themselves to be cowardly or incompetent in battle. To be sure, political leaders may

⁶¹ Air and naval combat could clearly provide useful further tests of my argument and its competitors, and some evidence along these lines appears in the context of the larger land wars that the case studies examine.

still rely on time in grade or political loyalty as secondary considerations in the promotion process, but the best militaries will be those in which political intervention in the promotion process focuses heavily on actual wartime performance or other demonstration of combat skills as the most crucial basis for movement up—and out of—the chain of command. This, too, is likely to affect soldier motivation, as the individual soldier knows he will be protected from the dangers of bad command.

In the most effective armies, political leaders are also likely to be deeply involved in the design of *training regimens*. Political leaders will push military leaders to make military education rigorous, realistic, and frequent, so that unit members have a chance to bond with one another and to build trust with their officers before entering combat. Political leaders are also likely to push to ensure that military training occurs in both small- and large-unit settings and across different parts of the military. It is only through these sorts of extensive exercises that small-unit proficiency can aggregate into the coordination involved in larger-unit complex operations. Although we should not expect to see presidents leading marching drills, there should be close and sustained civilian attention to the actual content of military training. Political leaders are likely to make suggestions for improvements in training based on intelligence and other information from the battlefield, which should help produce units that with high levels of tactical proficiency and the ability to plan and conduct more sophisticated operations.

Precisely because political leaders in this setting use controls on promotion and training to ensure that they have a proven and proficient officer corps, they are likely to be willing to adopt decentralized *command arrangements* that devolve significant decision-making authority to those in the field. This devolution enables military units to engage in the improvisation and initiative required to perform complex operations. While we should still expect political leaders to seek information about what is happening on the battlefield, we should not expect to see them restraining commanders from making key operational and tactical decisions absent headquarters approval. We should also see them pushing to create integrated and unified command structures that enable rapid decision-making and coordination across different parts of the military.

Finally, political leaders are likely to implement *information management* policies that actively encourage both vertical and horizontal communication within the military and between political and military leaders. By institutionalizing procedures for horizontal information sharing, political leaders can ensure that military units are able to disseminate vital information to one another quickly in battle, improving their ability to communicate in large-unit and combined arms operations, as well as to improvise and react quickly to reported changes in the adversary's behavior. By formalizing procedures for vertical information sharing, political leaders are also likely to ensure that feedback from the battlefield moves up the chain of command—and makes it to the ears of political authorities—thereby further prompting changes in promotion patterns or training as needed.

In sum, unit cohesion, proficiency in basic tactics, and execution of complex operations are most likely in militaries where political leaders actively promote and fire officers on the basis of military competence; encourage rigorous, realistic, and frequent training across military units of varying sizes and with different specializations; decentralize battlefield command; and emphasize vertical, horizontal, and political-military information sharing about battlefield events. Under these arrangements, high levels of political intervention in the military should noticeably improve battlefield effectiveness. Examples of

states that implemented these policies—and generated effective armies as a result—include the Nazis in World War II and the Israelis in 1967.⁶²

To be sure, this list of best practices is not an exhaustive account of all forms of political intervention that may occur in effective armies; political leaders can and do implement other policies with respect to these or other areas of military activity. For example, political leaders make many decisions about military pay and benefits, the military budget, conscription, and a host of other policies. But as long as political leaders also adopt best practices in these areas of intervention, their armies should generally perform with maximum effectiveness.

Deviations from Best Practices

What drives the adoption of different forms of intervention? Why would political leaders ever adopt anything besides best practices? Political leaders face inherent trade-offs between protection against external and internal threats. Where leaders prioritize the military's performance of domestic tasks, such as suppression of dissidents, coup protection, fighting insurgencies, or state-building, they are likely to deviate from best practices in ways that harm performance in conventional war against external adversaries. For example, political leaders may want to use the military as a domestic police force, as a palace guard, or as an agent of governance to oversee activities like administering local affairs, running schools, building roads, and managing commercial enterprises.⁶³ This is most obviously the case in military dictatorships, but even in regimes with nominally civilian leaders, the military may be the only national institution efficient enough to handle most of the business of the state.⁶⁴

Where leaders prioritize these sorts of domestic tasks, they will deviate from the best practices in political intervention just described. Additionally, even where leaders prioritize external combat effectiveness, they may have mistaken beliefs about which practices will best achieve this goal. The conditions under which these deviations might occur are discussed in more detail at the end of this section, but the key point to keep in mind is that for a variety of reasons, it is difficult, if not impossible, to systematically predict *ex ante* the particular forms of intervention that leaders will choose to adopt. As a result, I focus less on the causes of deviation from best practices than on the actual content and consequences of such deviations. What are the alternative models of political intervention that leaders may adopt in response to internal threats, and in what ways do they impact the components of battlefield effectiveness?

Adequate Militaries: Mixed Practices and Reduced Effectiveness

In some militaries, political leaders orient their intervention away from best practices and towards other policies regarding promotions, training, command, and information—

⁶² On the Nazis, see Forster, "The Dynamics of Volksgemeinschaft..."; Messerschmidt, "German Military Effectiveness..."; and Williamson Murray, "Net Assessment in Nazi Germany in the 1930s," in *Calculations: Net Assessment and the Coming of World War II*, ed. Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett (New York: Free Press, 1992), p. 85. On the Israelis, see Herzog, *The Arab-Israeli Wars*; and Martin van Creveld, *The Sword and the Olive: A Critical History of the Israeli Defense Force* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002).

⁶³ Kristina Mani, "Militaries in Business: State-Making and Entrepreneurship in the Developing World," *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (July 2007), p. 591-611.

⁶⁴ Samuel Finer, *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1962); and Roman Kolkowicz and Andrzej Korbonski, eds., *Soldiers, Peasants, and Bureaucrats: Civil-Military Relations in Communist and Modernizing Societies* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1982).

policies that the leader may believe afford some protection against internal threats or some advancement toward internal goals. These changes do not necessarily decimate battlefield effectiveness, but the need to attend to a mixed set of missions, both internal and external, does reduce the military's ability to conduct complex operations.

First, civilians in these situations are still involved in shaping *promotion patterns*, but considerations of political loyalty weigh much more heavily in their decision-making. This does not mean that merit plays no role in the process, only that merit considerations become relevant only within a much more narrow pool of politically reliable officers—a pool likely to be formed on the basis of ascriptive traits, such as race, class, ethnicity, tribe, or regional background. Political leaders often believe they have to be much more concerned about these aspects of the officer corps' composition if there is a serious risk of a coup, or if the military is conducting internal counterinsurgency operations or engaged in repression against the domestic population.

Whatever the motives, where military leaders are selected based on criteria other than battlefield performance and experience, the human capital of the officer corps is likely to suffer. Even if considerations of merit are not irrelevant, this sort of officer corps is inherently less likely to be able to properly plan and conduct complex operations and is also unlikely to have the full trust of its soldiers, who may perceive their leaders as dangerously ill-prepared cronies of the regime. Both of these factors should reduce the ability to conduct complex operations.

Additionally, when political leaders alter *training regimens* to bar large-unit or multi-unit exercises, the military's ability to perform complex operations will degrade further. Political leaders may implement such restrictions because they believe small-unit skills are less likely to be useful in a coup, or because they are more relevant to domestic operations. After all, there is very little need to practice things like division-size maneuvers when conducting a campaign against guerillas or unarmed dissidents. Such exercises could also provide opportunities for conspiracy or disguise a coup. But whatever the reason, militaries under these restrictions are unlikely to develop competence at combined arms operations or other activities that require practiced coordination across different parts of the military. Nevertheless, if the military still conducts rigorous, realistic, and frequent training at the small-unit level, it is likely to retain some basic tactical proficiency, especially if officers are still chosen with at least some consideration for merit.

Adequate militaries are also likely to have political leaders who increasingly centralize *command arrangements*. Rather than encouraging devolution of decision-making authority to battlefield commanders, political leaders are likely to seek to retain control of even basic tactical activities. As a result, units under this sort of constraint will not be able to conduct fast-moving complex operations that require initiative and improvisation on the battlefield. Nevertheless, there is no reason they cannot be proficient in performing pre-planned (and pre-approved) operations, or why they should not be proficient in performing basic tactics.

Lastly, political leaders under these practices will continue to emphasize the need for vertical and civil-military communication, but they also may introduce some restrictions on horizontal communication in the military, thereby worsening *information management*. For example, political leaders may prohibit large gatherings of officers in the absence of political officials, prohibit the dissemination of information from one unit to another, or monitor all communications traffic between units. Again, these restrictions may stem from fears that extensive communication among different military units poses a coup risk to the regime, or simply from the belief that such communication is not necessary if the military is engaged only in smaller-scale operations against domestic opponents. Whatever the reason, where

this sort of restriction exists, it is another impediment to conducting complex operations, even though militaries should still be able to perform basic tactics. Examples of militaries that fall under this heading include the Egyptian army in 1973 and the Chinese army in the 1979 war against Vietnam.

Mediocre Militaries: Worst Practices and Minimal Effectiveness

What forms of political intervention might cause a military to move even further down the effectiveness spectrum, to a point where it might remain cohesive but prove unable to perform even very basic tactics, much less conduct complex operations? This sort of minimal effectiveness is likely in militaries where political leaders engage in what I call “worst practices”—more than simply the absence of best practices or a mix of good and bad practices. Worst practices are a particular series of political interventions regarding promotion, training, command, and information that all but eliminate the military’s proficiency in even basic tactics, much less complex operations. They may or may not leave room for a military to retain some basic cohesion, but overall military performance will be quite poor.

First, regarding *promotion patterns*, political leaders are likely to shift the criterion for officer selection, promotion, and demotion entirely to political loyalty, and even to select actively against proven combat prowess. In other words, it is not simply that political leaders strongly consider ascriptive traits or loyalty in their hiring and firing, but that they actually seek to reduce or eliminate the presence of competent officers. Political leaders may take this step because they believe competent officers pose a coup threat, or because they want to cultivate an officer corps that is more focused on other tasks, such as internal governance. Whatever the reason, where political leaders are actively intervening in the promotion process in an attempt to weed out officers with actual military skills, particularly through widespread purges, battlefield effectiveness will be nearly impossible. The officer corps will lack the capability to instill even basic tactical skills in their units, much less conduct complex operations.

Similarly, under worst practices political leaders introduce even stronger restrictions on *training*, limiting both large- and small-unit activities. They can take this step for a variety of reasons. They may be so focused on the use of the military for internal, governance-related tasks that they consider its development as a combat force, even at the small-unit level, to be a waste of time. Or, they may fear that the development of any tactical skills, even at the small-unit level, could present an opportunity for conspiracy or coup. Or, some leaders may actually want a skilled military force—either for external use, or for internal use against domestic enemies, including potential coup plotters—but they simply may not understand that training is necessary to achieve it. For example, one might suppose that even leaders who fear coups would still want some part of their military organization to be well-trained in order to defend them against this threat. But as we will see, this is not always the case, and training restrictions may persist. This phenomenon speaks again to the highly contingent relationship between leaders’ threat perceptions and their adoption of particular forms of intervention in the military.

Whatever the driver, where political leaders introduce comprehensive restrictions on *training*, limiting both large- and small-unit activities, tactical proficiency is likely to decline dramatically. Without regular and realistic practice, small units are unlikely to be able to develop even very basic skills like weapons handling or the use of terrain for cover and concealment. Without these building blocks, complex operations are impossible, and even simple operations are likely to be beyond reach. Again, the problem is not that political

authorities are necessarily any more or less involved in the training process than they are under any other arrangement, but rather that the nature of their involvement prevents the development of specific skills relevant to external effectiveness.

Under worst practices, political leaders both centralize and fracture *command arrangements*. First, they centralize command by locating the majority of military decision-making authority in their own hands, even regarding tactical matters. In so doing, they retain personal control over their armies' movements but at the price of commanders' ability to make decisions and rely on initiative during battle, presenting a major obstacle of the conduct of complex operations.

Second, political leaders under worst practices fracture their command structures by purposely dividing whatever decision-making authority is not in their own hands among multiple commanders. Political leaders may establish several overlapping chains of command and rotate officers through these commands frequently. They may do this so that none of the commanders has a big enough force or base of loyalty to overthrow the regime. Or political leaders may fracture command structures because such arrangements are simply better suited to internal missions the military needs to perform. For example, it makes sense for each commander to have a separate, largely-self contained military apparatus with its own chain of command if its intended use is policing a particular province or fighting insurgents in a well-defined area.

Whatever the motivation, worst practices in command arrangements are likely to make the cross-unit coordination at the heart of complex operations essentially impossible. Absent an integrated command structure, conducting combined arms or interservice military activities is undoable, even if the manpower and weapons are available.

Finally, in mediocre militaries political leaders also alter their *information management* policies to reduce internal military communication and to keep themselves informed of all officer activities. They implement more severe restrictions on horizontal communications among officers, backed up with an internally directed intelligence apparatus to detect and punish any transgressors. While in some sense political leaders are still very interested in maintaining what we might call civil-military communication, they are mostly seeking information about the military itself—in particular, its loyalty to the regime and/or its role in domestic affairs—rather than about the military's capabilities in external conflict.

Indeed, leaders in these circumstances often demonstrate reluctance to hear candid assessments of the military's external battlefield performance, creating a "shoot the messenger" climate in which officers are reluctant to report information that they believe their political leaders do not want to hear. These information management policies compound the effects of the policies already described regarding personnel, training, and command, resulting in military units that are likely to be incapable of tactical proficiency, unable to conduct complex operations, and poorly situated to self-correct these deficiencies even in the face of battlefield setbacks. Examples of states with these forms of political intervention in place include the Soviet Union immediately after the purges in the late 1930s, as well as Republican Spain during the Spanish civil war.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ On the Soviet Union, see "Attaché Assessments of the Impact of the 1930s Purges on the Red Army," (no author) *Journal of Soviet Military Studies*, Vol. 2 (1989), p. 425; John Erickson, *The Soviet High Command: A Military-Political History, 1918-1941* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2001); John E. Jessup, "The Soviet Armed Forces in the Great Patriotic War, 1941-5," in Murray and Millet, Vol. III, pp. 256-276; and Brian Taylor, *Politics and the Russian Army: Civil-Military Relations, 1689-2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). On Republican Spain, see Helen Graham, *The Spanish Civil War: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press,

The only saving grace of mediocre militaries is that their political leaders also choose to adopt coercive command measures toward soldiers and officers in order to enforce some cohesion. For example, draftees know they will be caught and punished, soldiers know that their officers will shoot them if they attempt to flee the battlefield, and officers know they will be thrown in prison or worse if they lose a battle. As a result, once in battle these sorts of militaries are likely to continue offering at least token resistance to the enemy, even when they know they lack the tactical skills needed to do so effectively. In this sense, units may remain somewhat cohesive even when they are operating under an otherwise pathological model of political intervention. This is not to say they are skilled or have much hope of prevailing—important sources of strong cohesion in adequate and excellent militaries—only that they are unlikely to desert or refuse to fight.

Poor Militaries: Worst Practices and Total Ineffectiveness

Theoretically, there is a distinction between militaries that can maintain cohesion even in the absence of tactical proficiency (mediocre militaries, on the spectrum of the dependent variable) and those that have neither cohesion nor tactical proficiency (poor militaries). Empirically, however, this is a very fine line. There is little reason for units to remain cohesive when they know themselves and their commanders to be tactically inept, as would be the case in almost any military whose political leaders had adopted the “worst practices” just described.

The only question is whether political leaders choose to coerce their own soldiers and officers into continued fighting. Where soldiers and officers enjoy impunity even if they avoid military service, flee the battlefield, or refuse to engage in combat, cohesion is likely to collapse entirely. This is the crucial difference between the third and fourth models of political intervention. In this final forms, the military actually can be said to be totally ineffective—lacking the ability to conduct complex operations, to perform basic tactics, or to maintain even a shred of cohesion. These are the truly terrible militaries or military units that simply break and collapse when they encounter the adversary. Some units from both the Iraqi military in 2003 and the Argentine military in 1982 fall into this category.

Summary of Hypotheses

The chart below summarizes the main implications of the theory for battlefield effectiveness in states with different forms of political intervention in the military. It is important to note that there are ideal-types, and no military is likely to fit perfectly in a single box. However, in the analysis of a given military, and particularly in the analysis of specific military units, it is possible to establish the presence or absence of particular forms of intervention regarding each of the four sets of military activities. When the majority of indicators for a particular category are present, we can generate a prediction about the likely resulting performance on the battlefield.

Generally speaking, the more of a military’s units are subject to best practices, the higher the overall battlefield effectiveness of that military should be. Additionally, if and when political leaders shift their forms of intervention over time, there should be observable shifts in battlefield effectiveness. Certainly, some changes can occur faster than others. For example, political leaders can change commanders relatively quickly (even during a battle), but it takes more time to alter training practices. As a result, although it is possible to predict

2005); Helen Graham, *The Spanish Republic at War, 1936-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Gerald Howson, *Arms for Spain: The Untold Story of the Spanish Civil War* (London: J. Murray, 1998).

the general direction of the change in effectiveness that should occur following a shift in the forms of political intervention, there are likely to be differences in the speed of that shift depending on the specific changes made.

THE THEORY	
Independent Variable: Forms of Political Intervention in the Military	Dependent Variable: Battlefield Effectiveness
<i>EXCELLENT Militaries: Best Practices and Maximum Effectiveness</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Promotion</u>: based on competence • <u>Training</u>: rigorous, realistic, frequent, both large- and small-unit • <u>Command</u>: decentralized • <u>Information</u>: vertical and horizontal, political-military communications all strongly encouraged 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly cohesive • Tactically proficient • Capable of complex operations
<i>ADEQUATE Militaries: Mixed Practices and Reduced Effectiveness</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Promotion</u>: based on a mix of competence and political loyalty • <u>Training</u>: rigorous, realistic, but restrictions on large-unit training • <u>Command</u>: increasingly centralized • <u>Information</u>: horizontal communications monitored and at least partially restricted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cohesive • Tactically proficient • No complex operations
<i>MEDIOCRE Militaries: Worst Practices and Minimal Effectiveness</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Promotion</u>: based entirely on political loyalty, with active selection against competence; purges likely • <u>Training</u>: restrictions on both large- and small-unit training • <u>Command</u>: highly centralized and fractured, plus strong coercive measures in the field • <u>Information</u>: horizontal communications heavily restricted, shoot the messenger problem, large internally directed intelligence apparatus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Somewhat cohesive • Not tactically proficient • No complex operations
<i>POOR Militaries: Worst Practices and No Effectiveness</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Same practices as mediocre militaries, minus coercive command measures in the field 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not cohesive • Not tactically proficient • No complex operations

Given these caveats, it is possible to establish some broad hypotheses about the sort of variation that should exist if the theory just espoused is correct, versus the variation we should see if the other theories already discussed—those focused on the roles of wealth, demography, external threat, regime type, culture and society, and civil-military relations—are correct. Figure 1 (see Figures & Maps) provides a concise list of each theory’s hypotheses about the existence and likely nature of the three types of variation in battlefield effectiveness: cross-national; sub-national, over time; and sub-national, across different

military units. In the last row is a list of hypotheses about the sort of variation we should see if the theory focused on political intervention in the military over the military is correct.

With these broad hypotheses established, it is possible to move toward a research design that enables us to test them against one another. I describe such a design in the fifth and final section of this chapter. First, though, it is important to address the question of the why leaders choose particular forms of intervention, and also to discuss my strategy my strategy for measuring the variables discussed in these hypotheses.

Choosing Different Forms of Intervention

If the choice of how to intervene reflects leaders' beliefs about the nature and severity of internal and external threats, is it possible simply to examine other variables that might correlate with the threat environment, in order to predict the state's likely battlefield effectiveness? For example, is it the case that autocratic leaders, leaders of poorer nations, or leaders from particular cultures have an inherent tendency to select into or away from best practices in intervention? Or is it possible that different forms of political intervention simply stem from the threat environment?

In a word: no. Leaders' choice of intervention practices is highly contingent and not easily predicted *ex ante* by examining other large structural variables in a given case. The choice of how to direct their political intervention depends fundamentally on leaders' perceptions of both the nature and relative intensity of internal and external threats, and on their beliefs about which practices generate effectiveness.⁶⁶ So if we have perfect information about these threats, and more importantly about how leaders perceive these threats and the appropriate responses to them, then we might be able to make some educated guesses about the forms of political intervention they will adopt.

But three problems complicate the process of making such guesses. First, leaders themselves often have inaccurate information, leading them to miscalculate which forms of political intervention are optimal. Second, the mix of threats facing states is sometimes so intense and diverse that there is no single, optimal set of practices that leaders necessarily should be expected to adopt.⁶⁷ Third, even arrangements that are optimal when adopted may become less optimal over time but prove "sticky" or resistant to change. Hence it is hard to predict forms of political intervention solely by examining the broad features of a given case at a particular point in time.

First, as mentioned, leaders' perceptions of the threat environment can frequently be wrong, and in a variety of ways. At times leaders inflate internal threats, optimizing their political intervention to fight imaginary domestic enemies, while at other times they optimize it for external battlefield performance but leave themselves vulnerable to overthrow or

⁶⁶ This idea draws on the work on alliance decisions in Steven R. David, "Explaining Third World Alignment," *World Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Jan. 1991), pp. 233-256; and Steven R. David, *Choosing Sides: Alignment and Realignment in the Third World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), which in turn draws on Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

⁶⁷ For many states, of course, there is a large margin of error in deciding which practices to adopt, at least in terms of the consequences for battlefield effectiveness against external adversaries. In much of the world, the chances of a challenge to the state's external borders is minimal. On these questions, see Tanisha M. Fazal, *State Death: the Politics and Geography of Conquest, Occupation, and Annexation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Jeff Herbst, "War and the State in Africa," *International Security*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (1990), pp. 117-139; Herbert Howe, *Ambiguous Order: Military Forces in African States* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2005); David R. Mares, ed., *Civil-Military Relations: Building Democracy and Regional Security in Latin America, Southern Asia, and Central Europe* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998); and Paul Sigmund, "Approaches to the Study of the Military in Latin America," *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 26 (1993), pp. 111-122.

unrest at home. For instance, Stalin and Mao both seem to have over-estimated the internal threats they faced while under-estimating external ones. In the late 1930s, Stalin engaged in extensive purges of the officer corps to protect himself against coups, even though decades of subsequent historical research have been unable to uncover credible evidence of a military plot to overthrow him, and other evidence suggests that the general population's support for his rule was actually quite robust, despite his beliefs otherwise.⁶⁸ Stalin's dismantling of the officer corps is all the more puzzling because it occurred at a time when the Soviet Union was diplomatically isolated and facing dire threats in both the east (Nazi Germany) and the west (imperial Japan)—an environment that should have produced strong incentives for best practices in terms of political intervention toward the military. Similarly, at the height of the Cold War, China faced potentially existential threats from both the United States and the Soviet Union. But Mao chose to disrupt the external focus of the PLA and use the army to engage in state-building, while also relying on it to destroy the regime's domestic political opponents—even though there is, again, little credible evidence that of actual threats to Mao's rule.⁶⁹

Other leaders have made the opposite mistake, under-estimating internal threats and over-estimating external ones. Despite being surrounded by countries still reeling from World War I, for example, Hitler believed that Germany had to engage in a highly revisionist and risky foreign policy in order to be secure. Meanwhile, although he himself had engaged in a putsch attempt in the 1920s, Hitler apparently was not as well protected from this threat as he could have been—his own officers nearly succeeded in killing him in 1944.⁷⁰ Mussolini, too, for some reason believed that the greatest dangers he faced were British and American domination of the Mediterranean, even though what actually removed him from power was a revolt of his officers in 1943.⁷¹

All of this is to say that calculating threats is hard, and leaders often don't do it as well as historians. This reality makes it difficult to predict what forms of intervention leaders will adopt, even if we have significant information about the threat environment and about other large structural factors such as regime type. Other things being equal, of course, we might expect that leaders of wealthy, Western democracies would be less likely to face internal threats, and therefore less likely to adopt worst practices in political intervention. But other things often aren't equal, and where democratic leaders adopt worst practices, we should expect to see the same results found in autocratic regimes that adopt such measures. One might in fact argue that this was exactly the result seen in some of the more notorious instances in which democratic armies turned in disappointing battlefield performances: interwar France, Republican Spain, or early post-independence India.

⁶⁸ David Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus: The Red Army on the Eve of World War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998); and Donald Cameron Watt, "The High Command: Who Plotted against Whom? Stalin's Purge of the Soviet High Command Revisited," *Journal of Soviet Military Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1990), pp. 46-65; and Earl F. Ziemke, "The Soviet Armed Forces in the Interwar Period," in Murray and Millet, Vol. II, pp. 1-38.

⁶⁹ Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2006); Andrew Scobell, "Military Coups in the People's Republic of China: Failure, Fabrication, or Fancy?" *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1995); and Ellis Joffe, "The Military as a Political Actor in China," in Korbonski and Kolkowicz, eds., *Soldiers*, pp. 139-158.

⁷⁰ Albert Seaton, *The German Army, 1933-1945* (New York: St. Martin's Press); and MacGregor Knox, *Common Destiny: Dictatorship, Foreign Policy, and War in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), chapter 5.

⁷¹ MacGregor Knox, "The Italian Armed Forces, 1940-3," in Murray and Millet, Vol. III, pp. 126-179.

By the same token, democracies do not have a monopoly on regime consolidation. Some autocratic leaders have presided over highly legitimate, well-functioning states that have had relatively little need to devote security resources to internal tasks. One could argue that Wilhelmine Germany, Nazi Germany, and North Vietnam all fell into this category. Where autocratic leaders adopt best practices in political intervention over the military, we should expect very high levels of battlefield effectiveness, comparable to any democracy with the same resources. In both scenarios, the key point is that the forms of intervention themselves, adopted in response to leaders' perceptions of the threat environment, drive the key variations in battlefield performance. But there is not a necessary correlation between the choice of particular forms of intervention and the large structural variables often examined in studies of military performance.

Furthermore, as mentioned, even where leaders correctly perceive the threat environment they face, there may be no objectively optimal configuration of practices that can protect them from both internal and external dangers simultaneously. Some states may face such a diverse array of both internal and external challenges that any arrangement adopted to cope with some of these problems creates vulnerabilities to others. In a situation where all options are equally bad, there is no way to make a reasonable prediction about which forms of intervention a leader should or will adopt.

Lastly, even if we believe that leaders' perceptions of the threat environment are perfectly accurate at some initial point in time, leaders can choose the wrong forms of intervention in response, or the chosen forms can outlive their usefulness. Like many other institutional arrangements, political-military relations can be "sticky"—they may be optimal or rational at the time they are adopted, but they can become very difficult to change even when the threat environment warrants a shift. Indeed, a large literature suggests that external threats at the time of state formation lock in particular domestic institutional arrangements, particularly those related to military organization, and there is no reason to believe that internal threats could not have the same effects.⁷² So, for example, leaders may adopt forms of intervention designed to guard against a particular type of internal threat but then find that external threats grow unexpectedly, and faster than they can reorient their military organizations to cope with them. Or the reverse may happen.

For all of these reasons, my approach focuses directly on the forms of intervention themselves and on their consequences for battlefield effectiveness, rather than on the highly contingent and sometimes opaque processes that lead to the adoption of those forms. Where leaders deviate from or gravitate toward the best practices described above, there should be observable consequences for wartime performance. It is these consequences that the empirical research investigates.

IV. Research Design

Measuring and Coding the Variables of Interest

⁷² Peter Gourevitch, "The Second Image Reversed: The International Sources of Domestic Politics," *International Organization*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (1978), pp. 881-911; Otto Hintze, "Military Organization and the Organization of the State," in Felix Gilbert, ed., *The Historical Essays of Otto Hintze* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, Ad 990-1992* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992); and Charles Tilly, "Reflections on the History of European State-Making," in Charles Tilly, ed., *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

Before we can test any of the above claims against possible competing explanations, we have to be able to measure the variables of interest. Above all, we need a satisfying way to measure battlefield effectiveness—some means of actually tracking variation in unit cohesion, tactical proficiency, and the ability to perform complex operations. In this section I explain why qualitative indicators best enable us to gather meaningful information about the components of the dependent variable. I then turn to possible means of measuring the independent variables of interest, again concluding that qualitative evidence is most useful.

In order to measure battlefield effectiveness some studies rely on the loss-exchange ratio of the two sides—attacker casualties divided by defender casualties.⁷³ This figure serves as both a definition and a measure of battlefield effectiveness; the two are treated as synonymous. The side that is most effective is, by definition in these studies, the side that suffers the least casualties, adjusting for the fact that offense is almost always a more casualty-intensive endeavor than defense.

Unfortunately, measures of the dependent variable based on battle deaths sometimes obscure as much as they reveal, even when they are adjusted to account for differences in states' material resources or the sizes of the armies they field for particular wars.⁷⁴ Battle deaths as a measure of effectiveness present the classic inferential problem of observational equivalence: very different actions produce the same observed result in terms of casualties, making casualties a poor way of detecting the phenomena of interest. For example, low casualties may result from the ability to conduct sophisticated operations that shield soldiers from their enemies' firepower, which many observers pinpoint as the cause of the extremely low American casualties in the Gulf War.⁷⁵ But low casualties also can result from armies surrendering, retreating, or simply collapsing in the face of enemy contact, which occurred in the South Korean army after the invasion from the North in 1950.⁷⁶ Likewise, high casualties can result from incompetent armies repeatedly attempting the same ill-advised tactics, which many observers blame for the extraordinarily high number of battle deaths suffered by the belligerents on the Western front in World War I. But high casualties can also result from very skilled units motivated to fight to the death, as the Wehrmacht proved in the winter of 1944-45.⁷⁷ In short, whether armies' battle deaths are high or less tells us very little about how cohesive, tactically proficient, and operationally sophisticated that army is, in the absence of any other contextual information.⁷⁸

⁷³ For example, Biddle and Long, "Democracy and Military Effectiveness"; and Beckley, "Economic Development and Military Effectiveness."

⁷⁴ For a detailed discussion of quantitative measures of battlefield effectiveness and why I choose not to use them, please see Appendix A.

⁷⁵ For a discussion of these issues, see Daryl Press, "Lessons from Ground Combat in the Gulf," *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Fall 1997), pp. 137-146; Stephen Biddle, "Victory Misunderstood: What the Gulf War Tells Us about the Future of Conflict," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Fall 1996) pp. 139-179; Stephen Biddle, "The Gulf War Debate Redux" *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Fall 1997), pp. 163-174; and Thomas G. Mahnken and Barry D. Watts, "What the Gulf War Can (and Cannot) tell Us about the Future of Warfare," *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Fall 1997) pp. 151-162.

⁷⁶ Korea Institute of Military History, *The Korean War, Vol. I*, Allan Millett, ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000-2001).

⁷⁷ Trevor Dupuy, David Bongard, and Richard Anderson, *Hitler's Last Gamble: the Battle of the Bulge, December 1944-January 1945* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994); and Charles MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets: the Untold Story of the Battle of the Bulge* (New York: Morrow, 1985).

⁷⁸ On the value of context-dependent evidence, see Alexander George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), p. 19.

Because of these problems, I choose to rely on qualitative rather than quantitative measures of the dependent variable. Specifically, I want to gather evidence to answer the questions listed earlier as indicators of the three components of the dependent variable: unit cohesion, tactical proficiency, and complex operations. I seek to answer these questions with respect to individual military units of a variety of sizes ranging from corps- and division-level down to brigades and battalions. What I am seeking to detect are changes in the performance of units over time or variation in the performance of different units within the same war, campaign, or battle, as well as overall differences in military performance between one state and another. Another advantage of qualitative measurement of the dependent variable is that it enables me to gather data from these sorts of heterogeneous units of observation—that is to say, evidence that would be aggregated and lost in quantitative measurements that require a homogeneous unit of observation, such as a single army fighting a single war.⁷⁹

What about measuring the independent variable, political intervention in the military? To do this, the case studies examine the nature of political intervention both over time and across units, in the context of particular cases.⁸⁰ Specifically, the empirical research looks for answers to the following questions:

[SEE NEXT PAGE]

⁷⁹ For more discussion of this point, particularly in regards to existing datasets of battle deaths, please see Appendix A.

⁸⁰ There are some existing quantitative measures of political intervention in the military, and it is important to understand why none of these actually captures the variation of interest to this study. Interested readers are directed to Appendix B.

CODING THE INDEPENDENT VARIABLE: POLITICAL INTERVENTION IN THE MILITARY
Regarding Promotion Patterns
What are the primary criteria for promotion in the senior officer corps, junior officer corps, NCO corps, and among enlisted personnel?
What is the relative weight given to political loyalty versus demonstrated military competence in the promotion process?
How important are sectarian background and/or ideological credentials for advancement?
Is a strong performance in training or on the battlefield good or bad for an officer's prospects for advancement? What happens to commanders who preside over battlefield disasters?
Are there mass firings that amount to purges, and if so, how often do they occur?
Regarding Training Regimens
Which skills are emphasized in training?
What size units engage in training exercises? Is it all small-unit, or are there efforts to practice coordination of large-unit activities?
Is training rigorous and intensive, or largely perfunctory? Does specialized training occur?
Is training realistic? How closely does it mirror the battlefield environment? Are there live-fire exercises?
Does the content of training remain static, or does it evolve in response to new information from the battlefield?
Are training commands run by experienced and competent officers?
Regarding Command Arrangements
Are there clear, institutionalized procedures for conveying orders during battle?
To what extent does command authority reside with those not present on the battlefield? For example, how many layers of approval are required before commanders can execute a tactical decision?
Are command arrangements generally described as prioritizing central oversight of battlefield developments, or as devolving authority to officers in the field?
Are there "dual command" arrangements, for example, commissars alongside regular officers who are given a veto over battlefield decisions?
Are officers ever fired or shuffled among commands, and if so why?
What punishment do deserters face, if any?
Regarding Information Management
Are separate units fighting on the same battlefield regularly able to communicate with one another via horizontal channels?
Are political leaders regularly updated on battlefield events as they happen, via vertical channels of communication?
How often do military and political leaders interact, and what is the format and substance of their communication?
Are commanders encouraged to deliver candid assessments of battlefield performance to political leaders?
Is there an internally directed intelligence gathering organization that reports on the military to political leaders?

With these and the other indicators in mind, it is possible to trace qualitatively both the causes and effects of the forms of political intervention outlined in the theory, and to compare the influence of those mechanisms on battlefield effectiveness to the impact of the variables emphasized in other theories. After all, the argument I have presented is about causal processes, not simply causal effects.⁸¹ Therefore I seek not just to test the general direction and strength of the relationship between my variables—akin to the logic of cross-tabulations and regression, or congruence tests—but also to test whether the actual steps constituting that relationship are in fact what I have theorized them to be—a different logic that Brady and Collier have called a “causal process observation.”⁸² This is exactly the situation in which qualitative work is most useful.

Case Selection

If battlefield effectiveness is about “what states do with what they have,” then the most important feature of the research design should be holding constant “what states have” in the face of variation in the factors of interest. As mentioned, there are three kinds of variation in the dependent variable that can provide analytical leverage: variation in the performance of the same military across time, variation across the units of a particular military at a particular point in time, and variation between one nation’s military and another.

The first two kinds of variation are within-country, which almost automatically holds constant demography and culture, and usually wealth and regime type. In these sorts of cases it is easier to pinpoint variation in what states do with what they have, because what they have—their key resources, wealth and demography—are held constant, as are at least some of the other variables usually said to influence effectiveness.

The third kind of variation is cross-national, however, making differences in resources (as well as the other variables said to matter for translating resources into fighting power) much more likely to arise.⁸³ Such variation has the potential to confound the analysis, because gaps in resources rather than differing values of my independent and intervening variables might explain most of the apparent differences in performance.

The key to solving this problem in cross-national comparisons is to examine states trying to undertake similar tasks on the battlefield with similar material endowments. Such comparisons are a bit harder to control than within-country comparisons, but they also expand the theory’s potential generalizability. As a result, my research design seeks to examine militaries that, taken individually, provide opportunities to probe the two kinds of within-country variation, and, taken collectively, also provide opportunities for cross-national comparison.

Thus, to the extent possible I seek to hold constant within and across cases the other non-material variables said to explain effectiveness: regime type, external threats, culture and society, and the general level of military autonomy or civilian control (though not the specific forms of political intervention). Where I cannot hold these other variables constant, I at least seek to find cases where the values of these variables are not an obvious

⁸¹ In other words, I am not attempting to prove a covering law. I do posit that certain values on the independent variable regularly lead to certain values on the dependent variable, but the theory is really about the intervening causal mechanisms by which this process happens. Alexander George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 12, 134-6, 207.

⁸² Henry Brady and David Collier, *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

⁸³ On the value of within-country versus cross-national comparison, and the difficulties of the latter, see George and Bennett, *Case Studies*.

explanation for the state's battlefield effectiveness, in order to avoid the aforementioned problem of overdetermination. For example, if regime type varies between two states, but the more autocratic state is more effective on the battlefield, then the variation in regime type, though it clearly exists, cannot be the explanation for variation in the dependent variable. This sort of puzzle would actually make the case more rather than less valuable as a potential target of analysis.

In order to pick cases, I began by identifying all instances of interstate conventional wars during the period 1945-1991. I selected 1945 as a starting date because the style of warfare on which I based the definitions of the dependent variable had clearly emerged by the end of World War II. I selected 1991 as an end date simply because that is the cut-off point for the Correlates of War (COW) dataset, the most widely used standardized listing of wars in the social sciences. From the COW data, I composed an initial list of conflicts that had caused more than 1,000 battle deaths. In several instances I broke up into multiple observations conflicts that COW listed as single wars. For example, COW lists the Korean War as a single conflict, when it is probably better understood as 3 distinct wars: a war between North and South Korea following the North's invasion; a war between North Korean troops and the United States, leading a coalition that included South Korean forces; and a war between the United States and Chinese forces, leading a coalition that included North Korean troops. I engaged in this procedure to make the units of observation as similar, fine-grained, and numerous as possible.

I also put the data in dyadic form, that is, I converted each observation into a pair in which one state was fighting another. In instances where allied forces were under a truly integrated command structure (for example, the United States and its partners in the Korean War, or Lebanon and Syria in 1948), I aggregated the data and listed the leader of the coalition. This procedure produced 35 dyads, although some of them repeat a single country fighting the same war more than once, because that country fought multiple opponents. The dyads are listed in chronological order in the chart below.

POTENTIAL CASES:	
Pairs of States Engaged in Conventional Interstate Wars, 1945-1991	
<i>(Year listed is initial year of the war.)</i>	
1.	Pakistan vs. India, 1947
2.	Israel vs. Lebanon, 1948
3.	Israel vs. Jordan, 1948
4.	Israel vs. Egypt, 1948
5.	South Korea vs. North Korea, 1950
6.	United States vs. North Korea, 1950
7.	United States vs. China, 1950
8.	Israel vs. Egypt, 1956
9.	USSR vs. Hungary, 1956
10.	South Vietnam vs. North Vietnam, 1961
11.	China vs. India, 1962
12.	United States vs. North Vietnam, 1965
13.	Pakistan vs. India, 1965
14.	Israel vs. Jordan, 1967
15.	Israel vs. Syria, 1967
16.	Israel vs. Egypt, 1967

17. Israel vs. Egypt, 1969
18. El Salvador vs. Honduras, 1969
19. India vs. Pakistan in the West, 1971
20. India vs. Pakistan in the East, 1971
21. Israel vs. Syria, 1973
22. Israel vs. Egypt, 1973
23. Israel vs. Iraq, 1973
24. Turkey vs. Cyprus, 1974
25. South Vietnam vs. North Vietnam, 1975
26. Ethiopia vs. Somalia, 1977
27. Tanzania vs. Uganda and Libya, 1978
28. Vietnam vs. Cambodia, 1978
29. Vietnam vs. China, 1979
30. Iran vs. Iraq, 1980
31. Israel vs. Syria, 1982
32. United Kingdom vs. Argentina, 1982
33. Vietnam vs. China, 1987
34. Iraq vs. Kuwait, 1990
35. Iraq vs. United States, 1991

In order to select actual case studies from this long list, I conducted initial research on each war and ruled out conflicts in which the apparent values of the dependent variable for one or both of the states seemed easily predicted by the existing literature.⁸⁴ So, for example, I eliminated from consideration all of the dyads involving Israel, a democracy, outfighting its generally poor, autocratic, Arab neighbors. The outcomes of these cases, as discussed, seem overdetermined, making the cases of limited methodological utility for my purposes. For similar reasons, I also removed from consideration the wars between India and Pakistan, as democracy and wealth seemed again to be major confounding variables that could explain the variation in the two countries' battlefield effectiveness.

To be clear, if the argument I have presented is correct, differing forms of political intervention in the military are probably still a very important driver of variations in the battlefield effectiveness between Israel and the Arab states, and between India and Pakistan. And in fact, these could be useful cases to examine in additional research. But for the purpose of initially testing the theory, these dyads do not provide the sort of clean, strong tests that would lead to clear support for or rejection of my argument, because they make it very hard to isolate the variable of interest, political intervention, from major other factors that are said to influence effectiveness. Hence my methodological decision to remove them from consideration, which reduced the number of dyads to 19, as shown below.

POTENTIAL CASES:	
Pairs of States Engaged in Conventional Interstate Wars, 1945-1991	
1.	South Korea vs. North Korea, 1950
2.	United States vs. North Korea, 1950
3.	United States vs. China, 1950

⁸⁴ In addition to all of the empirical sources already cited in this chapter, my primary resource in learning about wars with which I was not familiar was Clodfelter, *Warfare and Armed Conflict*.

4. USSR vs. Hungary, 1956
5. South Vietnam vs. North Vietnam, 1961
6. China vs. India, 1962
7. United States vs. North Vietnam, 1965
8. El Salvador vs. Honduras, 1969
9. Turkey vs. Cyprus, 1974
10. South Vietnam vs. North Vietnam, 1975
11. Ethiopia vs. Somalia, 1977
12. Tanzania vs. Uganda and Libya, 1978
13. Vietnam vs. Cambodia, 1978
14. Vietnam vs. China, 1979
15. Iran vs. Iraq, 1980
16. United Kingdom vs. Argentina, 1982
17. Vietnam vs. China, 1987
18. Iraq vs. Kuwait, 1990
19. Iraq vs. United States, 1991

I then sought to narrow the list further by examining the length of the remaining wars. I ruled out extremely short wars that lasted only a few days or weeks and contained only a very small number of engagements, because they offered little or no opportunity to test my claim that there should be over-time variation in battlefield effectiveness given shifts in the forms of political intervention. Again, this does not mean that my theory does not necessarily apply to short wars, only that such wars usually offer the chance for only one initial reading of the value of the independent variable, when it would be much more methodologically useful to have cases that could allow us to probe the effects of multiple values of the independent variable over time in the same state, where other potential confounding variables still would be held constant. This limitation left the following list of viable cases.

POTENTIAL CASES:	
Pairs of States Engaged in Conventional Interstate Wars, 1945-1991	
1. South Korea vs. North Korea	
2. United States vs. North Korea, 1950	
3. United States vs. China, 1950	
4. South Vietnam vs. North Vietnam, 1961	
5. United States vs. North Vietnam, 1965	
6. South Vietnam vs. North Vietnam, 1975	
7. Ethiopia vs. Somalia, 1977	
8. Tanzania vs. Uganda and Libya, 1978	
9. Vietnam vs. Cambodia, 1978	
10. Vietnam vs. China, 1979	
11. Iran vs. Iraq, 1980	
12. United Kingdom vs. Argentina, 1982	
13. Iraq vs. United States, 1991	

From this list of 13, I then began to rule out cases for which there simply were not adequate sources to reliably gauge the values of the key variables, especially the independent variable. This consideration eliminated the wars in Africa and the wars involving China and Vietnam in which the United States played no role, narrowing the list further.

POTENTIAL CASES:	
Pairs of States Engaged in Conventional Interstate Wars, 1945-1991	
1.	South Korea vs. North Korea
2.	United States vs. North Korea, 1950
3.	United States vs. China, 1950
4.	South Vietnam vs. North Vietnam, 1961
5.	United States vs. North Vietnam, 1965
6.	South Vietnam vs. North Vietnam, 1975
7.	Iran vs. Iraq, 1980
8.	United Kingdom vs. Argentina, 1982
9.	Iraq vs. United States, 1991

From the remaining list of 9 cases, I began to consider which ones seemed especially puzzling in light of the existing theories of military effectiveness. Two dyads immediately stood out: South Korea vs. North Korea during 1950, and South Vietnam vs. North Vietnam during the period 1961-1975. These pairs of participants seemed to display significant variation in their fighting capabilities despite being “separated at birth” and having extremely similar values for all the variables cited in existing theories. There is no obvious theoretical explanation for the variation in their performance, although communism was one potentially important difference between the two sides of the dyad in each of those wars.

Another conflict that seemed to radically confound the predictions of the existing theories was the Iran-Iraq War: despite being economically weaker, less populous, more autocratic, and culturally Arab, Iraq was ultimately arguably more effective on the battlefield than Iran.

The Korean War after American entry also seemed to pose two anomalies. The United States, an economically advanced democracy, was at different points in the war arguably outfought by both North Korea and China, highly autocratic regimes with minimal levels of economic development.

The remaining observations were less intuitively puzzling. The Falklands War and the Gulf War both involved large Western democracies steamrolling poorer autocracies (in the latter case, an autocracy with an Arab culture as well). Meanwhile, the course of the United States’ war against North Vietnam seemed to stem at least in part from the doctrinal mismatch problem already discussed in this chapter, making it a less useful opportunity to examine battlefield effectiveness in conventional operations, especially prior to 1968.

Given all of these considerations, the cases that seemed most worth further examination were North Korea vs. South Korea, North Vietnam vs. South Vietnam, Iran vs. Iraq, the United States vs. North Korea, and the United States vs. China. Out of these cases, I chose to examine North vs. South Vietnam and Iran vs. Iraq. I made this decision primarily because these wars were longest with the most diverse array of military units taking on different types of operations, enabling me to test my hypotheses more thoroughly.

Additionally, more detailed information was available about both sides of both of these wars, enabling me to wring the maximum amount of data out of the examination of single wars.

Lastly, all four of these states were non-democratic, and all experienced high levels of political intervention into their militaries as they fought large-scale ground wars. These commonalities make the cross-national—and, as will be discussed below, sub-national—variation in their battlefield effectiveness all the more puzzling. According to existing theories of effectiveness, there should have been very little variation of any type across or within these four states. Indeed, as the chart below suggests, these two pairs of states are remarkably closely matched along the dimensions said to matter for battlefield effectiveness.

To the extent that the pairs were “mismatched,” i.e., they had different values for any of the independent variables of interest, these differences deepen rather than resolve the puzzle of variation in their battlefield effectiveness. For example, North Vietnam was more authoritarian than South Vietnam—a factor that should have hindered the generation of military power—yet it produced a more effective army. Similarly, Iraq had a smaller population and a pervasive Arab culture—both factors that existing theories predict should hinder performance—yet it ultimately proved far more innovative and tactically proficient than its more populous Persian adversary, Iran.

THE CASES		
	North Vietnam vs. South Vietnam, 1961-1975	Iraq vs. Iran, 1980-88
<i>Wealth</i>	Roughly equal levels of economic development and human capital	Roughly equal levels of economic development and human capital; Iran wealthier
<i>Demography</i>	Roughly equal populations	Iranian population three times that of Iraq
<i>Regime Type</i>	Both autocratic, North more so than South	Both autocratic, Iraq more so than Iran
<i>External threats</i>	High for both, but higher for South	High for both
<i>Culture and Society</i>	Not identical, but very similar	Different: Iraq Arab, Iran Persian
<i>Civil-military relations</i>	Similar: extensive political intervention in the armed forces in both societies	Similar: extensive political intervention in the armed forces in both societies

As the chart emphasizes, this case selection strategy deliberately tries to move away from the sorts of cases whose values of the dependent variable are over-determined—the kind that dominate much of the existing effectiveness literature. It moves the study of ineffectiveness out of the Arab world, to southeast Asia; and it moves the study of effectiveness away from rich, western democracies, to autocracies, including an Arab autocracy in the Middle East. It tries to explain the cases that need explaining.

Structured, Focused Comparisons Using Primary Documents

To examine political intervention and battlefield effectiveness in these four states, the empirical chapters rely extensively on primary documents, often ones not examined in existing work on these wars. For the Vietnam cases, the documents include from U.S.

military and civilian records, translated histories and captured papers, contemporary news accounts, biographies, memoirs, and secondary material. For the Iran-Iraq cases, the documents include recently released and translated records and audio tapes captured from the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, in addition to declassified U.S. documents on the war and secondary material. In general, the approach was to “triangulate” the questions of interest using multiple sources wherever possible.

Each comparison begins with an overview of the war, explaining the puzzle of battlefield effectiveness in more detail for the particular case and discussing the inadequacy of the existing theoretically-driven explanations in accounting for all the observed variation. Then, drawing on documentary sources, the chapters establish the values of the independent variable for the armies of both sides. After coding each regime’s forms of political intervention according to the criteria set out above, the chapters generate predictions about how each side should have performed in battle if the theory is correct. They also pay particular attention to identifying what would count as disconfirming evidence.

Then the study turns to a close examination of the battles each pair of states fought. I discuss the selection of battles in more detail in the chapters, but the general principle was to cover all of the major ground battles for each war in which third parties did not play a major role. So, for example, the chapters avoid focusing a great deal of attention on Vietnam War battles that involved large numbers of U.S. combat troops, or Iran-Iraq War battles that involved large Kurdish forces. In so doing, the analysis is able to eliminate a major potential confounding variable and further isolate the possible impact of political intervention. The chapters also seek to examine a range of battles that fully captures each military on both the offense and defense.

For each battle, the chapters provide basic background, a discussion of the tactical orientation and goals of each side, the weapons and manpower of each, and their losses. After relaying the battle’s major events, the chapters then code each military according to the three components of battlefield effectiveness: unit cohesion, tactical proficiency, and the ability to conduct complex operations. The chapters then compare these outcomes with those predicted based on the theory. Each chapter also addresses case-specific alternative explanations beyond those generated by the existing theoretical literature.

Overview of the Findings

The empirical evidence generally provides strong support for the political intervention explanation. The comparison of North and South Vietnam offers an instance in which two states should have performed very similarly in war but in fact displayed tremendous cross-national and within-country variation. As mentioned in the Introduction, South Vietnamese leaders generally adopted worst practices in political intervention, which accounts for their poor performance against the North Vietnamese, despite the fact that the two countries had almost identical levels of economic development, the same size populations, similar colonial legacies, and very high stakes in the war.

If anything, in fact, the stakes in the war were higher for South Vietnam, and it should have performed especially well given the massive infusion of American aid it received. But the empirical evidence reveals that the ways in which South Vietnamese leaders intervened in their military consistently foiled battlefield effectiveness. Meanwhile, the forms of North Vietnamese intervention, though no less extensive or “political,” had the opposite effect and maximized fighting power.

Interestingly, however, where South Vietnamese political leaders varied their forms of intervention—notably, with respect to the 1st Division, which was consistently subjected

to mixed or best practices rather than worst practices—battlefield effectiveness was much better. Indeed, an analysis of the major battles of the war shows that the 1st Division's military performance proved to be virtually indistinguishable from that of North Vietnamese units. This convergence suggests just how differently the war could have turned out, and how much sooner it could have ended, had South Vietnamese leaders adopted best practices with respect to their entire military rather than a single division. It is open to question, of course, why South Vietnamese leaders did not believe that this alternative was open to them, and this question is discussed in more detail in the empirical chapters. Still, the excellent performance of the South Vietnamese 1st Division suggests the limits of traditional explanations of the war's outcome, including communist ideology, the benefits and disadvantages of fighting on one's own territory, and the role of outside powers. Even with these other factors in play, South Vietnamese forces could fight surprisingly well when political leaders adopted best practices.

In the Iran-Iraq cases, political leaders in both states initially adopted worst practices with respect to political intervention in the military. The result was that for most of the war neither side was able to capitalize on the advantages that it possessed—in Iran's case, superior economic wealth and a three-fold population edge, and in Iraq's case, far stronger allies and a far greater quantity and quality of weapons. Most of the first six years of the war were a bloody military stalemate.

That said, in the early years of the war Iran's regular forces do seem to have benefited from the slightly better practices in political intervention that the Shah had employed, not all of which Iran's revolutionary leaders had yet been able to dismantle. In particular, Iranian units drawn from the pre-revolutionary regular army, which had received American training during the 1970s, displayed noticeably better tactical proficiency in the initial battles than the revolutionary masses roused by Shia clerics to become martyrs.

Unfortunately for Iran, however, its leaders never successfully integrated pre-revolutionary and revolutionary armed forces, and in fact mistakenly credited the revolutionary forces rather than the legacy regular units with their country's early battlefield successes. As a result, Iran's leaders only deepened their imposition of worst practices as the war went on, decimating whatever legacy lingered from the Shah's era. They instead relied on soldiers who were ideologically motivated to be cohesive but who lacked any ability to convert that cohesion into tactical proficiency or complex operations.

With two belligerents both under the full grip of worst practices, the war devolved into deadlock from roughly 1982-1986. Finally, however, in 1986—several long years after the disastrous effects of worst practices had been evident, even to him—Saddam Hussein endeavored to shift the nature of his political intervention into the Iraqi armed forces. Specifically, he adopted something very close to best practices with respect to his Republican Guard units, even as he kept worst practices with respect to other units. The result of this shift was a relatively rapid improvement in the battlefield effectiveness of the Republican Guard.

Indeed, once subject to different forms of political intervention, these Iraqi units' effectiveness improved so significantly that they were able to beat their larger, wealthier, more populous neighbor in a succession of quick battles that ended the war in 1988. These victories occurred despite the fact that the Iraqi military experienced no great increase in its autonomy, and the fact that it obviously retained its Arab culture, a trait sometimes maligned in the effectiveness literature as hindering military performance.

Put simply, both Iran and Iraq performed poorly when their militaries were uniformly subject to worst practices: in the Iranian case, after about 1982, and in the Iraqi

case, before about 1986. By contrast, in the period before these practices were fully imposed on the regular military in Iran and in the period after these practices were lifted on the Republican Guard units in Iraq, military performance by those forces was noticeably better compared both to the opponent's military and to other units drawn from the same state. The contrast was subtle in the Iranian case but dramatic in the Iraqi case.

These distinctions—similar to those seen in the Vietnam comparisons—suggest again the power of the political intervention variable in explaining battlefield effectiveness, even across a range of states with very different national institutions. It is to the Vietnam cases that we now turn.

APPENDIX A: Quantitative Measures of Battlefield Effectiveness

As discussed above, the study relies on qualitative rather than quantitative measures of battlefield effectiveness. But are there quantitative indicators of battlefield effectiveness that would enable better measurement of the dependent variable? Clearly, raw casualty figures do not quite capture the general concept of effectiveness I described above, as what states do with what they have. The fact that a particular military suffered many more casualties than the other in battle would not constitute any sort of puzzle for effectiveness if this difference were explained entirely by an imbalance in material resources between the two sides. Any measure capturing true effectiveness would have to convey not just the losses suffered by each side, but the extent to which these figures diverged from our expectations of what each side's losses should have been, based on each side's resources.

Earlier in the chapter I presented one possible method of tracking this divergence: examining whether or not the two sides' ratio of battle deaths was the inverse of the ratio of their CINC scores, and if not, by how much each side exceeded or fell short of the expected ratio. After all, if material power translates directly into the ability to inflict battle deaths on the other side, then the ratio of battle deaths should be inversely proportional to the ratio of CINC scores, and any gap that arises suggests that need for further examination.

CINC scores are very blunt, however, reflecting an extremely broad measure of a state's resources, many of which might not be relevant to a particular war. For example, in the Sino-Indian border war of 1962, neither side had even close to its entire armed forces involved in the fighting. Similarly, during the Cold War the United States fought only limited conflicts that always left the majority of its forces western Europe, South Korea, and Japan. As a result, a second approach to measuring battlefield effectiveness with casualty data would be to record the battle deaths that a state suffers out of the fielded forces it commits to a particular war.

I pursued both this approach and the CINC-based approach using a dataset of all interstate war participants between 1945 and 1991. I gathered data from a variety of sources to compute two figures for each observation of a country fighting a war: 1) how different its military's battlefield deaths were from what one would expect based on its CINC score (as discussed earlier in the chapter), and 2) the battle deaths each military suffered out of the total number of troops it committed to the war.⁸⁵ I chose the unit of observation as country-war rather than country-battle because there is no dataset of individual battles appropriate for my purposes.⁸⁶ I was then able to create distributions ranking all militaries according to

⁸⁵ As mentioned earlier, CINC scores were taken from the National Military Capabilities dataset, v. 3.02. I took my initial list of wars from the Correlates of War Inter-state War Data, v. 3.0, which appears in Meredith Reid Sarkees, "The Correlates of War Data on War: An Update to 1997," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2000), pp. 123-144. Also as mentioned, I broke several wars that COW codes as single conflicts into smaller, separate conflicts, to better capture the nature of the actual events and gather more precise data. I also excluded observations that did not have a significant ground component (that is, they consisted almost entirely of air or naval engagements), because the theory here focuses on armies. So, for example, I excluded the French and British strikes against Egypt in 1956, but I did include the ground war in the Sinai between Egypt and Israel that year. For battle death data, I counted only battle-related military fatalities, not civilian deaths. I amended almost all of the COW figures, as further research revealed most of them to be of questionable accuracy. Specific coding decisions and sources are available upon request, but most battle death data were gathered from Clodfelter, *Warfare and Armed Conflicts*. For coalitions, I aggregated the battle deaths and CINC scores of the two sides.

⁸⁶ The two datasets commonly said to have reliable battle data are not well suited to the questions of interest here. The PRIO dataset tracks all deaths, military and civilian, for a given year in a given war, for both sides—

these two different casualty-based measures of effectiveness.⁸⁷ Below are the results, along with a baseline distribution based solely on raw casualty ratios.

Ranking of Armies' Battlefield Effectiveness Using Three Quantitative Measures		
<i>Note: The state listed first in each dyad was more "effective" than its opponent according to the measure used. Gaps in performance between the two sides of a dyad narrow as the list descends, meaning that at the top of the list the first side significantly out-performed the other; but at the bottom of the list effectiveness scores were nearly even. This table shows only the top half of the distribution; the bottom half is a mirror, with the direction of each dyad reversed.</i>		
Ratio of Raw Battle Deaths	Ratio of Battle Deaths Discounted for Ratio of CINC Scores	Ratio of Battle Deaths Discounted for Ratio of Fielded Forces
1. United States vs. Iraq, 1991	1. Iraq vs. United States, 1991	1. United States vs. Iraq, 1991
2. Israel vs. Egypt, 1967	2. North Korea vs. United States, 1950	2. Israel vs. Egypt, 1967
3. South Korea vs. North Korea, 1950	3. Hungary vs. USSR, 1956	3. USSR vs. Hungary, 1956
4. Tanzania vs. Uganda and Libya, 1978	4. Cambodia vs. Vietnam, 1978	4. South Korea vs. North Korea
5. Israel vs. Egypt, 1969	5. Israel vs. Egypt, 1948	5. Vietnam vs. Cambodia, 1978
6. Vietnam vs. Cambodia, 1978	6. North Korea vs. South Korea, 1950	6. Israel vs. Lebanon, 1948
7. United States vs. China, 1950	7. Somalia vs. Ethiopia, 1977	7. Tanzania vs. Uganda, 1978
8. Israel vs. Egypt, 1973	8. Cyprus vs. Turkey, 1974	8. Ethiopia vs. Somalia, 1977
9. Israel vs. Egypt, 1956	9. Pakistan vs. India in the East, 1971	9. South Vietnam vs. North Vietnam, 1961
10. Israel vs. Syria, 1967	10. Vietnam vs. China, 1979	10. Israel vs. Syria, 1967
11. Ethiopia vs. Somalia, 1977	11. Argentina vs. United Kingdom, 1982	11. Israel vs. Egypt, 1969
12. Israel vs. Syria, 1973	12. Pakistan vs. India in the West, 1971	12. United States vs. North Vietnam, 1965
13. United States vs. North Korea, 1950	13. China vs. United States, 1950	13. Iraq vs. Iran, 1980
14. United States vs. North Vietnam, 1965	14. Vietnam vs. China, 1987	14. United States vs. North Korea, 1950
15. Israel vs. Syria, 1982	15. Egypt vs. Israel, 1967	15. India vs. Pakistan in the East, 1971
16. USSR vs. Hungary, 1956	16. North Vietnam vs. United States	16. United Kingdom vs. Argentina, 1982
17. United Kingdom vs. Argentina, 1982	17. Syria vs. Israel, 1973	17. Israel vs. Jordan, 1967
18. South Vietnam vs. North Vietnam, 1961	18. Syria vs. Israel, 1967	18. United States vs. China, 1950
19. Israel vs. Lebanon, 1948	19. Jordan vs. Israel, 1967	19. China vs. India, 1962
20. India vs. Pakistan in the East, 1971	20. North Vietnam vs. South Vietnam, 1961	20. Israel vs. Egypt, 1956
21. Iraq vs. Iran, 1980	21. Syria vs. Israel, 1982	21. Pakistan vs. India, 1965
22. Pakistan vs. India, 1965	22. Lebanon vs. Israel, 1948	22. Israel vs. Syria, 1982
23. Israel vs. Jordan, 1967	23. Egypt vs. Israel, 1969	23. Israel vs. Jordan, 1948

not very conducive for pinning down the battlefield effectiveness of the two militaries. The HERO dataset, compiled by the Historical Evaluation and Research Organization (HERO) for the U.S. Army, covers individual battles from 1800 to 1982. But this dataset does not constitute a random sample and therefore cannot be the basis of externally valid statistical inferences. The Army picked observations based on its own definition of what constituted a "major" battle. A majority of the observations involve the United States, Israel, or Germany, while there are no observations of many other states such as India and Pakistan, even though they fought multiple wars during the relevant time period. The HERO compilers reduced the various conflicts in Indochina, which spanned more than two decades and involved three great powers, to a single 1972 observation, while the Yom Kippur war, which lasted 20 days, is the subject of 32 observations.

⁸⁷ Each observation was a directed dyad, that is, one side fighting a war against an opponent. The total N was 70.

24. Cypress vs. Turkey, 1974	24. India vs. China, 1962	24. India vs. Pakistan in the West, 1971
25. India vs. Pakistan in the West, 1971	25. Pakistan vs. India, 1947	25. Iraq vs. Kuwait, 1990
26. Kuwait vs. Iraq, 1990	26. Uganda vs. Tanzania, 1978	26. Israel vs. Egypt, 1948
27. Iraq vs. Israel, 1973	27. Egypt vs. Israel, 1973	27. Egypt vs. Israel, 1973
28. Pakistan vs. India, 1947	28. Kuwait vs. Iraq, 1990	28. South Vietnam vs. North Vietnam, 1975
29. China vs. India, 1962	29. Pakistan vs. India, 1965	29. Turkey vs. Cyprus, 1974
30. South Vietnam vs. North Vietnam, 1975	30. Iran vs. Iraq, 1980	30. Israel vs. Syria, 1973
31. Israel vs. Jordan, 1948	31. Honduras vs. El Salvador, 1969	31. Vietnam vs. China, 1979
32. China vs. Vietnam, 1987	32. Israel vs. Iraq, 1973	32. El Salvador vs. Honduras, 1969
33. El Salvador vs. Honduras, 1969	33. North Vietnam vs. South Vietnam, 1975	33. India vs. Pakistan, 1947
34. Egypt vs. Israel, 1948	34. Egypt vs. Israel, 1956	34. Vietnam vs. China, 1987
35. Vietnam vs. China, 1979	35. Jordan vs. Israel, 1948	35. Iraq vs. Israel, 1973

The distributions revealed by these three quantitative measures of the dependent variable raise more questions they answer, however. For example, as anticipated, the raw battle death ratios comport poorly with the substantive understanding of effectiveness described earlier in this chapter. According to this measure, the surprised, disorganized, and nearly defeated South Korea in 1950 turned in the third most effective military performance in the period 1945-1991. Another way of stating this is that the North Korean communists were, according to this measure, nearly the worst army in the dataset. The raw deaths measure also ranks South Vietnam as significantly more effective than North Vietnam in both the 1961-1965 period and as somewhat better in 1975. It seems unlikely that most experts on these wars would concur with these appraisals of the two sides' military performances.

Indeed, in both wars, the side that suffered more casualties is rated as the better fighting force. But South Korea's and South Vietnam's low casualties resulted from poor unit cohesion, not from skilled performance of complex operations. North Korea's and North Vietnam's high casualties were the result of highly cohesive units that fought to the death. (Another factor that might have mattered is that both North Vietnam and North Korea were on the strategic offensive, although their opponents did attempt to conduct counteroffensives, so it is not clear that the offense-defense distinction necessarily accounts for the disparity in battle deaths.)

Do the other two measures that attempt to refine the raw casualty data resolve these sorts of anomalies? The second measure, which examines how different each side's battle deaths were from what we would expect based on the ratio of their CINC scores, does seem to produce more reasonable rankings of the belligerents in the Korean War and the Vietnam War during the period 1961-1965. But the new measure introduces new anomalies, too: it positions Iraq in 1991 as the most effective army in the dataset, Argentina as fighting much better than Britain in the Falklands, and India as out-performing China in 1962. Again, these rankings fly in the face of these armies' actual abilities—or inabilities—to perform the tasks relevant to battlefield effectiveness. Only small parts of the Iraqi and Argentine militaries were cohesive and capable of complex operations, for example. The Sino-Soviet border war was also a lopsided battlefield defeat for India, one so stunning that it resulted in sweeping and permanent defense reforms in the country.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ See references to India in footnote 31.

This second measure produces numerous other puzzles too. It has Pakistan outperforming India in all of the wars on the subcontinent; Arab states almost always outperforming Israel; Egypt performing worse in 1973 than in 1967; and North and South Vietnam engaged in an extremely close fight in 1975. Most military historians would probably counter that, in fact, India has consistently turned in superior battlefield performances against Pakistan; that the Israelis have generally performed better than their Arab opponents; that Egyptian performance improved significantly between 1967 and 1973; and that North Vietnam rapidly crushed South Vietnam on the battlefields of 1975. All of this seems to suggest that the measure does little to capture variation in the actual components of the dependent variable.

What about the third measure, then, which simply asks which side suffered more battle deaths out of the forces that it committed to a particular war? This measure resolves many of the anomalies that arose with the first two. It ranks the United States as fighting better than Iraq in 1991, for example, Israel as fighting better than the Arab states most of the time (though not against Egypt in 1973), China as doing much better than India in 1962, and the United Kingdom outperforming Argentina in 1982. All this comports with the actual histories of these wars and what we know about the fighting capabilities of the parties involved.

But again, strange new outliers appear with the new measure. South Korea appears to have clobbered North Korea in 1950. The United States appears to have fought much better than North Vietnam during the period 1965-1973, and also to have fought much better than both North Korea and China during the Korean War. While there is no disputing the literal meaning of the data—that the “less effective” side in all of these cases lost more of its fielded forces to the enemy than the other way around—it is hard to make the case that these rankings are substantively meaningful. None of the three measures seem to capture actual variation in the performance of the tasks relevant to battlefield effectiveness, primarily because casualties present the problem of observational equivalence mentioned earlier. For these reasons, I rely on qualitative measures of the dependent variable and examine casualty data only within this larger qualitative context.

APPENDIX B: Quantitative Measures of Political Intervention in the Military

The study relies on qualitative indicators of the independent variable because no existing dataset codes the actual political intervention variable specified in the theory, and because coding all states according to that variable on my own would be prohibitively time-consuming.

What measures of political intervention exist in the literature, and why do these not serve as useful proxies for the independent variable in the theory? One approach, relying on the Arthur Banks dataset, simply distinguishes among regimes that have “strong” civilian control, “weak” civilian control, and “military government.”⁸⁹ Unfortunately, this method makes it impossible to test the argument that it is the form of control—that is, the nature of political intervention, rather than just the degree—that may matter for effectiveness.

For example, Banks codes Iraq under Saddam Hussein in 1991 as an instance of “weak civilian control,” likening the regime to a near-military dictatorship because Saddam donned a military officer’s uniform. This coding misses the fact that Saddam actually feared his military and most of his population, and intervened in his armed forces to guard against coups and internal conspiracies by the majority Shia. As the empirical research in the project will show, Saddam never served a day in the armed forces and was a general only because he had received an honorary degree from Iraq’s military academy in 1970.⁹⁰ Not only was his regime an instance of extremely strong civilian control adopted in response to high levels of internal threat, but to understand what made the Iraqi regime different from, say, its opponent in 1991, the United States, which also had very strong civilian control of the military, it is necessary to move beyond the distinctions Banks provides.

Other scholars rely on the presence or absence of recent coups as the key indicator of political-military relations.⁹¹ The problem with this measure, also drawn from the Banks dataset, is that the presence or absence of actual coups again tells us nothing about the presence or absence of political intervention in the armed forces, much less its character. To continue the example from above, in 1991 neither the United States nor Iraq had had a military coup during the previous decade, so according to this approach both would be coded as having “harmonious” rather than “conflictual” civil-military relations. But this commonality obscures crucial differences in the reasons that the two states had not experienced recent coups: in the American case, because the military posed no internal threat to the survival of the state or the leader; in the Iraqi case, because Saddam Hussein had intervened in the military specifically to ensure that his military could not topple him as it had other Iraqi leaders.

Recognizing this problem of observational equivalence, wherein the same indicator actually masks two very different underlying phenomena, other scholars have moved closer to directly measuring forms of intervention. For example, Aaron Belkin and Evan Schofer

⁸⁹ Todd Sechser, “Are Soldiers Less War-Prone than Statesmen?” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 48, No. 5 (October 2004), pp. 746-774. The dataset upon which Sechser relies is Arthur Banks, *Cross-National Time Series Data Archive, 1815-1999* (Binghamton, NY: Computer Solutions Unlimited).

⁹⁰ Ahmed Hashim, “Saddam Husayn and Civil-Military Relations in Iraq: The Quest for Legitimacy and Power,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (2003), p. 27; and Cordesman and Wagner, *The Lessons...*, p. 68.

⁹¹ Biddle and Long, “Democracy and Military Effectiveness...”. This is, of course, a very useful measure when the topic of interest actually is violent regime change, as in Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Randolph M. Siverson, and Gary Woller, “War and the Fate of Regimes,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 86, No. 3 (September 1992), pp. 638-646.

code the number of military branches and the size of states' paramilitary forces, arguing that increases in these indicators reflect increased regime concern with coups. One problem is that these data are available only for a very limited time span, 1966-1986. More importantly, though, these indicators lack context. The United States has a large number of military branches, for example, but this is because it has a military organization with a variety of specialties, not because civilians divide the military as a way to control it.

Barbara Geddes has come closest to actually coding regimes according to their forms of political intervention in the military.⁹² She examines all authoritarian regimes since 1945, answering a series of questions about each in order to classify them as single-party (communist), personalist (run by an individual civilian dictator), military dictatorships (regimes in which the corporate entity of the military runs the state), or other. Many of her questions relate to the relationship between political authorities and the armed forces. Jessica Weeks has drawn attention in particular to Geddes' coding of personalist regimes, in which the leader personally controls the security apparatus and personally controls appointments to high office.⁹³ These seem to be reasonable proxies for at least some of the forms of political intervention outlined in the theory. Unlike the other coding approaches described, for example, this one does capture the difference between the United States and Iraq in 1991. Both sides had high control over their militaries, but President Bush's control was institutional, whereas Saddam Hussein's control rested entirely on his personal authority.

That said, as argued above, even personal control over the armed forces is not always bad for effectiveness, depending on exactly how the leader intervenes. The question is the ends to which personal control is put. As discussed above, Adolf Hitler intervened deeply in his military. For example, he did personally control many military promotions. But unlike Saddam, or Stalin through 1941, Hitler hired and fired officers largely on the basis of combat performance, not internal political loyalty, especially before the assassination attempt against him in 1944.⁹⁴ David Ben-Gurion led Israel in a very similar fashion during its early years, maintaining very close personal control of the armed forces yet producing the foundation of what seems to have been a very effective army.⁹⁵ So it is not clear that even the Geddes/Weeks' notion of "personalism" tracks the sort of variation in political intervention of interest to the theory here.

⁹² Barbara Geddes, untitled paper on authoritarianism, presented for presentation at the 1999 American Political Science Association Conference, available at <http://www.uvm.edu/~cbeer/geddes/APSA99.htm>; see also *Paradigms and Sand Castles: Theory Building and Research Design in Comparative Politics* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

⁹³ Weeks, "Autocratic Audience Costs."

⁹⁴ Knox, *Common Destiny*, chapter 5; Seaton, *The German Army*.

⁹⁵ Cohen, *Supreme Command*, chapter 5; Moshe Lissak, "Paradoxes of Israel Civil-Military Relations: an Introduction," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3 (September 1983): 1-12; Yoram Peri, "Party-Military Relations in a Pluralist System," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3 (September 1983): 46-63; Amos Perlmutter, "The Israeli Army in Politics: The Persistence of the Civilian over the Military," *World Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (1968), pp. 606-643.

CHAPTER 2

Political Intervention in the Militaries of North and South Vietnam

The contrasting battlefield performances of North and South Vietnam during the period 1954 to 1975 present an enduring puzzle in the history of warfare. Why did these two states, seemingly so similar in most respects, generate armies displaying such tremendous variation in battlefield effectiveness? North Vietnam is still renowned in the annals of warfare for its ferocious fighting capabilities. South Vietnam is nearly as famous as an icon of incompetence and cowardice, disparaged for its seeming inability to build even a mediocre military despite a massive infusion of U.S. aid.

While the reality of both sides' performances was more complicated than these pervasive images suggest, the stereotypes do capture a basic puzzle. Why was North Vietnam able to generate cohesive, consistently tactically proficient armed forces, capable of conducting complex operations, while South Vietnam proved unable to do so? As we will see, the existing theoretical explanations of military effectiveness do not provide a satisfying answer to this question. Indeed, the contrast between North and South Vietnam becomes more rather than less puzzling the more one learns about the two states and the war they fought.

The existing explanations, both theoretical and case-specific, have particular difficulty accounting for variation within the South Vietnamese military. While South Vietnam's overall performance was clearly inferior to the North's, its armed forces were not uniformly terrible, as often assumed. South Vietnam never developed the ability to consistently conduct the most difficult complex operations, particularly large-scale offensive operations. But some of its units proved to be cohesive, tactically proficient, and capable of more operational sophistication than usually recognized. These units contrasted with other parts of its military that were indeed unable to meet even basic standards of cohesion and tactical proficiency. Any explanation of the contrast in performance between North and South Vietnam has to be able to account not just for the general variation between the two states but also for these other sorts of variation that occurred within the South Vietnamese military itself—variation that is crucial in explaining the course, costs, and ultimate outcome of the war.

This chapter and the next argue that it is impossible to make sense of all the observed variation, both cross-national and sub-national, without reference to the differing ways in which the two sides' political leaders intervened in their military organizations. In both regimes, political leaders sought to keep a very tight hold on their armed forces—but the mechanisms they used to actually execute this intervention contrasted sharply and had very different implications for the battlefield effectiveness of the two regimes.

North Vietnamese leaders implemented almost all of the best practices described in the first chapter, utilizing a model of political intervention that consistently and expressly maximized external combat performance. By contrast, South Vietnamese leaders oriented much of their military toward internal tasks related to coup protection, governance, and domestic repression of dissidents, mostly adopting worst practices that sacrificed external combat performance in order to execute other missions. There were some exceptions to this rule, however—units where the nature of political intervention differed, which in turn performed noticeably better in battle. A comparison across units reveals just how important variations in political intervention really were in explaining the variation within the South Vietnamese military and between North and South Vietnam overall, providing important support for the theory outlined in Chapter 1.

This chapter proceeds in three main parts. The first section provides background, discussing the origins and basic course of the Vietnam War after the end of French rule and sharpening the puzzle presented by the contrast in North and South Vietnamese battlefield performance. The second section establishes the values of the independent variable with respect to South Vietnam, drawing on a variety of documentary sources from both the United States and South Vietnam to answer the series of coding questions presented in Chapter 1. After providing a brief overview of the history and structure of the country's military, the section marshals evidence about the nature of political intervention in the four key areas of military activity: promotion patterns, training regimens, command arrangements, and information management. It then generates predictions about how different units within the South Vietnamese military should have performed according to the different theories presented in the first chapter, including the political intervention theory.

The third section of the chapter repeats this procedure with respect to political intervention in the military of North Vietnam, again drawing extensively on primary documents, including official histories, captured materials, and other studies and records from both the United States and North Vietnam. Chapter 3 then turns to the empirical evidence needed to adjudicate amongst these predictions, examining a series of battles between North and South Vietnam during the period 1962-1975.

A note about terminology is important at the outset. Throughout this manuscript, the two primary actors of interest are described as North and South Vietnam. Historical research makes it increasingly clear, however, that many native southerners supported and even helped lead the communist party based in Hanoi, while as many as a million northerners also had fled communism to live in the south.¹ As a result, the use of the terms "North" and "South," and references to "Northern" and "Southern" forces, should not be taken as literal geographic references, but as shorthand for the governments in the two capitals and the military apparatuses they directed. This is the most neutral way to refer to what otherwise might be called communist and non-communist forces, and it achieves the same objective, which is to delineate the existence of two competing governments within the territory of Vietnam.

I. Background: The Vietnam War

The Origins of the War from the French Arrival to 1954

In order to have some context in which to assess political intervention in the North and South Vietnamese militaries, it is necessary to establish some background about the two states that emerged in 1954 from the remnants of French Indochina.² The French had first established themselves in Saigon nearly a hundred years earlier, in 1859, moving within a decade to control all of Cochinchina, Vietnam's southernmost region, and soon thereafter the middle and northern regions of Tonkin and Annam as well (see map 1).³ French interests in Vietnam were primarily economic, rooted in the belief that the region could serve as both a source of raw goods and a market for French manufactured products.

¹ Robert K. Brigham, "Why the South Won the American War in Vietnam," in *Why the North Won the Vietnam War*, ed. Marc Jason Gilbert (New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 97-99, 107, 113.

² This section draws heavily on Anthony James Joes, *The War for South Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1990).

³ The French did establish different governing structures over the three regions, with the tightest control in Cochinchina, which was ruled directly from Paris. The region of Tonkin was not a colony, but instead a direct protectorate with a French governor ruling in place of the emperor. The northernmost region of Annam was ruled by its own emperor.

Ultimately the French venture in Indochina became more of an economic drain than a boon, but France still held tightly to Vietnam through the rest of the nineteenth century and the upheavals of World War I.

The experience of French imperial rule had profound consequences for Vietnam's political development. Perhaps the most important of these was the political awakening it stirred and then frustrated among the Vietnamese elite. By the 1920s a large crop of Vietnamese had been educated in France and had served in the French army during World War I. But they found that positions of authority in their own country remained closed to them, open only to better paid, often less educated Frenchmen. The resulting resentment among urban Vietnamese surfaced in a variety of forms during the interwar years, although only the nascent Vietnamese communists possessed the tight organizational discipline needed to evade French repression. Indeed, as historian Anthony James Joes has noted, "It is another one of the rich ironies of the whole Vietnamese revolution that the French would search desperately in the 1950s for an effective nationalist alternative to the communists, an alternative that, by their persecution from the 1920s to the 1940s, they had all but eliminated."⁴

The Japanese occupation of Vietnam during the period 1940-45 provided the opening for which the communists and other revolutionaries had waited. In 1941, they established the League for the Independence of Vietnam, or Viet Minh, an organization that temporarily put aside the goal of class struggle and focused exclusively on the nationalist objective of evicting the Japanese and establishing an independent Vietnamese state. Because the Japanese army controlled the cities, this revolutionary organization focused on the countryside, promising land redistribution as a way to recruit peasants to the cause.

For most of their occupation, the Japanese were content to rule through the French, but in March 1945 they imprisoned French officials, interned French forces, and offered the Annamese emperor Bao Dai independence. He accepted, declaring the independence of Annam and Tonkin, while the Japanese continued to rule Cochinchina. When the Japanese surrendered to the Allies on August 15, however, a power vacuum emerged. Viet Minh troops moved into Hanoi, forced Bao Dai to abdicate, and declared the independence of Vietnam under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh.

The success of this August Revolution was short-lived, as the French soon reasserted their authority, especially in the south. Knowing that the Viet Minh were not yet in a position to defeat the French, Ho again compromised, signing an agreement with the French representative Jean Sainteny in 1946. The Ho-Sainteny agreement did not grant Vietnam full independence, but it recognized the legitimacy of Ho's rule over Tonkin and Annam in a government now called the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV).⁵

The Viet Minh did not give up on the task of truly evicting the French, however. The 1949 victory of Mao's forces across the border brought them an infusion of better weapons and equipment, improving the Viet Minh's odds of military success against the French considerably. But this new friend brought a new enemy. Worried about the spread of communism via China's assistance to the Viet Minh, the United States established the

⁴ Joes, *The War*, p. 9.

⁵ Joes, *The War*, chapter 2.

Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) as a means of channeling an ever growing steam of military aid to the Franco-Vietnamese forces.⁶

For their part, the French belatedly recognized that they would never again rule Vietnam, but they shared with the United States the goal of a non-communist successor regime. After protracted negotiations, the French came to support a government led by Bao Dai, who broke with the Viet Minh and was recognized by the French as ruler of an independent State of Vietnam, including Cochinchina, in June 1948. The French military effort then focused on defending this government. By mid-1949, 41,500 Vietnamese troops had joined the French in the campaign, troops that would eventually become the nucleus of the future Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).⁷

Unfortunately, the next several years produced little more than bloody stalemate.⁸ Finally, in the spring of 1954, the war culminated in the famous battle for Dien Bien Phu, an isolated French base in a remote corner of Tonkin near the Laotian border. The French defenders, outnumbered and outgunned, capitulated in May, shattering French domestic support for the war.

The Geneva Conference ensued, partitioning Vietnam into two states. Territory north of the 17th parallel, essentially the region of Tonkin, was to be ruled by Ho Chi Minh, while land south of that parallel, essentially the regions of Annam and Cochinchina, was to be ruled by Bao Dai, who would soon appoint Ngo Dinh Diem as his prime minister.⁹ For one year there was to be free migration across the demilitarized zone so that people could settle under the government of their choice. Despite Hanoi's violent obstruction of this migration, something close to a million Northerners resettled in the South, among them many Christians and intellectuals.¹⁰

For its part, the Diem government adamantly opposed holding the elections called for (albeit vaguely) in the Geneva agreements.¹¹ They argued that the French had had no right to commit the State of Vietnam to such elections, nor to partition Vietnam in the first place. They also knew that because the population of the DRV was slightly larger, and because Ho's sympathizers could rig the vote in their own territory, any "plebiscite" would result in a communist takeover of all of Vietnam.¹² The stage was set for further military confrontation.

An Overview of the War Between North and South Vietnam

Historical debate continues about the origins of the insurgency in South Vietnam, and, indeed, leaders in Hanoi were themselves divided in the period after Geneva regarding whether to prioritize building socialism at home or carrying the revolution to the south.¹³

⁶ Arthur J. Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp. 196, 469. At this time MAAG was limited to a total of 685 military personnel.

⁷ Dommen, *Indochinese Experience*, p. 195.

⁸ These events are chronicled in much greater detail in Dommen, *Indochinese Experience*, chapter 4.

⁹ Joes, *The War*, chapter 3. For background on Diem, see Jacobs, Seth. 2006. *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America's War in Vietnam, 1950-1963* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield).

¹⁰ Dommen, *Indochinese Experience*, chapter 5.

¹¹ For background on the legal complexities surrounding the supposed requirement for elections, see Dommen, *Indochinese Experience*, pp. 343-348.

¹² Joes, *The War*, chapters 4-5.

¹³ George Herring, *America's Longest War: the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002), p. 81; and Tuong Vu, *Paths to Development in Asia: South Korea, Vietnam, China, and Indonesia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 124.

What is known is that an insurgency was well underway by the late 1950s, aimed primarily at local administration and the middle class of South Vietnam. State officials, teachers, medical personnel, and social workers were all targets of intimidation, kidnapping, and assassination in a campaign that had killed 20 percent of all village chiefs by 1958. The insurgency had Hanoi's blessing but was also clearly fueled by indigenous grievances with the Diem government, and in fact, those in the south often sought revolution at a faster pace than leaders in Hanoi thought wise.¹⁴

Sensing momentum, however, party leaders started to infiltrate more heavily armed units to South Vietnam in 1959. They also formed the National Liberation Front (NLF) in December 1960 as a way to unify efforts to overthrow the Diem government and to appeal directly to Southern nationalism.¹⁵ This move continued Ho's long-running willingness to follow the Leninist principle of the united front: temporarily allying with potential non-communist adversaries in order to achieve intermediate objectives, with the full recognition that today's comrades would become tomorrow's targets.¹⁶ The NLF also helped Hanoi conceal its direction of the war in the South—something it denied at the time but proclaimed heavily once the war was over.¹⁷

The NLF's studious avoidance of communism as a stated goal did little to assuage U.S. concerns about the fate of South Vietnam.¹⁸ President Kennedy more than tripled the size of the MAAG in his first seven months in office, to 1,905 personnel. He also introduced additional personnel to directly support struggling South Vietnamese forces and moved to establish a command structure that could encompass combat troops in addition to advisors and support personnel. The result was the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), formed in February 1962.¹⁹ In addition to ramping up military operations, MACV assisted Saigon in attempting to secure the villages, most notably through the Strategic Hamlet Program.²⁰ MACV also sent numerous South Vietnamese officers to America for training and established dozens of training centers in South Vietnam.²¹

The year 1963 proved fateful for the Republic of Vietnam. It began with the ARVN's disastrous performance in the battle of Ap Bac, a battle discussed in more detail in the next chapter. The year ended with President Diem dead at the hands of his own officers. Thus began two years of intense instability in which the clique of officers that had initiated the coup, known as the Young Turks, proceeded through no fewer no fewer than seven

¹⁴ William J. Duiker, "Victory by Other Means: the Foreign Policy of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam," in *Why the North*, ed. Gilbert, pp. 58-9; and Brigham, "Why the South," in *Why the North*, ed. Gilbert, pp. 98-99, 102.

¹⁵ Dommen, *Indochinese Experience*, p. 423-4.

¹⁶ Duiker, "Victory by..." p. 50.

¹⁷ William J. Duiker, "Foreword: the History of the People's Army," in *The Military History Institute of Vietnam, Victory in Vietnam: the Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975*, trans. Merle L. Pribbenow (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), pp. ix-xvi.

¹⁸ Duiker, "Victory by..." p. 60.

¹⁹ Dommen, *Indochinese Experience*, p. 475.

²⁰ Dommen, *Indochinese Experience*, p. 501. This program was not the first of its kind. Diem had pursued the creation of "agrovilles" in the late 1950s along similar lines, although there was important differences. Both programs faced serious implementation problems. Joes, *The War*, chapters 5-6; and Ronald Spector, *Advice and Support: the Early Years, 1941-1960* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2005), pp. 332-3.

²¹ James Lawton Collins, Jr., *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950-1972* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1975), p. 123.

additional changes of government, including five separate coups.²² By 1965 the situation had stabilized somewhat, with an original Young Turk, General Nguyen Van Thieu, now serving as president, and Air Vice-Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky serving as premier.²³ They presided over a new military governing body made up of several dozen generals known as the Committee for the Direction of the State, or the Directory.²⁴

Nevertheless, the political instability of 1964-5 convinced U.S. policymakers that merely advising Vietnamese forces would not be enough to ensure the survival of a non-communist regime in the South. The United States had already inserted more than 23,000 soldiers into South Vietnam by 1964.²⁵ By the end of 1965, the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam escalated to 184,000 soldiers, including four full combat divisions that initiated a new series of offensives to find and destroy the elusive North Vietnamese guerrillas.²⁶ By 1967, neither side had won, but the casualties the Americans incurred did manage to lay the foundation for profound U.S. domestic opposition to the war. During this time the United States also massively increased its effort to train and equip the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF), growing it to an authorized strength of over 600,000 men by 1967.²⁷

For its part, Hanoi believed by 1968 that it had reached the crucial point at which it could shift from a Maoist revolutionary strategy focused purely on the countryside to a Leninist approach that would seek to cause an uprising against the Thieu-Ky regime in the cities. The result was the Tet Offensive, a series of coordinated attacks throughout Vietnam. But although tactically impressive, Tet only hardened South Vietnamese antipathy for the North. It also enabled the United States to bring its full combat power against its suddenly exposed guerrilla opponents, mauling them so badly that they never regained their previous influence in the South.

It would be four long years before the North attempted another major offensive, although the interlude was hardly peaceful. The two sides fought numerous battles in South Vietnam during this period, reflecting the increasing willingness of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) to confront the United States and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) in direct battles for control of territory. During this time South Vietnam and the United States also mounted several operations to disrupt the PAVN's foreign supply routes, collectively known as the Ho Chi Minh trail. These operations included a somewhat successful incursion into Cambodia in 1970 and a disastrous invasion of Laos in 1971.

Neither of these ventures stopped the North from launching the 1972 Easter offensive, a coordinated series of assaults across multiple provinces in South Vietnam. Here again, Hanoi failed to provoke the much-sought urban uprising, but it smelled blood. South Vietnamese combat performance revealed itself to be uneven at best and remained heavily reliant on American leadership and support. More importantly, the North knew that this leadership and support would not last forever. Having already heavily shifted much responsibility directly to the South Vietnamese through the policy of "Vietnamization" begun in 1970, the Nixon administration soon signed the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, officially ending the U.S. combat role in the war.

²² Nguyen Cao Ky, *How We Lost the Vietnam War* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), p. 48; and Jeffrey D. Clarke, *Advice and Support: the Final Years, 1965-1973* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1988), p. 81.

²³ This uneasy arrangement was ratified by a flawed but accepted election in 1967. Joes, *The War*, chapter 7.

²⁴ Clarke, *Advice and Support*, p. 23.

²⁵ Clarke, *Advice and Support*, p. 13.

²⁶ Clarke, *Advice and Support*, p. 109.

²⁷ Clarke, *Advice and Support*, p. 213.

After the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces, the South Vietnamese were left to defend themselves, albeit with a large stockpile of U.S. military equipment.²⁸ In the early 1970s alone, for example, Saigon had received an additional \$753 million of new airplanes, helicopters, tanks, artillery pieces, and other military equipment.²⁹ In January 1975, however, the North launched a final series of offensives. By May 1 of that year, PAVN divisions were patrolling the streets of Saigon, and the Republic of Vietnam was no more.

The Puzzle of Battlefield Effectiveness in North and South Vietnam

For nearly thirty years, scholars have focused on the war between North Vietnam and the United States, with many trying to explain the North's combat prowess or the United States' inability to adapt to the demands of a counterinsurgency.³⁰ Far fewer works have examined the war's even more startling contrast between North Vietnam and South Vietnam—the two actors who actually sealed the country's fate after more than thirty years of conflict involving France, Japan, the United States, Laos, Cambodia, China, and the Soviet Union.

Why did the countries demonstrate such varying levels of battlefield effectiveness? Having been “separated at birth” in 1954 and sharing so many important traits, North and South Vietnam should have generated roughly comparable armies, at least according to existing theories of military effectiveness focused on wealth, demography, regime type, external threats, culture and society, and civil-military relations. For example, both states exhibited low levels of economic development, with their populations consisting primarily of rural peasants unable to read or write. Of the two, the South actually had a larger educated urban elite. North and South Vietnam also were almost exactly the same size with roughly equal populations.³¹

Similarly, both states were autocratic. The two regimes were not identical, of course: North Vietnam was a totalitarian state nearly on a par with Pol Pot's Cambodia or Mao's China, while South Vietnam might more accurately have been described as weakly authoritarian. But neither could have been described as a democracy. Neither could have been said to derive any aspect of its military performance from the purported democratic advantages in strategic assessment or from a liberal political culture.³² If anything, the supposed disadvantages of autocracy should have weighed more heavily on North Vietnam.

Additionally, both states faced threatening external environments that should have induced strong pressures for effective military organization. While many observers do point to this motive as an explanation for the North's performance, it is unclear why the external

²⁸ James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004), pp. 29-31.

²⁹ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 202.

³⁰ For example, Michael Lee Lanning and Dan Cragg, *Inside the VC and the NVA: the Real Story of North Vietnam's Armed Forces* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008); and Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1988).

³¹ Ky, *How We Lost*; and Clarke, *Advice and Support*. The combined populations of the two states was believed to be somewhere above 30 million people. South Vietnam's estimated population was 16 million by 1970.

³² POLITY scores reinforce this notion. These scores code states based on the presence of institutions and procedures that allow citizens to express preferences about policies and leaders; the existence of institutionalized constraints on the executive; and the guarantee of civil liberties. A score of 10 indicates a completely institutionalized democracy, while a score of -10 indicates a completely institutionalized autocracy. North Vietnam's POLITY scores increased slightly during the war, from -9 (1954-59) to -8 (1960-68) to -7 (1969-75), while South Vietnam consistently scores -3, except for the years 1965-72, which are coded as a period of “foreign interruption.” Monty G. Marshall and Keith Jagers, POLITY IV Dataset, 2009 version.

threat environment did not have a similar impact on the South. After all, South Vietnam did not lose the war in a bolt-from-the-blue surprise attack—it was defeated in 1975 by an adversary it had been fighting in one form or another for over 20 years, one who had attacked along the usual routes of advance, seeking objectives it had aggressively pursued from the first day of independence. South Vietnam surely had both motive and opportunity to introduce any needed military reforms.

Furthermore, it is important to remember that the North's objectives included not simply control of territory or the capture of key national resources but also complete political transformation of South Vietnam in a direction that many South Vietnamese did not want. By the late 1950s South Vietnam contained close to a million internal refugees who had reluctantly left their ancestral homelands in the North to flee communist rule.³³ Many of them had actually fought with the Viet Minh against the French but had decided they were now willing to live under a largely pro-French regime in the South.³⁴ This exodus presaged the one that occurred in the face of the North's final offensives in 1975, when again millions of people struggled to move south, beyond the reach of communism.³⁵

All of this is to say that many of South Vietnamese showed little desire to be under rule from Hanoi.³⁶ Every time they had the chance to rise up and join a Northern offensive—in 1968, 1972, and 1975—they declined. Many South Vietnamese were clearly terrified of the possibility of conquest by the North, a situation that should have induced pressures for military performance at least as strong as those said to operate in the case of North Vietnam.

Cross-national cultural or social differences also do not seem like a plausible explanation for variation between North and South Vietnam. Clearly, the two states were not identical, and for most of their history the two regions were not unified. As Joes has observed, “North Vietnamese see themselves as dynamic and southerners as rather lazy and slow-witted. Southerners view northerners as aggressive, money-hungry, harder-working, and more enduring. They perceive themselves as more pacific than the militant inhabitants of the Red River Delta, possessing in their enjoyment of the bounties and beauties of nature the true secret of happiness.”³⁷

Nevertheless, North and South Vietnam were more alike than different on the cultural and social dimensions that are said to matter for military performance—and certainly much more alike than most opponents facing each other in war. They shared a common religious legacy from long-standing Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist influences, all introduced by China. For centuries they had also shared a common social hierarchy, as well as the experience of French colonial rule.³⁸ Both were largely ethnically homogenous,

³³ Joes, *The War*, p. 35

³⁴ Maj. Gen. Nguyen Duy Hinh and Brig. Gen. Tran Dinh Tho, *The South Vietnamese Society*, Indochina Monograph (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), p. 23.

³⁵ Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval: an Insider's Account of Saigon's Indecent End Told by the CIA's Chief Strategy Analyst in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1977).

³⁶ For example, despite the fact that the South Vietnamese military suffered high rates of desertion, these desertions tended to occur for personal rather than political reasons. These were almost no instances of voluntary defections to the North.

³⁷ Joes, *The War*, p. 3.

³⁸ Hinh and Tho, *South Vietnamese Society*, pp. 3-5. To be sure, the colonial experience was also not identical for the two regions. The South (Cochinchina) had been annexed to Vietnam only a century before French occupation, making it less bound to Confucian tradition and more receptive to the French than the North (Tonkin and Annam). The French settled Cochinchina first and had the most harmonious relations with the locals, some of whom became large landowners in the productive delta and who became part of the new upper

although in South Vietnam there were significant religious divisions between Buddhists and Catholics, as well as political tensions between native-born southerners and refugees from the North.³⁹

Ideology—not only communism, but also nationalism—did constitute an important social difference between the two states, and it will be discussed in more detail at the end of Chapter 3. But it is important to note that although North Vietnam marshaled a clear ideological advantage, it is unclear how this alone translated into better battlefield capabilities. It might explain why those who fought for Hanoi were better motivated and therefore had better unit cohesion, but it is harder to explain how this factor also could have produced such big cross-national differences in tactical proficiency and the ability to conduct complex operations. Additionally, the absence of nationalism or communism cannot explain the variation seen across different units of the South Vietnamese military, again suggesting that something besides ideology alone was at work.

Lastly, the level of civilian control over the military is not a convincing explanation of either the cross-national or within-country variation in battlefield effectiveness in these cases. First, in neither state was the political leadership purely civilian, as we shall see. South Vietnam was essentially a military dictatorship after 1963, while in North Vietnam most key leaders held military and political roles simultaneously. In short, the normal distinctions between civilian and military leaders fit poorly with the realities of political control over the military in these cases.

That said, political leaders in both states did seek and exert very tight control over their military organizations. What varied were the forms of intervention and the effects on four sets of key military activities: promotions, training, command arrangements, and information management. The remainder of this chapter will examine the nature of political intervention in the militaries of both South and North Vietnam and the effects this intervention should have had if the theory from Chapter 1 is correct.

II. Political Intervention in the South Vietnamese Military and Its Predicted Impact on Battlefield Effectiveness

What policies did South Vietnam's political leaders adopt regarding the military's promotion patterns, training regimens, command arrangements, and information management? What kinds of outcomes should these policies have produced in terms of battlefield effectiveness, if the theory presented in Chapter 1 is correct? How do these predicted results differ from what we would expect to see if political intervention were irrelevant to explaining battlefield effectiveness, or if other variables were more important?

By and large, South Vietnamese leaders adopted what were identified in the first chapter as worst practices in political intervention. This is not to say that South Vietnamese leaders were uninterested in military matters, disengaged from management of the war, or

class. Hinh and Tho, *South Vietnamese Society*, p. 9. These differences clearly mattered for some things, like how receptive the two regions were to communism, but they do not seem to shed much direct light on variation in military performance between the North and the South.

³⁹ The South was more than 80 percent ethnic Vietnamese. The remainder of the population included a tiny proportion of Indians, Pakistanis, Malays, and Arabs, along with the larger minority groups, the Chams, Cambodians, Chinese, and Montagnards. Hinh and Tho, *South Vietnamese Society*, p. 96. On religious differences, see Hinh and Tho, *The South Vietnamese Society*, p. 142. For examples of regional differences and their influence on early South Vietnamese politics, see Hinh and Tho, *The South Vietnamese Society*, p. 74-77, 130-1.

unaware of the country's daunting security challenges—quite the opposite. South Vietnam's political leaders were highly attuned to military activities and profoundly concerned with directing them. The problem lay in the ends to which their political intervention was oriented: protection of the regime from coups, suppression of opposition groups, and domestic governance. Repeatedly, political leaders prioritized effectiveness at these tasks over actual battlefield effectiveness, controlling the military in ways that should have undermined cohesion, tactical proficiency, and the ability to conduct complex operations against North Vietnam, if the theory in Chapter 1 is correct.

As a result, overall South Vietnamese military performance should have been quite poor, falling into either the “mediocre” or “terrible” categories identified in the first chapter. Nevertheless, if and when South Vietnamese military units were exempt from these forms of intervention, either by design or by accident, battlefield effectiveness should have been substantially better, with units demonstrating much greater cohesion and tactical proficiency.

Crucially, the theories based on variables besides political intervention practices predict that we should observe very little variation at all: the South should have performed about the same as the North, and within the South Vietnamese military there should not have been wide differences in performance across units. To the extent that we observe either significant cross-national or cross-unit variation, it casts doubt on the explanatory power of these other theories.

Nevertheless, merely detecting such anomalies does not provide evidence in favor of the intervention explanation. For example, if it were the case that instances of excellent battlefield performance coincided with the imposition of worst practices in political intervention, or that instances of terrible military performance coincided with best practices in political intervention, that would constitute strong evidence against my explanation. But to detect such disconfirming evidence, we first have to know much more about the value of the independent variable in South Vietnam—about the actual policies that the country's political leaders adopted towards its military.

This section briefly reviews the basic structure and history of the South Vietnamese armed forces. Then it examines forms of political intervention in the four areas of interest: promotions, training, command, and information, using the coding questions presented in Chapter 1. In each of the four areas I outline the general policies that South Vietnam's leaders adopted, while also exploring exceptions to these policies. I conclude with predictions about how different parts of the military should have performed in battle if the intervention theory is right or wrong, and if the other theories are right or wrong.

Background on South Vietnam and Its Military

In its short life, the Republic of Vietnam lurched through several tumultuous experiments in governance: the period in which Diem took power from Bao Dai and initially consolidated his rule, from 1954 to 1955;⁴⁰ the period between this consolidation and the coup, from 1956 to 1963; the interregnum following the coup, in which South Vietnam experienced a quick succession of military-led governments, from 1963 to 1965; the period in which Thieu and Ky attempted to consolidate the regime that finally emerged in 1965, lasting through the election of 1967; and the period from that election to the conquest of the regime in 1975, during which Thieu's power grew and Ky's declined.

⁴⁰ The Republic of Vietnam officially came into being on October 26, 1955, with Diem as President. Lt. Gen. Dong Van Khuyen, *The RVN/AF* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), p. 8.

What is most remarkable about South Vietnam is that despite all of these changes—or perhaps because of them—the forms by which the country’s political leaders intervened in their armed forces were remarkably consistent. The leaders themselves changed, and the civilian or military character of the regime vacillated, yet the actual content of political intervention in the military always hewed relatively closely to the worst practices that Diem adopted in the early years of the Republic.

Those policies sprang from Diem’s belief that his new regime faced a greater threat from military coups, domestic opposition groups, and a sheer lack of governance than it did from North Vietnam. Almost immediately upon coming to power, for example, Diem found himself facing a challenge from General Nguyen Van Hinh, the Chief of the General Staff of the National Army.⁴¹ In September 1954 Hinh “declared openly that he needed only to pick up the telephone to unleash a coup d’état.”⁴²

Hinh’s words were not an idle threat. The French Expeditionary Corps were still in Saigon.⁴³ Hinh had been a major in the French Air Force, was a French citizen, had a French wife, and had been picked by the French to lead the National Army. Fortunately for Diem, American pressure forced Hinh into exile in France. But the incident taught Diem an early lesson on the importance of loyalty among his military commanders, especially when so many were former officers in the very colonial army that Diem had so staunchly opposed.⁴⁴

The French had left other problems for Diem as well. In their quest to destroy the Viet Minh, they had cultivated the Binh Xuyen, a mafia-like armed gang in Saigon. The Binh Xuyen’s private army did not disappear with the Tricolor. In 1954 it still had 2,000 regular troops near Saigon, organized into five main battalions, plus another 1,500 crack assault troops, and 10,000 other followers.⁴⁵ When Diem refused to renew the licenses for Binh Xuyen’s casinos and brothels, they united with the forces of two religious sects, the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, in seeking his overthrow.⁴⁶ Diem spent much of the first half of 1955 peeling away the religious sects from this alliance (mostly with bribes) and then sending government forces to root out the hard core of Binh Xuyen fighters in block-by-block fighting.⁴⁷

The ARVN did manage to crush the Binh Xuyen by May 1955. During the following year Diem also ordered massive anticommunist sweeps, decimating the party’s presence in the south.⁴⁸ And, indeed, it is hard to argue that Diem should have done anything other than tackle these domestic threats first. Still, most of the ARVN divisions “existed largely on paper; even those which had begun to function lacked their full complement of men and material. Virtually all of the divisional and regimental commanders were new to their units and did not know their men or their subordinate officers. Few had ever commanded

⁴¹ General Cao Van Vien, *Leadership*, Indochina Monograph (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1981), p. 22.

⁴² Hinh and Tho, *The South Vietnamese Society*, p. 30.

⁴³ Spector, *Advice and Support*, p. 225.

⁴⁴ Hinh and Tho, *The South Vietnamese Society*, p. 30.

⁴⁵ Cao Van Vien, *Leadership*, p. 42.

⁴⁶ For background on the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, see Jeanne S. Mintz, Herbert M. Silverberg, and James E. Trinnaman, *A Short Guide to Psychological Operations in the Republic of Vietnam*, (Washington, DC: Special Operations Research Office, July 7, 1965), unclassified assessment available at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC, pp. 27-34.

⁴⁷ Cao Van Vien, *Leadership*, p. 42-49; Hinh and Tho, *The South Vietnamese Society*, p. 32. Unfortunately, “the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao adherents and members of the Binh Xuyen were the most dedicated anti-Communists of South Vietnam.” Hinh and Tho, *The South Vietnamese Society*, p. 27.

⁴⁸ Brigham, “Why the South,” in *Why the North*, ed. Gilbert, pp. 100-101.

anything larger than a battalion. All lacked experience in the use of artillery and other supporting arms.”⁴⁹

Over the next several years, and after considerable wrangling, Diem and the MAAG managed to devise a new force structure. By 1960, the ARVN consisted of seven standard infantry divisions organized under three major corps headquarters, one for the northern, central, and southern regions of the country. These divisions each had roughly 10,000 men and were tasked largely with static defense of their particular geographic areas. Separate armor, airborne, marine, and aviation components of the ARVN were envisioned as more mobile forces that could engage in combat throughout the country, reacting to major conflagrations or conducting offensive operations. Local security (or “pacification duties,” as it were called at the time), would continue to be provided by the separate Territorial Forces, consisting of small Civil Guard units at the province level and the Self-Defense Corps at the village level, both formed in 1955.⁵⁰ South Vietnam also acquired a small navy and air force during this time.

SOUTH VIETNAMESE FORCE STRUCTURE IN 1960⁵¹	
Army (ARVN)	
<i>Infantry</i>	
I Corps (Northern region)	1 st Division 2 nd Division
II Corps (Central region)	22 nd Division 23 rd Division
III Corps (Southern region)	5 th Division 7 th Division 21 st Division
<i>Armor</i>	4 armored battalions
<i>Airborne</i>	1 brigade
<i>Marines</i>	3 battalions ⁵²
<i>Aviation</i>	1 helicopter squadron
<i>Rangers</i>	9,000 men ⁵³
Territorial Forces	Civil Guard (province level) Self-Defense Corps (village level)
Navy	18 amphibious craft 3 minesweepers 7 submarine chasers
Air Force	1 fighter-bomber squadron 2 C-47 transport squadrons 2 light aircraft observation squadrons

Despite the establishment of this force structure, the specter of both coups and internal opposition continued to haunt the regime. Indeed, Diem evaded an assassination

⁴⁹ Spector, *Advice and Support*, p. 278.

⁵⁰ Collins, *Development and Training*, p. 10.

⁵¹ Data from Spector, *Advice and Support*, chapter 15; and Collins, *Development and Training*, p. 10.

⁵² Data from Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York: NYU Press, 2008), p. 34.

⁵³ Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, p. 34.

attempt in 1957. Then on November 11, 1960, three airborne and one marine battalion attempted a coup against him. Diem was saved only when the 7th, 9th, and 21st divisions converged on the capital in his defense.⁵⁴ On February 22, 1962, two VNAF pilots bombed the Presidential Palace, again attempting to kill Diem.

The coup of November 1963 eventually succeeded where these efforts failed, but it was against the backdrop of these earlier threats that Diem adopted his initial patterns of political intervention regarding promotion, training, command, and information. As we will see, these patterns by and large involved worst practices. They were also continued under Diem's successors, even as the RVNAF grew from a 150,000 man force in the early 1960s to over a million men by the early 1970s, adding a new corps, appending new independent regiments and divisions to the existing corps, and gaining other types of forces as well (see chart below and map 2).

[SEE NEXT PAGE]

⁵⁴ Thomas R. Cantwell, "The Army of South Vietnam: a Military and Political History, 1955-75," Ph.D. dissertation, University of New South Wales, 1989, pp. 60-1. These early coup attempts are also discussed in Ky, *How We Lost*, pp. 28-9.

SOUTH VIETNAMESE FORCE STRUCTURE IN 1969

Army (ARVN)⁵⁵	
<i>Infantry</i>	
I Corps Tactical Zone (Northernmost region)	1 st Division 2 nd Division 51 st Regiment (independent)
II Corps Tactical Zone (North central region)	22 nd Division 23 rd Division 42 nd Regiment (independent)
III Corps Tactical Zone (South central region)	5 th Division 7 th Division 25 th Division
IV Corps Tactical Zone (Southernmost region)	7 th Division 9 th Division 21 st Division
<i>Armor</i>	12 armored squadrons
<i>Airborne</i>	9 battalions
<i>Marines</i>	6 battalions
<i>Rangers</i>	20 battalions
Territorial Forces⁵⁶	Regional Forces (formerly Civil Guard, province level) Popular Forces (formerly Self-Defense Corps, village level) People's Self-Defense Forces (additional) ⁵⁷
Navy⁵⁸	River patrol boats, landing craft, coastal patrol craft, several destroyers, approx. 17,000 men ⁵⁹
Air Force	Similar force structure as before, approx. 17,000 men ⁶⁰

1. Promotion patterns

According to Diem's former chief of staff, General Cao Van Vien, Diem personally reviewed the promotion of all high-level officers and others in positions he considered important.⁶¹ This in itself is not surprising, as many civilian wartime leaders keep a close eye on officer appointments. But from the earliest days of the American advisory mission,

⁵⁵ Data from Cantwell, "The Army...", pp. 153-5.

⁵⁶ Data from Lt. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong, *Territorial Forces* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1981), pp. 66-7.

⁵⁷ These were formed on a purely volunteer basis after Tet for local defense of small areas. Their numbers swelled to 4.4 million by late 1971. "A GVN People's Army," August/October 1971, section from *A Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War: 1965-1972, Vol. 4: Allied Operations*, in the unclassified collection of *The Southeast Asia Analysis Report*, available at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC, p. 126..

⁵⁸ Navy and Air Force figures actually from 1968. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, pp. 23-4.

⁵⁹ This figure is actually for 1968. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 23.

⁶⁰ This figure is actually for 1968. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 24.

⁶¹ Vien, *Leadership*, p. 39.

observers noted that Diem hired and fired officers primarily on the basis of political loyalty to him, not merit.

In fact, Diem often intentionally selected against competence in the officer corps. Lt. Gen. Samuel T. Williams, the head of the MAAG, noted as early as 1957, “Officers who are performing their duties efficiently are relieved and transferred to other duties.”⁶² In 1964, Col. Wilbur Wilson, the senior advisor to III Corps, made the same observation: “The generals got to be generals by virtue of their ability in political intrigue, not as a result of their ability as military men,” resulting in a case of “the blind leading the blind.”⁶³ Brigadier General James Lawton Collins, who served in a number of assignments in South Vietnam in the 1950s and 60s, also concluded that “the greatest obstacle in improving and training the armed forces was the lack of qualified leadership at all levels, both officer and noncommissioned officer,” primarily due to the nature of the promotion system. “U.S. advisers continually cited poor leadership as the foremost reason for unit ineffectiveness.”⁶⁴

A popular line in South Vietnam in the late 1950s contended that to be an officer in the ARVN required a man to have “the three D’s”: D not only for *Diem*, as in the officer had to be loyal to Diem and not considered a threat to the regime, but also D for *Dao*, the Vietnamese word for religion, meaning the officer had to share Diem’s Catholic faith; D for *Dang*, the Vietnamese word for party, meaning the officer had to belong to Diem’s political party, the Can Lao; and D for *Du*, a designation for Central Vietnam, meaning that the officer had to have the same regional origins as Diem’s family.⁶⁵ Performing well in battle was at best a secondary consideration among these requirements, and often officers realized that demonstrating too much battlefield competence could result in demotion.

These trends continued under the Thieu regime. As Allan Goodman, a civilian researcher who spent substantial time in South Vietnam, wrote in 1970, “The portrait of the RVNAF officer of a decade ago remains essentially unchanged.... Political loyalty, not battlefield performance, has long dominated the promotion system in the officer corps, with the result that there is often an inverse relationship between rank and military skill. Morale is low.”⁶⁶ South Vietnamese officials themselves after the war made this same connection between the incompetent leaders that Thieu elevated and the broader problems in the army: “the majority of the high-ranking commanders were servants to the Thieu regime,” they noted. The result was “a number of lazy, corrupted, and unqualified generals” who succeeded only in “destroying the fighting morale of the young ARVN officers.”⁶⁷

Under both Diem and Thieu, these politically favored officers often fled the battlefield or chose never to set foot on it at all, which undermined the motivation of their units and made it difficult for the officers to command efficiently.⁶⁸ One observer noted that it was not simply that Thieu cared about political loyalty, but that he truly attempted to weed out those who might be competent enough to threaten him: “Thieu did not want good men in leading military positions because he was afraid that once they were in such positions they

⁶² Quoted in Spector, *Advice and Support*, p. 301.

⁶³ Quoted in Clarke, *Advice and Support*, p. 47.

⁶⁴ Collins, *Development and Training*, p. 75.

⁶⁵ Hinh and Tho, *The South Vietnamese Society*, p. 129.

⁶⁶ Allan E. Goodman, *An Institutional Profile of the South Vietnamese Office Corps*, report for the Advanced Research Projects Agency, RM-6189-APRA, June 1970, available through DTIC, p. vi.

⁶⁷ Stephen Hosmer, Konrad Kellen, and Brian Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam: Statements by Vietnamese Military and Civilian Leaders*, report R-2208-OSD (HIST) (Santa Monica, CA: the RAND Corporation, December 1978), p. 31.

⁶⁸ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 57.

would mount a coup against him.”⁶⁹ An internal Pentagon report noted as late as October 1969 that “RVNAF commanders in the field appear to be least favored in terms of promotion.”⁷⁰

Indeed, before 1966, the RVNAF did not have even the appearance of an objective promotion or officer evaluation system.⁷¹ A popular story recounts that during the political turbulence of 1964, one high-ranking general tried to buy himself protection simply by visiting his old units and distributing rank insignia from a bag he had brought, “as if they were souvenirs.”⁷² Whether literally true or not, the tale was certainly believable.

In 1966, Thieu acceded to MACV’s pressure for a more regularized promotion system, and four kinds of promotions were established: annual normal, battlefield, and special. Nevertheless, despite the formal creation of this promotion pathway for those who demonstrated skill on the battlefield, less than 2 percent of all officers promoted in 1968 actually owed their rank to combat performance.⁷³ A Pentagon report that year stated, “The Vietnamese simply will not promote on the basis of battlefield performance.”⁷⁴ Another report in January 1969 noted, “Service in battle is clearly not the path to success in the ARVN.”⁷⁵ Another report in the same series in 1970 noted, “While the Vietnamese have a better promotion system on paper, it has changed little in the way it operates.”⁷⁶ As a result, most promotions for field grade officers and above still depended either on time in grade, or fell into the “special” category, meaning they occurred without regard to rank, length of service, or experience at all.⁷⁷

In fact, the criteria for promotion based on combat prowess were intentionally made so exacting that few officers could meet them. Candidates for the rank of lieutenant colonel or colonel, for example, were required to have three separate citations, including one at the army level—a very hard bar for almost anyone to meet.⁷⁸ Moreover, even when officers were promoted on merit, they often found they were not given actual jobs in their new units. According to Lt. General Dong Van Khuyen, the last chief of staff of the Joint General Staff, “Most RVNAF commanders had the habit of using old cronies, those with ranks below TO&E authorization, whom they considered more pliable and easier to motivate than officers with full authorized ranks.... Even when an officer with appropriate rank was transferred to a unit that had a vacancy in his rank, he had to wait for some time before he

⁶⁹ Tran Van Don, quoted in Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 45.

⁷⁰ “RVNAF Leadership,” October 1969, section from *A Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War: 1965-1972, Vol. 6: Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces*, in the unclassified collection of *The Southeast Asia Analysis Report*, available at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC, p. 165.

⁷¹ Goodman, *An Institutional Profile*, p. 26.

⁷² Vien, *Leadership*, p. 63.

⁷³ Goodman, *An Institutional Profile*, p. 27-81. The same statistic appears in “RVNAF Leadership,” June 1968, section from *A Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War: 1965-1972, Vol. 6: Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces*, in the unclassified collection of *The Southeast Asia Analysis Report*, available at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC, p. 149.

⁷⁴ “RVNAF Leadership,” June 1968, p. 151.

⁷⁵ “The Situation in South Vietnam,” January 1969, section from *A Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War: 1965-1972, Vol. 1: the Situation in Southeast Asia*, in the unclassified collection of *The Southeast Asia Analysis Report*, available at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC, p. 33.

⁷⁶ “RVNAF Leadership,” March 1970, section from *A Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War: 1965-1972, Vol. 6: Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces*, in the unclassified collection of *The Southeast Asia Analysis Report*, available at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC, p. 178.

⁷⁷ Clarke, *Advice and Support*, p. 219-220.

⁷⁸ Khuyen, *The RVNAF*, pp. 101; and Clarke, *Advice and Support*, p. 219-222.

would be given a suitable assignment because all positions has [sic] already been filled by the 'right' officer."⁷⁹

Just as important, neither Diem nor Thieu made a point of removing commanders who revealed themselves to be incompetent. To be sure, U.S. advisors faced incentives to inflate the effectiveness ratings of the units with which they worked—after all, if the RVNAF commanders were ineffective, it reflected almost as poorly on the advisor as it did on the commander—so at times it could be difficult to know who deserved to retain command. Yet that makes it all the more startling that even in instances where everyone agreed South Vietnamese commanders were inept, they retained command. In 1967, for example, American advisors rated the commanders of the 5th, 18th, and 25th Divisions “flatly incompetent”—and the Directory generals agreed. Yet the division commanders were not replaced because they were vital political supporters of the Thieu regime.⁸⁰

As the U.S. Army history of the period notes, “The actual basis for Vietnamese intransigence lay in the political role of the officer corps and the desire of the senior generals to control its composition. Rapid promotions would destroy the existing network of local ties and personal loyalties that not only provided the current leaders with their political power but also formed the economic and social underpinnings of the Saigon regime.”⁸¹ Indeed, even in the few instances in which incompetent commanders were inadvertently removed for other reasons, their replacements proved equally inadequate.⁸²

In short, despite a great deal of political tumult in South Vietnam, by and large its leaders adopted a very consistent set of worst practices in political intervention regarding promotions. These policies should have produced inherent obstacles to the development of an officer corps capable of planning and conducting complex operations. The poor quality of officers also should have undermined unit cohesion by making soldiers skeptical of their leaders' competence.

There was one major exception to this pattern, however: the ARVN 1st Division, and particularly its rapid reaction force, known as the Hac Bao, or “Black Panther” Company. Starting in 1966, President Thieu selected commanders for this division, and in particular for the elite airmobile unit within the division, based on proven battlefield prowess. His first pick was Colonel Ngo Quang Truong, universally hailed as a highly competent officer and “a born leader of men.”⁸³ He had a proven combat record as a skilled officer, and he in turn selected his battalion commanders on the basis of their combat records.⁸⁴

In some ways, Thieu's differing selection criteria for the 1st Division might not seem especially surprising. The 1st Division was responsible for the territory closest to the border with North Vietnam, notably the provinces of Thua Thien, which contained the historic city of Hue, and Quang Nam, home to the key port of Da Nang. On the other hand, given the mobility afforded by the Ho Chi Minh trail, other parts of South Vietnam were just as

⁷⁹ Khuyen, *The RVNAF*, p. 106.

⁸⁰ Clarke, *Advice and Support*, p. 245. Eventually, in 1969, the commanders of the 5th and 18th were removed, although their replacements were of questionable ability. Also unfortunate: the original commanders of the 5th and 18th were re-assigned to training commands. “RVNAF Leadership,” February 1970, section from *A Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War: 1965-1972, Vol. 6: Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces*, in the unclassified collection of *The Southeast Asia Analysis Report*, available at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC, p. 168; and “RVNAF Leadership,” October 1969, p. 7.

⁸¹ Clarke, *Advice and Support*, p. 514.

⁸² Clarke, *Advice and Support*, chapters 14 and 20.

⁸³ Vien, *Leadership*, p. 92.

⁸⁴ Cantwell, “The Army...,” p. 310; Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, p. 70.

vulnerable to an attack from the North as was Quang Tri. Of the five provinces where most of the conventional fighting was occurring, only two (Quang Tri and Thua Thien) were in Corps Tactical Zone I, where the 1st Division operated; the rest (Kontum, Tay Ninh, and Chau Doc) were spread out across the other Corps Tactical Zones (see map 2).⁸⁵ Hence there is no obvious reason that the quality of leadership in this division was any more important than in any other part of the army.

Additionally, Hue had been the site of a major Buddhist uprising in 1966—an uprising in which many members of the 1st Division had sided against the government.⁸⁶ This uprising had almost toppled Thieu's regime, so if there were any division in which domestic political loyalty should have mattered, it was the 1st Division. Yet although Col. Truong clearly was loyal to the government—he had been the deputy commander of the Airborne units that had helped restore order in Hue—it was his combat skills that mattered most, and he was allowed to promote other officers under his command according to this same standard. Indeed, the same internal Pentagon report that noted the promotion problems plaguing most of the ARVN noted that in Military Region I, where 1st Division operated, “RVNAF leadership is good and the units are excellent.”⁸⁷

2. *Training regimens*

South Vietnam's leaders also generally adopted worst practices with regard to training. Very little rigorous, realistic, large- or small-unit training of any type occurred during the entire war. Despite numerous opportunities to push for such training, both the Diem and Thieu regimes refrained from doing so. Political leaders were more concerned with maintaining the military as a governing institution capable of providing local security and services—a mission from which training for external warfare would have distracted.

To be clear, the problem was not that the country lacked the infrastructure or resources needed to conduct rigorous training at both the large- and small-unit levels. Training was a top priority for the MAAG and later for MACV, and the United States grew the number of Vietnamese training centers from one in 1956 to 33 by 1970. It also established an additional 25 different military schools and sent South Vietnamese officers to undergo military training in the United States. Unit training was a major focus of U.S. advisors working with their Vietnamese counterparts at all levels of command.⁸⁸

Nevertheless, as one senior U.S. officer later reflected, “Headway in this area was generally extremely slow.”⁸⁹ As late as 1970, U.S. advisers lamented that the South Vietnamese officers paid “only lip service to practical training,” which had a ripple effect down the chain of command, producing apathy among the troops.⁹⁰ After the war a number of generals stated flatly that “leadership of service schools in South Vietnam was a sort of elegant exile for unwanted commanders, often of limited competence.”⁹¹ For example, the National Military Academy at Da Lat was run by General Lam Quang Tho, described as

⁸⁵ “The Situation in South Vietnam,” November/December 1970, section from *A Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War: 1965-1972, Vol. 1: the Situation in Southeast Asia*, in the unclassified collection of *The Southeast Asia Analysis Report*, available at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC, p. 42.

⁸⁶ Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, chapter 2.

⁸⁷ “The Situation in South Vietnam,” November/December 1970, p. 41-2.

⁸⁸ Collins, *Training and Development*, chapter V.

⁸⁹ Collins, *Training and Development*, p. 123.

⁹⁰ Clarke, *Advice and Support*, p. 378.

⁹¹ Quoted in Hosmer et al, p. 58.

“one of the least effective South Vietnamese general officers.”⁹² Even Westmoreland observed that the academy was “a dumping ground for inept officers.”⁹³

In fact, the entire enterprise of training was perfunctory at best. In 1966, for example, “MACV proposed a six-week refresher training program for all South Vietnamese infantry battalions.... Only a few battalions actually received the training, and the instruction for those that did was marginal. Unit commanders at all levels showed little interest in the program.... Commanders simply were not interested in training and found excuses to avoid it.”⁹⁴ For example, during the first half of 1969, 66% of maneuver battalions conducted no training whatsoever; 15% conducted 10 days or less; and only 4% conducted a month or more of training.⁹⁵

Those commanders who did participate in training often viewed the time as a break from normal military duties and an opportunity for rest and relaxation.⁹⁶ More than a decade into the war, “no ‘proficiency in training’ evaluations had been enforced, which meant that in most cases a new recruit ‘graduated’ from basic combat training based solely on the fact that he had been ‘present for duty’ during this five week period.”⁹⁷ ARVN soldiers rarely received practical instruction on most topics and almost never had the opportunity to engage in realistic simulations of interservice or combined arms operations, which in turn directly impacted the motivation to fight. Soldiers were well aware that they had not been prepared for battle.⁹⁸

At the root of these general training problems lay political leaders’ reliance on the military as an instrument of governance. Rather than pushing military officers to engage in training, South Vietnam’s political leadership allowed corps and division commanders to refuse to release the forces under their command for training.⁹⁹ After all, even under Diem, who ran a nominally civilian regime, “only 5 province chiefs were civilians; the remaining ones were all military.”¹⁰⁰ By 1970, the situation had not changed: “the RVNAF [was] frequently the government’s sole representative and development agent in the rural areas.”¹⁰¹

The result was military officers who felt more pressure to govern their districts, provinces, or regions than to train effective combat forces. Gen. Cao Van Vien, Diem’s chief of staff and later the chairman of the Joint General Staff under Thieu, noted that there was more to the job than commanding large units:

A province chief had to be an able administrator also. He had to supervise a large bureaucracy, prepare and execute a provincial budget, regulate trade and commerce, and protect national resources under his custody.... He had to plan for and meet the objectives set forth for security and development, and this required his involvement in countless programs and projects whose implementation needed his constant supervision and guidance. Toward the people he governed, a province chief had to show he was a sensitive leader who listened to their demands and grievances, cared for lives and welfare, and responded to their aspirations.... In the

⁹² Clarke, *Advice and Support*, p. 161.

⁹³ Clarke, *Advice and Support*, p. 161.

⁹⁴ Clarke, *Advice and Support*, p. 161.

⁹⁵ “RVNAF Leadership,” October 1969, p. 3.

⁹⁶ Collins, *Training and Development*, chapter V.

⁹⁷ Cantwell, “The Army...,” p. 177-8.

⁹⁸ Quoted in Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 58.

⁹⁹ Collins, *Training and Development*, p. 126.

¹⁰⁰ Vien, *Leadership*, p. 55.

¹⁰¹ Goodman, *An Institutional Profile*, p. 3.

exercise of his duties... he had to receive guests, brief visitors, and escort dignitaries on tours.... No matter how devoted he was, he simply could not perform all of his duties effectively.¹⁰²

After the war, other generals similarly reported that the main directives they received concerned governance rather than making use of the large training infrastructure established by the MAAG and later MACV.¹⁰³ Even Westmoreland was ultimately hesitant to push harder for progress in this area. As a 1967 MACV study admitted, “The military was the only body in South Vietnam with the experience and administrative skills to run the country.”¹⁰⁴

One might suppose that at least elite units would have received better, more rigorous training. After all, MAAG had urged the formation of specialized airborne, armor, and marine units exactly for this reason—to provide more highly skilled mobile strike forces that could complement the more static corps formations that roamed each of the three (eventually four) military regions of South Vietnam.¹⁰⁵ Unfortunately, the elite units’ ostensible specialization instead became the prevention of coups: both Diem and Thieu used them as counterweights to the regular army. Surprisingly, however, the units still received little actual military training, despite their supposed role as specialized forces intended to remain in Saigon guarding the Presidential Palace and other key spots.¹⁰⁶

This oddity speaks again to the highly contingent, even irrational, nature of leaders’ decisions about how to intervene in their military organizations. For example, Diem formed new armored units after the coup attempt in 1962, stationing them with the 7th and 21st divisions outside Saigon. But although these units had the newest armored personnel carriers and appeared frequently in presidential parades, they rarely trained in actually using the APCs with infantry.¹⁰⁷ The creation of Ranger units followed a similar pattern. Against U.S. advice, Diem simply took the fourth company out of each infantry battalion and redesignated it a Ranger battalion. But beyond the title, Rangers received no special training.¹⁰⁸ The Airborne had the same problems.¹⁰⁹ While “elite” status often indicated that a unit was volunteer-only, or had better pay and access to medical care, it rarely meant that the unit’s training differed from those of any other army units, even when such training seemed like it might have benefited regime security, evaluated objectively.

The 1st Division was again a noticeable exception to this pattern. Its Hac Bao Company was the closest thing the ARVN had to functioning special forces, and it did engage in regular and realistic exercises.¹¹⁰

3. *Command arrangements*

South Vietnamese political leaders also intervened extensively in their military’s command arrangements. Again, however, this intervention was oriented more toward

¹⁰² Vien, *Leadership*, p. 157.

¹⁰³ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Clarke, *Advice and Support*, p. 259.

¹⁰⁵ Prior to 1961, South Vietnam was divided into three main zones, each of which was assigned a corps-sized force. That year the number expanded to four, which were now called Corps Tactical Zones (CTZs). Each CTZ was then subdivided into Division Tactical Areas (DTA) assigned to particular divisions (or in a few cases, to independent regiments). Truong, *Territorial Forces*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁶ Cantwell, “The Army...,” p. 41.

¹⁰⁷ Cantwell, “The Army...,” p. 125

¹⁰⁸ Collins, *Training and Development*, p. 17.

¹⁰⁹ Cantwell, “The Army...,” p. 42.

¹¹⁰ Wiest, *Vietnam’s Forgotten Army*, p. 99.

combating internal threats and securing the regime in power than maximizing battlefield effectiveness against North Vietnam. Leaders in South Vietnam both centralized and fractured the system for giving and receiving orders within their military organization.

First, by any standard, command arrangements over the ARVN were excessively centralized. Diem initiated this method of political control by establishing a personal chain of command directly from the presidential palace to corps and division commanders.¹¹¹ Frequently he used this radio net to send orders “from a van in the garden of the presidential palace... directly to combat regiments, bypassing the Department of National Defense, the General Staff, and the field commands.”¹¹² This sort of personal chain of command acted as an automatic brake on activities in the field.

Diem was particularly cautious about authorizing operations that might incur casualties because he believed that losses suffered during failed offensives had been the underlying cause of the coup attempt against him in 1960.¹¹³ This belief was incorrect—again highlighting the contingent nature of leaders’ motives for various forms of political intervention—but the highly centralized command arrangements and resulting climate of officer passivity that this belief engendered persisted even long after Diem was gone.¹¹⁴ Collins noted years later that one of the major problems in the ARVN was that few officers who had come up in the Diem system were willing to do anything “in the absence of detailed orders.”¹¹⁵

Second, at the time that South Vietnamese leaders centralized command in some ways, they intentionally fractured it in others. For example, Diem and later Thieu maintained separate chains of command for elite forces, notably the airborne, marines, and rangers. In this way they could ensure that even if one of these factions turned against the regime, the others could be contacted to counteract it. Similarly, they maintained a separate chain of command to the Civil Guard (later named the Regional Forces) through the Ministry of the Interior, bypassing the Joint General Staff in the Ministry of Defense. Because of these arrangements, it would have been very difficult for any single commander to usurp command of all of the military forces in South Vietnam at any given time.¹¹⁶ But the arrangements also should have made it hard for these forces to communicate with one another or to coordinate action effectively in battle.

Diem and Thieu also frequently shuffled command assignments within the officer corps. This approach had the benefit of preventing the development of independent bases of loyalty in the armed forces—bases that might be used to launch coups—but it also “prevented commanders from gaining the full support of their troops.”¹¹⁷ Junior officers could expect to have a new supervisor “every one or two months,” limiting their accountability with respect to any long-term tasks.¹¹⁸

Diem and then Thieu also created overlapping chains of command to constrain military commanders. As one U.S. Army study of the system noted, the command structure

¹¹¹ Vien, *Leadership*, p. 39.

¹¹² Collins, *Training and Development*, pp. 10-11, 90.

¹¹³ The origins of this erroneous belief are discussed in more detail in Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), pp. 122-3.

¹¹⁴ Goodman, *An Institutional Profile*, p. 14.

¹¹⁵ Collins, *Training and Development*, p. 75.

¹¹⁶ David M. Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac: They Did Everything But I Learn from It* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), p. 41.

¹¹⁷ Collins, *Training and Development*, p. 32.

¹¹⁸ Cantwell, “The Army of...,” p. 102.

seemed designed to intentionally inhibit operations, containing “conflicting, duplicating chains of command and communication and... various major agencies... installed in widely separately areas so as to hamper coordination, rapid staff action, and decision-making.”¹¹⁹ Commanders often received orders from multiple different military and/or civilian authorities. For example, under Diem, many units were only nominally commanded by the military, with the real orders coming from a Can Lao party member who had been installed by Diem’s brother, Ngo Dinh Can.¹²⁰ Even when Diem and the Can Lao were gone, the average battalion commander could expect to receive orders in battle from both the commander of his regiment or division, as well as from the commander of the military region in which he was operating.¹²¹ When these orders conflicted, it was safest to do nothing.

Unfortunately, South Vietnam’s political leaders did little to punish those who declined to fight in this corrosive command environment. As early as 1956, a report on the ARVN noted that “insubordination was rampant; orders were freely disobeyed, and senior officers were reluctant to punish subordinates who might have powerful political connections.”¹²² More than 20 years later, after the war, Lt. Gen. Dong Van Khuyen observed that these attitudes never really changed. A military justice system eventually emerged, but it was too small to cope with violations in an army of the ARVN’s size, and its powers of punishment were very limited.¹²³ On the off chance the average deserter was even caught, he could expect to return to his unit without formal sanction.¹²⁴ Small unit leaders reported that this climate of impunity was a major hindrance to exercising effective command.¹²⁵ For the most part, desertions rose steadily throughout the period of the war, even among non-combat units.¹²⁶

4. *Information management*

South Vietnam’s political leaders by and large also adopted worst practices with respect to information management. Although the country’s political leaders were quite concerned with managing the flow of information within the military and between the military and political leaders, the actual policies they adopted focused on gaining information about potential internal threats, particularly coup plots, rather than on the external threat of North Vietnam. This emphasis detracted from monitoring information relevant to professional military activities and combat effectiveness. As with the other forms of political intervention, this pattern originated with Diem but continued and even intensified under his successors.

First, South Vietnam’s political leaders always maintained a large intelligence apparatus designed primarily to monitor communications in the officer corps. In the early years, there were at least six major and several minor intelligence-collecting groups in South

¹¹⁹ USACGSC, Staff Study on Army Aspects of Military Assistance, p. C-20, quoted in Spector, *Advice and Support*, p. 279.

¹²⁰ Spector, *Advice and Support*, p. 347.

¹²¹ Spector, *Advice and Support*, pp. 279-80.

¹²² Spector, *Advice and Support*, p. 280.

¹²³ Khuyen, *The RVNAF*, p. 136. For example, a soldier had to desert his unit three separate times to be eligible for capital punishment. Khuyen, *The RVNAF*, pp. 149-50.

¹²⁴ Clarke, *Advice and Support*, p. 152.

¹²⁵ Khuyen, *The RVNAF*, p. 143.

¹²⁶ Among non-combat units, the rate rose from 4.6 per thousand in 1968 to 12.9 per thousand in late 1972. Khuyen, *The RVNAF*, p. 139.

Vietnam, according to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).¹²⁷ Additionally, as mentioned, Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Can, led a secret political party of Diem supporters known as the Can Lao. He managed to place numerous Can Lao members in the Defense Ministry, where they provided Diem with frequent information about officer sentiment and military activities. Can also helped handpick party members for division and corps commands, from which they continued to feed Diem information.

Furthermore, "cells or committees of the Can Lao existed at all echelons of the army, frequently without the knowledge of the unit commanders. The staffs of senior commanders were so riddled with Can Lao operatives and informers that some generals... hesitated to plan any real operations with their staffs."¹²⁸ Unfortunately, this type of intelligence apparatus had a tendency to produce only the sort of information that spies believed Diem wanted to hear. Even as the Viet Cong grew in strength during the period 1959-1960, for example, Diem continued to believe that the regime was enjoying increasing battlefield success against them.¹²⁹

Although the Can Lao disbanded after Diem's fall, the Thieu regime continued to keep close tabs on officers, with similar results.¹³⁰ Premier Ky ran both the Central Intelligence Office, South Vietnam's equivalent of the CIA, as well as the more mysterious Military Security Service (MSS). Both of these organizations purported to gather intelligence on the enemy, but in reality they focused on potential dissent among military officers and local officials.¹³¹

The Thieu regime also took further measures to prevent communication among military commanders.¹³² For example, Thieu actively discouraged them from meeting with one another. As one general explained after the war, "He was all the time afraid of a government by the generals.... He had in mind that if all these people got together to talk about the military situation, they would also discuss the political situation and make a coup."¹³³ As a result his commanders often had little idea what their counterparts in the next province or region were doing—or any access to their information about the adversary. In sum, South Vietnam's political leaders adopted worst practices with regard to information management, much as they generally did regarding command arrangements, training, and promotion.

Predictions If the Political Intervention Explanation Is Right: Confirming Evidence

- Regular ARVN units, including infantry divisions, the airborne, the Rangers, the Marines, and the armor squadrons should have performed poorly, demonstrating virtually no effectiveness: no ability to conduct complex operations; little to no tactical proficiency; and, because the regime did not employ internally directed coercive measures, very little cohesion.
- The ARVN 1st Division, including the Hac Bao Company, should have displayed at least adequate effectiveness. Because political leaders adopted different training and promotion policies toward these units, they should have demonstrated at least basic

¹²⁷ Spector, *Advice and Support*, p. 316.

¹²⁸ Spector, *Advice and Support*, p. 279.

¹²⁹ Spector, *Advice and Support*, p. 342-4.

¹³⁰ For background on the Can Lao, as well as on the other major political party in South Vietnam, the Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang (VNQDD), or Vietnam, Nationalist Part, see Mintz et al, *A Short Guide*, p. 39.

¹³¹ Clarke, *Advice and Support*, p. 31.

¹³² Cantwell, "The Army of...," p. 166.

¹³³ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 23.

tactical proficiency and solid unit cohesion, compared to the other South Vietnamese units.

Predictions If the Political Intervention Explanation Is Wrong: Disconfirming Evidence

- Regular ARVN units that proved cohesive or demonstrated tactical proficiency would cast doubt on the intervention explanation, because they would show that units could still be effective even in the face of worst practices.
- Instances in which the ARVN 1st Division, including the Hac Bao, failed to execute basic tactics or remain cohesive, would also disconfirm the intervention theory, because they would suggest that mixed practices in political intervention did not produce even basic improvements in battlefield effectiveness.

Predictions If the Alternative Explanations Are Right: Additional Disconfirming Evidence

- There should have been very little variation across units in the ARVN.
- There should have been very little cross-national variation between the performance of ARVN units and that of North Vietnam.

II. Political Intervention in the North Vietnamese Military and Its Predicted Impact on Battlefield Effectiveness

What policies did North Vietnam's political leaders adopt regarding the military's promotion patterns, training regimens, command arrangements, and information management? What kinds of outcomes should these policies have produced in terms of battlefield effectiveness, if the theory presented in Chapter 1 is correct? How do these predicted results differ from what we would expect to see if political intervention were irrelevant to explaining battlefield effectiveness, or if other variables were more important?

By and large, North Vietnamese leaders adopted what were identified in the first chapter as best practices in political intervention. They sought to maintain a very tight grip on the military, but the nature of their intervention differed substantially from that practiced in Saigon. Political loyalty certainly mattered for entry into and promotion within the PAVN officer corps, for example, but so did competence. Officers were chosen primarily on the basis of merit, and performing well in battle was a ticket to advancement. In further contrast to South Vietnam, North Vietnam put its soldiers through rigorous, realistic, and often highly specialized training regimens.

Furthermore, North Vietnamese political leaders structured command arrangements to devolve substantial authority to officers on the battlefield, despite the presence of political commissars. They also encouraged regular flows of information both horizontally and vertically within the military, and between the military and political authorities. As a result, overall North Vietnamese military performance should have been excellent or least very good. Units should have demonstrated consistently strong cohesion, tactical proficiency, and the ability to conduct complex operations. There should not have been dramatic variation in effectiveness across different combat units, of the type observed in the ARVN.

This section briefly reviews the basic history and structure of the North Vietnamese armed forces. Then it examines political intervention in the four areas of interest: promotions, training, command, and information. In each of these four areas the section describes the general policies that North Vietnam's leaders adopted. It concludes with

predictions about how the military should have performed in battle if the intervention theory is right or wrong, and if the other theories are right or wrong.

Background on North Vietnam and Its Military

Just as the struggle for independence left distinctive marks on the ARVN, so too did the PAVN bear an organizational imprint from events that had occurred prior to its formal establishment in 1955. The PAVN's origins lay in the 1930 formation of the Indochinese Communist Party, the first attempt to gather communists under one political banner in Vietnam.¹³⁴ The ICP publically disbanded in 1945 in an attempt to gain nationalist support through the Viet Minh Independence League, but it never actually dissolved, and it reformed in 1951 under a new name, the Vietnamese Workers Party, or the Dang Lao Dong.¹³⁵

The party was led by Ho Chi Minh and his coterie of trusted associates, including future PAVN generals Vo Nguyen Giap, Song Hao, Nguyen Chi Thanh, and Van Tien Dung. They continued to recognize the importance of mass mobilization in addition to party-building, and they formed or participated in several popular front organizations between 1930 and 1954, reflecting what one observer has called a strategy of “accommodation” during the process of state formation.¹³⁶ Gradually the true political aims of their efforts became clear, but the most recent histories convincingly demonstrate that it was only in the second half of the 1950s that the Ho and his followers overcame the “organizational anarchy” of the nationalist movement and asserted their own transformative vision of the new Vietnamese state.¹³⁷ It was during this time that “party leaders carried out a massive purge of their organizations and destroyed half of the party and state apparatuses from the provincial level down” in an effort to consolidate and centralize party control.¹³⁸

In December 1960, they also created the National Liberation Front (NLF) as a mass mobilization organization in the south. As had so often been the case since 1930, though, Hanoi continued to emphasize this organization's nationalist rather than purely communist agenda, seeking to build a big tent. In 1962, a communist party of South Vietnam also was formed, named the People's Revolutionary Party (PRP), but again its connection to Hanoi was not publicized. Most importantly, the NLF acquired its own armed forces, called the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF).¹³⁹

As with the NLF and the PRP, Hanoi strove to make the PLAF appear autonomous and indigenous to South Vietnam, when in fact it was tightly aligned with Hanoi.¹⁴⁰ In fact, at every level of the PLAF, “a Party control unit was implanted to direct the political activities of each unit and assure its compliance with Party directives.”¹⁴¹ Furthermore, although it is true that most of the early PLAF recruits were from the south, they were usually led by Northern regroupees who had infiltrated south. As historian William Duiker has noted, “Their numbers were no reflection of their importance, for they often served as political cadres or officers, providing an element of experience and ideological steadiness to the

¹³⁴ BDM Corporation, *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam, Vol. I: the Enemy* (BDM Corporation: McLean, VA, 1979), p. 3-36.

¹³⁵ Vu, *Paths to Development*, p. 112; and BDM Corporation, *Strategic Lessons*, p. 3-12.

¹³⁶ BDM Corporation, *Strategic Lessons*, pp. 3-13 to 3-15.

¹³⁷ Vu, *Paths to Development*, p. 135.

¹³⁸ Vu, *Paths to Development*, p. 135.

¹³⁹ BDM Corporation, *Strategic Lessons*, pp. 3-13 to 3-15, and p. 3-28.

¹⁴⁰ BDM Corporation, *Strategic Lessons*, p. 1-11.

¹⁴¹ BDM Corporation, *Strategic Lessons*, p. 1-11 and p. 3-29.

young and frequently untrained recruits in rural areas.”¹⁴² Northerners were in fact so influential in the PLAF that their dominance at times led to vocal complaints on the part of southerners in the NLF.¹⁴³ For this reason, PLAF units are included below in the analysis of North Vietnamese military effectiveness during the war, especially as they were responsible for the majority of fighting against South Vietnam during the period 1961-1965 and their command structures with the PAVN were increasingly unified after that.¹⁴⁴

Beginning in 1955, Hanoi sought to turn what had been its anti-French fighting organization into a modern regular army. Historian Douglas Pike notes that by this time, in fact, “the basic structure of the PAVN as a national armed force had been established. It remained only for the Party to ‘regularize’ it. Gradually control mechanisms were introduced and perfected, and PAVN became less and less united front, more and more Party.”¹⁴⁵ The PAVN formed its first six divisions in 1955 simply by re-designating units from the war against the French. Hence the 308th, 304th, 312th, 316th, 320th, and 235th were born, each with an authorized strength of about 8,700 troops. Each division included three infantry regiments, a composite artillery regiment, an engineer battalion, a signal battalion, a military medical battalion, and a truck transportation company.¹⁴⁶

Some of the experienced leaders from each of these new divisions then assisted in the formation of eight additional new PAVN divisions and five new independent infantry regiments. These included the 350th, 328th, the 332nd, the 305th, the 324th, 330th, 335th, and the 338th. Again, although officially these divisions were new, many contained entire companies, battalions, and even regiments that remained intact from the war against the French. The 324th, the 330th, and the 338th had particularly high numbers of veterans.¹⁴⁷

During 1954-5, the PAVN also established additional independent infantry regiments, three artillery divisions, an anti-aircraft division, four engineering regiments, three signal battalions, and two transportation regiments—again, largely by re-designating existing forces from the war with the French.¹⁴⁸ This effort brought the total number of divisions to eighteen, although only fourteen of these were infantry. Throughout the rest of the 1950s, Hanoi worked to standardize and modernize its army, seeking “to transform what was still a rather loosely led ‘people’s army’ into a centralized, hierarchically organized, conventional armed force.”¹⁴⁹

Like the ARVN, the PAVN actually comprised three different types of troops: highly mobile Main Force units; regional or local force units organized within particular geographical constraints, akin to a national guard or standing reserve; and militia/self defense forces, organized along very decentralized lines around villages or factories. By and

¹⁴² William Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1981), pp. 212-13. “Cadre” was essentially another word for “leader” and was considered to be any soldier or civilian with the rank of assistant squad leader or above. Melvin Gurtov, *The War in the Delta: Views from Three Viet Cong Battalions*, prepared for the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs and the Advanced Research Projects Agency, Memorandum RM-5353-1-ISA/ARPA (Santa Monica: RAND, September 1967), p. 37-8.

¹⁴³ Duiker, *Communist Road*, pp. 302-3.

¹⁴⁴ Brigham, “Why the South,” in *Why the North*, ed. Gilbert, pp. 107-8, 110-111.

¹⁴⁵ Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People’s Army of Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1986), p. 41.

¹⁴⁶ The Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: the Official History of the People’s Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975*, trans. Merle L. Pribbenow (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), p. 29 and pp. 10-11.

¹⁴⁷ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, pp. 10-11.

¹⁴⁸ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 12.

¹⁴⁹ William Turley, “The Vietnamese Army,” in *Communist Armies in Politics*, ed. Jonathan R. Adelman (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982), p. 71.

large, however, it was the Main Force units that fought in South Vietnam. For this reason, PAVN forces are generally classified as falling into two categories: regular military forces and paramilitary forces, with the Main Force being the former and everything else being the latter.¹⁵⁰

As Pike argues, “This division into two elements appears to be employed by PAVN generals themselves in their strategic thinking.”¹⁵¹ Regular military forces included the People’s Army, by far its largest component, as well as a People’s Navy and People’s Air Force, which lacked independent service status. Among the Paramilitary Forces were the People’s Regional Force at the provincial level; the People’s Self-Defense Force in the cities, and People’s Militia in rural district areas; the Armed Youth Assault Force; and additional reserves.¹⁵²

Again, however, because these latter forces largely stayed in North Vietnam, the primary PAVN forces of interest were the so-called regular forces, or the Main Force units. Unlike South Vietnam’s provincial and local forces, North Vietnam’s homeland defense troops had little ability to participate directly in the war because of their location. So while it makes sense to “count” such forces in the calculation of South Vietnam’s manpower during the war, it makes less sense to do so for North Vietnam.

According to the PAVN’s own history, by 1960 it had a Main Force troop strength of 160,000 soldiers. This number grew to 204,000 in 1966, to 278,000 in 1967, and considerably higher by the end of the war in 1975, by which time many of the divisions had been organized into corps-level formations.¹⁵³ Below is a table showing the various sizes of PLAF and PAVN forces over time. It bears noting that South Vietnam and North Vietnam were roughly evenly matched at the start of the war, but South Vietnamese forces quickly outstripped the North in terms of numbers.

[SEE NEXT PAGE]

¹⁵⁰ Pike, *PAVN*, pp. 90-91.

¹⁵¹ Pike, *PAVN*, p. 91.

¹⁵² Pike, *PAVN*, p. 92.

¹⁵³ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, pp. 32, 211, 431. Pike reports that the PAVN had grown to 25 divisions by 1975. Pike, *PAVN*, p. 103.

ESTIMATED GROWTH OF NORTH VIETNAMESE FORCES, 1960-1968			
	1960	1964	1968
PLAF Main Force	Negligible ¹⁵⁴	At least 27,000 ¹⁵⁵	125,000 ¹⁵⁶
PLAF Guerrillas and Irregulars	15,000 ¹⁵⁷	At least 115,000 ¹⁵⁸	115,000 ¹⁵⁹
PLAF Total	15,000¹⁶⁰	221,000¹⁶¹	240,000¹⁶²
PAVN Main Force	160,000 ¹⁶³	At least 200,000 ¹⁶⁴	278,000 ¹⁶⁵
TOTAL NORTHERN FORCES: PLAF and PAVN available for combat in South Vietnam	175,000	421,000	518,000
PAVN Total including additional Paramilitary Forces in the North	200,000 ¹⁶⁶	300,000 ¹⁶⁷	700,000 ¹⁶⁸

Almost any North Vietnamese force, whether from the PLAF or PAVN, Main Force or otherwise, was at times referred to by the contraction “Viet Cong,” reflecting recurring confusion on the part of the ARVN and the U.S. Army regarding which forces they were facing.¹⁶⁹ This analysis avoids such terminology where possible (instead generally using the term PLAF prior to 1965 and PAVN afterwards), both because “Viet Cong” was intended to be derogatory and because it is short for Viet Cong-san, meaning Viet Communist, when in fact not all NLF members participating in the PLAF would necessarily have called themselves communist.¹⁷⁰ Ultimately, for purposes of this analysis, the distinction is not essential. All of these military organizations were subject to similar forms of political intervention from Hanoi and therefore should have displayed very little if any divergence in fighting capabilities.

¹⁵⁴ Duiker, *Communist Road*, p. 228.

¹⁵⁵ This estimate is calculated based on Duiker’s claim that there were 30-45 PLAF Main Force battalions by this time, and Lanning and Cragg’s estimate that the average battalion had 450-600 soldiers. If there were 45 battalions with 600 soldiers each, that would be 27,000 men. I chose the high estimate because Duiker also reports that total PLAF numbered 221,000 by the end of 1965, and only 115,000 of them were irregular or guerrilla units in 1964, suggesting that the PLAF Main Force units were growing rapidly during this period. Duiker, *Communist Road*, p. 246; and Lanning and Cragg, *Inside the VC*, p. 83.

¹⁵⁶ Duiker, *Communist Road*, p. 303.

¹⁵⁷ Duiker, *Communist Road*, p. 228.

¹⁵⁸ Duiker, *Communist Road*, p. 246.

¹⁵⁹ This figure carries forward the number for 1964, since no separate figure was available for 1968. It may somewhat high, but it generates a total number of PLAF forces (240,000) that is only slightly above what Duiker reports as the total number for 1965 (221,000), so it is probably not far off. Duiker, *Communist Road*, p. 246.

¹⁶⁰ Duiker, *Communist Road*, p. 228.

¹⁶¹ This estimate is actually for 1965. Duiker, *Communist Road*, p. 260.

¹⁶² Estimate computed by adding the two figures above it.

¹⁶³ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 32.

¹⁶⁴ This estimate is based on the PAVN claim that its forces were expanding rapidly during this period, reaching 204,000 by 1966. Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 211.

¹⁶⁵ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 211.

¹⁶⁶ Pike, *PAVN*, p. 41.

¹⁶⁷ PAVN gives this figure for 1963. Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 431.

¹⁶⁸ PAVN gives this figure for 1966. Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 431.

¹⁶⁹ Turley, “The Vietnamese Army,” in *Communist Armies*, ed. Adelman, p. 81; and Herring, *America’s Longest War*, p. 82.

¹⁷⁰ Brigham, “Why the South,” in *Why the North*, ed. Gilbert, p. 115, fn 44.

Indeed, throughout all of these efforts, the one theme sounded explicitly and unceasingly was the need for the party to main absolute, direct, and complete control over the armed forces.¹⁷¹ As General Giap wrote in a very typical 1961 proclamation, “The most fundamental principle in the building of our army is to put it under the Party’s leadership, *to ceaselessly strengthen the Party’s leadership* of the army. The Party is the founder, organizer, and education of the army” [emphasis in original].¹⁷²

North Vietnamese leaders viewed the PAVN as inherently politicized and war itself as inherently political.¹⁷³ As one official put it, “The Party Committee is unable to accomplish professional and technical [military] tasks, but these tasks cannot be effectively performed [by the military] unless they are directed and guided by a political brain.”¹⁷⁴ In other words, conquering South Vietnam required a modern army, but this army had to be subject to thorough and ever-present political intervention. As this same official noted in his journal, most likely after attending a training conference in the South, “The leadership of the Party over the armed forces should... be absolute, direct, and complete.”¹⁷⁵

His was far from an isolated viewpoint. As one senior PAVN general explained in 1959, “The Army must absolutely obey and accept the tight control of the Central Committee headed by Comrade Ho Chi Minh, and correctly carry out all policies of the Party.”¹⁷⁶ Close party leadership was, according to this view, central to fighting effectiveness. “It has been proven,” the general argued, “that those units that have a good Party Committee leadership have a sounder ideology, better discipline, a more positive attitude, and consequently their fighting and building achievements are bigger.”¹⁷⁷

The subordination of the military to political leaders was, quite literally, the party line, one whose repetition reflected its widespread acceptance. William Turley, one of the foremost experts on the PAVN, goes so far as to describe this emphasis on political control of the military as part of an “unshakeable consensus” in North Vietnam. Although party leaders and military officers at times debated the best way to implement party control, the principle itself was never questioned, making coups virtually a non-issue for North Vietnamese leaders.¹⁷⁸

Indeed, Turley argues that “Party leaders had little need to worry about the loyalty of the military leadership, as this leadership was drawn from the top ranks of the party.”¹⁷⁹ In his view, “the distinction between military and civilian roles before 1945 was extremely

¹⁷¹ For a representative example, see “Political Achievements Within the Armed Forces to Be Perpetuated,” translation of article by Tu Van Vien in *Hoc Tap*, no. 12, December 1964, p. 39, available through the Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, document number 2321310012.

¹⁷² General Vo Nguyen Giap, *People’s War, People’s Army* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), p. 129.

¹⁷³ Pike, *PAVN*, chapter 1; and BDM Corporation, *Strategic Lessons*, p. 3-20.

¹⁷⁴ Muoi Khan, “Notebook II: Notes Taken by Muoi Khan: Some Matters Pertaining to Organization and Working Methods for Strengthening the Leadership of the Party over the Troops and the Armed Forces,” contained in *Vietnam: Documents and Research Notes*, Document No. 34, produced by the United States Mission in Vietnam, May 1968, p. 10, available through the Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, document number 4080316008.

¹⁷⁵ Khan, “Notebook II,” p. 3.

¹⁷⁶ General Nguyen Chi Thanh, quoted in Khan, “Notebook II,” p. 4.

¹⁷⁷ Thanh, quoted in Khan, “Notebook II,” p. 7.

¹⁷⁸ William S. Turley, “Civil-Military Relations in North Vietnam,” *Asian Survey*, vol. 9, no. 12 (December 1969), p. 880.

¹⁷⁹ Turley, “The Vietnamese Army,” in *Communist Armies*, ed. Adelman, p. 63.

blurred, if it can be said to have existed at all.”¹⁸⁰ Unlike some revolutionary regimes, the Vietnamese did not inherit a military organization of questionable loyalty; rather, they built their organization and its associated military forces essentially from scratch. According to Turley, “The Vietnamese did create a party organization within the armed forces and appointed political officers in accordance with established Communist procedure. . . . But this political apparatus was created primarily for the purpose of indoctrinating peasant recruits and for recruiting new party members, not for guaranteeing the loyalty of military commanders.”¹⁸¹

After the August Revolution of 1945, the massive expansion of the military required for the struggle against the French necessitated the elevation of non-communist officers. To be sure, this development led Ho and his followers to seek close political supervision of their new comrades. “A decision was made,” according to Turley, “to strengthen the party and political work system in the army and to insist on the countersignature of military orders by political officers.”¹⁸² But even this measure was implemented only sporadically until the late 1940s due to the sheer shortage of political officers relative to the size of the armed forces.¹⁸³ In what would become a pattern, Hanoi clearly preferred officers with communist credentials but was willing to bend considerably on this point when it conflicted with the goal of expansion.

After 1955, North Vietnamese leaders developed a more institutionalized system of controls over the military. By this time there did exist a set of non-party, state institutions such as the National Assembly, Ministry of Defense and National Defense Council, but all real authority after 1955 rested with the eleven-member Politburo. The Politburo, in turn, acted on the advice of the party’s Central Committee, led by Party President Ho Chi Minh and his second-in-command (and successor after 1969) Secretary General Le Duan.¹⁸⁴

The Central Military Party Committee (CMPC) then served as the key intermediary between these political institutions and the Military High Command.¹⁸⁵ The Military High Command oversaw five Military Directorates, the most important of which by far was the Military General Staff Directorate, analogous to the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. Pike describes this General Staff as “the nerve center of the army, the most important military agency in the armed forces” of North Vietnam.¹⁸⁶ Of the other four Military General Directorates, the most important was the General Political Directorate, which worked most directly to implement guidance from the CMPC through the activities of party committees, attached to all subordinate levels of the military command.¹⁸⁷

The Central Committee also directed efforts in South Vietnam through the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), which maintained a direct command link to the Politburo in the North.¹⁸⁸ Established in 1951, the COSVN supposedly answered to its own political party, the PRP, in South Vietnam, but much of this seems to have been a fiction designed to perpetrate the myth of non-involvement by Hanoi. As a COSVN defector stated

¹⁸⁰ Turley, “The Vietnamese Army,” in *Communist Armies*, ed. Adelman, p. 68.

¹⁸¹ Turley, “The Vietnamese Army,” in *Communist Armies*, ed. Adelman, p. 68.

¹⁸² Turley, “The Vietnamese Army,” in *Communist Armies*, ed. Adelman, p. 68.

¹⁸³ Turley, “The Vietnamese Army,” in *Communist Armies*, ed. Adelman, p. 68.

¹⁸⁴ BDM Corporation, *Strategic Lessons*, p. 3-17; and Pike, *PAVN*, p. 91.

¹⁸⁵ BDM Corporation, *Strategic Lessons*, p. 3-20.

¹⁸⁶ Pike, *PAVN*, p. 95.

¹⁸⁷ Pike, *PAVN*, p. 95; and BDM Corporation, *Strategic Lessons*, p. 3-22.

¹⁸⁸ BDM Corporation, *Strategic Lessons*, p. 3-26; and Brigham, “Why the South,” in *Why the North*, ed. Gilbert, p. 108.

in 1968, “There is no such organization as a PRP with a Central Committee, a Standing Committee, etc., this organization exists only in name.”¹⁸⁹

In fact, despite all the apparent complexity and dissembling, the nature of North Vietnamese political intervention in the armed forces was in some sense remarkably simple and stable. As Pike observed:

In actual practice this ‘highest level’ High Command arrangement is not as complicated as it might appear since single individuals hold more than one position at the same time, some holding as many as six. Thus, both policy determination and operational authority is vested in perhaps a dozen individuals who, among themselves, hold complete and unchallengeable control of the Vietnamese armed forces.¹⁹⁰

For example, Giap, easily the most famous communist general of the war, actually held six different positions within the DRV government: he was simultaneously a member of the Politburo Central Committee; DRV vice prime minister; deputy chairman of the DRV National Defense Council; secretary of the Central Military Party Committee; DRV Minister of National Defense; and Commander in Chief of PAVN.¹⁹¹

These sorts of dual political and military roles were common among senior generals in the PAVN, leading Turley to conclude that “leaders of the central command are not military leaders so much as they are uniformed party leaders of the military.”¹⁹² Not only was the PAVN leadership remarkably stable, but so was the Politburo, whose membership underwent only two changes during the period 1946-1975, necessitated by the deaths of Ho Chi Minh and General Nguyen Chi Thanh.¹⁹³ To summarize, North Vietnam’s political leaders actively, consistently, and frequently intervened in their armed forces, but the nature of this intervention differed considerably from the forms employed in South Vietnam.

1. Promotion patterns

Political leaders clearly intervened in the promotion patterns of the PAVN and PLAF, but in a manner entirely consistent with best practices. Merit remained the foremost criterion for advancement among the enlisted men and the officer corps. It was not enough simply to be a party member or of the right social class; those who wished to advance in the army had to demonstrate actual military competence. Furthermore, when these two imperatives clashed, considerations of military skill usually trumped loyalty as key driver of personnel decisions within the PAVN and the PLAF.

To be sure, being a party member guaranteed “at least some career success for a soldier,” while expulsion from the party was “the certain road to career oblivion.”¹⁹⁴ But it is important to note that party membership seems to have been a necessary but not sufficient condition for leadership at the company level and above.¹⁹⁵ Although full party membership was hard to obtain, basic party membership was widespread. For example, youths aged 16-25 who had joined Labor Youth Groups to receive political education and indoctrination

¹⁸⁹ BDM Corporation, *Strategic Lessons*, p. 3-28; and Pike, *PAVN*, p. 100.

¹⁹⁰ Pike, *PAVN*, p. 91.

¹⁹¹ Pike, *PAVN*, p. 119.

¹⁹² William S. Turley, “Origins and Development of Communist Military Leadership in Vietnam,” *Armed Forces and Society*, vol. 3, no. 2 (February 1977), pp. 224-5.

¹⁹³ BDM Corporation, *Strategic Lessons*, pp. 2-3 – 2-4.

¹⁹⁴ Pike, *PAVN*, p. 157.

¹⁹⁵ Lanning and Cragg, *Inside the VC*, p. 91.

were considered “party members.” In some PAVN units, 90 percent of the soldiers were party members, many of them relying on their participation in Labor Youth Groups to qualify for this status.¹⁹⁶ As such, the role of party membership in the promotion process should not be overstated.

Furthermore, internal debates about the qualifications for officership repeatedly stressed the need for proven military expertise in addition to political loyalty. For example, General Song Hao, one of the most senior generals of the PAVN, wrote that “our Party has attached importance not only to leading our Army in building itself politically, ideologically, and organizationally, but also in leading the formulation and development of our military art.”¹⁹⁷ He noted that the best officers were always “men with revolutionary consciousness” as well as “scientific and technical capacity.”¹⁹⁸ A similar view apparently filtered all the way down to a captured North Vietnamese platoon leader, who noted that a good officer had to have both “talent and virtue”: the talent to fight the war competently, in addition to the virtues of a correct temperament.¹⁹⁹ Political loyalty was considered important not because it would help prevent a military coup against the regime, but because it was believed to improve the fighting spirit of the soldiers.²⁰⁰ Indeed, Pike notes that the “PAVN has always accepted its role and deferred to the Party, more so than in other communist countries.”²⁰¹

Despite this ideal, considerable evidence suggests that when push came to shove, military merit took precedence over communist bona fides in the selection of leaders within the PAVN and the PLAF. As mentioned, this pattern was set early, when the demands of the Viet Minh war created a “need for commanders with high levels of military competency who knew strategy and tactics and could win battles.”²⁰² The trend intensified after 1955, when the need to grow the army was so great that there was active promotion of “cadre from other classes who have been tested and have demonstrated a progressive attitude and loyalty to the revolution.”²⁰³

Known as the “red vs. expert” debate, internal North Vietnamese discussions about the appropriate qualifications for officers continued well into the 1960s, but Pike concludes that the debate was essentially “settled in favor of the expert.”²⁰⁴ Although political commissars remained attached to virtually all units (as will be discussed in more detail below), these officials were subordinate to military commanders when it came to combat decision-making.²⁰⁵ Particularly as the Vietnam War escalated, PAVN POWs and defectors “indicated either that the military commander was unquestionably supreme or that an uneasy division of labor and authority had been worked out between the two in which the Political Commissar carefully kept out of combat decision making.”²⁰⁶ These reports again attest to

¹⁹⁶ Lanning and Cragg, *Inside the VC*, p. 91.

¹⁹⁷ Lieutenant General Song Hao, “Party Leadership Is the Cause of the Growth and Victories of Our Army,” Document No. 72, Vietnam Documents and Research Notes, January 1970, p. 24, available through the Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, document number 4080319006

¹⁹⁸ Hao, “Party Leadership,” p. 32.

¹⁹⁹ Quoted in Lanning and Cragg, *Inside the VC*, p. 91.

²⁰⁰ “Political Achievements Within the Armed Forces to Be Perpetuated,” translation of article by Tu Van Vien in *Hoc Tap*, no. 12, December 1964, p. 44, available through the Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, document number 2321310012

²⁰¹ Pike, *PAVN*, p. 149.

²⁰² Pike, *PAVN*, p. 167.

²⁰³ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 35.

²⁰⁴ Pike, *PAVN*, p. 21.

²⁰⁵ Khan, “Notebook II,” p. 9.

²⁰⁶ Pike, *PAVN*, p. 167.

the importance of military competence rather than just political loyalty in the selection of combat leaders.

In general, leadership in the PAVN and PLAF were described as excellent and the cornerstone of cohesion in the North Vietnamese armed forces—a major point of contrast with the ARVN.²⁰⁷ The party directly intervened in “selecting, assigning, and promoting personnel,” but did so based on criteria consistent with best practices.²⁰⁸

2. *Training regimens*

Training in the PAVN and PLAF also contrasted sharply with the forms used in the ARVN. While North Vietnamese training certainly included political indoctrination, leaders there were most interested in instilling actual military skills in their soldiers. Political leaders in North Vietnam actively directed the development of a rigorous, realistic, and frequent combat training system at both the small- and large-unit levels. They also saw to the development of numerous forms of specialized training and pushed for new training methods in response to lessons learned on the battlefield. Proven and experienced officers were put in command of the training system, which generally provided a very challenging course for soldiers. In short, the PAVN and PLAF largely adopted best practices with regard to training, notwithstanding the additional emphasis on political indoctrination.

To be sure, DRV leaders heavily emphasized the importance of instilling communist ideology in soldiers. In 1961, for example, General Giap noted, “The People’s Army must necessarily see to the strengthening of the leadership of Party and political work.... The Party has during the last two years, given a prominent place to the activities of its organizations as well as to the political work in the army. Officers, warrant officers and armymen, all of them have followed political courses....”²⁰⁹ A later Communist history of the period also reported that starting in the 1950s:

Basic subjects in Marxist-Leninist theory..., Party history, Party building, and political activities within the army were all developed into systematic programs of study at the army’s schools and institutes, and study documents on these subjects were prepared for on-the-job training of cadre and soldiers. Political activities during training and during combat were subjects taught at basic and supplementary training schools for both military and political cadre. With a regular and rather systematic program of education in Marxist-Leninist theory and in the major aspects of the political and military policies of the Party, the level of political awareness and the ideological methods of the cadre and soldiers of our armed forces were improved to a significant extent.²¹⁰

Nevertheless, these same sources harp on the high priority attached to actual military training. For example, Giap was well aware that ideological training alone was of little use in the army: “It is necessary to carry out regular training systematically and according to plan,” he wrote. “To meet the requirements of modern war, the army must be trained to master modern techniques, tactical use of arms, coordinated tactics and modern military service.”²¹¹

²⁰⁷ Lanning and Cragg, *Inside the VC*, p. 90; and William Daryl Henderson, *Cohesion: the Human Element in Combat* (Washington, DC: NDU, 1985), p. 29.

²⁰⁸ Pike, *PAVN*, p. 159.

²⁰⁹ Giap, *People’s War*, p. 59.

²¹⁰ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 99.

²¹¹ Giap, *People’s War*, p. 138.

North Vietnam's own post-war history confirms this attitude, noting that "the Central Committee of the Party advocated the development of a strong standing army of high quality," which required five-year army plans with a heavy emphasis on training in military subjects, including the training of technical personnel.²¹²

The history goes on to report that as soon as the war with the French was over, the Party Central Committee had "clearly stated that training was the central requirement for the completion of the work of building an army in peacetime."²¹³ The history discusses in considerable detail the manner in which "training activities systematically began to turn the army into a regular force."²¹⁴ According to the history,

Soldiers studied weapons theory and were trained in shooting techniques, the use of bayonets, grenade throwing, and breaching and overcoming obstacles. In addition to basic weapons training, practice fire and night firing lessons were incorporated into the training program. Training in physical fitness and sports was considered a part of the technical training program. With regard to tactics, all units were trained from the squad up to the battalion level in offensive and defensive combat in regular terrain, and steps were taken to study and begin training in combat methods for use in mountain jungle terrain, in swampy rice fields, in river crossings, and night combat operations.²¹⁵

Furthermore, military training almost always trumped political training when soldiers' time was limited.²¹⁶ According to Turley, the senior officer corps recognized by the late 1950s "that more attention to professional and technical training, instead of political activities, was necessary. . . . Time spent on training in military subjects increased and time spent on political subjects declined."²¹⁷ During this period, "The General Staff and the military regional and divisional headquarters also held many short-term classes, providing supplemental training to company and battalion-level cadre and supplying basic training lessons and training methods for technical affairs and tactics at the subunit level. Training sites suited to the terrain and to unit training programs were constructed in areas where troops were stationed."²¹⁸

By the early 1960s, according to North Vietnam's official history, "the school system of the armed forces was strengthened and expanded. In North Vietnam there were two study institutes, eight officers training schools, one basic education school, and five military-political schools at the military region level." The party also directed the establishment of military training schools in South Vietnam under the control of the COSVN and dedicated to training company, platoon, and squad leaders.²¹⁹ According to another history, the average soldier now received three months of initial training in infantry tactics, including infantry

²¹² Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 22-3.

²¹³ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 39.

²¹⁴ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 39.

²¹⁵ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 39.

²¹⁶ This policy was not without its detractors. The debate over whether to emphasize political indoctrination or modern tactics in training was vociferous in the mid-1950s, with General Giap seeking to focus on the latter and Truong Chinh, Secretary General of the Party until 1956, believing the former was more important. Giap won this argument. Turley, "Civil-Military Relations," p. 882.

²¹⁷ Turley, "The Vietnamese Army," in *Communist Armies*, ed. Adelman, p. 72.

²¹⁸ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 14.

²¹⁹ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 100.

assault, basic air defense, using the bayonet and grenades, marksmanship, and movement, with only about two weeks of that time devoted to political subjects.²²⁰

Melvin Gurtov, a civilian researcher who conducted extensive interviews with former members of VC Main Force battalions during the 1960s, drew a similar conclusion about the importance of combat skills in the training process, noting that “in theory, the Viet Cong believed that political and military training should be given equal consideration, but in practice, military training received more emphasis.”²²¹ Gurtov’s interview subjects reported that “for the most part, military training took precedence even though political doctrine might, under less pressing circumstances, have seemed indispensable.”²²² While cautious about drawing over-broad conclusions from his limited sample, Gurtov wrote, “What does seem fairly certain is that political training for most of the units in question was subordinated to military training.... Indoctrination yielded to establishing battlefield proficiency among new recruits. The priority given to war skills was reflected in the ignorance of interviewees, including cadres, about political matters.”²²³

North Vietnam’s training system was also highly rigorous, heavily emphasizing the demonstration of actual proficiency rather than rote learning or pro forma drills.²²⁴ Captured documents for a training program “reveal a well-organized and ambitious schedule” focused on “close-order drill, firing positions, bayonet drill, and grenade throwing,” as well as “use and maintenance of weapons, ... fortifications and camouflage; movement procedures; individual, cell, and squad tactics; sanitation; protective measures against toxic chemicals; military discipline; guard and patrol duty; liaison; reconnaissance; and POW escort,” and “marksmanship and weapon familiarization, techniques of armored vehicle destruction, ambush tactics, surprise attack, anti-heliborne or paratroop tactics.”²²⁵ The Communists also developed longer-term and more specialized training for operators of crew-served weapons, signals operators, communications specialists, sappers, and so on.²²⁶

Once in the field, soldiers could also expect further on-the-job training and careful practice of imminent operations. One history notes that “rehearsals for [an] operation began on sand tables and progressed to practices on stake-and-string replicas of the target. Depending upon the difficulty of the objective, this phase lasted from three days to well over a month.”²²⁷ Another soldier reported, “Before any operation a few among us would be sent out to make a study and survey of the battlefield, and then a plan of operation would be drawn up and presented to all the men in the unit. Each would then be given a chance to contribute ideas and suggestions. Each squad, each man, would be told what action to take if the enemy was to take such-and-such a position.”²²⁸

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, training advanced to cover more complex operations. For example, troops progressed from learning positional to mobile defenses,

²²⁰ Lanning and Cragg, *Inside the VC*, p. 41.

²²¹ Lanning and Cragg, *Inside the VC*, p. 55.

²²² Gurtov, *War in the Delta*, p. 18.

²²³ This conclusion could reflect some selection bias, in that the least politically indoctrinated soldiers might have been the most likely to defect and therefore to end up speaking with Gurtov. Nevertheless, his conclusions are consistent with evidence from Northern leaders’ own discussion of their training curriculum, cited above. Gurtov, *War in the Delta*, p. 21.

²²⁴ Lanning and Cragg, *Inside the VC*, p. 42.

²²⁵ Lanning and Cragg, *Inside the VC*, p. 54.

²²⁶ Lanning and Cragg, *Inside the VC*, p. 55.

²²⁷ Lanning and Cragg, *Inside the VC*, p. 181.

²²⁸ Quoted in Henderson, *Cohesion*, p. 29.

coordinated with combined arms counterattacks.²²⁹ Troops also began to learn envelopment and flanking maneuvers and to fight on different types of terrain both offensively and defensively.²³⁰ The North Vietnamese ensured realism in training by conducting regular exercises at all levels of command, across different combat arms, and on the offense and defense.²³¹ As their history notes, “The phrase ‘sweat on the exercise field to lessen bloodshed on the battlefield’ became a slogan in our army.”²³² It was not unusual for Ho Chi Minh himself to attend live fire exercises.²³³

Furthermore, North Vietnam put many of its best and most experienced officers in charge of training and exercises.²³⁴ These leaders based the development, execution, and adjustment of their battlefield preparation plans on lessons learned from the war against the French and experience the North Vietnamese were acquiring in South Vietnam and Laos.²³⁵ As the war went on, they also periodically re-drafted training regulations to reflect new information learned in the field and further analysis of the lessons of past military experience.²³⁶ Clearly, North Vietnam followed best practices with respect to training, in a sharp contrast to the forms of intervention used by South Vietnamese leaders in this area of military activity.

3. *Command arrangements*

North Vietnamese command arrangements also hewed closely to best practices, emphasizing the authority of officers on the battlefield. To be sure, party control of the military’s command structure was an “immutable principle,” and even small units always contained some type of political officer.²³⁷ But these officers usually lacked actual command authority, which was entrusted to officers selected on the basis of military competence.

As early as the 1930s, “the Party stipulated that all units from squad level up must have a Communist Party representative on the command.”²³⁸ This system arose because of the ever-present North Vietnamese worry that participation in a united front organization left the armed forces vulnerable to usurpation by non-communist revolutionary movements.²³⁹ This concern intensified during the war against the French, when there simply were not enough party members to fill all leadership positions, and “large numbers of officers with only military competence began filling PAVN officer ranks.” As a result, in 1952 party leaders instituted what was known as the “two-commander system,” essentially requiring that political officers down to the platoon level sign off on all orders.²⁴⁰

Pike reports that this system resulted in significant friction within units and that during the early 1960s, “the struggle for power between these two figures seesawed back and forth.” However, as the Vietnam War escalated, the balance of power “tilted toward the military commander,” and political officers were careful from then on not to interfere with

²²⁹ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, pp. 39-42.

²³⁰ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, pp. 104, 106.

²³¹ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 39.

²³² Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 105.

²³³ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, pp. 39, 185.

²³⁴ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, pp. 79, 84.

²³⁵ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 100.

²³⁶ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 102.

²³⁷ Pike, *PAVN*, p. 147.

²³⁸ Pike, *PAVN*, p. 147.

²³⁹ Pike, *PAVN*, p. 147.

²⁴⁰ Pike, *PAVN*, p. 159.

combat decision-making.²⁴¹ Captured documents attest to this arrangement, with one officer reporting that “in the military and administrative fields, [the political commissar] is subordinate to the military commander” at his same level of command.²⁴² In short, despite the formal existence of a dual-command system, in reality the military commander selected on the basis of military qualifications made the key combat decisions in the PAVN and PLAF.

The arrangement was not perfect, of course, with one officer admitting that

in certain places and at certain time [sic], differences exist in the understanding of military missions and working procedures.... In other places, the working procedures are not appropriate. The Party Committee dedicates too much attention to military affairs, discussing and deciding too many matters without allowing the military agencies to develop their functions, or the Party Committee leaves all military affairs to the military agencies without giving them due attention. Often the working procedures and behavior of Party Committee members differ from those of the military commanders. Discrepancies may develop.... In some places, important matters and deficiencies go unnoticed. A thorough understanding does not develop between Party Committee members and military commanders.²⁴³

Similarly, Pike notes that there were “occasional bouts of open confrontation” within the dual-command system, “including a few reliable reports of battlefield disputes in which the military commander shot his Political Commissar.”²⁴⁴

Clearly, the party’s desire to maintain political officers in all units sometimes clashed with military imperatives. Even as late as 1974, an article by General Le Quang Dao, PAVN’s chief political commissar, indicated that the army still had to deal with “the problem developing out of the dual control system existent within PAVN, the military command structure vs. the Party leadership within the armed forces, the military commander vs. the political commissar.”²⁴⁵ Furthermore, the dual control system was officially abolished after the war, suggesting that North Vietnamese leaders believed it had more problems than virtues.²⁴⁶

Still, the system afforded considerable latitude to most battlefield commanders in the PAVN and the PLAF. They had to report their activities to political officers and be accountable for them, but political officers did not enjoy a veto over these decisions.²⁴⁷ Indeed, it is important to understand that although political officers existed in almost all units, their role was not solely to maintain political loyalty but also to fill the roles served in Western armies by the chaplain, the troop information and education officer, or the special services officer. Pike notes that “in PAVN and PLAF units in the South [the political officer’s] duties were many and varied but chiefly involved political indoctrination, personal

²⁴¹ Pike, *PAVN*, p. 167.

²⁴² Khan, “Notebook II,” p. 9.

²⁴³ Khan, “Notebook II,” p. 15.

²⁴⁴ Pike, *PAVN*, p. 167.

²⁴⁵ Douglas Pike notes, “Problems of the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN), May 1974, p. 1, available through the Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, document number 2122905006.

²⁴⁶ Pike, *PAVN*, pp. 159-60, 166.

²⁴⁷ Khan, “Notebook II,” p. 10-11.

problem solving, and generally attending to his unit's morale."²⁴⁸ While no less politicized or interventionist, this system again contrasts with that of South Vietnam.

4. Information management

In general, North Vietnam seems to have adopted best practices with regard to information management. First, PAVN and PLAF units seem to have been free to communicate horizontally with one another. The North Vietnamese history notes that the CMPC emphasized to its tactical commanders that they needed to "exercise independence in battle, take the initiative in cooperating with and supporting friendly units, [and] maintain close coordination."²⁴⁹

Second, within individual units, North Vietnamese political leaders also required extensive use of what were called "self-criticism sessions," that is, meetings in which personnel discussed recent performance and areas in need of improvement. Such sessions ensured that soldiers and officers shared feedback from battlefield experiences. They also reassured soldiers that problems were being aired and addressed, strengthening their commitment to the fight, while nevertheless reinforcing the politically convenient implication that military leaders were, in fact, fallible.²⁵⁰ Over and over, North Vietnamese documents reflect a military in which political leaders encouraged candid discussion of weaknesses and ideas for improvement; there was no prize for hiding problems or punishment for delivering unfavorable information.²⁵¹

Beyond the self-criticism sessions, there is also significant evidence of active debate in the North Vietnamese officer corps about military strategy and tactics. During the mid-to-late 1960s, for example, Giap thought efforts to fight the United States directly were wasteful and that Hanoi should return to a slow and protracted guerrilla war, even if it took 15-20 years to win. Some officers published articles agreeing with Giap, while the commander in the south at the time, General Nguyen Chi Thanh, continued to defend a much more aggressive offensive strategy.²⁵² The key point is that this was the sort of debate that did not regularly occur within the South Vietnamese officer corps.²⁵³

Also consistent with best practices in information management, North Vietnamese political leaders seem to have regularly gathered information about battlefield events. Their history notes the existence of a reporting system by which commanders informed the CMPC, and in turn the Central Committee and the Politburo, of battlefield events.²⁵⁴ Furthermore, there are repeated references to Ho Chi Minh receiving a steady stream of candid information about the war. The Communist history claims that Ho "regularly monitored the activities of our units on the battlefields"²⁵⁵ and that "every day Uncle Ho

²⁴⁸ Pike, *PAVN*, p. 164.

²⁴⁹ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 103.

²⁵⁰ Pike, *PAVN*, p. 153-5; and Lanning and Cragg, *Inside the VC*, p. 85-6.

²⁵¹ For example, "Report on Political and Ideological Situation," Document No. 19, Vietnam Documents and Research Notes, November 19, 1967, pp. 5-6, available through the Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, document number 2120908016; and Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 113.

²⁵² Duiker, *Communist Road*, p. 250; Duiker, "Victory by Other Means," in *Why the North*, ed. Gilbert, p. 66; and Brigham, "Why the South," in *Why the North*, ed. Gilbert, pp. 110-1.

²⁵³ Duiker, *Communist Road*, p. 254-5.

²⁵⁴ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 173.

²⁵⁵ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 437.

received a briefing, either in person or by telephone, from the Combat Operations Department on the combat situation in both North and South Vietnam.”²⁵⁶

Information also seems to have flowed in the other direction. From the beginning, high-level officer training in the PAVN involved reading directly from Politburo resolutions on the army.²⁵⁷ COSVN leaders also annually “attended a Politburo meeting in Hanoi to consult with Party leaders and receive directions for future strategy in the South.”²⁵⁸ Again, while not especially detailed, these facts are at least consistent with best practices in information management, posing a stark contrast to the constriction of information seen in South Vietnam.

Predictions If the Political Intervention Explanation Is Right: Confirming Evidence

- PAVN and PLAF units should have performed very well, consistently displaying good cohesion, tactical proficiency, and the ability to conduct complex operations, due to the adoption of best practices in political intervention.

Predictions If the Political Intervention Explanation Is Wrong: Disconfirming Evidence

- PAVN and PLAF units that demonstrated poor unit cohesion, a lack of tactical proficiency, and/or an inability to conduct complex operations would cast doubt on the intervention theory, because they would constitute instances of poor battlefield performance even in the face of best practices.

Predictions If the Alternative Explanations Are Right: Additional Disconfirming Evidence

- There should have been very little cross-national variation between the performance of PAVN/PLAF units and those of South Vietnam, if political intervention is irrelevant to battlefield performance.

IV. Conclusion: Summary and Initial Implications

This chapter has contrasted the nature of political intervention in the militaries of North and South Vietnam in order to generate predictions about how the two states should have performed in battle. The general argument is that despite the fact that North and South Vietnam shared many common characteristics said to matter for military performance, political leaders in the two states adopted radically different forms of political intervention in the armed forces.

In both states, political leaders frequently intervened in military activities related to promotion patterns, training regimens, command arrangements, and information management. These activities were unquestionably “politicized.” But the forms of this politicization and intervention varied dramatically between the two regimes, and even varied considerably across different units of the South Vietnamese military. North Vietnamese leaders generally adopted best practices in their forms of intervention, while South Vietnamese leaders adopted worst practices toward most units, with the exception of the ARVN 1st Division.

²⁵⁶ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 187.

²⁵⁷ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 25.

²⁵⁸ Duiker, *Communist Road*, p. 230.

As a result, the intervention theory predicts that there should have been substantial cross-national variation in the military performance of North and South Vietnam, as well as observable variation across different units of the South Vietnamese military. Specifically, the PAVN and PLAF should have performed much better on the battlefield than most ARVN units, except for the ARVN 1st Division. Evidence of poor PAVN or PLAF performance, or of good ARVN performance outside the 1st Division, would cast significant doubt on the intervention theory, as would a general lack of cross-national variation between North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese battlefield performance.

That said, even the evidence presented thus far should induce significant skepticism about the structural variables emphasized in existing theories of military effectiveness. The contrast between North and South Vietnam suggests that very different forms of political intervention in the armed forces can arise even in states that share many common structural traits, such as wealth, population size, regime type, external threat levels, culture, and society. Indeed, it shows that even in environments of low military autonomy, “politicization” of the military can take very different forms. The evidence of cross-units variation in the South Vietnamese case, in particular, shows that these policies are much more agile than often assumed.

All of this suggests that autocracy and “bad” political-military relations are not necessarily synonymous. It also suggests that significant external threats do not automatically induce “good” political-military relations. None of this proves that structural variables are irrelevant in explaining military performance, of course. Nor does it prove that differences in political intervention actually matter for battlefield effectiveness. But it should make us quite curious about the material covered the next chapter: a series of battles between North and South Vietnam during the period 1962-1975, which will make it possible to adjudicate amongst the predictions derived from the intervention theory and its competitors.

CHAPTER 3

Battlefield Effectiveness in North and South Vietnam

The previous chapter contrasted the nature of political intervention in the militaries of North and South Vietnam. Whereas North Vietnam was found to have adopted best practices in political intervention, South Vietnam was found generally to have adopted worst practices. The major exception to this rule was the ARVN 1st Division, particularly the Hac Bao company. Nevertheless, if the theory in Chapter 1 is correct, the ARVN generally should have demonstrated almost no battlefield effectiveness—very little unit cohesion, virtually no tactical proficiency, and no ability to conduct complex operations. The 1st Division should have demonstrated at least cohesion and tactical proficiency, but this performance should have been an outlier. North Vietnam's PLAF and PAVN forces, on the other hand, should have been highly effective on the battlefield—cohesive, very tactically proficient, and consistently capable of conducting complex operations. As discussed earlier, the competing theories would predict very little within-country or cross-national variation at all.

To test the validity of these divergent predictions, this chapter examines the battlefield evidence from the war in Vietnam, with a particular focus on events from 1962 to 1975. Specifically, the chapter focuses on the following six major campaigns or battles: the battle of Ap Bac in 1963; the battle of Binh Gia in 1964-5; the battle for the Citadel at Hue during the Tet offensive of 1968; the South Vietnamese invasion of Laos in 1971, known as Lam Son 719; the Easter offensive and the response to it in 1972; and the final battles in 1975.

Out of all the conflict that occurred in Vietnam during this period, the chapter examines these battles for three main reasons. First, these were all battles in which the United States did not participate or in which its role was very circumscribed. So, for example, the chapter does not focus on ARVN operations during the period 1965-1968, because U.S. combat forces heavily dominated virtually all ARVN conventional activities during this period.¹ This does not necessarily mean that the ARVN's performance during this time contradicts the predictions of the intervention theory, only that the extensive U.S. combat role during this period makes it difficult to isolate the effects of the variables of interest. Instead the chapter focuses on battles in which U.S. firepower, resources, or advisory leadership were much more minimal, thereby controlling for an important potential confounding variable in the assessment of both North and South Vietnam's fighting effectiveness.

Second, the analysis focuses on what were substantively the important major engagements during the war. To be sure, the war was incredibly complex, encompassing a bewildering degree and variety of conflict, so an almost infinite number of additional tests is possible, and the judgment of which battles were crucial is subjective at the margins. Nevertheless, as a group, these battles constitute the core series of events that must be explained by any account of the battlefield effectiveness of the two sides. Trying to discuss the Vietnam War without reference to them is about as satisfying as discussing the U.S. post-war role in Europe without reference to the Marshall Plan or NATO. One can debate whether this discussion is sufficient for a complete analysis, but it is certainly necessary.

¹ Lt. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong, *RVNAF and U.S. Operational Cooperation and Coordination* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), p. 165.

Third, this series of battles captures both offensive and defensive operations for both the North and the South and for different units within the South Vietnamese military, providing an additional series of controls across a full range of values of the independent variable. This group of battles enables examination of the validity of all of Chapter 2's predictions for the PAVN and the PLAF, the ARVN general forces, and the ARVN 1st Division, even accounting for the fact that these forces were trying to do different things at different times.

SELECTION OF BATTLES AND CAMPAGINS FOR EXAMINATION		
	On the tactical offense	On the tactical defense
ARVN general forces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ap Bac, 1963 • Binh Gia, 1964-5 • Invasion of Laos, 1971 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hue, 1968 • Easter Offensive, 1972 • Final offensives, 1975
ARVN 1st Division	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invasion of Laos, 1971 • Response to Easter Offensive, 1972 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hue, 1968 • Invasion of Laos, 1971 • Final offensives, 1975
PAVN and PLAF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hue, 1968 • Easter Offensive, 1972 • Final offensives, 1975 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ap Bac, 1963 • Binh Gia, 1964-5

After providing some general background, the chapter examines each of these battles or campaigns in turn. Each section first presents the context, the forces involved on the two sides, and the key battlefield events. Then it reviews each side's performance according to the questions established in Chapter 1, enabling a coding of the value of the dependent variable for the actor of interest and thereby an evaluation of the validity of competing predictions. It is important to note that each battle or campaign offers the opportunity to observe multiple readings of the dependent variable, because each battle involves units from both the PLAF/PAVN and the ARVN, and in some instances from different units within the ARVN.

After performing this analysis on the six major campaigns or battles of interest and finding general support for the intervention theory, the chapter concludes by briefly examining evidence that might undermine this support. Specifically, I sought out supposed instances of effectiveness in the general ARVN units (not in the 1st Division), or instances of poor PAVN performance. As a result, the final section of the chapter examines the failed PLAF raid at Phuoc Chao in 1962, the battle of Dan Tien in 1962, and the South Vietnamese incursion into Cambodia in 1970. Nevertheless, the chapter concludes that these outliers cast only very limited doubt on the intervention theory.

I. Background: the Vietnam War, 1962-1975

The battlefield events discussed in this chapter occurred against the backdrop of a long and multi-faceted war, which this analysis does not seek to describe in its entirety. Nevertheless, it is useful to bear in mind the war's major contours during the period 1962-1975. Through 1965, the war was primarily a Vietnamese affair, with the U.S. role significant but still advisory. The PLAF led much of the fighting against Saigon, although the PAVN role was growing. As the 1960s wore on, the war became increasingly conventional, in the sense that the two sides generated regular, uniformed units of company- or battalion-size or

larger to fight for and hold territory, as evidenced in the battles at Phuoc Chao (1962), Dan Tien (1962), Ap Bac (1963), and Binh Gia (1964-5), all examined below. This is not to say that the PLAF were not also conducting an insurgency, only that their combat repertoire included much more than hit-and-run terrorist attacks and clearly sought to gain control of actual real estate in South Vietnam.

The period 1965-1969 saw the introduction of U.S. combat troops and a dramatic escalation in violence against the North Vietnamese. The PAVN came to play a more prominent role than the PLAF in most large battles, with many of the PLAF forces wiped out entirely during the series of 1968 attacks known as the Tet Offensive. The battle for the Citadel at Hue, examined below, occurred during this larger campaign. Although Tet was a military disaster for the North Vietnamese, it did succeed in draining U.S. domestic support for the war.

After the adoption of the Nixon Doctrine in June 1969, the U.S. ground presence in Vietnam began to contract substantially, as primary combat responsibilities shifted back to the South Vietnamese. The war took on a strongly conventional character, with clashes between ARVN and PAVN at the brigade or even division level not unusual. Thieu's government focused in particular on breaking up North Vietnamese supply lines in both Cambodia (1970) and Laos (1971), two campaigns examined below.

Hanoi now knew that a large-scale conventional offensive would be needed to win the war, and it launched the series of attacks known as the Easter Offensive (1972) with that goal in mind. The offensive occurred along similar lines as the attacks in 1968, and, like the Tet Offensive, the Easter Offensive was premised on the notion that a quick succession of North Vietnamese military victories would give way to popular uprisings that would finish the job of overthrowing the Thieu regime. In fact, the Easter Offensive nearly succeeded militarily, but heavy U.S. airpower assisted the South Vietnamese in driving it back. The campaign is discussed in detail below.

In 1973, the United States signed the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, officially ending the U.S. combat role and soon leaving only a bare-bones infrastructure for continued support to South Vietnam. From 1973 on, the war became entirely a Vietnamese affair again, with the North launching a final series of offensives in 1975, along the same lines as those in 1972 and 1968. Bereft of U.S. help, the South Vietnamese crumpled, and the Hanoi achieved the victory that it had sought for more than 30 years. These final battles are also discussed in detail below.

II. The Battle of Ap Bac, 1963

The battle known as Ap Bac presents one of the first opportunities in the Vietnam War, prior to extensive U.S. combat involvement, to observe the ARVN and PLAF in a relatively conventional fight for control over territory. In this battle, the PLAF was essentially trying to draw the ARVN into an ambush, while the ARVN was attempting to conduct a three-pronged armor-infantry assault on the PLAF's prepared defensive position. As such, the battle enables a close evaluation of both sides' unit cohesion and tactical proficiency. The battle also saw South Vietnam attempt to conduct complex operations on the offense, trying to integrate several different battalion-sized units in combined-arms maneuver, and it saw the PLAF attempt to engage in some minimal complex operations on the defense, trying to integrate three companies' use of light arms along a thinly covered front.

As will be discussed below, the battle provides some initial confirmation for the intervention theory. Despite having a 4:1 advantage in manpower and massively greater firepower, the ARVN forces demonstrated unit cohesion that was uneven at best. Furthermore, their tactical proficiency and attempts to conduct complex operations were very poor, and for reasons directly attributable to the nature of political intervention in the military. By contrast, the PLAF demonstrated remarkable unit cohesion, tactical proficiency, and a solid ability to conduct some minimal complex operations on the defense. The PLAF took significant casualties, but they also inflicted significant casualties. The table below provides a brief summary of the battle, which is then discussed in more detail.²

THE BATTLE OF AP BAC, 1963		
	North Vietnam	South Vietnam
<i>Battle summary</i>		
Tactical orientation	Defensive	Offensive
Plan	Ambush ARVN forces	Three-pronged armor-infantry assault on PLAF position
Weapons	12 Browning automatic rifles, 5 machine guns, 2-3 rifle grenades, 60-mm mortar	13 M-113 armored personnel carriers, helicopters, artillery
Manpower	~350	~1200
Losses	~100 KIA	~63 KIA, 109 WIA
<i>Effectiveness summary</i>		
Unit cohesion?	Yes	Uneven
Tactical proficiency?	Yes	No
Complex operations?	Yes, minimally	No
Confirms theory?	Yes	Yes

The Forces on Each Side

The battle began before dawn on January 2, 1963, in Dinh Tuong province, about 65 miles southwest of Saigon, deep in the Mekong Delta. ARVN intelligence had indicated that an enemy radio station was located near the hamlet of Tan Thoi, about 1500 meters northwest of the hamlet of Bac (see map 3). Reports further suggested that a reinforced company of Viet Cong, about 120 men plus perhaps another 30 or so locals, guarded the radio.³ Both hamlets were surrounded by knee-deep rice paddies bordered by a series of connecting streams and canals, covered with tree lines on both banks.⁴ The second half of 1962 had seen a series of ambushes by the Viet Cong of ARVN forces areas just like this, so the ARVN was eager to go on the offense. The supposed radio station at Tan Thoi seemed

² I report whatever casualty figures are available for this and the other battles. The information is not standardized, because some battle accounts report KIA, others KIA and WIA, and others just “losses.” I do not rely on these numbers as a measure of effectiveness (see Appendix A in Chapter 1 for a full discussion of why). Although of varying reliability and relevance, these numbers provide an additional piece of information for the reader to evaluate, in the context of all the other information about the battle and with a recognition that the source of the information may be biased.

³ Lt. Col. John P. Vann, “After Action Report on Dinh Tuong,” January 9, 1963, Historian’s Files and Working Papers, Center of Military History, Washington, DC, p. 4. This background also appears in David M. Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac: They Did Everything But Learn from It* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), p. 71; and General Donn A. Starry, *Armoured Combat in Vietnam* (Dorset, UK: Blandford Press, 1981), p. 25.

⁴ Vann, “After Action Report,” p. 4.

to offer the perfect opportunity, especially as the expected victory would coincide with President Diem's birthday on January 3.

The ARVN battle plan envisioned trapping the PLAF company at Tan Thoi from three directions. First, the 7th Division would land an infantry battalion of approximately 330 men to the north of the village by helicopter, who would then press southward. At the same time that this battalion (known as the 2nd Battalion, 11th Infantry Regiment, or the 2-11 IN) brought pressure from the north, a battalion of Civil Guard units divided into two task forces (A and B) were to attack from the south, preventing escape.⁵ From the southwest, just along the flank of the guerrillas, a company of thirteen M-113 armored personnel carriers (APCs) with mounted infantry were also to attack. These amphibious tracked vehicles, drawn from the 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment (2nd ACR), would be able to pivot and close with the guerrillas once they began to break under the pressure from the infantry and Civil Guard units.⁶

Although no preplanned air sorties were to occur, artillery as well as fighter-bombers would be on call to provide additional firepower for any of the units.⁷ There were also two additional reserve infantry companies at the nearby base of Tan Hiep; they could be lifted by helicopter to the battlefield if needed.⁸ Additionally, the 352nd Ranger Company would be stationed about 1200 meters northeast of the 2/11, providing a blocking force to prevent another possible avenue of PLAF escape.⁹ In short, the plan envisioned throwing about 1,200 ARVN soldiers, thirteen APCs, and several varieties of direct and indirect firepower from three directions at about 150 lightly armed guerrillas believed to be hiding out at Tan Thoi.¹⁰

Four South Vietnamese commanders were at the center of the battle that would unfold. First, Colonel Bui Dinh Dam commanded the 7th Division, in whose area of operations the battle occurred and from which the infantry units were drawn. It was Dam who devised the battle plan with U.S. advisors and who was supposed to oversee its execution. Nevertheless, Dam's background was in administration, not combat; he had previously been chief of staff of the 7th division, and this was his first time in command.¹¹

Dam answered to the second major ARVN figure of the battle, General Huynh Van Cao, the recently promoted commander of the newly created IV Corps, whom Dam had replaced.¹² The third figure was Major Lam Quang Tho, who commanded both the M-113 company from the 2nd ACR and the Civil Guard task forces. Tho, however, was also the chief of Dinh Tuong province, meaning that his chain of command ran through the Department of the Interior, rather than the ARVN and the Department of Defense—even though both the 2nd ACR and the Civil Guard were Defense assets.¹³ In other words,

⁵ This is merely a summary of the overall plan. For an extremely thorough account of the entire battle, see Toczek, *Battle of Ap Bac*.

⁶ Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), p. 205.

⁷ Working paper from the Stennis Report, February 14, 1963, Historian's Notes and Working Papers, Center of Military History, Washington, DC, p. 1.

⁸ Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, p. 205.

⁹ Toczek, *Battle of Ap Bac*, pp. 75-6.

¹⁰ Toczek, *Battle of Ap Bac*, p. 71.

¹¹ Toczek, *Battle of Ap Bac*, p. 73; and Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: U.S.-Vietnam in Perspective* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio, 1978).

¹² Thomas R. Cantwell, "The Army of South Vietnam: a Military and Political History, 1955-75," Ph.D. dissertation, University of New South Wales, 1989, pp. 69-70; and Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, p. 121.

¹³ Toczek, *Battle of Ap Bac*, p. 73.

although Dam's plan depended on Tho's units, Tho did not answer to Dam or to Cao. Fourth, under Tho was Captain Ba, who commanded the M-113 company, usually known as the 4-2 because it was the 4th mechanized Rifle Squadron of the 2nd Armored Cavalry. Ba had been noted as aggressive and capable.¹⁴

ARVN COMMANDERS AND THEIR FORCES AT AP BAC		
<i>Commander</i>	<i>Forces</i>	<i>Additional Information</i>
Cao	IV Corps	Recently promoted from command of 7 th Division
Dam	7 th Division, including the 2/11 IN (2 nd Infantry Battalion, 11 th Regiment)	First battle as commander of 7 th Division; previous positions were administrative
Tho	2 nd ACR, including the 4-2 (M-113 company); Civil Guard Task Forces A and B	Also the province chief; did not answer to Cao or Dam, but rather to Department of Interior
Ba	The 4-2 (M-113 company)	Noted as aggressive and capable

For their part, the PLAF forces in the area went well beyond the single company reported by ARVN intelligence. The PLAF actually had three Main Force companies totaling about 320 men, with about 30 additional locals assisting them.¹⁵ This figure still gave the ARVN about a 4:1 advantage in manpower but certainly presented a greater challenge. The PLAF forces included the 1st Company of the 514th Regional Battalion, known as the C1/514, which had executed a very successful ambush on the ARVN just a few miles northwest of Tan Thoi in 1962.¹⁶ It now guarded the area just east of Tan Thoi. Also present was the 1st Company of the 261st Regional Battalion, known as the C1/261, guarding the area just east of Bac.¹⁷

The PLAF forces were lightly but sufficient armed. Their small arms were mostly of American manufacture, including 12 Browning Automatic Rifles (BARs) and four .30 calibre machine guns. They also had "two or three locally produced rifle grenades, one 60 mm mortar with three rounds, ...and at least one heavy machine gun."¹⁸

More importantly, the PLAF had carefully prepared the terrain to maximize the use of these weapons. Well aware that an attack was coming, the PLAF had established Bac and Tan Thoi as mutually supporting positions, digging carefully camouflaged foxholes behind the canal lines that jutted out at odd angles into the rice paddies.¹⁹ The PLAF also positioned its machine guns so as to create interlocking fields of fire along the various dikes.²⁰ Indeed, these positions were so well hidden in the surrounding vegetation that even the famed American advisor Lt. Col. John Paul Vann was totally unable to spot any evidence of them when circling overhead at a few hundred feet during the battle.²¹ The PLAF's positions also

¹⁴ Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, p. 231; and Toczek, *Battle of Ap Bac*, p. 73.

¹⁵ Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, p. 206. Similar figures are reported in General Cao Van Vien, *Leadership*, Indochina Monograph (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1981), p. 55.

¹⁶ Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, p. 207.

¹⁷ Toczek, *Battle of Ap Bac*, p. 85.

¹⁸ Toczek, *Battle of Ap Bac*, p. 70.

¹⁹ Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, p. 209.

²⁰ Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, p. 210; and Starry, *Armoured Combat*, p. 25.

²¹ Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, p. 210.

were slightly elevated, providing an excellent downward view of the paddies through which the ARVN would have to approach.²²

Additionally, as historian David Toczek relates, “To maximize the effectiveness of their weapons, the PLAF soldiers set about aiming stakes for the automatic weapons, which were small posts marked with white tape that designated each weapon’s sector of fire. With their positions along the canals, the guerillas also did not have to worry about resupplying themselves during the coming battle. Since the water level in the canals was well below the tops of the dikes because of the dry season, the insurgents could safely use sampans [wooden boats] to move supplies without exposing themselves to enemy fire.”²³ In short, although the PLAF forces were outnumbered and outgunned, their careful use of the terrain appeared to offer the possibility of a strong defense of Tan Thoi and Bac—certainly a much more vigorous defense than the ARVN was expecting.

The Battle

Before dawn, the ARVN units moved into place, with the Civil Guard task forces coming into position in the south and the 4/2 moving its APCs into place toward the southwest. Dam also directed the airlifting of the 2/11 IN to the northwest of Tan Thoi. But fog enveloped the area, preventing the insertion of the second and third companies of the battalion. As a result, the Rangers moved southwest to reinforce the components of the 2/11 IN that had made it to the landing site, although after moving this short distance, the Rangers ceased to move for the rest of the battle.²⁴

All the noise from these initial movements was enough to alert the PLAF units, and they quickly moved into their prepared positions as the Civil Guard and 4-2 commenced their attack.²⁵ Knowing the limited range of its own weapons, the PLAF let the Civil Guard get within thirty yards of its positions before opening fire.²⁶ Then the PLAF suddenly let loose, wounding the Civil Guard’s commanding officer and killing the executive officer almost immediately.²⁷ The ARVN task forces quickly became disorganized and paralyzed, unable even to move to safety.²⁸

As the advisor to the Task Force A reported, “I attempted to get the TF Commander to maneuver through the tree line to the right, using it for cover and concealment. He informed me that the Sector Chief had ordered him to occupy a blocking position at this location. If the TF had moved, it would have forced the VC into the same position that we were in earlier. The TF Commander either could not, or would not get permission to make the move.”²⁹ Instead, the advisor related in his after-action report, “Some [ARVN] soldiers covered behind the paddie [sic] dyke and would not return fire, others held weapons above the dyke and fired without aiming.”³⁰ Artillery fire was no help.

²² Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, p. 209.

²³ Toczek, *Battle of Ap Bac*, p. 70.

²⁴ Toczek, *Battle of Ap Bac*, p. 78.

²⁵ Col. James M. Winterbottom, “Translation of VC Document on Ap Bac Battle 2 Jan 63,” April 20, 1963, Historian’s Files and Working Papers, the Center of Military History, Washington, DC, p. 10.

²⁶ Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, p. 215.

²⁷ 1st Lt. Arthur L. Bloch, “Field Advisor Narrative Analysis: Task Force A, 2 January 1963,” January 6, 1963, Historian’s Files and Working Papers, Center of Military History, Washington, DC, p. 1. These events are also described in Palmer, *Summons*, p. 34.

²⁸ Maj. Jack A. Macslarrow, “Field Advisor Analysis, Dan Thang 1,” 2-4 January, 1963, Historian’s Files and Working Papers, Center of Military History, Washington, DC, p. 5.

²⁹ Bloch, “Field Advisor Narrative,” p. 2.

³⁰ Bloch, “Field Advisor Narrative,” p. 2.

Although it was “timely,” according to the advisor, it was wildly insufficient and inaccurate, with the forward observer failing to adjusting the volume or aim.³¹

Task Force B also refused to budge at this point, with its advisor later reporting that it added “nothing to the friendly cause.”³² Some of its soldiers “were observed by US Advisory personnel to abandon many of their weapons while cowering in the bottom of a ditch. The District Chief took no corrective action even though he was present at the time of this occurrence.”³³ According to the advisor, however, not all of the paralysis was the direct fault of the commanders on the scene: “The Commander of Task Force B requested permission to attack the main objective on at least three occasions during the afternoon but was denied permission on each occasion by the Sector Commander,” that is, by Major Tho, who apparently feared losing the provincial forces on which he relied for governance.³⁴ Like Task Force A, Task Force B also had serious problems calling in artillery to suppress PLAF fire, as Task Force B had departed its base without its forward observer personnel, “who were considered ‘unnecessary,’” according to the advisor.³⁵

Meanwhile, by 9:30am the fog had lifted, and the other two companies of the 2/11 IN were able to land in the north. Aware of the disaster with the Civil Guard, however, Dam now wanted to bring in a reserve infantry company from Tan Hiep by helicopter. Vann, who served as Dam’s division advisor, circled over head in his observation plane to find a spot for the insertion. Still unable to detect the well-concealed PLAF positions in the treeline, Vann recommended inserting the reserve forces only 300 meters away, just to the west of Ap Bac.³⁶

The resulting attempt at insertion turned the battle from bad to worse for the ARVN. Up until that point, despite the problems that the Civil Guard had encountered, the PLAF were still basically pinned in from three directions, with two of those prongs not having suffered much enemy contact at all. But bringing in the infantry reserve meant relying on helicopters, and the PLAF was ready for them.

Of the ten H-21s bringing in these troops or escorting them, one was downed almost immediately. The H-21 that went to rescue the first one was then shot down too. Another went down in an attempt to rescue the first two. Meanwhile, a fourth H-21 had been forced to crash land about a mile away. As Neil Patrick Sheehan put it, “In approximately five minutes of shooting they had brought down four helicopters.... The guerillas had hit every helicopter out of the fifteen except for one...”³⁷ The PLAF also immediately pinned down the reserve soldiers that disembarked from the helicopters.³⁸ It was now fairly clear that the reserve was more in need of help than the Civil Guard it had come to assist.

³¹ Bloch, “Field Advisor Narrative,” p. 2.

³² Macslarrow, “Field Advisor Analysis,” p. 2. See also Letter from Maj. Jack A. Macslarrow to Major Tho, January 3, 1963, Historian’s Files and Working Papers, Center of Military History, Washington, DC, pp. 1-2, and 5.

³³ Macslarrow, “Field Advisor Analysis,” p. 4.

³⁴ Macslarrow, “Field Advisor Analysis,” p. 2. See also Letter Macslarrow to Tho, pp. 1-2; and Major William J. Hart, “Field Advisor Narrative Analysis, Task Force B: 2 January 1963,” January 7, 1963, Historian’s Files and Working Papers, Center of Military History, Washington, DC, p. 1.

³⁵ Macslarrow, “Field Advisor Analysis,” p. 2. See also Letter Macslarrow to Tho, pp. 1-2.

³⁶ Toczek, *Battle of Ap Bac*, p. 80.

³⁷ Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, p. 220.

³⁸ Toczek, *Battle of Ap Bac*, p. 81.

Realizing the gravity of the situation, Vann turned to Ba's mechanized company to salvage the situation. Ba had a good reputation, and Vann knew that if the 4/2 could just cross the canal, its firepower and mobility could be brought to bear against the PLAF hidden away in the treeline. But Captain Ba had suddenly become timid, resisting Vann's suggestions to cross the canal. Repeatedly, Ba refused. Only after Vann ordered the American advisor to shoot Ba—an order the advisor clearly did not intend to follow but which Ba could hear loud and clear on the radio—did Ba relent and attempt to find a suitable place to allow the M-113s to cross the canal.³⁹ Even then he continued to deliberately delay the crossing.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, the C1/514 turned its attention to the 2/11 IN, which was now trying to press down on Ap Tan Thoi as originally planned from the north. Again, however, ARVN units walked right into well-prepared defensive positions. "Waiting until the lead company of the 2/11 IN had closed to within 20 meters of its positions," Toczek writes, "C1/514 opened fire, catching the 2nd Company almost completely by surprise."⁴¹ But the situation quickly became stalemated as the C1/514 sent another platoon to help pin down the 2/11 IN.⁴² Neither the 2/11 IN nor the PLAF company was able to move.

PLAF leaders were worried at this point. According to Toczek, "It appeared that the 7th Division was slowly massing a coordinated assault. The 2/11 IN, although not making much progress against C1/514, was pressing firmly enough to keep the northern PLAF company fixed in place. South of Ap Bac, the two CG task forces stood a short distance away from completely enveloping C1/261. Worse, the mechanized company was crossing its last obstacle and would soon close with the insurgents who were dug into the sides of the dikes."⁴³ Now would have been a good time to retreat, and, in fact, the commander of C1/261 hoped he would be told to withdraw, but the PLAF battalion commander told him to stand firm.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, the ARVN continued to fire artillery, although it was falling well wide of the defenders' positions. Task Force A could have used this moment to attack, as the PLAF worried it would, but decided not to.⁴⁵ Indeed, the Civil Guard soldiers decided it was time for lunch and began to build cooking fires. "Not taking fire, [they] casually sat or stood around, presenting an idyllic scene for the soldiers of 4/2 ACR to the north."⁴⁶

But the 4/2's own situation quickly turned ugly. When Ba's APCs finally did cross the canal and move toward the PLAF, their movements were so poorly coordinated that the PLAF were able to pick off the vehicles one by one; the gunners were especially vulnerable.⁴⁷ The APCs also did not coordinate their movement with the dismounted infantry, who were quickly mowed down because the vehicle gunners were not suppressing the enemy fire from the tree lines. Having waited until the APCs came in very close range, the PLAF now unleashed its carefully prepared interlocking fields of fire to devastating effect.

³⁹ Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, p. 238.

⁴⁰ Captain James B. Scanlon, "Field Advisor Narrative Analysis," January 7, 1963, Historian's Files and Working Papers, Center of Military History, Washington, DC, pp. 1-2.

⁴¹ Toczek, *Battle of Ap Bac*, pp. 90-1.

⁴² Toczek, *Battle of Ap Bac*, pp. 90-1.

⁴³ Toczek, *Battle of Ap Bac*, pp. 91-2.

⁴⁴ Toczek, *Battle of Ap Bac*, p. 92.

⁴⁵ Toczek, *Battle of Ap Bac*, p. 86.

⁴⁶ Toczek, *Battle of Ap Bac*, p. 91.

⁴⁷ Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, p. 256.

The ensuing chaos actually caused some of the M-113 drivers to back up, abandoning or even injuring their own wounded comrades in the process.⁴⁸ One advisor later reported that the gunner near him became so panicked that he “ducked down and was blindly firing his machine, mostly in the air. . . . The M-113 next to me started to back up, leaving one of their men who had just been hit.”⁴⁹ Other M-113s sought to hide behind the downed helicopters rather than attack.⁵⁰ Even the sole M113 with a flamethrower (instead of the normal .50 calibre machine gun) did not have much effect because “the crew had not mixed enough of the jelling agent with the gasoline to keep the jet of flame burning properly.”⁵¹ The ball of flame that should have burned the guerillas out of their positions wound up having “the force and effect of a Zippo lighter.”⁵²

Despite all of these problems, Ba’s APC made it through and was attempting to attack. Ba was still leading from the front. But then, in a freak accident, Ba suffered a concussion inside his APC and was knocked unconscious. The entire attack ground to a halt for twenty minutes as Ba struggled to regain consciousness.⁵³ Eventually he did, but the momentum of the attack was gone. Ba remained “too stunned to even realize that he ought to force the four or five carriers hanging back at the canal to come forward and bolster his attack. He could not think beyond making the frontal assault that he had been taught most often to do.”⁵⁴

Ba continued to advance. Just as his carrier and one or two others were about to close with the PLAF by crawling up the dikes leading to the foxholes, a PLAF squad leader climbed out of his foxhole and threw a grenade right onto the M-113 at a range of only 15-20 yards. Emboldened, other PLAF fighters quickly copied him. After that it was all over for the 4-2. Still stunned from his head injury, “Ba allowed the driver of his carrier to back up, and the one or two vehicles persevering with him followed. The assault had failed.”⁵⁵

At this point Vann realized some other major intervention was required. He suggested that Dam call in a mobile reserve unit, the 8th Airborne Battalion, for a drop east of Ap Bac, to close the cordon on the PLAF as the three prongs of the initial attack had failed to do. “If the ARVN forces could not take Ap Bac, Vann reasoned, they could at least hold the PLAF in position until they could mass enough forces and firepower to close with the enemy and destroy the insurgents the following morning.”⁵⁶ But time was of the essence, as daylight was waning.

Dam replied that the drop would be made, but only to the west of Ap Bac rather than the east.⁵⁷ Vann also wanted the drop to occur as soon as possible so that there would be time to close with the defenders before dark. Instead, the drop happened just before dusk, and it missed its target by more than half a mile. Many of the Airborne actually “landed in front of the Viet Cong positions on the west and northwest sides of Tan Thoi, instead of safely behind the Civil Guards and M-113s at Bac as Cao had planned.”⁵⁸ As a result, “they

⁴⁸ Starry, *Armoured Combat*, p. 27.

⁴⁹ Scanlon, “Field Advisor Narrative,” p. 2.

⁵⁰ Scanlon, “Field Advisor Narrative,” p. 2.

⁵¹ Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, p. 254.

⁵² U.S. advisor quoted in Toczek, *Battle of Ap Bac*, p. 94.

⁵³ Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, p. 253. Interestingly, Toczek makes no mention of this concussion in his account.

⁵⁴ Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, p. 255.

⁵⁵ Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, p. 257.

⁵⁶ Toczek, *Battle of Ap Bac*, p. 94.

⁵⁷ Toczek, *Battle of Ap Bac*, p. 95-6.

⁵⁸ Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, p. 262.

were unable to do more than launch piecemeal attacks in small units before darkness put an end to the fighting. The PLAF made short work of them and inflicted substantial casualties. Nineteen of the paratroopers were killed and thirty-three wounded, including the two American advisors to the battalion, a captain and a sergeant.”⁵⁹

After night fell, the PLAF slipped away to the east in a very orderly, organized, careful withdrawal, without detection by the ARVN (see map 4).⁶⁰ The next morning the ARVN entered the village, but as one advisor summed it up, “No VC were found, no weapons were found.”⁶¹ The battle had ended.

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of South Vietnam

The ARVN units involved in the battle of Ap Bac were drawn from parts of the South Vietnamese military subject to worst practices in political intervention. These included the 7th Division, a standard infantry division; an APC company, a Ranger company, and an Airborne battalion, all supposedly “elite” units whose actual purpose was protection of President Diem against coups; and Civil Guard task forces, commanded by officers whose primary task was provincial government. The ARVN 1st Division, which Chapter 2 showed was subject to better practices in political intervention, had no involvement in the battle.

As a result, the intervention theory would predict that the units involved at Ap Bac should have demonstrated minimal effectiveness at best, showing no ability to conduct complex operations, virtually no tactical proficiency, and no unit cohesion unless soldiers were coerced into remaining on the battlefield, a practice not generally followed in the ARVN. In fact, the evidence from the battle is consistent with these predictions and suggests initial support for the theory. Moreover, close examination of the battle reveals not only that the ARVN performed as predicted but that the reasons for its poor performance were closely tied to the nature of political intervention in the South Vietnamese military.

First, as predicted, unit cohesion was poor. Soldiers displayed little confidence in or obedience to their leaders, in part because they knew that most had not been well trained or selected on the basis of merit.⁶² As one of the advisors noted immediately after the battle, “there is still too much political interference in the Vietnamese army and... promotion too often depends on political loyalty rather than military ability.”⁶³ The result was “a complete lack of discipline in battle that permitt[ed] commanders at all levels, and even private soldiers, to refuse to obey any orders they personally [found] distasteful.”⁶⁴ Indeed, none of the commanders higher than Captain Ba even appeared on the battlefield to lead their forces.⁶⁵

Moreover, it was not just U.S. advisors who thought that the ARVN had poor cohesion. The PLAF made the same observation in its after-action report, noting the “panic” that frequently engulfed ARVN units under stress.⁶⁶ “The demoralization of the enemy officers and troops is very serious. They did not dare to fight,” the PLAF report stated, “and their formation would be dispersed upon confronting friendly firepower.”⁶⁷

⁵⁹ Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, p. 262.

⁶⁰ Winterbottom, “Translation of VC Document,” pp. 21-23.

⁶¹ Mays, “Field Advisor Narrative,” p. 3.

⁶² Vann, “After Action Report,” p. 19.

⁶³ David Halberstam, “Harkins Praises Vietnam Troops,” *New York Times*, January 10, 1963, p. 3.

⁶⁴ Vann, “After Action Report,” p. 19.

⁶⁵ Toczek, *Battle of Ap Bac*, p. 127.

⁶⁶ Winterbottom, “Translation of VC Document,” p. 13.

⁶⁷ Col Winterbottom, “Translation of VC Document,” p. 40.

Although the ARVN units did not literally break and run from the battlefield, it is important to remember that no one was chasing them; they were on the offense. At multiple points in the battle, individual ARVN soldiers chose to simply hide or wait out the fighting, suggesting that underlying unit cohesion was very weak. In the opening phase of the battle, for example, ARVN soldiers in the Civil Guard abandoned their weapons and hid in ditches. Others continued firing but made no effort to aim. They essentially tried to maintain the appearance of fighting while knowing that their actions could not possibly harm the adversary.

For its part, the 4-2 showed good cohesion initially, but all discipline disintegrated once it came under fire after crossing the canals. This is not surprising, because most of the APC crews' "training" had come in the form of presidential parades.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, the 2/11 IN did hold together in the north, but it faced only a very short period of fire before the tactical situation there devolved into a stalemate. In sum, ARVN cohesion would have to be described as uneven at best.

Second, ARVN tactical proficiency was poor, reflecting the lack of training described in Chapter 2. At multiple points in the battle, units proved unable to conduct basic activities central to their assigned functions. The APCs failed to mass for their attack, for example, allowing themselves to be picked off vehicle by vehicle in the order in which they crossed the canal. The 4-2 also proved unable to aim its .50 calibre mounts accurately or to operate its prized flamethrower. The Airborne troops proved unable to conduct a timely and accurate jump, and were unable to defend themselves quickly upon landing, even though, again, these are the central sorts of activities for which an army supposedly acquires such forces. Throughout the battle, ARVN artillery fires also were repeatedly observed to be insufficient in volume to suppress the relatively light fires from the PLAF, suggesting very basic problems in efficient operation. In sum, the ARVN forces showed a basic lack of key tactical skills—a simple inability to use their weapons.

Finally, the battle also revealed the ARVN to be utterly incapable of aggregating basic tactical actions into larger complex operations. For example, units repeatedly failed to perform even relatively self-contained combined arms operations. The M-113 drivers exhibited a deadly inability to coordinate their movement and fire with dismounted infantry, even though such coordination is the entire reason to have armored personnel carriers. The Civil Guard units had not bothered to bring along their artillery forward observers, resulting in a lack of effective suppressive fire when they were trying to advance on the well-defended PLAF positions. And even though everyone could see that the artillery was falling wide of the PLAF positions, the problem was never corrected.

Perhaps more importantly, the ARVN repeatedly failed to integrate low-level initiative and high-level coordination. At several points in the battle, commanders could have pushed forward their attack in keeping with the overall known goals of the operation, pressing in on the defenders from all three sides with overwhelming numbers and superior firepower. But this sort of low-level action in support of a higher-level coordinated plan never happened. For example, the Rangers and the 2/11 IN could have moved more aggressively south to press down on Tan Thoi, before the C1/514 had a chance to reinforce and react. But the Rangers stopped moving at the first opportunity, and the 2/11 IN moved slowly, giving the C1/514 time to turn to neutralize them. The Civil Guard task forces in the south also essentially stopped moving after taking their first losses in the opening moments of the battle. Ba's company, too, was extremely slow to cross the canals and never regrouped

⁶⁸ Cantwell, "The Army of...", p. 125

after its initial assault failed. Then the Airborne waited until very late in the day to make its jump, giving the PLAF an opportunity to escape under the cover of darkness. In short, whenever ARVN commanders had the opportunity to choose between acting and not acting, it appeared they almost always chose the latter.

It is clear that much of their hesitation—and the fundamental problem in executing the battle plan—stemmed directly from the nature of political intervention in the military, in particular the centralization and fracturing of command. Even where commanders knew what to do and wanted to do it, they lacked authority to follow through, because that authority was either concentrated at higher echelons or divided among multiple lower-level commanders.

For example, on three separate occasions, Col. Dam ordered Major Tho's Civil Guard units to advance. Dam outranked Tho, but because Tho was not in Dam's chain of command, the order was not followed.⁶⁹ Why were there two chains of command, one might ask? Because, as discussed in Chapter 2, President Diem wanted to divide his military forces and weaken the chances of a coup. Similarly, why was Tho so unmoved by Dam's pleas to advance? Because Tho needed his Civil Guard units to survive the battle with few casualties and return to their duties helping in the governance of Dinh Tuong province.⁷⁰

Tho also "owned" Ba's APC units—another arrangement imposed by Diem to ensure that no division commander could command valuable armored units that might attempt a coup. The problem, of course, was that when Dam (and Vann) told Ba to move, he had to wait for approval from Tho.⁷¹ It was for this reason that Ba was "intolerably slow" and apparently showed "a lack of aggressiveness and willingness to fight," even though Ba had previously been characterized by American advisors as just the opposite sort of officer.

Similarly, the poor employment of the Airborne also stemmed from the highly centralized nature of command. Dam wanted the drop made sooner and to the east, but he was overruled by his corps commander, General Cao, who had specifically been told by Diem not to incur too many casualties.⁷² As discussed in Chapter 2, Diem believed (falsely) that earlier battle casualties had been the cause of previous coup attempts against him. He also no doubt wanted to preserve his Airborne forces, a mobile unit that he believed could protect him in the future if other parts of the army turned against him or if domestic dissidents engaged in an uprising.⁷³ Hence he restricted Dam's ability to actually employ the Airborne in a way that could have salvaged the battle.

In short, the battle of Ap Bac revealed an ARVN unable to maintain unit cohesion, perform basic tactics, or conduct complex operations. And according to at least one U.S. advisor on the ground, the battle was no fluke: "Time after time I have seen the same Vietnamese officers and troops make the same mistakes in virtually the same rice paddy," he said. "The only difference was that usually they get away with it without getting hurt because the Communists simply slip away. This time the Communists fought, and our people were torn up."⁷⁴

Most importantly, the ARVN's deficits were not simply the result of idiosyncratic factors. The morning's fog, the scant protection that the M-113 provided its gunners, Vann's

⁶⁹ Vann, "After Action Report," p. 17.

⁷⁰ Ted Surong, "The Lesson of Ap Bac," *Conflict*, vol. 9 (1989), p. 334.

⁷¹ Vann, "After Action Report," p. 8; and Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, p. 233.

⁷² Starry, *Armoured Combat*, p. 27.

⁷³ Vann, "After Action Report," p. 17; Palmer, *Summons*, p. 36-7; Cantwell, "The Army of . . .," pp. 69-70; and Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, p. 121.

⁷⁴ Quoted in David Halberstam, "Vietnam Defeat Shocks U.S. Aides," *New York Times*, January 6, 1963, p. 2.

poor choice of a landing zone for the helicopters, Ba's concussion—all conspired to make the ARVN's ambitious battle plan more difficult to execute.⁷⁵ But close examination of the battle shows that the ARVN's effectiveness problems ran deeper than bad luck. They stemmed fundamentally from the forms of political intervention that Diem adopted toward his army.

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of North Vietnam

Chapter 2 argued that North Vietnam's political leaders generally adopted best practices with regard to intervention in their military. As a result, the theory would predict that the PLAF units at Ap Bac should have demonstrated strong cohesion, sound tactics, and an ability to conduct offensive operations. In fact, the evidence from the battle is consistent with these predictions, providing some initial support for the theory, at least regarding PLAF performance on the defense.

First, the PLAF units demonstrated very solid cohesion despite being outnumbered and outgunned. PLAF troops had a clear route of escape to the east, but there were no instances of desertion during the battle.⁷⁶ Soldiers waited until nightfall when they were given orders to withdraw, rather than breaking and running. They appear to have believed their officers' exhortation that "it is better to die at one's post."⁷⁷ Moreover, the PLAF's own after-action report noted that "in general our troops had good morale,"⁷⁸ and the Americans also noted that it was nearly impossible to break the PLAF's willingness to fight. One reported afterwards in astonishment, "My God, we got a fix on one machine gun position and made 15 aerial runs at it, and every time we thought we had him, and every time that gunner came right back up firing."⁷⁹

There was one exception to this pattern. A handful of new recruits who had never seen Airborne troops before became frightened at the sight and jumped into their ditches, jamming their weapons.⁸⁰ This event was minor, however; the PLAF still killed 19 of the jumpers and wounded 33 more. In general, unit cohesion was very solid.

Second, the PLAF's tactical proficiency was excellent; soldiers demonstrated very strong basic skills. For example, all observers of the battle agreed that the PLAF made superb use of the terrain to conceal its positions.⁸¹ "Their well sited, camouflaged, and deep fighting positions permitted them to withstand the direct fire of the M113s, as [well as] much of the artillery, and almost all of the air effort," according to one report.⁸² Additionally, the PLAF's own after-action report noted, "Accurate firepower was also one of our important strengths."⁸³ The Americans agreed: "The marksmanship of the VC riflemen was excellent. Most of the ARVN 50 calibre gunners died of head wounds within the opening minutes of the fight."⁸⁴

⁷⁵ Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 195-6. Moyar gives these factors significant weight in his account.

⁷⁶ Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie*, p. 239.

⁷⁷ Winterbottom, "Translation of VC Document," p. 17.

⁷⁸ Winterbottom, "Translation of VC Document," p. 9.

⁷⁹ Advisor quoted in David Halberstam, "Vietnamese Reds Wins Major Clash," *New York Times*, January 4, 1963, p. 2.

⁸⁰ Winterbottom, "Translation of VC Document," p. 21.

⁸¹ Winterbottom, "Translation of VC Document," p. 36.

⁸² Lieutenant Colonel Andrew P. O'Meara, "Recollections of Ap Bac," undated, historians' files on South Vietnam, Center of Military History, Washington, DC, p. B-2 and B-3.

⁸³ Winterbottom, "Translation of VC Document," p. 36.

⁸⁴ O'Meara, "Recollections of Ap Bac," pp. B-2 and B-3.

The PLAF also displayed superb fire discipline, reflecting knowledge of the exact range of its weapons and the moment at which they would be effective. Repeatedly, the PLAF refrained from firing at the ARVN attackers until they were close enough to be trapped and hit. Their after-action assessment emphasized that they had developed very detailed and deliberate tactics for confronting APCs, helicopters, and airborne troops. They knew the vulnerabilities of each and fired accordingly.⁸⁵

Third, the PLAF successfully demonstrated the ability to conduct relatively complex operations. Although it was only lightly armed, it successfully established interlocking fields of fire with its machine guns, maximizing the benefit of its defensive positions. It had few arms to combine but managed to integrate the weapons that it did possess. Perhaps most important to remember is that the PLAF was outnumbered 4:1, meaning that its commanders frequently had to shift small groups of soldiers from one part of the defensive front to another. PLAF commanders reacted quickly to the different prongs of the ARVN attacks, fighting them off in turn.⁸⁶ Indeed, the PLAF itself considered this a key accomplishment, noting that it had maintained “a combined command of 3 different types of Troops [sic] in a counter mopping up operation.”⁸⁷

The strategic implications of the battle are debatable, of course. The North saw it as a “great victory.”⁸⁸ An internal MACV report took the opposite view, claiming that “the 2 January operation in the south is an example of what must be accomplished.... The 2 January operation in the south achieved a desirable confrontation of forces in which the Viet Cong came off second best.”⁸⁹ Casualty data from the battle does little to resolve these interpretations, with the PLAF estimated to have lost 100 men killed in action, and the ARVN 63, with an addition 109 wounded.⁹⁰ Whatever the broader strategic interpretation of the day’s events, the PLAF clearly demonstrated superior battlefield effectiveness—a direct reflection of the forms of political intervention its leaders adopted regarding military promotions, training, command, and information management.

III. The Battle of Binh Gia, 1964-5

Like the Battle of Ap Bac, the engagements known as the Battle of Binh Gia offer an opportunity relatively early in the war, prior to extensive U.S. involvement, to observe both North and South Vietnam engaged in a conventional fight for control over territory. As such, it enables a clear evaluation of both sides’ unit cohesion and tactical proficiency. Additionally, the battle saw South Vietnam attempt to conduct complex operations on the offense, trying to integrate several different battalion-sized units in combined-arms operations. The battle also saw the North Vietnamese Main Force units (simply referred to as “Viet Cong” in most accounts of the battle, but probably a mix of PLAF and PAVN

⁸⁵ Winterbottom, “Translation of VC Document,” pp. 42-4.

⁸⁶ Toczek, *Battle of Ap Bac*, p. 124.

⁸⁷ Winterbottom, “Translation of VC Document,” p. 29.

⁸⁸ Winterbottom, “Translation of VC Document,” p. 29.

⁸⁹ “The Use of U.S. Helicopters in Support of Vietnamese Operations on 2 January 1963,” memo to Major General Fred C. Weyand, subject: Information Regarding U.S. Military Operations in Vietnam for Chair, House Armed Services Committee, January 30, 1963, available in the Historian’s Files and Working Papers, Center of Military History, Washington, DC, p. 5.

⁹⁰ These estimates appear in W.B. Rosson, “Foreword,” in Toczek, *Battle of Ap Bac*, p. xv. One South Vietnamese general claimed the ARVN casualties were much higher, around 400 men. Vien, *Leadership*, p. 55.

forces given the location and year) attempt to engage in much more extensive complex operations on the tactical defense than at Ap Bac.⁹¹ Here it sought to integrate the activities of a division-size force composed of several different arms and to combine low-level initiative with high-level coordination. As such, the engagement against offers a good opportunity to test the predictions of the intervention theory.

The battle does confirm theory. Despite having much heavier weapons, the ARVN forces acquitted themselves poorly. Their unit cohesion that was uneven at best. Furthermore, their tactical proficiency and attempts to conduct complex operations were very poor, and for reasons directly attributable to their leaders' forms of political intervention in the military. By contrast, the North Vietnamese demonstrated remarkable unit cohesion, tactical proficiency, and a solid ability to conduct some minimal complex operations, this time on the offense. The North Vietnamese did outnumber the ARVN in this series of engagements, but they also inflicted about four times the number of casualties that they took. The table below provides a brief summary.

THE BATTLE OF BINH GIA, 1964-5		
	North Vietnam	South Vietnam
<i>Battle summary</i>		
Tactical orientation	Offensive	Offensive, then defensive
Plan	Draw ARVN forces into a series of ambushes	Drive North Vietnamese forces out of hamlet
Weapons	New heavy machine guns, recoilless rifles, submachine guns, and hand grenades; artillery	M-113 armored personnel carriers, M-24 light tanks
Manpower	~8,700 ⁹²	~5,831 ⁹³
Losses	132 KIA	461 casualties
<i>Effectiveness summary</i>		
Unit cohesion?	Yes	No, except Marines
Tactical proficiency?	Yes	No
Complex operations?	Yes, minimally	No
Confirms theory?	Yes	Yes

The Forces on Each Side

The Battle of Binh Gia took place from December 1964 through early January 1965 and bore a striking resemblance to Ap Bac: Main Force units with the North's blessing took

⁹¹ The PAVN's own account of the battle strongly suggests a mix of local and Northern forces, referring to all as "Main Force." The Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: the Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975*, trans. Merle L. Pribbenow (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), pp. 138-141.

⁹² As discussed below, total Northern forces at Binh Gia roughly equaled a division, and the average PAVN division had about 8,700 men. Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 29.

⁹³ This rough estimate is based on the fact that an average ARVN division had 12 battalions and about 10,000 men, yielding a rough estimate of about 833 men in an average battalion. The seven different battalions and 1 M-113 company engaged at Binh Gia therefore would have constituted a bit more than half a division, or about 5,831 men. Data on force structure taken from Cantwell, "The Army of..." p. 153, and James Lawton Collins, Jr., *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950-1972* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1975), p. 10.

control of a hamlet relatively close to Saigon and then skillfully ambushed the clumsy piecemeal relief forces that they knew the ARVN would send to re-take the area. Although there were important differences between the two battles, the similarities suggest that the debacle of January 1963 was not an isolated or fluke event. Again, supposedly “elite” ARVN units demonstrated significant problems in maintaining cohesion and demonstrating tactical proficiency, even when simply trying to defend themselves in the midst of a supposedly offensive operation. Although the documentary record surrounding Binh Gia is not as rich as that covering Ap Bac, it is nevertheless clear that the two sides’ performances there were consistent with the predictions from Chapter 1.

The battle involved a mix of units of different types from both sides. As mentioned, the North brought to the fight two Main Force regiments, the 1st and the 2nd, although it is unclear whether these were PAVN or PLAF. Also present was a regimental-sized artillery unit designated Q-563 by the North and designated as the 80th Artillery Group by U.S. forces.⁹⁴ The North also called upon local forces in the form of one infantry battalion, a number of heavy weapons companies, and the 445th infantry company.⁹⁵ All told, according to Mark Moyar, “the Viet Cong fielded a force that was equal in size to a full division, larger than anything the Viet Cong had ever put onto a field of battle. These forces were extraordinarily well equipped because of the exertions of the North Vietnamese Navy, which had secretly delivered an astounding 500 tons of weapons to the attack force shortly before the battle.”⁹⁶

Meanwhile, ARVN forces involved in the battle eventually included three Ranger battalions (the 30th, 33rd, and 38th), a Marine battalion (the 4th), an APC company of the same type that operated at Ap Bac, and three Airborne battalions. Crucially, however, these forces were committed piecemeal and were never all present at the same time, giving a significant numerical advantage to the North in any given engagement.

The Battle

The Battle of Binh Gia was the culmination of a much larger North Vietnamese effort to bait and bleed ARVN forces in Phuoc Tuy, a coastal province about 40 km east of Saigon, in the III Corps Tactical Zone. Throughout November 1964 the North Vietnamese had conducted a harassment campaign and small raids in Phuoc Tuy, attacking Binh Gia only on December 4-5.⁹⁷ Binh Gia was a hamlet of about 6,000 residents, most of them Catholic refugees from the North.⁹⁸ As a North Vietnamese history of the battle notes, “The Binh Gia Campaign was designed to draw in enemy regular units so that we could annihilate them.”⁹⁹

⁹⁴ This unit was apparently under the control of the Central Office for South Vietnam, or COSVN. Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, p. 336.

⁹⁵ Nguyen Viet Ta et al, *The Resistance War in Eastern Cochinchina (1945-1975), Vol. II* (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 1993), p. 173, translated and available in the Historian’s Working Files and Papers at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC.

⁹⁶ Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, p. 336.

⁹⁷ “Analysis of Situation in Phuoc Tuy, RVN,” message traffic from COMUSMACV to Department of Defense National Military Command Center, January 8, 1965, p. 2-5, available in the Historian’s Working Files and Papers at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC.

⁹⁸ Nguyen Viet Ta et al, *The Resistance War in Eastern Cochinchina (1945-1975), Vol. II* (Hanoi: People’s Army Publishing House, 1993), p. 173, translated and available in the Historian’s Working Files and Papers at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC.

⁹⁹ Ta et al, *Resistance War*, p. 173.

In the initial attack, the 445th raided the hamlet, while the 1st Regiment simultaneously surrounded and shelled the Duc Thanh district military headquarters, located four kilometers to the west (see map 5). The locals defended their hamlet, but the 445th and elements of the 1st Regiment were still able to set up a frontal defensive position in the hamlet looking straight out toward the military headquarters. When the ARVN then sent in the 38th Ranger Battalion to Duc Thanh in an attempt to regain control of their own headquarters, the battalion was torn up by the mutually supporting enemy positions. The 38th suffered very heavy casualties.¹⁰⁰

Two days later, on December 7, North Vietnamese forces launched more attacks: in addition to an assault on another district military headquarters known as Dat Do, and renewed attacks on Binh Gia, they raided the Xuyen Moc military headquarters, about 15 kilometers southeast of Binh Gia, and the Duc Thanh district military headquarters, about 2 km to the west, as well as the Van Kiep Commando Training Center, also in the area.¹⁰¹

In response, the ARVN sent a troop of M-113s to clear the highway between Binh Gia and Duc Thanh. But the North had anticipated this move, and the 2nd Regiment rushed to the scene, arriving just as the M-113s showed up. According to the PAVN history of the battle, there was no time to dig positions, but the North's forces "ran out to the road and laid down such heavy fire that the enemy armored convoy was forced to halt. Other elements of the regiments maneuvered through a hail of enemy fire from the machine gun mounts on top of the armored vehicles and from enemy aircraft overhead. The entire regiment surged forward and cut the enemy formation in two.... Our soldiers used hand-held charges, hand grenades, and infantry weapons to fight the enemy.... Some soldiers leapt up onto the sides of the vehicles and threw hand grenades inside the crew compartments."¹⁰² The North Vietnamese account of the engagement claimed to have destroyed 13 M-113s. The American reports on the engagement did not confirm this figure, but no one considered the incident a success for the ARVN armored forces, which withdrew.¹⁰³

Throughout the rest of December, the North kept up its attacks in Phuoc Tuy, culminating on December 28 with an attack once again on Binh Gia. This time the 445th and the 1st battalion of the 1st Regiment dug in to await the inevitable ARVN reaction. When it came, in the form of the 30th Ranger battalion, the Rangers were annihilated, suffering very heavy losses and failing to retake the hamlet.¹⁰⁴ The ARVN then sent in a third Ranger battalion, the 33rd, which was also "completely destroyed."¹⁰⁵

Finally, having lost three Ranger battalions in quick succession, South Vietnam sent in the Marines, landing the 4th Battalion by helicopter on December 30. The battalion linked up with what was left of 30th and the 33rd and cleared the hamlet. But the North's forces had already withdrawn, waiting for a better moment to resume the attack. That time came the following morning when the Marine battalion's 2nd company moved out to an area near a

¹⁰⁰ Ta et al, *Resistance War*, pp. 175.

¹⁰¹ Earle G. Wheeler, "Memorandum for Mr. McGeorge Bundy, Subject: Binh Gia Engagements, 28 December – 4 January," January 5, 1965, p. 5, available in the Historian's Working Files and Papers at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC; and Ta et al, *Resistance War*, pp. 175.

¹⁰² Ta et al, *Resistance War*, pp. 176-7.

¹⁰³ "Analysis of Situation," p. 2.

¹⁰⁴ Ta et al, *Resistance War*, pp. 179.

¹⁰⁵ Ta et al, *Resistance War*, pp. 180.

rubber plantation about one kilometer south of Binh Gia, searching for a helicopter that had been shot down the day before.¹⁰⁶

Suddenly the North's forces pounced from three directions.¹⁰⁷ According to the North Vietnamese history of the battle, the ARVN Marines put up a "ferocious resistance," but it was not enough.¹⁰⁸ "The Marine battalion commander and battalion surgeon were shot dead in the opening moments of the fighting, and the battalion executive officer suffered a mortal wound. The Marines called for air strikes, only to be told that no air assets were currently available."¹⁰⁹ Indeed, the Marine commander at the scene did not even bother to call actual ARVN air assets, he explained, because "if I ask through Vietnamese channels, I'll get aircraft one month from now."¹¹⁰ Artillery was also unavailable.¹¹¹

Even with this lack of firepower, "two of the Marine companies fought their way northward out of the plantation and, despite heavy Viet Cong infantry and artillery attacks along the gravel road, made it back to Binh Gia in an orderly manner."¹¹² According to historian Mark Moyar, "Of the two Marine companies that remained in the rubber plantation, one was eventually overrun and decimated, with all but a dozen or so of its men perishing. The other clung desperately to a hilltop inside the plantation, its ranks depleted but not broken by numerous Viet Cong artillery barrages and large infantry assaults. At sundown, the company moved off the hilltop and daringly slipped through the Viet Cong lines to safety."¹¹³ By the next day, the 530-man Marine battalion had been reduced to 232 men,¹¹⁴ although the Marines reported that enemy casualties in the rubber plantation engagement had also been high.¹¹⁵

At this point, South Vietnam decided to commit its Airborne battalions, inserting three into Binh Gia on the first day of 1965. Unsurprisingly, they made no contact, as their opponents had again withdrawn.¹¹⁶ On January 3, the PLAF managed to ambush elements of the 35th Ranger battalion, an M-113 troop, and 1 M-24 platoon as they made their way south down the highway out of Binh Gia. But for all intents and purposes, the struggle for control of the area was over. North Vietnam claimed to have killed or wounded 1755 enemy soldiers, while the South reported its casualties at 461 and VC casualties at only 132 killed.¹¹⁷ Either way, the North had again challenged the South to a stand-up fight and managed to hold territory for an extended period of time while bleeding the ARVN.

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of South Vietnam

The ARVN units involved in this battle were drawn primarily from parts of the military identified in Chapter 2 as being subject to worst practices in political intervention: the Rangers, the Armor units, the Marines, and the Airborne. The intervention theory would

¹⁰⁶ Kenneth Sams, "The Battle of Binh Gia, 27 December 1965," CHECO Southeast Asia Report, 1965, p. 4, available in the Historian's Working Files and Papers at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC.

¹⁰⁷ Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, p. 339.

¹⁰⁸ Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, p. 338.

¹⁰⁹ Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, p. 339.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Sams, "Battle of Binh Gia," p. 2.

¹¹¹ "Analysis of Situation," p. 8.

¹¹² Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, p. 339.

¹¹³ Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken*, p. 339; see also "Analysis of Situation," p. 3.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Sams, "Battle of Binh Gia," p. 6.

¹¹⁵ "Analysis of Situation," p. 3.

¹¹⁶ "Analysis of Situation," p. 3; and Sams, "Battle of Binh Gia," p. 6.

¹¹⁷ Ta et al, *Resistance War*, p. 182.

predict that these forces should have demonstrated virtually no battlefield effectiveness, especially given the absence of coercive measures to keep soldiers on the battlefield. In short, their performance here should have looked very similar to that at Ap Bac.

In fact, these predictions are largely borne out by the evidence from Binh Gia. While we do not have detailed reports on the nature of cohesion in the Ranger and Armor units, and there are no reports that these units simply broke and ran, we do know that their engagements were extremely short, suggesting that they did not remain intact as fighting units for very long. The North's losses were minimal when they engaged the Rangers or Armor units, and there are no reports that these ARVN units were able to extract themselves once under attack. For its part, the Airborne never actually encountered the enemy.

The 4th Marine battalion is the only force in either side's account of the battle to be described as making an effort to resist when attacked. What accounts for this variation is not clear, but, whatever the reason, the Marines' apparently better cohesion and proficiency was not enough to enable the ARVN as a whole to conduct the sort of complex operations that could have produced a real victory for South Vietnam in Phuoc Tuy. For example, the Marines clearly could have benefited from combined arms help in the form of air strikes or artillery during their battle, but they never got it. Command was so highly centralized that the major on the scene knew not even to ask.

More generally, it seems obvious that the ARVN could have performed better had it committed its units all at once after the initial attack on Binh Gia in early December, rather than inserting them piecemeal. Indeed, according to General William Westmoreland, the commander of MACV at the time, "Had this entire force between brought to bear simultaneously in accordance with a well coordinated plan, the situation would have been considerably different."¹¹⁸ But again, ARVN commanders were subject to such strict centralized command procedures that they did not even ask for a larger force or attempt anything resembling a complex operation. They knew that political leaders would be extremely reluctant to commit troops to battle that might be needed to defend the regime.¹¹⁹

Indeed, officers trying to fight at Binh Gia were well aware that December 1964 was a perilous time for General Khanh, the ruling officer at the time.¹²⁰ Khanh was deeply distracted by a political struggle with his rival, General Duong Van Minh (known as "Big Minh"), and both Khanh and the commander of III Corps were far too wrapped up in this internal tug of war to release all of their mobile forces to defend Phuoc Tuy. As Westmoreland explained shortly after the battle, "Despite the efforts of III Corps Senior Advisor, a major operation did not materialize prior to the VC occupation of Binh Gia on 28 December.... A specific problem according to III Corps Senior Advisor was the reluctance of the Corps Commanders (General Vien) to ask for Airborne battalions from the General Reserve, since he was convinced that these units would not be made available and he would thus lose face."¹²¹ Indeed, General Khanh apparently completely ignored the events in Phuoc Tuy until December 31, when it became apparent that his prized Airborne would need to be involved.¹²²

In Westmoreland's view, "the deficiencies in the Government of Vietnam's responses from 28 December forward may be attributed, in considerable measure, to

¹¹⁸ "Analysis of Situation," p. 5.

¹¹⁹ "Analysis of Situation," p. 5.

¹²⁰ Nguyen Cao Ky, *How We Lost the Vietnam War* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), p. 48.

¹²¹ "Analysis of Situation," p. 5.

¹²² "Analysis of Situation," p. 5.

distracting influences” resulting from the power struggle between Khanh and Minh. He reported, “III Corps commander was immersed in Armed Forces Council matters and until 30 December had scant time for tactical operations. His boss, General Khanh, made himself unavailable to GHQ and to field commanders by holing up in Vung Tau,” a coastal town. “So preoccupied with non-military matters was the CINC that, though Binh Gia and Vung Tau are in the same province, Khanh appeared oblivious to the severity and implication of the continuing action, at least until 31 December.”¹²³ Of course, by then it was too late, and the ARVN units had been mowed down one by one. Again, the nature of political intervention in the South Vietnamese military had directly hindered its ability to conduct complex operations.

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of North Vietnam

Chapter 2 argued that North Vietnam’s political leaders generally adopted best practices. As a result, the intervention theory would predict that their units at Binh Gia should have demonstrated strong cohesion, sound tactics, and an ability to conduct complex operations. In fact, the evidence from the battle is consistent with these predictions.

First, the North’s unit cohesion appears to have been excellent. Despite being at the end of a nearly two-month excursion deep into South Vietnam, one which had already involved considerable combat, the forces at Binh Gia continued to demonstrate a strong will to fight, with individual soldiers motivated to stay in the battle and no reports of desertions or collapsing units.¹²⁴ American assessments echoed this point, citing the “excellent” morale of enemy units.¹²⁵ Westmoreland’s report also commented on the “strong determination” and “unusual confidence” of the VC forces.¹²⁶

Second, the North Vietnamese forces demonstrated tactical proficiency, reflecting their political leaders’ emphasis on merit-based promotions and rigorous, realistic training. Indeed, the North’s own history of the battle notes that “each unit... was given additional tactical and technical training” prior to the start of the campaign.¹²⁷ The Politburo also ensured that “many high-level cadre with experience in building up main force units and in leading and directing massed combat operations were sent south with Comrade Nguyen Chi Thanh,” the commander of the Binh Gia campaign.¹²⁸ Similarly, Westmoreland’s report noted that the North’s effort “was clearly well planned, directed, and executed. Forces were well uniformed, equipped, and trained.”¹²⁹ Although their weapons were fairly basic—heavy machine guns, recoilless rifles, submachine guns, and hand grenades—the soldiers knew how to use them.

Repeatedly, North Vietnamese forces also managed to use terrain to their advantage, concealing their defensive positions when conducting ambushes, as at the rubber plantation. They also demonstrated these skills when they managed to use what territory they did gain at Binh Gia on the night of December 4-5 to establish a base for firing onto the Duc Thanh military headquarters where they (correctly) believed the ARVN would respond first.

¹²³ “Analysis of Situation,” p. 8.

¹²⁴ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, pp. 140-1.

¹²⁵ “Binh Gia Action Report,” Defense Intelligence Bulletin, January 4, 1965, p. S-2, available in the Historian’s Working Files and Papers at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC.

¹²⁶ “Analysis of Situation,” pp. 7-8.

¹²⁷ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 138.

¹²⁸ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 137.

¹²⁹ “Analysis of Situation,” pp. 7-8.

Finally, the Binh Gia campaign provides at least some evidence of North Vietnam's ability to conduct complex operations. The campaign involved only some basic very basic combined arms activities, integrating artillery and infantry, although it should be noted that the ARVN failed to integrate even these two arms at both Ap Bac and Binh Gia. What Binh Gia most clearly demonstrated was the North's superior ability to engage in operations that combined both low-level initiative and high-level coordination. The Central Military Party Committee had made a decision in October 1964 to conduct a winter campaign deep in the South, and the military proved able to integrate the activities of several different kinds of units in pursuit of this larger goal. The North Vietnamese Navy, Main Force regiments, a COSVN artillery unit, and local forces such as the 445th all managed to work together in the battle, notably in the three-pronged attack on the Marines near the rubber plantation. The North proved flexible in its employment of a mobile division-sized force, moving it among several different locations and quickly setting up new ambushes in response to reports of ARVN's insertion of new units. While one could certainly imagine operations of greater complexity, the contrast between the North and South even with respect to this sort of basic integration is noticeable and seems attributable at least in part to the far more decentralized North Vietnamese command structure, better officers, better training, and better information management.

IV. The Battle for the Citadel at Hue During the Tet Offensive of 1968

The battle for the Citadel offers an opportunity to examine a large-scale, extended engagement involving the ARVN forces identified as being subject to better practices in political intervention, the 1st Division and the Hac Bao company. Evidence from the battle demonstrates where ARVN units were subject to forms of political intervention more similar to those implemented in North Vietnam, their battlefield effectiveness was much better. Both the PLAF/PAVN and the ARVN units at Hue demonstrated strong unit cohesion, tactical proficiency, and the ability to conduct both offensive and defensive complex operations—but the ARVN's fighting prowess in the battle was particularly notable given that it was outnumbered and trying to re-take territory for most of the battle. As such, the fight for the Citadel at Hue provides an especially convincing confirmation of the predictions in favor of the intervention theory generated in Chapter 2.

The battle took place during the North Vietnamese Tet Offensive of 1968. This offensive involved coordinated, near-simultaneous attacks during late January and early February 1968 by both PAVN regulars and Main Force PLAF units in 36 of South Vietnam's 44 provincial capitals, five of its 6 major cities, 64 of its 242 district capitals, and more than 50 hamlets (see map 6).¹³⁰ The North Vietnamese had spent months planning these attacks, stealthily infiltrating men and supplies in order to take advantage of the truce typically observed by both sides in honor of Tet, the year's biggest holiday. This offensive represented North Vietnam's first true attempt to take the fight to the cities, with the expectation that the people of the South would rise up and join them in the overthrowing the American-backed Thieu regime.¹³¹

¹³⁰ James H. Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive: a Concise History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. xvi.

¹³¹ For background, see Arthur J. Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp. 661-664, 668-9.

In that respect the offensive was a colossal miscalculation, and indeed, the venture decimated the PLAF, which was essentially never again able to field Main Force units.¹³² Again, South Vietnam's educated urban elite proved themselves hostile toward communism—unsurprising given their likely fate under such a regime.¹³³ In many of the population centers targeted during Tet, it was the citizens themselves who helped expel the invaders, curbing the offensive in a matter of hours or days. ARVN commanders also distinguished themselves in repelling attacks on Da Nang, Ban Me Thuot, and Dalat, although in many areas of the country, particularly the Delta, the Americans had to come to the rescue.¹³⁴ In most of the country, the offensive ended almost as quickly as it began, by the first week in February.

Intense, sustained fighting occurred at three locations, however: Khe Sahn, Saigon, and Hue. Khe Sahn was a U.S. base in the far northwest corner of South Vietnam, and therefore its defense was almost entirely an American matter. In Saigon the ARVN forces played a much larger role, but the American commander there had sensed an attack was coming and had pulled his combat forces back from the border to defend the city. As a result, fifty-three U.S. maneuver battalions, along with a hefty dose of American airpower, were available to help defend the city.¹³⁵

It was in the fight for Hue, the ancient capital of Vietnam, that the ARVN faced the most sustained, intense test of its battlefield effectiveness against PAVN forces during the Tet offensive, mainly because of the very minimal involvement there by the Americans. Indeed, there were fewer than 200 American soldiers normally stationed in Hue, and the nearest U.S. combat base, Phu Bai, was eight kilometers to the southeast. Additionally, the North Vietnamese had correctly predicted that the country's northeast monsoon would impede aerial re-supply and close air support operations in Hue, further limiting the United States' ability to aid the ARVN in defending the city. Finally, once the battle for Hue began, the U.S. forces that were there chose to divide the battlefield with their ARVN counterparts, creating a sector for which the ARVN forces were independently responsible.¹³⁶

For all of these reasons, the battle for Hue offers the best opportunity during the years of extensive U.S. combat involvement in Vietnam to examine ARVN and PAVN battlefield effectiveness. In particular, the fighting at Hue affords a clear opportunity to evaluate both sides' unit cohesion, tactical proficiency, and performance of complex operations, both offensively and defensively. As such, the battle against offers a good opportunity to test the predictions of the intervention theory.

[SEE NEXT PAGE]

¹³² Willbanks, *Tet Offensive*, p. 81.

¹³³ These fears were borne out after 1975, when many were killed, imprisoned, or "re-educated."

¹³⁴ Willbanks, *Tet Offensive*, p. 40-1. Unfortunately, information on many of these engagements is sparse. It is unclear why some of these units seem to have performed better than others. More will be known after the publication of Erik Villard's forthcoming book on the Tet offensive, which will enable further testing of my hypotheses.

¹³⁵ Willbanks, *Tet Offensive*, pp. 31-39.

¹³⁶ Willbanks, *Tet Offensive*, pp. 44-49.

THE BATTLE FOR THE CITADEL AT HUE, 1968		
	North Vietnam	South Vietnam
<i>Battle summary</i>		
Tactical orientation	Offensive, then defensive	Defensive, then offensive
Plan	Take and hold the Citadel at Hue as part of the larger Tet Offensive	Defend and then re-capture the Citadel from PAVN and PLAF
Weapons	Mortars, machine guns	Light anti-tank weapons, machine guns, M-16 rifles
Manpower	8,000 initially, then increasing to probably double that ¹³⁷	A few hundred initially, then rising to 12,500 ¹³⁸
Losses	1,042 KIA, several times that number WIA	384 KIA, 1800 WIA
<i>Effectiveness summary</i>		
Unit cohesion?	Yes	Yes, in 1 st division
Tactical proficiency?	Yes	Yes, in 1 st division
Complex operations?	Yes	Yes, in 1 st division
Confirms theory?	Yes	Yes

The Forces on Each Side

The Perfume River slices the city of Hue into two parts: an ancient northern half protected by an imperial fortress known as the Citadel, and a southern half known as the New City that is largely residential. The Citadel is a square whose corners face north, south, east, and west, covering three square miles in area, with outer walls thirty feet high and forty feet thick. (See map 7.) Its southeast wall borders the river, while the other three walls are bordered by a deep moat. At the time of the battle, the inside of the Citadel housed a great many shops and homes, while its outer walls held numerous bunkers and tunnels built by the Japanese during World War II.¹³⁹ Inside the Citadel, key landmarks included Tay Loc Airfield in the western corner and the old Imperial Palace on the southeastern wall, above which flew the Republic of Vietnam flag.

The headquarters of the 1st Infantry Division sat in the Citadel's northern corner, where the division was commanded by General Ngo Quang Truong, a highly respected officer who "had won his position through ability and combat leadership."¹⁴⁰ Most of the 1st Division's combat units were actually outside the city, however, guarding the routes of advance. Only its Hac Bao (Black Panther) unit was actually stationed in the Citadel. The Hac Bao was commanded by 1st Lt. Tran Ngoc Hue, a protégé of Truong's recognized as a rising star in the ARVN. He, too, had earned his position based on merit rather than political

¹³⁷ This is a very rough estimate inferred from Willbanks, *Tet Offensive*, p. 45.

¹³⁸ This is a rough estimate based on the presence of the 1st Division and the insertion of 3 Airborne battalions. ARVN typical divisions had about 10,000 men, and an average battalion had about 833 soldiers, so ARVN forces probably totaled no more than 12,500. This estimate is very generous because it assumes that all of the 1st Division made it back inside the Citadel intact and does not reflect that the Airborne forces arrived at the battle late and left early.

¹³⁹ Smith, *Siege*, p. 8.

¹⁴⁰ Willbanks, *Tet Offensive*, p. 46; and Smith, *Siege*, p. 13-14.

connections, and as such, he was a rare exception to the normal rules governing military promotion in South Vietnam.¹⁴¹

For their part, the North Vietnamese initially committed an estimated 8,000 troops to the battle at Hue, out of roughly 80,000 committed to the offensive overall.¹⁴² The forces at Hue included two PAVN regiments and 6 PLAF Main Force battalions. As the battle wore on, however, “the total Communist force in and around the city would grow to twenty battalions when three additional infantry regiments were dispatched to the Hue area from the Khe Sahn battlefield.”¹⁴³

The Battle for Hue

The battle for Hue swung like a giant pendulum, first in one direction, then back in the other: its first phase involved a North Vietnamese attack that overran all but the tiny 1st Division headquarters in the northern corner of the Citadel, but then its second phase saw the ARVN, led by the 1st Division and particularly its Hac Bao company, launch counter-attacks from this outpost, gradually regaining the lost ground. They were helped in the final days by the U.S. Marines, although for most of the battle the U.S. and ARVN forces operated separately, with the ARVN handling areas to the north of the river and the Marines to the south.¹⁴⁴

On the first morning of the Tet offensive, General Truong grew suspicious upon hearing reports of enemy attacks elsewhere in the country. After reviewing recent intelligence reports from I Corps, Truong issued alert orders to confine all troops to their barracks. Although some had already gone on leave for the holiday, many stayed in place and began defensive preparations. Truong also sent out his 36-man Reconnaissance team to protect the western approaches to the city.¹⁴⁵

The six platoons of the Hac Bao, numbering about 200 men and stationed in the western corner of the Citadel near Tay Loc Airfield, were sent to guard various avenues of advance. Lieutenant Hue sent three of his platoons south of the river to act as security at the provincial headquarters, a power station, and a prison. Two more were split up and dispatched to guard the gates entering the Citadel, leaving only one platoon and the headquarters staff, about 50 men in total, to thwart any attack inside the Citadel itself.¹⁴⁶

The events of January 31, 1968 would prove Truong’s suspicions correct. In the wee hours of the morning, PAVN and PLAF troops launched a massive attack on the Citadel. It followed a pattern similar to that seen in other cities targeted in the Tet offensive.¹⁴⁷ The North Vietnamese 6th Regiment, consisting of the 800th and 802nd Battalions, and reinforced with local PLAF troops, gathered along the western edge of the Citadel. Cued by a rocket barrage on the city from the mountains to the west, they attacked in the middle of the night, overrunning the ARVN forces guarding the western entrances. They soon “fanned out to begin a coordinated attack from west to east.”¹⁴⁸ Meanwhile, separate PAVN units also

¹⁴¹ Smith, *Siege*, p. 23.

¹⁴² Willbanks, *Tet Offensive*, p. 39.

¹⁴³ Willbanks, *Tet Offensive*, p. 45.

¹⁴⁴ Willbanks, *Tet Offensive*, p. 49.

¹⁴⁵ Col. Hoang Ngoc Lung, *The General Offensives of 1968-69* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1981), p. 78; and Smith, *Siege*, p. 125.

¹⁴⁶ Smith, *Siege*, p. 20.

¹⁴⁷ Willbanks, *Tet Offensive*, p. 31.

¹⁴⁸ Smith, *Siege*, p. 23.

overran the MACV compound south of the river and took control of the residential areas in Hue outside the Citadel, where they began rounding up supposed counter-revolutionaries.

Lt. Hue led the first organized resistance to the attack inside the Citadel. His Hac Bao soldiers fired back on the North Vietnamese with light anti-tank weapons (LAWs), machine guns, and M-16 fire. Fortunately, Hue had held several special training sessions for his unit on the use of the new LAWs, which proved quite effective in fending off the attackers.¹⁴⁹ Also coming to the initial defense of the Citadel was a platoon from the ARVN 1st Ordnance Company that happened to be in the area near the airfield.

According to George Smith, an American advisor in Hue during the offensive, “The unexpected heavy volley stopped the NVA [North Vietnamese Army, another name for the PAVN] attack cold and further disoriented the NVA troops. The enemy then tried a flanking movement to the right to skirt the fire coming from the ordnance compound and ran straight into the Hac Bao platoon. Hue’s troops... inflicted heavy casualties. The action forced the 800th Battalion to veer to the south and held up the 802nd, which was trying to push its way toward the ARVN 1st Division HQ along the northwestern wall.”¹⁵⁰

With the PAVN attack temporarily delayed, Truong ordered the Hac Bao and ordnance units to withdraw into the division headquarters in the northern corner of the Citadel. This key decision saved both the valuable Hac Bao unit from being destroyed piecemeal and also maintained a crucial foothold in the Citadel from which to launch ARVN’s eventual counteroffensive. Meanwhile, PAVN forces continued to move west, taking control of the lightly defended Imperial Palace, also inside the Citadel.¹⁵¹

Because he had managed to save his headquarters, General Truong was able to radio immediately for reinforcement. He ordered the four battalions of his 3rd Regiment, as well as 1st Division’s 4th Battalion, 2nd Regiment, and the 3rd Troop, 7th Armored Cavalry, to return to the Citadel from their various locations outside Hue. He also requested that Saigon airlift three Airborne battalions, the 2nd, 7th, and 9th, into Hue.

Unfortunately, none of these units could arrive immediately, so for the time being the headquarters would be defended only by the Hac Bao, the tiny Reconnaissance Company, and the non-combat 1st Infantry support personnel caught up in the fighting. Truong’s men had no heavy weapons, just a few jeep-mounted light machine guns and a few LAWs. They also had no artillery or air support, due both to the inclement weather and to the priority afforded U.S. forces struggling to defend the MACV compound in the southern half of Hue.¹⁵²

As the day wore on, the North attacked the ARVN headquarters three more times, but each time Truong’s men managed to repel the invaders. According to Smith, “Each attack became weaker as the enemy had to divert some of its resources to deal with ARVN reinforcements coming down Route 1 from the north. There would be one more attack on the 1st Division compound the night of 31 January, but it proved to be the last one. The enemy pulled back from the division CP [command post] and strengthened its defenses at the airfield. Other enemy troops set up a headquarters in the Imperial Palace compound, while others moved to the southeast to put pressure on Truong’s garrison from the south.”¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Smith, *Siege*, p. 24.

¹⁵⁰ Smith, *Siege*, p. 24.

¹⁵¹ Smith, *Siege*, p. 25-6.

¹⁵² Smith, *Siege*, p. 27.

¹⁵³ Smith, *Siege*, p. 28.

By February 2, some of Truong's requested reinforcements, including the Airborne battalions, had made their way to the Citadel by boat and helicopter.¹⁵⁴ According to a South Vietnamese history of the battle, "With these additional forces, the 1st Division finally retook the Tay Loc airfield inside the old citadel after two days of heavy fighting during which the enemy lost in excess of 200 killed."¹⁵⁵ Shortly thereafter, other elements of the 1st Division "fought their way to the An Hoa Gate, liberating most of the northwestern wall of the Citadel and resulting in an astounding additional 693 enemy killed in action (KIA). ARVN forces now controlled the more open areas of the northern sector of the Citadel and were poised to launch attacks throughout the remainder of the city."¹⁵⁶

Despite this progress, Truong could see by now that he was literally fighting a losing battle—the North Vietnamese continued to receive fresh supplies and troops, while his own forces were suffering more and more attrition and had no relief in sight. Unfortunately, U.S. and ARVN forces had never closed off the western resupply and infiltration routes to Hue.¹⁵⁷ As a result, "enemy forces were well dug in, and, from all appearances, willing to fight it out to the end."¹⁵⁸ Worst of all, the ARVN still lacked heavy weapons, a particular disadvantage when trying to retake well-defended positions nestled in the thick walls of the Citadel.¹⁵⁹

This is not to say that the ARVN did not keep trying. According to Smith, "The rest of General Truong's 3rd Regiment, the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Battalions, arrived on 7 February.... Each unit had been trying to assault the Citadel from the south after breaking free of enemy pressure at the outset of the battle. The 2nd and 3rd Battalions, which had been bypassed by the enemy invasion a week earlier, had slowly moved eastward along the northern shore of the Perfume River to the base of the Citadel, which they were unable to enter...." Even the Airborne performed surprisingly well.¹⁶⁰

But as Airborne casualties rose, Thieu soon wanted the units to return to Saigon.¹⁶¹ When Truong protested, he was eventually told that three battalions of Vietnamese Marines would replace the departing Airborne.¹⁶² Not reassured by this promise, Truong finally asked the Americans for help. In response, the United States sent in three mechanized U.S. Marine companies.¹⁶³

The U.S. Marines soon got a sense of what Truong's men had been up against. The Citadel's walls were sturdy and its streets narrow, making tanks necessary yet cumbersome to employ. "The NVA forces had had a couple of weeks to prepare their defensive positions in the Citadel," Smith explains. "Firing positions were cleverly concealed not only in buildings and on rooftops but in spider holes at street level."¹⁶⁴ Despite heavy pounding by naval guns and U.S. airpower, including high-explosive bombs, napalm, and tear gas, the North Vietnamese kept firing, demonstrating "fortitude and resilience."¹⁶⁵

¹⁵⁴ Smith, *Siege*, p. 64.

¹⁵⁵ Lung, *General Offensives*, p. 80.

¹⁵⁶ Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York: NYU Press, 2008), p. 110.

¹⁵⁷ Smith, *Siege*, p. 91.

¹⁵⁸ Smith, *Siege*, p. 121.

¹⁵⁹ Smith, *Siege*, p. 128.

¹⁶⁰ Smith, *Siege*, p. 120-126.

¹⁶¹ Smith, *Siege*, p. 135.

¹⁶² Smith, *Siege*, p. 127; and Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, p. 112.

¹⁶³ Smith, *Siege*, p. 131.

¹⁶⁴ Smith, *Siege*, p. 141.

¹⁶⁵ Smith, *Siege*, p. 143.

After several delays, the South Vietnamese Marines also finally arrived at the Citadel. The Hac Bao, which had also just helped the 3rd Regiment break out of an encirclement toward the southern corner of the Citadel, quickly moved to guide the Vietnamese Marines into position and then helped them push the North's force back along the northwestern wall.¹⁶⁶ Meanwhile, the unit that the Hac Bao had just helped break free of the encirclement, the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Regiment (2/3), turned to the task of guarding the U.S. Marines' right flank as the armored companies moved through the city.¹⁶⁷

The U.S. Marines did not have an easy go. Although the ARVN Airborne had fought well, its withdrawal by Saigon had been premature, ceding several key defensive positions to the PAVN and PLAF, who now used them to fire on the advancing U.S. Marines.¹⁶⁸ In fact, it was this error that lay at the root of many later Marine accounts disparaging ARVN performance in Hue.¹⁶⁹ Fighting was hand-to-hand at times, and U.S. Marine casualties were high.¹⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the U.S. Marines did have the benefit of organic heavy weapons, particularly recoilless rifles. Additionally, the weather had cleared, enabling the use of supporting airpower.¹⁷¹ Truong's men had enjoyed neither of these advantages.

Indeed, the ARVN 2/3 on the Marines' flank continued to face a very tough fight. According to historian Andrew Wiest, "The NVA set up mutually supporting defensive positions in buildings that flanked the winding roads, with snipers firing from upper floors and numerous defenders in lower windows or doorways creating a deadly crossfire that converted the streets into kill zones. Lacking heavy-weapons support, 2/3 attempted to deal with such defenses by having elements of the battalion lay down covering fire while others dashed forward."¹⁷² Eventually, the Hac Bao went back in to help both the Marines and the 2/3 "in the final push toward the southeastern wall of the Citadel."¹⁷³

Meanwhile, elements of the U.S. 1st Cavalry helped seal the western routes of entry that had been providing fresh troops and supplies to the North Vietnamese throughout the battle.¹⁷⁴ By February 22, the PAVN and PLAF began to withdraw, ceding the Citadel piece by piece to the Marines and the 2/3.¹⁷⁵ Finally, "on the night of February 23-24, an ARVN battalion launched a surprise attack westward along the wall in the southeastern section of the Citadel. A savage battle ensued, but the South Vietnamese pressed the attack. The PAVN, suffering from a lack of ammunition and supplies, fell back. Allied forces overran some of the last positions; VC and PAVN troops abandoned the others as they withdrew westward to sanctuaries in Laos."¹⁷⁶ Members of the 2/3 soon took down the NLF flag and raised the South Vietnamese banner over the Citadel, while the Hac Bao retook the Imperial Palace.

The battle officially ended on March 2.¹⁷⁷ In 26 days of fighting, the ARVN had lost 384 killed and 1,800 wounded, while Allied forces claimed to have killed over 5,000 North

¹⁶⁶ Smith, *Siege*, p. 145.

¹⁶⁷ Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, p. 113.

¹⁶⁸ Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, p. 113.

¹⁶⁹ Smith, *Siege*, p. 167.

¹⁷⁰ Willbanks, *Tet Offensive*, p. 54.

¹⁷¹ Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, p. 112.

¹⁷² Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, p. 114.

¹⁷³ Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, p. 115.

¹⁷⁴ Smith, *Siege*, p. 146.

¹⁷⁵ Smith, *Siege*, p. 161.

¹⁷⁶ Willbanks, *Tet Offensive*, p. 54.

¹⁷⁷ Smith, *Siege*, p. 163.

Vietnamese soldiers.¹⁷⁸ Later a captured North Vietnamese document revealed that losses in Hue had been significantly lower, about 1,042 killed and several times that number wounded. Among the dead were 1 regimental commander, 8 battalion and 24 company commanders, and 72 platoon leaders.¹⁷⁹

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of South Vietnam

Chapter 2 argued that because patterns of training and promotion were different for the ARVN 1st Division, particularly the Hac Bao company, its performance should have been markedly better than that of other ARVN units. In fact, the fighting at Hue bears out this prediction, showing that where political intervention varied in the ARVN, so did battlefield effectiveness. Compared to the earlier battles examined, ARVN soldiers at Hue performed far more cohesively and skillfully, even showing the ability to perform some complex operations. In fact, they demonstrated effectiveness comparable to that of North Vietnamese forces.

First, ARVN cohesion at Hue was, in general, excellent. Unlike other units in other battles, the ARVN stood and fought in the Citadel over a long period of time in extremely difficult conditions. Yet there are no reports of unit collapse, and the battle is replete with incidents in which units called to fight aggressively moved to do so. For example, Truong's outlying battalions all showed up to fight in Hue, even though they could have fled, and even though they all encountered resistance on their approach. One South Vietnamese history of the battle notes this fighting spirit explicitly, praising "the laudably high morale of our troops. After being forced into a defensive posture, ARVN units had fought gallantly and continued to fight well despite persuasive enemy appeals to surrender."¹⁸⁰ Moreover, most accounts of the battle tie the 1st Infantry and Hac Bao cohesion directly back to the merit of these units' leaders, suggesting that promotion policies governing these units had a clear impact on their performance.¹⁸¹

Second, the ARVN units in the Citadel repeatedly demonstrated strong tactical proficiency. Although severely handicapped by a lack of heavy weapons, the ARVN proved skillful in the use of the weapons they did have, notably the LAWs, as well as machine guns and rifles. The fact that they could continue to repulse the multiple attacks on their headquarters on the first night of the offensive and then even manage to retake areas like the airfield later in February further testifies to their tactical abilities. Again, it contrasts sharply with the performance of other units in the ARVN who seemed to display basic problems following orders and using their weapons. Where ARVN units were trained regularly and realistically, their skills clearly improved.

Third, the ARVN in the Citadel consistently demonstrated the ability to engage in large-scale coordinated operations that conformed to an overall plan yet nevertheless required substantial initiative on the part of individual soldiers and lower-level commanders. The mere fact that Truong began the battle with hardly any of his troops actually in the Citadel, yet was able to draw them all in to fight in a coordinated fashion at multiple different locations, testifies to the fact that the 1st Division was capable of more than basic tactical proficiency.

¹⁷⁸ Willbanks, *Tet Offensive*, p. 54.

¹⁷⁹ Lung, *General Offensives*, p. 84.

¹⁸⁰ Lung, *General Offensives*, p. 85.

¹⁸¹ Smith, *Siege*, p. 23.

Similarly, the Hac Bao unit not only managed to stay intact and perform adequately in individual engagements despite its platoons' dispersal at the start of the battle, but it also repeatedly moved to different areas across the battlefield in response to the needs of the various battalions in the 1st Division and the actions of the enemy. On the initial night of the battle it even proved able to conduct a fighting withdrawal from the airfield to the headquarters. This behavior suggests that at least some parts of the ARVN were capable of complex operations that aggregated tactical skills into larger-scale, more difficult activities.

Along these same lines, the 2/3 displayed particularly strong abilities to conduct complex operations as it cleared the city while operating on the U.S. Marines' right flank. It carefully coordinated its movement with the firepower that it did have. It also engaged in the carefully planned surprise attack that finally ended the battle. This success and the others show clearly the benefits of a unified, decentralized command structure, compared to the centralized, fragmented arrangements seen in earlier battles.

To be sure, the battle for the Citadel at Hue was won not only by the ARVN, but also by the U.S. Marines. Indeed, some histories of the battle have referred derisively to the ARVN as mere "spectators" in the fight for the Citadel, which they claim was won solely by the Marines.¹⁸² On this subject, a few facts about the Marines' role are worth bearing in mind.

First, the U.S. Marines did not enter the battle until late February, after significant evidence of the ARVN's independent battlefield effectiveness in the Citadel was evident. This takes nothing away from the U.S. Marines' fighting prowess but merely suggests that whatever their role in concluding the battle, the ARVN's capabilities can still clearly be evaluated in the long period of battle prior to Marine involvement. Second, although there is no doubt of the U.S. Marines' crucial contribution to the battle's outcome, they enjoyed several enormous advantages that the ARVN did not possess for most of the battle: organic heavy weapons, air and artillery support, aerial resupply, and clear weather.¹⁸³

Additionally, perhaps by sheer bad luck, the ARVN were responsible for the toughest sectors of North Vietnamese resistance even after the Marines' entry into the battle. As Smith later reflected, "Having witnessed fighting on both sides of the Perfume River, I believe that the enemy resistance was strongest in the Citadel, particularly in the west and southwest sectors where ARVN troops were deployed. That area of operations was the closest point to the enemy's command and resupply headquarters. The ARVN units, lacking the marines' heavy weapons capability, particularly tanks and 106mm recoilless rifles, faced fresh troops almost daily for three weeks."¹⁸⁴ Their performance is all the more remarkable in this light. Indeed, the Marines' fight would have been even more difficult had Truong not maintained the initial foothold in his headquarters, recaptured Tay Loc airfield, and then attached the 2/3 to the Marines' right flank as a guide through the city.¹⁸⁵

Finally, many U.S. Marine accounts of the battle mistakenly conflate ARVN performance outside the Citadel in the southern half of Hue—the area of operations where most U.S. Marines were engaged—with that of the 1st Division inside the Citadel. ARVN units south of the Perfume River did in fact perform poorly and also engaged in significant looting from their own citizens after the U.S. Marines had cleared neighborhoods.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸² Keith Nolan, *Battle for Hue: Tet, 1968* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1983), p. 172.

¹⁸³ Smith, *Siege*, p. 141.

¹⁸⁴ Smith, *Siege*, p. 168.

¹⁸⁵ Lung, *General Offensives*, p. 84. This view is echoed in Smith, *Siege*, p. 165.

¹⁸⁶ Nolan, *Battle*, pp. 76, 87-8.

However, these units were not from the 1st Division or Hac Bao, and their behavior should not detract from the credit due the ARVN inside the Citadel.¹⁸⁷ If anything, U.S. Marine accounts of poor ARVN effectiveness in the southern half of the city merely confirm the general predictions of the intervention theory, that most ARVN units did not fight cohesively or proficiently and that the 1st Division and Hac Bao were exceptions to the rule, along with some instances of Airborne troops fighting well during the limited time that Saigon allowed their deployment.

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of North Vietnam

Chapter 2 argued that North Vietnam's political leaders generally adopted best practices with regarding to intervention in the military. As a result, the intervention theory would predict that during the Tet offensive the PAVN and PLAF units should have demonstrated strong cohesion, sound tactics, and an ability to conduct complex operations. In fact, the evidence from Hue is consistent with these predictions.

First, the cohesion of the North Vietnamese forces was again remarkable. They persisted in their hold of the city for nearly a month, despite having to subsist in defensive positions that in most cases were less than hospitable. Although the PAVN and PLAF clearly had an evacuation route out of the city to the west, there is little evidence that any of their forces used it to flee the battlefield. Moreover, the North Vietnamese engaged in repeated attacks when trying to take their objectives in the Citadel, for example, their three attacks on the headquarters compound on the first night of the offensive. This sort of offensive activity suggests that their commitment to succeeding in their mission was more than perfunctory and that cohesion was high. Indeed, the PAVN history of the battle praises the "high resolve" of its fighters at Hue.¹⁸⁸ (Of course, this version of history also claims that "the population of Hue city rose up in insurrection," which did not occur.)¹⁸⁹

Second, the North Vietnamese demonstrated excellent tactical proficiency, as the all accounts of the battle reflect. Although they lacked anything heavier than mortars and machine guns inside the city, the PAVN and PLAF troops knew how to use their weapons and were described as "skillful" and as having clearly "rehearsed their attacks beforehand."¹⁹⁰ Just as important, they also knew how to use the urban terrain of Hue for cover and concealment while trying to take or defend territory, another area in which they had received special training.¹⁹¹

Third, the North Vietnamese attack on the Citadel clearly showed their ability to aggregate tactical abilities into complex operations. The North Vietnamese repeatedly combined their arms and coordinated the activities of multiple different types of units to produce maximum effect, both offensively and defensively. In the attack's initial phase, for example, the infantry of the 6th Regiment coordinated its movement with the rocket barrage from the mountains to the west. Then the battalions of the 6th, the 800th, and 802nd overran Hue from west to east in a synchronized attack. As the PAVN history proudly notes, "Because our plan was detailed and the organization and command of our approach march was properly handled (in spite of the fact that we had a large number of forces and had to divide the approach march into many columns, cross many rivers and streams, and bypass

¹⁸⁷ Smith, *Siege*, p. 167.

¹⁸⁸ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, pp. 219.

¹⁸⁹ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, pp. 218.

¹⁹⁰ Willbanks, *Tet Offensive*, p. 31.

¹⁹¹ Willbanks, *Tet Offensive*, p. 45; and Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 219.

many enemy outposts), all units reached their positions securely and on time.”¹⁹² As the battle progressed, the PAVN also successfully established blocking positions to attempt to interdict Truong’s reinforcements converging on the city.

Additionally, once they had taken over most of the Citadel, North Vietnamese forces proved themselves able to conduct impressive defensive operations that again combined arms and coordinated activities across different types of units. Both the ARVN and American histories note that the North Vietnamese skillfully established complex defensive positions with interlocking fields of fire.¹⁹³ Indeed, had these positions not been established, the United States’ heavy firepower never would have been needed.

All of this is not to say that the North Vietnamese performance was flawless. Indeed, in broader military terms the Tet offensive was a disaster, as it enabled the destruction of most of the PLAF Main Force units and also galvanized further South Vietnamese resistance. Additionally, even at the tactical-operational level, the North Vietnamese clearly did not achieve their objectives in Hue: for example, they failed to ever overrun Truong’s headquarters.¹⁹⁴ Nevertheless, the sheer length of the battle testifies to their battlefield effectiveness—as well as to that of the ARVN units responsible for defense of the Citadel.

V. The Invasion of Laos, 1971

The invasion of Laos offers an opportunity to gauge the battlefield effectiveness of both North and South Vietnam after more than five years of direct U.S. combat involvement in the war, including intensified attempts at training the South Vietnamese. By this time, three full years after the Tet Offensive, the threat to the South had become undeniably clear, which should have produced strong pressures for improved ARVN performance. Indeed, as the United States’ own after-action report noted of the invasion of Laos, “Operation Lam Son 719 was a real test of the effectiveness of the RVNAF and the Vietnamization program.”¹⁹⁵ This was mainly because U.S. combat forces and advisors were not authorized to cross the border into Laos, making the fighting a much clearer reflection of the actual capabilities of the ARVN and the PAVN.¹⁹⁶ The United States did provide fire support from bases inside South Vietnam, although poor weather greatly circumscribed the contribution that airpower could make.¹⁹⁷

Furthermore, the campaign in Laos involved attempts by both North and South Vietnam to engage in full-scale conventional warfare, offering a clear opportunity to examine the two sides’ unit cohesion and tactical proficiency, as well as their abilities to conduct complex operations. Additionally, both sides conducted both offensive and defensive operations involving multiple divisions—including, on the South Vietnamese side, regular

¹⁹² Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 218.

¹⁹³ Wiest, *Vietnam’s Forgotten Army*, p. 110.

¹⁹⁴ Smith, *Siege*, p. 55.

¹⁹⁵ “LAMSON 719 After Action Report,” Department of the Army, Headquarters, XXIV Corps, May 14, 1971, p. 99, available in the Historian’s Working Files and Papers at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC.

¹⁹⁶ Because of the Cooper-Church Amendment passed after the invasion of Cambodia, no U.S. advisors or combat forces could cross the border into Laos, although U.S. airpower and fire power from support bases inside South Vietnam did play a role in the battle. James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004), p. 98.

¹⁹⁷ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 102; Maj. Gen. Nguyen Duy Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, Indochina Monograph (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1977), p. 64.

divisions and the ARVN 1st Division. As such, the invasion of Laos provides an ideal opportunity to test the predictions of the intervention theory.

The evidence strongly confirms that theory. During the battle, ARVN units generally proved themselves incapable of unit cohesion, tactical proficiency, or complex operations, whether on the offense or the defense. The one clear exception to this pattern was the ARVN 1st Division, as the theory would predict. The 1st Division fought well across all three components of the dependent variable. All of the PAVN units also consistently demonstrated unit cohesion, tactical proficiency, and the ability to conduct complex operations, on both the defense and offense. Again, these outcomes are consistent with the predictions of the intervention theory about how military units should fight when they are subject to better forms of political intervention.

THE INVASION OF LAOS, 1971		
	North Vietnam	South Vietnam
<i>Battle summary</i>		
Tactical orientation	Defensive, then offensive	Offensive, then defensive
Plan	Ambush ARVN forces, overrun ARVN firebases, drive ARVN out of Laos	Raid Northern stronghold in Laos by establishing a chain of firebases, then withdraw
Weapons	Tanks, artillery, rifles, machine guns, mortars, rocket launchers	APCs, tanks, other vehicles, light anti-tank weapons, artillery, U.S. helicopters
Manpower	At least 30,000	17,000
Losses	~20,000	7,000+ KIA
<i>Effectiveness summary</i>		
Unit cohesion?	Yes	No, except 1 st Division and to a lesser extent the Marines
Tactical proficiency?	Yes	No, except 1 st Division
Complex operations?	Yes	No, except 1 st Division
Confirms theory?	Yes	Yes, except for Marine cohesion

The Forces on Each Side

The South Vietnamese invasion of Laos, known as Lam Son 719, began on January 30, 1971. It aimed to attack crucial nodes in the Ho Chi Minh trail, particularly two major supply areas known as Base Area 604 and Base Area 611.¹⁹⁸ These were located near a deserted village known as Tchepone, about 60 km inside Laos. The sole route of approach to Tchepone was an old French-built highway called Route 9, bordered to the south by the Xepon river, which flowed under triple canopy vegetation all the way to the village (see map 8).¹⁹⁹ Also to the south of Route 9, just adjacent to the Laotian border, was the Co Roc highland, a four-km mountain range that provided excellent observation of both Route 9 to

¹⁹⁸ Lam Son was the birthplace of a famous Vietnamese patriot, Le Loi, who defeated an invading Chinese army in 1427 A.D. The operation's numerical designation came from combining the year, 1971, with the main highway to be used, Route 9.

¹⁹⁹ Keith William Nolan, *Into Laos: the Story of Dewey Canyon II/Lam Son 719; Vietnam 1971* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1986), p. 14.

the west and Khe Sahn to the east. Farther west into Laos, south of Route 9 and the river, was a high escarpment that overlooked both. To the north of Route 9 was hilly terrain with heavy vegetation.²⁰⁰

To conduct Lam Son 719, the ARVN marshaled the 1st Division, as well as elements of the 1st Armor brigade, 3 Ranger battalions from I Corps, the Airborne division, and two Marine brigades. In total it committed about 17,000 troops to the operation.²⁰¹ The 1st Division was commanded by Brigadier General Phu, a man with extensive combat experience who was described as “competent and hard-working.”²⁰² Unfortunately, the other ARVN commanders in the operation did not have similarly sterling reputations. The I Corps commander, in charge of the overall operation, was Lt. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam, a man with little combat experience of his own who had already acquired the nickname “Bloody Hands” because of his fatally poor attention to operational issues.²⁰³ His primary interests were military administration and his daily game of tennis.²⁰⁴

Lt. Gen. Du Quoc Dong, equal in rank to Lam, commanded both the Airborne and Armor forces involved in the battle. A close political ally of Thieu, he too had little command experience and had already shown himself to lack initiative during an incursion into Cambodia the previous year. The Marine commander, Lt. Gen. Le Nguyen Khang, was not much better. An ally of Ky, he remained in Saigon throughout the operation and delegated most actual command decisions to Col. Bui The Lan, who was considered more competent.²⁰⁵

ARVN COMMANDERS AND THEIR FORCES IN LAM SON 719		
<i>Commander</i>	<i>Forces</i>	<i>Notes</i>
Phu	1 st Division	Combat veteran described as “competent” and “hard-working”
Lam	I Corps	Nicknamed “Bloody Hands”; no experience with a major campaign
Dong	Armor, Airborne, Rangers	Equal in rank to Lam; ally of Thieu
Khang	Marines	Equal in rank to Lam; ally of Ky; mostly delegated command to Col. Lan

The ARVN plan envisioned the Armor units moving directly down Route 9 while the other forces established a series of firebases along the sides of the narrow path to protect the advance (see map 9). Specifically, the 1st Division was to secure the Co Roc and the escarpment south of Route 9, while the 1st Airborne battalion and 1st Ranger battalion were to be dropped into the hilly terrain north of Route 9. The northern flanking forces would then to converge on Tchepone and Base Area 604, while the southern flanking forces were to converge in and clear out Base Area 611. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese Marines were to serve as reserve forces in the Khe Sahn area.²⁰⁶ In many ways, the operation was intended to

²⁰⁰ Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, pp. 26-8.

²⁰¹ Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, p. 127.

²⁰² Nolan, *Into Laos*, p. 105

²⁰³ Nolan, *Into Laos*, p. 104.

²⁰⁴ Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, p. 209.

²⁰⁵ Nolan, *Into Laos*, p. 105.

²⁰⁶ Nolan, *Into Laos*, p. 103-4.

be a replay of the previous year's successful (and largely unopposed) incursion into Cambodia.²⁰⁷

However, precisely because that operation had decimated supply routes through Cambodia, the North Vietnamese now recognized the importance of defending their base areas in Laos. According to the PAVN's official history, in late 1970 North Vietnam formed the 70th Corps-Sized Group, consisting of the 304th, 308th, and 320th Divisions, plus a number of specialty branch regiments and battalions, to counter any potential South Vietnamese invasion into Laos.²⁰⁸ By early 1971 North Vietnam forces in the area had, according to PAVN's later history, "grown to 60,000 troops, consisting of five divisions (308th, 304th, 320th, 324th, and 2nd), two separate infantry regiments (27th and 278th), eight artillery regiments, three engineer regiments, three tank battalions, six anti-aircraft regiments, and eight sapper battalions, plus rear service and transportation units."²⁰⁹ South Vietnamese estimates put enemy combat strength at more like 30,000, but either way, it is clear that North Vietnam had a large concentration of men in the area.²¹⁰

Sent to the front as the representative of the Central Military Party Committee and the High Command was Colonel General Van Tien Dung, and in command was Major General Le Trong Tun, Deputy Commander of the General Staff. The PAVN history adds that "many senior cadre from the general departments and specialty branches were sent to reinforce the front's staff agencies. This was a strong command structure with sufficient ability and authority to command all forces participating in the campaign and to coordinate operations."²¹¹ With these forces in place, the battle began on January 30, 1971.

The Battle

The initial phases of the invasion went well for South Vietnam. The ARVN Armor column advanced approximately 20 km along Route 9 and linked up with the Airborne. Five firebases were established along the way, with Airborne and Ranger units guarding the northern flank of the westward advance and the 1st Division guarding the southern flank. By the end of the first week, however, the forward advance of the Armor and Airborne had slowed, so "a decision was made to step up the operation by having the 1st Infantry Division quickly occupy the higher mountain tops south of the Xepon River and establish fire support bases there to support the Airborne Division's push toward Tchepone."²¹²

Although the 1st Division succeeded in this task, pushing south and successfully engaging the enemy at several points, ARVN Armor progress remained very slow. According to one account, "On 11 February, the attack ground to a halt.... The ARVN force just stopped attacking...."²¹³ Lacking orders urging them forward, "the South Vietnamese forces in Laos sat where they were."²¹⁴ Meanwhile, the initial sluggishness of the Armor advance had given the PAVN time to reinforce the area, activating what was soon revealed to be a dense network of defenses. The PAVN began to lay siege to stalled ARVN

²⁰⁷ This operation is discussed in more detail at the end of the chapter.

²⁰⁸ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 272.

²⁰⁹ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 274.

²¹⁰ Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, p. 131.

²¹¹ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, pp. 274.

²¹² Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, p. 74.

²¹³ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 105.

²¹⁴ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 105.

units isolated along Route 9, massing infantry, armor, and artillery to confront them piecemeal.²¹⁵

Soon the PAVN overran the Rangers' firebase, leaving the remaining two firebases guarded by the Airborne even more exposed. The first of these was soon overrun in a combined armor-infantry attack that the Airborne failed to repel, despite having significant quantities of light anti-tank weapons. U.S. airpower was of little use in defending these bases, because the PAVN intentionally hugged the South Vietnamese positions closely.²¹⁶

Seeing the Airborne's losses, Thieu became anxious that the division would be destroyed, so he suggested that it be removed from battle and replaced with the Marines. Lam had the sense to see the infeasibility of this suggestion: "such a relief under the combat conditions on that battlefield would be very hazardous."²¹⁷ Flying to Saigon to meet with Thieu, Lam instead proposed that the Airborne simply drop back to protect Route 9 from the north, while allowing the 1st Infantry alone to continue west. It would now be the 1st Division that would make a heliborne assault on Tchepone, with the 1st Marine brigade following behind it and the 3rd Marine brigade remaining in reserve.²¹⁸

Thieu accepted this plan and then adjusted the overall objective of the operation as well: the goal was now simply to reach Tchepone, rather than to destroy Base Areas 604 and 611. Reaching the town "had become more of a political and psychological symbol than an objective of practical military value. There was nothing of military importance in the ruined town; enemy supplies and war materiel were all stored in caches in the forests and mountains."²¹⁹ But the ARVN had to press on in service of this new directive.

The Airborne soon lost its remaining firebase under the pressure of continuing heavy infantry-armor attacks from the PAVN.²²⁰ Meanwhile, the 1st ARVN successfully executed heliborne assaults to the west, establishing three bases in the face of heavy resistance.²²¹ The 1st Division "fought aggressively, repeatedly engaged the enemy, and defeated him everywhere," getting to Tchepone in just three days.²²² The next day the 1st Division's rapid reaction force, the Hac Bao, also successfully landed near Tchepone and extracted the crew of a U.S. aircraft that had gone down as it supported the final attack. According to a South Vietnamese general whose memoirs are otherwise quite critical of ARVN performance in the operation, "The Black Panthers scored a major combat exploit by rescuing all the Americans and subsequently made contact with the enemy, sustaining light casualties but killing more than 60 Northern troops. During this violent action, they also seized 30 NVA automatic rifles, destroyed an anti-aircraft gun position, and found another 40 NVA soldiers killed by airstrikes."²²³

Inside Tchepone, the 1st Division found modest amounts of rice, weapons, and enemy dead, but the North Vietnamese had already moved most of their supplies farther west.²²⁴ Nevertheless, with some ability to claim victory, President Thieu made the decision to end the operation right away, on March 15. The extremely difficult task of returning to

²¹⁵ Hihn, *Lam Son 719*, pp. 76, 86.

²¹⁶ Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, pp. 84, 145.

²¹⁷ Hihn, *Lam Son 719*, p. 89.

²¹⁸ Hihn, *Lam Son 719*, p. 89.

²¹⁹ Hihn, *Lam Son 719*, p. 90.

²²⁰ Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, p. 96.

²²¹ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 108-9.

²²² Hihn, *Lam Son 719*, p. 98.

²²³ Hihn, *Lam Son 719*, p. 98.

²²⁴ Hihn, *Lam Son 719*, p. 127.

South Vietnam along Route 9 now fell to the 1st Division. Instead of this road having been secured by Armor and Airborne units as originally planned, the PAVN could now pounce on it from all directions: the 308th Division from the North; elements of the 320th and 304th Divisions from the east; the 2nd Division directly in the path of the ARVN 1st; and the 324th Division near the Co Roc, where the Marines had tried to enter the battle as reinforcements. A South Vietnamese general likened the PAVN to a hunter about to kill his prey by “locking its head and gripping its tail.”²²⁵

The 1st Division suffered extensive casualties as it fought its way back to positions from which it could be airlifted to South Vietnam.²²⁶ As the rear guard element, the 4th battalion of the 1st infantry regiment suffered particularly high losses in a day-long battle that left only thirty-two survivors. Nevertheless, the battalion did not break. It “had accomplished well its rear guard mission and in the process, had sacrificed nearly every man,” while inflicting much larger casualties on the North Vietnamese units on the attack.²²⁷ By contrast, the Armor and Airborne units did return, but their “withdrawal along Route No. 9 surely did not proceed as planned in an orderly and controlled manner.”²²⁸ The Marines also chose to make a hasty withdrawal rather than waiting for orders from General Lam.²²⁹

Total ARVN casualties were 9,065. The PAVN’s were estimated to be above 20,000, although this total includes numerous men killed by U.S. air strikes and artillery.²³⁰ Both sides claimed victory.

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of South Vietnam

Lam Son 719 was a nearly unmitigated disaster for the ARVN, which other than the 1st Division demonstrated virtually no battlefield effectiveness. Certainly, the North Vietnamese had known an attack was coming, and their defenses were prepared along the ARVN’s inevitable axes of advance. The simple geography of the area made the ARVN’s movements predictable, while the terrain, particularly the poor condition of Route 9, slowed the advance, as did bad weather at times.

Nevertheless, ARVN forces showed serious deficits in unit cohesion, tactical proficiency, and above all in the ability to conduct complex operations—deficits that were clearly linked to the nature of political intervention in the South Vietnamese military. Indeed, the only unit to have performed with adequate effectiveness during the invasion was the 1st Division, which was subject to different forms of intervention.

First, overall unit cohesion in the ARVN was poor. In particular, the Airborne and Rangers were not steadfast in their attempts to hold the firebases. As a South Vietnamese history put it, “When a FSB was threatened with being overrun, the only course of action our unit commanders took was to destroy the artillery, abandon the base, and extricate their troops by helilift.”²³¹ Lt. General James Sutherland, the American Corps commander involved in the operation, echoed these concerns, warning General Abrams, “I am very concerned about the discipline and morale of the airborne division,” because healthy,

²²⁵ Hihn, *Lam Son 719*, p. 113.

²²⁶ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 277; Hihn, *Lam Son 719*, p. 153; and Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 112.

²²⁷ Hihn, *Lam Son 719*, p. 108.

²²⁸ Hihn, *Lam Son 719*, p. 118, 163.

²²⁹ Hihn, *Lam Son 719*, p. 154.

²³⁰ Hihn, *Lam Son 719*, pp. 127-132.

²³¹ Hihn, *Lam Son 719*, p. 162.

unwounded troopers were attempting to leave the battle aboard supply helicopters. “The airborne infantry commander was among those who managed to get aboard the choppers,” reported General Sutherland. “I suspect that before this night is finished, the airborne troops may walk off.”²³²

The Armor units also shrank from the fight, abandoning two-thirds of their vehicles on Route 9, even though many were still in working order.²³³ These included 21 tanks, 26 armored personnel carriers, 13 bulldozers, two graders, and 51 other vehicles that had to be destroyed by U.S. airpower and artillery the next day to prevent them from falling into enemy hands.²³⁴ Again, many of these so-called elite troops did not live up to their reputations, fleeing the field as soon as they had the opportunity.

To be fair, the Marine units were described as “retaining unit integrity and cohesiveness,” which may in part have been attributable to their competent field commander, Col. Lan. But however good individual Marines might have been, their overall commander General Khang still ordered them to withdraw in defiance of orders from General Lam, “apparently to avoid a difficult battle,” making whatever cohesion they did have ultimately irrelevant to the battle’s final phases. It was only the 1st Division and the Hac Bao that actually received high praise for discipline and cohesion.²³⁵

Second, where they did stand and fight, most ARVN forces continued to display severe problems with basic tactical proficiency. For example, while there is no doubt that the Airborne troops faced difficult odds in defending their firebases, they were in fact armed with light anti-tank weapons that could have significantly impeded the PAVN’s armor-infantry attacks (and, in turn, protected the 1st Division’s eventual withdrawal down Route 9). But the Airborne troops repeatedly fired the weapons inside the minimum range needed to arm the projectile, rendering the weapons virtually useless. The Airborne troops apparently believed, or at least later reported, that the weapons were defective, though re-testing revealed that the weapons were in perfect order.²³⁶ The problem was not with the hardware, but with the ARVN’s lack of basic tactical skills—deficit that is not surprising in light of the intervention theory.²³⁷

Similar problems plagued the Armor units, where “gunners proved to be confused and hasty, firing from too far away and often too soon, thereby frequently causing deflections.”²³⁸ Additionally, armored vehicles were used primarily for transportation, not for maneuver or even firepower. As one ARVN general later lamented, “We had 300 armored vehicles but they could barely control 12 miles of road.”²³⁹

Meanwhile, none of these sorts of basic tactical problems were reported with regard to the 1st Division.²⁴⁰ It was instead described as “topping the honor roll,” “well led,” and “the number one ARVN combat unit.”²⁴¹ The 1st Infantry was also the only element that

²³² Quoted in Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 108.

²³³ Starry, *Armoured Combat*, p. 197; and Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, p. 155.

²³⁴ Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, p. 119.

²³⁵ Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, pp. 153-4.

²³⁶ Hihn, *Lam Son 719*, p. 144.

²³⁷ Nolan, *Into Laos*, p. 129.

²³⁸ Hihn, *Lam Son 719*, p. 88.

²³⁹ Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, p. 169.

²⁴⁰ Nolan, *Into Laos*, p. 259.

²⁴¹ Hihn, *Lam Son 719*, p. 153.

showed the ability to maneuver on foot rather than relying solely on motorized or airborne transport across the battlefield.²⁴²

Third, beyond basic tactics, Lam Son 719 was a damning indictment of the ARVN's ability to conduct complex operations. Repeatedly ARVN forces displayed an inability to combine arms. For example, more than eight years after Ap Bac, the ARVN still demonstrated an inability to coordinate movement with artillery or air support.²⁴³ Indeed, this shortcoming as described in the Laos operation was virtually identical to that noted by American advisors during the early 1960s.²⁴⁴

More importantly, the fracturing of the ARVN command structure profoundly hindered the application of low-level initiative in support of a higher-level plan, the real key to complex operations. For example, even if the Armor, Airborne, and Ranger units had been more cohesive or tactically proficient, it is not clear that these improvements would have translated in much greater fighting effectiveness, because the commanders of these units had the ability to refuse to participate in the joint campaign plan devised by Lam. According to a South Vietnamese officer's account, Lam

was virtually ignored by the two commanders of the Airborne and Marine divisions, lieutenant generals themselves who were more accustomed, as commanders of national strategic reserve forces, to answering directly to Saigon rather than responding to a corps commander. They contested Lam's orders and directives at every opportunity. Although Lam appealed to President Thieu for support, Thieu refused to reprimand Lam's subordinate commanders, even when their actions bordered on insubordination during the heat of the battle.²⁴⁵

For example, it was Dong who ordered the Armored units to stop moving forward in their advance early in the operation, and Khang who ordered his Marines to withdraw early.²⁴⁶

Why did Thieu refuse to rebuke, or better yet fire, Dong and Khang? Not because he lacked information about how his command arrangements were affecting the course of the battle.²⁴⁷ Rather, Thieu did not intervene because Thieu believed Dong's Airborne was the best safeguard against a coup, and because Khang's Marines secured the power of Thieu's rival, Ky, whom he did not wish to provoke.²⁴⁸ Thieu needed Dong's loyalty and Khang's continued neutrality. As one general put it, "the most important problem... was insubordination on the part of general reserve unit commanders who like many other generals considered themselves," correctly, "the pillars of the regime."²⁴⁹

At the same time that this sort of fracturing presented one set of problems, the centralization of ARVN command posed another. While Thieu allowed a paralyzing division of authority to persist among his generals, he used what authority he did retain to try to control the movement of units from Saigon, rather than devolving this power to Lam. Thieu's personal intervention in the course of the battle explains why the initial advance slowed, why the Airborne was replaced by the Marines midway through the operation, and

²⁴² Hihn, *Lam Son 719*, p. 161.

²⁴³ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 106-7.

²⁴⁴ Collins, p. 37.

²⁴⁵ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 112.

²⁴⁶ Nolan, *Into Laos*, p. 119.

²⁴⁷ Nolan, *Into Laos*, p. 155.

²⁴⁸ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, pp. 106 and 112.

²⁴⁹ Hihn, *Into Laos*, p. 158.

why the goals of the campaign were scaled back in a manner that made withdrawal far more difficult. Ultimately, the same elite forces tasked with conducting the invasion played vital roles in securing Thieu in power domestically, so his political intervention in the battle was focused on preserving these units.²⁵⁰

Only the 1st Division had a unified, decentralized command structure: it was directly controlled by Phu, who did not have to share authority with other generals or take tactical and operational orders from Saigon. Only the 1st Division, which was not responsible for backing any of the Republic's political leaders, actually followed Lam's orders and demonstrated some ability to conduct complex operations.²⁵¹ The result of these differing patterns of political intervention was clear. As the Deputy Senior Advisor to I Corps commented in his after-action report that despite the many ARVN shortcomings on display during Lam Son 719, "The 1st Division demonstrated the ability to conduct a large scale airmobile operation against a well trained, locally superior force. Many problems arose during the operation but most were solved on the spot."²⁵²

None of this is to suggest that Lam himself was a particularly worthy general, however. Even during this campaign, in which more than 7,000 ARVN soldiers would eventually lose their lives, Lam took breaks everyday to play tennis.²⁵³ Thieu had promoted him primarily based on political loyalty, and as the battle wore on Thieu eventually realized the gravity of this error. On February 23 he actually tried to replace Lam with General Do Cao Tri, the III Corps commander who had proven himself competent during the incursion into Cambodia the previous year.²⁵⁴ Unfortunately, Tri was killed in a helicopter crash on his way to take command, leaving Lam in charge.²⁵⁵ It is little wonder, then, that the larger ARVN force never proved able to conduct complex operations either offensively or defensively.

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of North Vietnam

Although Lam Son 719 inflicted heavy losses on the North Vietnamese and probably delayed the Easter Offensive of 1972, the battles in Laos reflected well on the PAVN's actual battlefield effectiveness. North Vietnamese leaders had adopted best practices in political intervention, which resulted in units that were highly cohesive and tactically proficient, consistent with the predictions of the theory. Most importantly, these units also demonstrated the ability to conduct complex operations.

First, regarding unit cohesion, the accounts of the battle actually offer very little comment on this subject except for a brief moment in the PAVN history that notes the "steadfast resolve" of its soldiers. In this case, though, absence of evidence may not be evidence of absence: neither the North's nor the South's record of the battle contains any accounts of PAVN surrender, PAVN withdrawals, or PAVN abandonment of positions. This stands in stark contrast to how both sides record the ARVN's performance. Another

²⁵⁰ Hihn, *Into Laos*, p. 158.

²⁵¹ Nolan, *Into Laos*, p. 105

²⁵² Terry L. Florence, "Final Combat Operation After Action Feeder Report, Lam Son 719," memo to Headquarters, U.S. Army Advisory Group, 1st Infantry Division (ARVN), April 25, 1971, p. 5, available in the Historian's Working Files and Papers at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC.

²⁵³ Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army*, p. 209.

²⁵⁴ General Tri's record in Cambodia is discussed later in the chapter.

²⁵⁵ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 108.

indicator of strong PAVN cohesion is that out of the tens of thousands of soldiers it had in theater, only 57 were taken prisoner.²⁵⁶

Second, and more concretely, the record of the battle is full of examples of the PAVN's clearly demonstrated tactical proficiency, which would be hard to execute in the absence of cohesion. For example, the PAVN units consistently made excellent use of the terrain surrounding Route 9 to conceal their positions, as well as to establish observation points for accurate fire.²⁵⁷ According to the U.S. after-action report, PAVN forces "registered mortar, artillery, and rocket fires on most potential landing or pick up zones in the area.... Consequently, nearly every landing and pick up zone came under indirect fire attack soon after any allied airmobile operation began."²⁵⁸ The PAVN also used the terrain to create "mutually supporting, well dug-in, crescent-shape, covered trench segments," called horseshoe blocks, which greatly slowed the ARVN advance.²⁵⁹

Additionally, the PAVN demonstrated great tactical proficiency in the area of air defense. The U.S. after-action report from Laos notes, "The NVA skillfully deployed throughout the Lam Son 719 operational area an extensive, sophisticated, well-integrated, highly mobile air defense system. Large numbers of anti-aircraft weapons of several calibers were strategically positioned, well-camouflaged, and effectively dug-in."²⁶⁰ It seems clear that PAVN soldiers possessed basic tactical skills and applied them more consistently than did the ARVN.

Third, and most importantly, the PAVN demonstrated the ability to aggregate basic tactical skills into complex operations at both the small- and large-unit levels. For example, even in very small units of ten to twelve members, the PAVN soldiers were capable of effectively combining arms such as small weapons, machine guns, mortars, and rocket launchers, to devastating effect and with excellent consistency.²⁶¹ According to an ARVN officer, "The enemy effectively coordinated all his capabilities, to include antiaircraft, artillery, mortars, and massive infantry formations."²⁶² Indeed, infantry and anti-aircraft gunners coordinated their movements especially closely so as to "hug" ARVN positions and prevent the application of American air support.²⁶³ Again, this coordination bespeaks an operational sophistication missing in most of the ARVN. Additionally, the PAVN proved able to coordinate the movement of a multi-division force, another task that the ARVN's convoluted command structure rendered impossible. In short, the battles of Lam Son 719 provide strong confirmation of the political intervention theory.

VII. The Easter Offensive, 1972

Coming only a year after the confrontation in Laos, the Easter Offensive of 1972 offers an opportunity to probe what, if anything, the two sides learned from that campaign.

²⁵⁶ Hihn, *Lam Son 719*, p. 131.

²⁵⁷ "Appendix 6 (Enemy Tactics) to Annex C (Intelligence) to Combat After Action Report: Lam Son 719," Headquarters, U.S. Army Vietnam, April 1, 1971, p. 2, available in the Historian's Working Files and Papers at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC.

²⁵⁸ "Appendix 6 (Enemy Tactics)," pp. 1-2.

²⁵⁹ Hihn, *Lam Son 719*, p. 143.

²⁶⁰ "Appendix 6 (Enemy Tactics)," p. 1.

²⁶¹ "Appendix 6 (Enemy Tactics)," p. 1.

²⁶² Hihn, *Lam Son 719*, p. 145.

²⁶³ "Appendix 6 (Enemy Tactics)," p. 1.

Indeed, 1972 saw the most widespread conventional fighting of the entire war, with major battles occurring in all four military zones of South Vietnam. Both sides attempted to conduct multi-division operations on both the offense and defense. Furthermore, U.S. ground forces had dwindled substantially by 1972 under the policy of Vietnamization.²⁶⁴

As will be argued below, though, the Easter Offensive is not as clean of a test of each side's battlefield effectiveness as one would like. It is true that the U.S. Army and Marines had a much more limited presence in Vietnam by 1972. Nevertheless, American advisors were still heavily involved in coordinating South Vietnamese military operations—and unlike in Lam Son 719, these advisors were actually at the scene of all the major battles, greatly enhancing their contribution to ARVN fighting effectiveness, especially in the attempt to conduct complex operations.

Most importantly, however, U.S. airpower, and to a lesser extent U.S. artillery and naval gun fire, played an overwhelmingly prominent role on the battlefield during the Easter Offensive (see chart below). Sources from North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and the United States all agree: more than merely “supporting” ARVN forces or “tying down” PAVN forces, U.S. firepower repeatedly proved to be the decisive element that determined who won and lost particular engagements.²⁶⁵

U.S. FIXED-WING STRIKE SORTIES IN SOUTH VIETNAM, 1972²⁶⁶					
	March	April	May	June	<i>Totals by type</i>
USAF tactical air	247	3,032	7,516	5,310	16,105
USAF gunships	24	407	491	325	1,247
USAF B-52s	689	1,608	2,223	2,207	6,727
U.S. Navy	128	4,683	3,247	2,040	10,098
U.S. Marine Corps	-	537	1,381	1,937	3,855
<i>Totals by month</i>	1,088	10,267	14,858	11,819	

Although it is important not to fixate on battle outcomes per se, U.S. firepower remains an extremely powerful confounding variable in any attempt to gauge South and North Vietnamese effectiveness in the Easter Offensive. The signal to noise ratio is simply much lower here than for the other battles and campaigns examined in the chapter.

Nevertheless, the analysis seeks to isolate these signals as much as possible, and it finds that, where discernable, they lend some support to the intervention theory. In general, the Easter Offensive revealed PAVN forces to have very impressive unit cohesion and tactical proficiency, as well as the ability to conduct complex operations. By contrast, the ARVN generally continued to demonstrate serious deficits in basic cohesion and proficiency, and virtually no ability to conduct complex operations. Again, these deficits were directly attributable to the nature of political intervention in the South Vietnamese military.

²⁶⁴ At the end of 1971, the United States had 158,120 soldiers in South Vietnam, but by the end of 1972, only 24,000 remained. Dale Andradé, *America's Last Vietnam Battle: Halting Hanoi's 1972 Easter Offensive* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2001), p. 7.

²⁶⁵ For a South Vietnamese perspective, see Lt. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), especially p. 172. For a U.S. perspective, see Capt. David K. Mann, *The NVA 1972 Invasion of Military Region I: Fall of Quang Tri and Defense of Hue*, Project CHECO Report, January 22, 1973, available in the Historian's Working Files and Papers at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC.

²⁶⁶ All data taken from James Willbanks, *The Battle of An Loc* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 158.

And again, the exceptions to this pattern proved the rule. The ARVN 1st Division, where political intervention was much closer to best practices, continued to perform considerably better than the other ARVN units in the Easter Offensive. Additionally, other ARVN units involved in the fighting, notably the 23rd Division and I Corps, each at least improved their performance somewhat after changes in the nature of political intervention in these units occurred during the Easter Offensive itself. All of this additional variation in performance within the ARVN again suggests the importance of the political intervention variable.

THE EASTER OFFENSIVE, 1972		
	North Vietnam	South Vietnam
<i>Battle summary</i>		
Tactical orientation	Offensive, then defensive	Defensive, then offensive
Plan	Three-prong, multi-division attack to take and hold territory throughout South Vietnam	Defend and then re-take areas captured by PAVN forces
Weapons	T-54 tanks, 130-mm guns, 160-mm mortars, rockets, Sagger anti-tank missiles, anti-aircraft guns and missiles, including the SA-7	M-41 tanks, TOW missiles, artillery; plus U.S. airpower, artillery, and naval gunfire
Manpower	14 divisions, 26 independent regiments, and supporting armor and artillery units	14 divisions, 2 independent regiments, supporting armor and artillery units, plus local Territorial Forces
Losses	~100,000+ casualties	~8,000 KIA, ~24,000 WIA
<i>Effectiveness summary</i>		
Unit cohesion?	Yes	No, except 1 st Division
Tactical proficiency?	Yes	No, except 1 st Division
Complex operations?	Yes	No, except 1 st Division
Confirms theory?	Yes	Yes

Finally, it is also important to preemptively acknowledge the sheer scale of the fighting in 1972. The Easter Offensive and the response to it raged across huge swaths of South Vietnam and prompted operations of all sizes and kinds by both sides. The only major scholarly work to examine even close to all of the fighting runs more than 500 pages, and even it has to pick and choose what to cover.²⁶⁷ Data remain sparse on some parts of the campaign, particularly in the Delta.

Because the goal here is not to provide a thorough historical rendition of the entire campaign, the analysis focuses only on the battles within the Easter Offensive that offer the best tests of the theory—instances about which information is available, instances in which the United States was least involved, and, crucially, instances in which the nature of political intervention in the ARVN shifted during the campaign, which should have produced shifts in battlefield effectiveness. As such, this section deals primarily with the battles in the north

²⁶⁷ Andradé, *America's Last Vietnam Battle*.

for Quang Tri and Hue, which occurred in two major phases, and the battles in Central Vietnam for Tan Canh and Kontum.

In both of these cases, there is sufficient information to gauge what happened; there was at least some fighting that occurred without major U.S. involvement; and there were shifts in the nature of political intervention in the ARVN during the offensive, which should have caused shifts in ARVN battlefield effectiveness as well. While far from a complete examination of the battles of 1972, these fights were central to the course and overall outcome of the Easter Offensive. The section below also briefly addresses the fighting near Saigon for Tay Ninh and An Loc, although only in enough depth to determine whether it provides disconfirming evidence, as it does not constitute a particularly useful test of the theory.

The Forces on Each Side

The Easter Offensive involved a massive PAVN conventional assault along three main avenues of advance into South Vietnam. First, on March 30, 1972, three North Vietnamese infantry divisions attacked into Quang Tri province across the DMZ and from sanctuaries in Laos to the west. Total PAVN forces in this area of operations included three additional infantry regiments, two anti-aircraft divisions, nine field artillery regiments, two tank and armored regiments, two engineer regiments, and 16 battalions of sapper, signal and transportation troops.²⁶⁸

Facing the PAVN in Military Region 1 (also known as MR-1 or the I Corps Tactical Zone) was the ARVN I Corps, commanded by General Hoang Xuan Lam—still in charge despite his disastrous performance in Lam Son 719 the previous year.²⁶⁹ Directly defending the DMZ was the ARVN 3rd Division, under the command of General Vu Van Giai, considered to be a very good officer.²⁷⁰ In addition to this newly established division, formed to replace the departing U.S. Marines, I Corps included the 1st Division, still under the command of Major General Pham Van Phu, as well as the 2nd Division, the 51st Infantry Regiment, the 1st Ranger Group, and the 1st Armor Brigade.²⁷¹

[SEE ON NEXT PAGE]

²⁶⁸ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 289.

²⁶⁹ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 1.

²⁷⁰ Andradé, *America's Last Vietnam Battle*, p. 34.

²⁷¹ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 16.

ARVN COMMANDERS AND THEIR FORCES AT THE START OF THE EASTER OFFENSIVE		
<i>Commander</i>	<i>Forces</i>	<i>Notes</i>
<i>Military Region I</i>		
Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam	I Corps	Same Corps commander responsible for Lam Son 719 disaster
Gen. Vu Van Giai	3 rd Division	Considered a good officer, but lacked command authority
Maj. Gen. Pham Van Phu	1 st Division	Combat veteran described as “competent” and “hard-working”; same commander as in Lam Son 719
<i>Military Region II</i>		
Lt. Gen. Ngo Dzu	II Corps	Little command experience, malleable, meek, considered to be one of the worst leaders in the ARVN ²⁷²
Colonel Le Duc Dat	22 nd Division	Well known for corruption; considered one of the worst commanders in the army
Colonel Ly Tong Ba	23 rd Division	The same young captain who commanded M-113 unit at Ap Bac; owed his low rank (given his age and experience) to lack of corruption; considered highly competent

The second major front of the offensive occurred in Military Region 2, where the PAVN attacked both Kontum and Binh Dinh provinces during April 1972. Here the PAVN forces included two infantry divisions; four separate infantry regiments; five artillery, engineer, and sapper regiments; six anti-aircraft battalions; and one tank battalion.²⁷³

Facing them were the ARVN 22nd and 23rd Infantry Divisions, as well as one independent infantry regiment. The 22nd was commanded by Colonel Le Duc Dat, well known for his corruption, while the ARVN 23rd was commanded by Colonel Ly Tong Ba, the man who had commanded the M-113 unit at Ap Bac as a young captain in 1963. Not a general officer despite commanding a division, Ba owed his low rank “to his unrepentant opposition to the corruption and incompetence that riddled both the Thieu regime and the South Vietnamese military.”²⁷⁴ Unsurprisingly, the Americans considered him “one of the best commanders in the army.”²⁷⁵

Overall command of II Corps lay with Lieutenant General Ngo Dzu, headquartered in Pleiku city and better known for his “malleability and meekness than for his command experience.”²⁷⁶ Indeed, General Dzu had held few combat command positions, was not comfortable in such a large operational command, and was considered to be one of the worst leaders in the ARVN at the time.²⁷⁷

²⁷² Andradé, *America's Last Vietnam Battle*, p. 207.

²⁷³ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 289.

²⁷⁴ Andradé, *America's Last Vietnam Battle*, p. 253.

²⁷⁵ Andradé, *America's Last Vietnam Battle*, p. 253.

²⁷⁶ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 80; and Andradé, *America's Last Vietnam Battle*, p. 207.

²⁷⁷ Andradé, *America's Last Vietnam Battle*, p. 207.

Also in April, the PAVN opened a third front in Military Region 3, where three more divisions crossed the border from Cambodia and attacked Tay Ninh and Binh Long provinces, eventually converging on the town of An Loc, 60 miles north of Saigon.²⁷⁸ Also in the area were three separate PAVN infantry regiments, and four regiments of other specialty troops including artillery and tank units.²⁷⁹ The ARVN 5th, 18th, and 25th Divisions were responsible for defending MR-3, along with three Ranger groups.²⁸⁰

Additional attacks occurred in the Delta, known as Military Region 4, although not on the scale of those in the three northernmost regions of the country. Data on these battles are more sparse, and much of the fighting was done by the Territorial Forces rather than the regular ARVN units, so the analysis here does not focus on the Delta in depth.²⁸¹

In all, North Vietnam committed virtually its entire combat force to the offensive: 14 divisions, 26 separate regiments, and supporting armor and artillery units.²⁸² These forces fielded T-54 tanks, 130-mm guns, 160-mm mortars, and a range of anti-aircraft guns and missiles, notably the new SA-7.²⁸³ Against this stood virtually the entire combat force of South Vietnam: 11 ARVN infantry divisions, plus 2 independent infantry regiments; 3 ARVN special reserve divisions—the Marines, the Rangers, and the Airborne; additional ARVN supporting armor and artillery units; plus the Territorial Forces responsible for local defense.²⁸⁴

It is hard to say which side had an overall numerical advantage. North and South Vietnam fielded the same number of combat divisions. The PAVN had many more independent infantry regiments, but the ARVN had the increasingly competent territorial forces, as well as U.S. advisory and air support. More importantly, the local balances of forces in particular campaigns and battles within the offensive varied greatly, as will be discussed below.

The Initial Battles in the North: the Fall of Quang Tri Province

The initial North Vietnamese attack caught the ARVN off-guard. Both American and South Vietnamese observers had suspected the North would mount an offensive sometime in 1972, but intelligence generally indicated that the PAVN would attack from the west rather than across the DMZ. Additionally, by sheer misfortune, the 3rd Division guarding this area was in the middle of rotating troops among firebases on March 30, leading to lapses in the normal patrols and look-outs.²⁸⁵

Amid this ARVN transition, the PAVN suddenly unleashed well-planned and highly accurate 130-mm artillery fire on the 3rd Division's firebases, following the barrage with well-coordinated armor-infantry attacks from the north across the DMZ, as well as from the west through Khe Sahn.²⁸⁶ According to a South Vietnamese history, "Enemy forces conducting these initial attacks included elements of the NVA 304th and 308th Divisions, three separate

²⁷⁸ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 1.

²⁷⁹ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 289.

²⁸⁰ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 108.

²⁸¹ Andradé, *America's Last Vietnam Battle*, p. 471.

²⁸² Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 1.

²⁸³ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 8.

²⁸⁴ These figures are amended from Cantwell, "The Army of..." p. 153-5.

²⁸⁵ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 24.

²⁸⁶ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 25; and Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 290-1.

infantry regiments of the B-5 Front, two armor regiments, five artillery regiments, and at least one sapper battalion.”²⁸⁷

Over the next several days, the PAVN quickly overran the 3rd Division’s firebases, the network of small outposts specifically intended to prevent the quick capture of the province. As the PAVN history of the campaign relates, “After the artillery’s destructive barrages, combined-arms forces launched assaults in the main sectors.... We also launched coordinated operations to encircle enemy forces, make deep penetrations to the east, cut supply routes, and isolate the campaign area from the south. During the first two days of combat our troops overran one entire group of strong points... [and] shattered the enemy’s strong outer defensive perimeter.”²⁸⁸ Indeed, panic engulfed a number of ARVN units as they observed large refugee flows fleeing the areas of PAVN attack, and fire support coordination to these outlying areas was poor.²⁸⁹

The ARVN was soon forced to contract to a much tighter defensive perimeter around the obvious target of the attack: the provincial capital, Quang Tri City (see map 10).²⁹⁰ As an ARVN history notes, “Both ARVN regular and territorial forces seemed to hold extremely well along this new line. To their credit, they had stopped the NVA invasion—for the time being. They had performed their task well, not through reliance on U.S. air support but with their own combat support.”²⁹¹

This last claim is somewhat true, in the sense that bad weather did prevent close air support to most units during this initial phase.²⁹² Lack of air support was also somewhat the ARVN’s own fault, however, as its disorderly retreat made it difficult to know the location of friendlies. But the ARVN did still benefit from immense U.S. naval gunfire and B-52 strikes.²⁹³ As one history notes, “Before April 1972, U.S. air activities in MR-1 were at a low level. Any 24-hour period with more than 10 tactical air sorties was considered a busy day.”²⁹⁴ This all changed after March 30, with U.S. air sorties rising to 300 or more per day, everyday. It was common to see more than 30 B-52 missions in a single 24-hour period.²⁹⁵

Furthermore, ARVN troops were subject to no such aerial attacks, as the PAVN did not bring an air force to the fight. It is exactly this sort of imbalance that makes it hard to know how much credit to give the ARVN for re-consolidating its position, especially since it clearly suffered basic problems in cohesion during the initial attempt at defense.

In any event, General Lam was not especially concerned with bolstering that defense or working to establish a defense-in-depth. Without having visited the front to actually inspect the 3rd Division’s line, Lam ordered a counterattack to the west on April 14, although he was careful to check his horoscope so he would know when to time the attack.²⁹⁶ Despite clear weather that enabled a significant surge in U.S. air support, the ARVN units defending

²⁸⁷ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 25.

²⁸⁸ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 291.

²⁸⁹ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 29. This account is also echoed in the North’s history, Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 291.

²⁹⁰ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 25.

²⁹¹ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 31.

²⁹² Capt. David K. Mann, *The NVA 1972 Invasion of Military Region I: Fall of Quang Tri and Defense of Hue*, Project CHECO Report, January 22, 1973, Chapter III, available in the Historian’s Working Files and Papers at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC.

²⁹³ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 31.

²⁹⁴ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 75.

²⁹⁵ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 75.

²⁹⁶ Andradé, *America’s Last Vietnam Battle*, p. 102.

the line refused to attack as ordered.²⁹⁷ “The troops still clung to their trenches and made no significant effort to move forward,” according to a South Vietnamese history.²⁹⁸ “By the end of the first week of the operation, no unit had advanced more than 500 meters from the line of departure.”²⁹⁹

Part of the problem was morale: “It seemed that the subordinate commanders knew that their units lacked the strength to break through the NVA formations facing them, that the enemy’s artillery would surely catch them in the open and destroy them, and that the coordinated fire and logistical support they would need to carry the attack was beyond the capability of the 3rd Division or I Corps to provide.”³⁰⁰

But these doubts stemmed from more than shell shock and were directly related to broader problems with General Giai’s command, which bore a strong resemblance to the difficulties seen the previous year at Lam Son 719. Although Giai was technically responsible for all of the forces holding the line against the PAVN, he actually had authority only over his own division, not over the Marines, Armor units, or Rangers in the area. This might have been just as well given that, as a division commander, he lacked the headquarters needed to truly control such a large group of forces.³⁰¹

The problem, however, was that the Marines and Rangers also were not controlled by I Corps. Instead the Rangers remained under their separate command out of Da Nang, while the Marines continued to be led from their headquarters in Hue. As one ARVN officer later speculated, “Perhaps General Lam did not feel certain he could handle the Marine Division commander who, during Lam Son 719, had failed to comply with his orders but still came out unscathed.”³⁰² After all, the Marine commander, General Khang, was a close political ally of President Thieu’s rival Ky, and reprimanding or threatening him risked upsetting the delicate political balance that underlay the regime’s stability. But the result—again—was a chain of command that wasn’t much like a chain at all, but instead like a series of scattered links, each perhaps solid on its own but not connected together to forge anything stronger. Soldiers on the ground could see the disastrous consequences and (understandably) refused to move.³⁰³

Lam did directly control the Armor units in I Corps, although this centralization posed its own set of problems, as he gave orders to these units without telling Giai.³⁰⁴ Indeed, “Lam let Giai take responsibility for the battle, but he did not grant him any real authority. From Danang, Lam personally interceded at all levels, sometimes going so far as to personally issue orders by radio to individual brigade commanders without notifying the division operations center. Both Giai and his division advisers often learned of new orders only as they were being carried out.”³⁰⁵

Predictably, Giai now found “that the orders he gave to his attached units had no effect until the subordinate commander had checked and received guidance from his parent headquarters. This was especially true if the orders required a difficult operation,” such as

²⁹⁷ Andradé, *America’s Last Vietnam Battle*, p. 103.

²⁹⁸ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 39.

²⁹⁹ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 38.

³⁰⁰ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 38.

³⁰¹ Andradé, *America’s Last Vietnam Battle*, p. 2.

³⁰² Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 33.

³⁰³ Andradé, *America’s Last Vietnam Battle*, p. 64.

³⁰⁴ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 38.

³⁰⁵ Andradé, *America’s Last Vietnam Battle*, p. 105.

the attempted counteroffensive.³⁰⁶ In light of these sorts of delays, it is not hard to understand why the 3rd Division was less than enthused about participating in a difficult attempt to re-take territory. Even though their own commander was competent, Giai's soldiers may have known he lacked the authority to lead all the forces required to make the operation successful.

With the ARVN having failed to launch this initial counteroffensive, a week later the commander of the 1st Armor Brigade decided of his own accord to pull some of his units south in order to clear elements in his rear. Again, Giai was out of the loop, this time with dire consequences. As soon as the other ARVN forces saw the Armor Brigade's tanks moving south, they were "gripped with panic, broke ranks, and streamed along."³⁰⁷ Before Giai even realized what had happened, many of his troops abandoned their positions, and the line of defense collapsed—not because of PAVN attacks but because of the internal command problem within the ARVN. Once Giai realized the problem, he again managed to re-establish defenses, but this time in an even tighter circle around Quang Tri City.³⁰⁸

As April wore on, Giai's lines continued to move closer and closer to Quang Tri. Unit discipline began to collapse as the 3rd Division became increasingly isolated.³⁰⁹ Then on April 27, the North Vietnamese launched a new assault. The 308th, 304th, and 324th divisions, combined with artillery and tank support units, overran the remaining defenders outside the city in a series of well-coordinated attacks.³¹⁰

By April 30, Giai realized the city would fall, and he generated a plan for withdrawal. But at the last minute, on the morning of May 1, General Lam called Giai to tell him not to withdraw after all: "all units were to remain where they were and hold their positions 'at all costs'." Lam added that "no withdrawal of any unit would be permitted unless he personally gave the authorization" after receiving it from President Thieu, who was apparently now directing events from Saigon.³¹¹ Of course, Lam had not shared with Thieu and the Joint General Staff the true scale of the threat, downplaying PAVN advances and overstating ARVN capabilities because he was afraid to share the bad news.³¹²

In a disturbing echo of what had happened in Laos, and a disturbing preview of what would happen in 1975, this sudden change in orders from an uninformed Thieu was a disaster, resulting in neither a robust defense of the city nor a clean withdrawal. "And so within the space of four hours," as an ARVN general later put it, "the ARVN dispositions for defense crumbled completely."³¹³ Or as the North Vietnamese later put it: "Surrounded and isolated, the enemy troops... broke and ran. Our troops clung to and pursued them. Accurate fire from our long-range artillery positions created added terror among the enemy troops. Abandoning their vehicles and artillery pieces, enemy troops fled on foot."³¹⁴ The ARVN abandoned the city, with General Giai attempting unsuccessfully in the final

³⁰⁶ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 33.

³⁰⁷ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 39-40.

³⁰⁸ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 39-40.

³⁰⁹ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 41.

³¹⁰ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 292.

³¹¹ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 44. A nearly identical account of these events appears in Mann, *The NVA 1972 Invasion*.

³¹² Andradé, *America's Last Vietnam Battle*, p. 143.

³¹³ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 45.

³¹⁴ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 292.

moments to catch up with his own fleeing troops in a commandeered armored vehicle.³¹⁵ Thieu had him arrested in Da Nang on May 5.³¹⁶

The Second Set of Battles in the North: the Defense of Hue and the Re-taking of Quang Tri Province

All of Quang Tri was now in the North's hands, the first time in the war that the DRV had gained control of an entire province. This conquest opened the door to Hue, the imperial capital only about 40 miles away that the PAVN had tried so hard to capture in 1968. The 304th and 308th Divisions had already been attacking it since March, with the 1st Division again holding them off in a series of battles in the foothills to the west of the city.³¹⁷

The 1st Division also had conducted a major counter-attack into the A Shau Valley on March 5, successfully airlifting into six landing zones and coordinating movement with ARVN artillery and U.S. airpower in attempt to drive back the North Vietnamese. The 3rd Regiment of the 1st Division temporarily retook territory at the mouth of the valley, holding it long enough to kill more than 200 PAVN soldiers who stood and fought for it viciously. Massively outnumbered, the ARVN regiment eventually had to withdraw on March 16, but the operation had clearly upset the PAVN's offensive timetable for Hue and was further testament to the combat effectiveness of at least some parts of the South Vietnamese military.³¹⁸

The PAVN gradually moved closer to the city throughout March, until Hue itself seemed on the verge of being attacked.³¹⁹ This reality, combined with the loss of Quang Tri province, and the panic engulfing civilians in the area, led Thieu to implement a long-overdue command shakeup. First, Thieu removed General Le Nguyen Khang from command of the Marine Division, replacing him with Colonel Bui The Lan, the more competent field commander from the Laos operation in 1971. Second, Thieu removed General Lam from command of I Corps, replacing him with the highly able General Truong, the former commander of the 1st Division and by now the commander of IV Corps.³²⁰

Finally, after the loss of an entire province, the nature of Thieu's intervention had changed: he was still personally involved in promotion decisions, but now he was following best practices instead of worst, by firing the two officers who had been responsible for disasters in 1971 and 1972 and putting competent, proven combat leaders in their stead. As discussed below, these changes caused some significant, though not sufficient, improvements in South Vietnam's battlefield effectiveness during the remainder of the Easter Offensive, consistent with the predictions of the intervention theory.

In his memoir, Truong recounted of the command shake-up, "I flew to Hue that very afternoon with a few staff officers of my own whose abilities and dedication had earned my respect."³²¹ Truong quickly established a new forward headquarters for I Corps at Hue, he recalled:

It was staffed by senior officers who had solid military backgrounds, both in the field and in staff work, a rare assemblage of talents from all three services and service branches. I had wanted to make sure that they knew

³¹⁵ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 45.

³¹⁶ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 62.

³¹⁷ Andradé, *America's Last Vietnam Battle*, p. 151.

³¹⁸ Andradé, *America's Last Vietnam Battle*, p. 152-3.

³¹⁹ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 48.

³²⁰ Col. G.H. Turley, *The Easter Offensive: Vietnam, 1972* (Novato, VA: Presidio, 1985), epilogue.

³²¹ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 53.

how to use sensibly and coordinate effectively all corps combat components and supporting units in a conventional warfare environment. I placed particular emphasis on developing an efficient Fire Support Coordination Center (FSCC).³²²

The elevation of Truong, the formation of his hand-picked leadership team, and the renewed attention to the developing a unified command structure buoyed I Corps, bringing about “a restoration of confidence among combat units. They all felt reassured that from now on they would be directed, supported, and cared for in a correct manner.”³²³ Unfortunately, the only functioning units left in the area were the 1st Division and the Marine Division. Nevertheless, Truong began to organize a defense-in-depth of Hue—the type that should have been established in the first place by the 3rd Division around Quang Tri City—and the Americans initiated a massive barrage of naval gunfire, artillery, and aerial bombing against PAVN forces to the west.³²⁴

During May and June, both the 1st Division and the Marines launched limited but effective counterattacks from their forward positions. In the face of the Marine attack, the NVA units were surprised, “resisted weakly and incurred extremely heavy losses.”³²⁵ The 1st Infantry also retook two of the westernmost firebases that had been lost earlier, conducting another round of carefully coordinated airborne operations to seize them. The Marines also fought off PAVN armor-infantry attacks to the northeast, and Colonel Lan was promoted to general.³²⁶

Again, however, it bears noting that U.S. firepower continued to play a crucial role. In the month of May alone, for example, the United States flew more than 6,000 air support sorties in I Corps. South Vietnam’s own Air Force played only a very limited role.³²⁷ U.S. naval gunfire was also massive, with as many as 38 destroyers and 3 cruisers committed to the effort along the Vietnamese coast during the month of June. On a light day, these ships might fire 1,000 rounds of support, while on heavy days the expenditure rose to as many as 7,000 rounds.³²⁸ To be sure, General Truong deserves great credit for improving the fire support coordination procedures, including the emplacement of forward observer teams to call in naval gunfire, which enabled the effective use of these U.S. assets. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the ARVN were highly dependent on these sources of non-organic firepower for their very survival, a fact that the PAVN history is quick to mention.³²⁹

Throughout May and June, Truong also oversaw an aggressive refitting and retraining effort in I Corps.³³⁰ As he explained, “A two-week quick recovery training program was conducted at each unit by ARVN and U.S. mobile training teams, usually at battalion level with all officers and NCOs attending. This program included both the theory and practice of marksmanship, the handling of individual and crew-served weapons, reconnaissance and tactics.”³³¹ Instructors also emphasized the proper use of the new TOW

³²² Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 53.

³²³ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 53.

³²⁴ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 54.

³²⁵ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 60.

³²⁶ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 60.

³²⁷ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 75.

³²⁸ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 76-7.

³²⁹ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 303.

³³⁰ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 59.

³³¹ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 60.

(tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided) anti-tank missile.³³² Artillery units underwent counter-battery fire training, another crucial deficit that had been evident at least since Lam Son 719.³³³ The 3rd Division was also reconstituted, undergoing a complete retraining program. Many of the soldiers who had abandoned it returned when it was placed under the leadership of Brigadier General Nguyen Duy Hinh.³³⁴

Having made these preparations, Truong launched Operation Lam Son 72 to re-take Quang Tri province on June 28. In this two-pronged counter-offensive, the Marines and the Airborne (who had been called in from Saigon) were to attack north, while the 1st Division continued to pin down enemy forces southwest of Hue so that they could not join the offensive.³³⁵ Unfortunately, the Airborne and Marine spearheads moved “slower than expected,” and enemy resistance became heavy.³³⁶ The PAVN defenders proved “ferocious,” repeatedly interdicting the counteroffensives with infantry and armor attacks.³³⁷ As General Truong later recalled, it became clear that the North planned to hold Quang Tri City “to the last man.... The enemy continued reinforcing; he was determined to go all out for the defense of this city. The ARVN drive was completely stalled.”³³⁸

Indeed, as had happened in Lam Son 719, the slowness of the ARVN offensive (or in this case, counteroffensive) had given the PAVN time to reinforce. By September, the North Vietnamese had flooded the area with their forces, which now included six infantry divisions: the 304th, 308th, 324B, 325th, 320B, and 312th. For its part, South Vietnam had only three divisions in I Corps and no additional reserves available.³³⁹

As South Vietnamese officers readily admit, these forces soon became heavily reliant on U.S. firepower to break up the building concentrations of PAVN forces. It was only after two months of heavy B-52 strikes and U.S. artillery bombardments that the Vietnamese Marines finally retook Quang Tri City on September 15. The Airborne also retook two of the firebases remaining in enemy hands, while the 1st Division continued to defend Hue and eventually retook several of the firebases to the west of Hue, albeit again with very heavy U.S. air support.³⁴⁰

By October, MR-1 was stabilized. While the ARVN certainly deserves credit for this eventual outcome, and in particular for changes in promotion, command, and training processes, it also seems clear that these efforts would have been moot without U.S. support. ARVN forces would not have lived to make these changes, nor been able to reap the benefits of them, absent the United States. As the PAVN history notes, “Eighty percent of our casualties were caused by U.S. air attacks and U.S. naval gunfire support.”³⁴¹

The Battles in Central Vietnam: Tan Canh and Kontum

In many ways the fighting in the Central Highlands of MR-2 paralleled the course of events in MR-1. The PAVN enjoyed initial successes, striking with deadly effect to overrun

³³² Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 60.

³³³ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 61.

³³⁴ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 62.

³³⁵ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 65.

³³⁶ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 66.

³³⁷ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 67. This description of PAVN tenacity also appears in the North’s account. Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 304-5.

³³⁸ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 67.

³³⁹ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 69.

³⁴⁰ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 70.

³⁴¹ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 304.

ARVN firebases and capture significant territory. This catastrophe, which threatened to slice South Vietnam in half, prompted a better-late-than-never series of shifts away from worst practices in political intervention, as had the catastrophe in MR-1. Again, political intervention in the military never went away, but its form changed significantly. Combined with a horrific onslaught of U.S. firepower, these changes proved just enough to drive back the skilled and determined North Vietnamese. As such, the battle for Central Vietnam provides some support for the theory by demonstrating that improvements in political intervention practices in South Vietnam did result in improvements in battlefield performance.

As in MR-1, the United States had retained little combat presence in MR-2 by the spring of 1972. The ARVN 22nd Division, commanded by Colonel Le Duc Dat, had primary responsibility for the northern areas of the region, notably Kontum and Binh Dinh provinces. In early March, in response to evidence of an impending attack, Saigon also dispatched an Airborne brigade and the tactical command post of the Airborne Division to Kontum to shore up forces there.³⁴²

The ARVN 23rd Division held responsibility for the large expanses comprising the rest of MR-2, including Pleiku province. In command of the 23rd was Colonel Ly Tong Ba, the man who had commanded the M-113 unit at Ap Bac as a young captain in 1963. The advisor who had overseen the battle of Ap Bac, John Paul Vann, was also still on the scene in MR-2, although now as a civilian. As mentioned, overall command of II Corps lay with Lieutenant General Ngo Dzu, headquartered in Pleiku.³⁴³

The PAVN attack in MR-2 built gradually with attacks on outlying firebases in Kontum province, defended mostly by Airborne forces (see map 11). On April 14, the first of these was overrun in a well-planned infantry attack utilizing artillery, rifles, mortars, and rockets. A week later, PAVN armor, infantry, and artillery overran a second firebase, also defended by the Airborne. Much as had happened to the 3rd Division as it tried to defend Quang Tri City, the 22nd Division quickly fell back to a tighter and tighter circle around its base at Tan Canh, to the northeast of Kontum city. To make matters worse, Colonel Dat had neglected to hold the ridgelines to the north and east of the base, which made the ARVN's position especially vulnerable. The PAVN soon detected this weakness and fired at least 1,000 highly accurate rounds per day into the base during the last two weeks of April.³⁴⁴

On April 23, the PAVN 2nd Division, along with B-3 Front units, sappers, and tanks, began to converge on Tan Canh itself. According to an ARVN history, "The enemy made extensive use of the wire-guided 'Sagger' missile which disabled our tanks and destroyed our bunkers with deadly accuracy. This was the first time our forces were exposed to this weapon and its use caught them and their U.S. advisors unprepared. One by the one, the M-41 tanks positioned in defense of the division CP [command post] were hit and disabled along with several bunkers. Then the division tactical operations center took a direct blast."³⁴⁵

With this stroke of bad luck, all command and control of the 22nd was lost, and the division's cohesion rapidly disintegrated. Colonel Dat refused to leave the destroyed command post and was never heard from again. Aside from some ARVN artillery, only U.S. firepower remained to stave off the PAVN attack. By the next day, PAVN tanks had

³⁴² Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 85.

³⁴³ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 80; and Andradé, *America's Last Vietnam Battle*, p. 207.

³⁴⁴ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 87.

³⁴⁵ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 88.

surrounded the base at Tan Canh. The remaining forces of the 22nd “fought in utter disorder, then broke ranks and fled through the defense perimeter.”³⁴⁶ Vann himself barely made it out by helicopter.

Overrunning Tan Canh was no small achievement, as the PAVN history notes: “For the first time in the history of the Central Highlands, our forces had destroyed an enemy divisional base camp located behind a fortified line of defenses.”³⁴⁷ PAVN forces soon consolidated their control of surrounding areas and continued pushing east toward Binh Dinh province on the coast. Within days, the PAVN 3rd Division also had captured the three northernmost districts of Binh Dinh, nearly cutting South Vietnam in half from its western border to the sea. Meanwhile, the PAVN 320th Division continued its pressure on the remaining firebases protecting Kontum city. They were soon abandoned, “while U.S. tactical air endeavored to destroy the positions and equipment they had left behind.”³⁴⁸

The situation was now dire, with General Dzu believing that Kontum could not hold. Thieu decided to replace Dzu with Major General Nguyen Van Toan, the ARVN Armor commander who was also serving in I Corps at the time. But events were moving too rapidly to turn around the entire II Corps effort. Colonel Ba, the commander of the 23rd, attempted to take control of the situation by moving his division headquarters to Kontum. He left all of southern MR-2, the area for which his division was normally responsible, to the territorial forces. His new plan was to rely on Ranger battalions to defend the avenues of approach to the city, while the 23rd would defend the city itself.

Although this plan was essentially sound, a familiar problem of command and control quickly emerged: Ba had no actual authority over the Rangers and Airborne, which maintained separate chains of command, and even in his own division he had actually been given control over only one regiment, the 53rd. As a result, “Colonel Ba’s predicament was not unlike what General Giai of the 3rd ARVN Division had faced in MR-1.”³⁴⁹ It also was not unlike the predicament Ba himself had faced at Ap Bac almost a decade earlier. Fortunately, the situation improved somewhat when the Rangers were replaced by the other two regiments of the 23rd Division, the 44th and 45th, both of which now fell squarely within Ba’s chain of command.

Meanwhile, PAVN forces continued to conduct infantry-armor assaults on the outskirts of Kontum City, pressing forward despite massive B-52 strikes.³⁵⁰ By the second week of May, Ba had organized the defense of Kontum, sending the infantry and armor forces of the 23rd to guard the northern and northwestern approaches to the city and relying on territorial forces to guard the southern and southeastern approaches.³⁵¹ An ARVN history notes that morale was high:

The division commander [Ba] seemed to make a big difference. He personally inspected the defense perimeter with his staff, encouraged and provided guidance for his troops on tactical detail and showed great care for them. The defense, fire support, and counterattack plans were coordinated and rehearsed daily, drawing on the painful lessons learned at Tan Canh. All units were given the opportunity to practice-fire the LAW

³⁴⁶ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 90.

³⁴⁷ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 294.

³⁴⁸ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 91.

³⁴⁹ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 93.

³⁵⁰ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 94.

³⁵¹ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 95.

antitank rocket until their troops became confident that enemy tanks were not as formidable as they had thought.³⁵²

On May 14, the PAVN armor columns attacked Kontum with five regiments drawn from the 320th, the B-3 Front, and the 2nd Division. The ARVN managed to break up the initial attacks using artillery and anti-tank weapons, although the new U.S. Cobra gunships swooping in from Pleiku probably didn't hurt either.³⁵³ In general, the 23rd fought considerably better than had its sister division, the 22nd, at Tan Canh.

During the night, however, a PAVN battalion managed to slip through a gap in the ARVN line between the 44th and 53rd Regiments. "This situation became critical when this enemy unit enlarged the gap and exploited its gains with successive waves of mass assaults."³⁵⁴ It soon became obvious that Kontum would be overrun, and ARVN soldiers prepared for the worst. But then, with perfect timing, two massive B-52 strikes suddenly landed on the PAVN forces, breaking their attack.³⁵⁵

Ba was able to capitalize on this stroke of good fortune, tightening his defensive perimeter to close the gaps yet again. He proved especially good at directing ARVN armor in this endeavor, as he was an armor officer himself. Having stabilized his defenses, Colonel Ba set about regaining some measure of initiative. With the support of U.S. tactical air and gunships, he launched several limited offensive operations in the areas north and northwest of the city within the range of ARVN artillery.³⁵⁶

On May 25, the PAVN resumed its attack with a large and accurate artillery barrage, which included the use of some of ARVN's own artillery captured at Tan Canh. The ARVN again managed to counter the attack, but again only with an extremely heavy reliance on airpower. Indeed, "the situation became so bleak that a tactical emergency was declared in order to divert all available tactical air and gunships to the area for the day"—this despite the ongoing attacks in the rest of the country.³⁵⁷ An ARVN history reports, "Despite all the efforts of ARVN troops and the firepower of U.S. tactical air and gunships, and even the commitment of ARVN tanks held in reserve, it was difficult to dislodge the enemy from his positions. He seemed determined to dig in and exploit his foothold in the city."³⁵⁸ In response, Col. Ba further tightened the perimeter, giving the B-52s more room to operate, but the PAVN still fought for Kontum house by house.

Eventually, "the attrition caused by airstrikes and gunships finally allowed ARVN forces to counterattack and regain the initiative. To dislodge the enemy, they had to fight from bunker-to-bunker [sic], using hand grenades."³⁵⁹ But by May 30 they had dislodged the NVA from their positions into the city.³⁶⁰ Ba got a star, and the ARVN controlled most of MR-2 again by May 31. With a unified, more decentralized command structure finally empowering a more competent leader, the ARVN, along with a massive dose of U.S. firepower, had scored a victory.

³⁵² Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 97.

³⁵³ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 97.

³⁵⁴ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 98.

³⁵⁵ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 98.

³⁵⁶ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 98.

³⁵⁷ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 102.

³⁵⁸ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 103.

³⁵⁹ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 104.

³⁶⁰ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 104.

The Battles Near Saigon: Tay Ninh and An Loc

Although not a major focus of the analysis here, the third major front of the Easter Offensive was in MR-3. Here the PAVN attacked the city of Tay Ninh on the morning of April 2, 1972, eventually converging on the town of An Loc in Binh Long, 60 miles north of Saigon. The PAVN laid siege to the town, hoping to make it the capital of a new provisional revolutionary government in South Vietnam. In the face of ARVN resistance, the attackers eventually retreated from An Loc three months later, a victory claimed at the time as a great success for Vietnamization.³⁶¹

In fact, however, most analysts of the battle conclude that ARVN forces did not acquit themselves very well at An Loc and prevailed only because of the United States—an outcome consistent with the predictions of the intervention theory, given that most of the units in MR-3 were subject to worst practices. As historian James Willbanks, a witness to the events, has noted, “The performance of the South Vietnamese during the demanding battle for An Loc [was] uneven at best,” with looting a serious problem and many units collapsing during the fight.³⁶² He continued, “ARVN forces were not prepared for what happened at An Loc. They were plagued by the same kinds of problems that had bothered them for the entire Vietnam War: politicized commanders, inept leadership, and tactical incompetence at the higher levels of command. The ARVN were victorious at An Loc because the American advisers and U.S. airpower had negated the debilitating effects of these long-standing maladies.”³⁶³

Indeed, the U.S. role at An Loc was even greater than in the northern and central sectors of the Easter Offensive, which is one of the reasons to be skeptical about how much light it can shed on the question of ARVN or PAVN effectiveness. U.S. ordnance unleashed on the PAVN here was simply horrendous—the PAVN’s static concentrations of men and materiel around the city provided ideal fixed targets.³⁶⁴ From April to June 1972, for example, the United States flew 887 B-52 strikes in MR-3, which is equal to about half the total number of B-52 sorties the United States later conducted in the entire 1991 Gulf War.³⁶⁵ Counting Navy, Air Force, and Marines Corps operations, there were 4,206 fixed-wing strikes in total in MR-3 during this period.³⁶⁶ This was in addition to massive Army aviation operations, which were also without precedent, and to all the other indirect fire provided by the United States.³⁶⁷ Although both ARVN and American sources have criticized the PAVN’s ability to coordinate armor, artillery, and infantry during the attacks in MR-3, one has to wonder how well any army lacking an air force could be expected to fight under such devastating conditions.³⁶⁸

It is also important to note that U.S. advisors also were responsible for coordinating all of this firepower. American observers and American forward air controllers were the ones calling in fire support, aerial interdiction strikes, and re-supply flights.³⁶⁹ Moreover, their

³⁶¹ Willbanks, *Battle of An Loc*, p. 165.

³⁶² Willbanks, *Battle of An Loc*, p. 156.

³⁶³ Willbanks, *Battle of An Loc*, p. 166.

³⁶⁴ Willbanks, *Battle of An Loc*, p. 156-7.

³⁶⁵ Willbanks, *Battle of An Loc*, p. 158; and Lewis D. Hill et al, *Gulf War Air Power Survey*, vol. 5 (Air Force Historical Studies Office, 1993), p. 316, available at <http://www.airforcehistory.hq.af.mil/Publications/Annotations/gwaps.htm>.

³⁶⁶ Willbanks, *Battle of An Loc*, p. 158.

³⁶⁷ Willbanks, *Battle of An Loc*, p. 160.

³⁶⁸ Willbanks, *Battle of An Loc*, p. 152-3; and Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 160.

³⁶⁹ Willbanks, *Battle of An Loc*, p. 157-162.

presence artificially altered the nature of ARVN performance, accounting for much of the cohesion that did exist in ARVN units. As Willbanks argues, “These strikes inflicted horrendous damage on the NVA, but maybe just as importantly they pumped up the morale of the beleaguered defenders, who were heartened time and again by the devastation the giant bombers inflicted on the NVA. Often, the big bombers were the only margin between hanging on and being overrun.”³⁷⁰

Not only was U.S. firepower vital in defending the city, but U.S. advisors also virtually commanded some ARVN units in An Loc.³⁷¹ Numerous advisors reported that ARVN leaders simply lacked the ability to coordinate their own firepower and movement, requiring U.S. officers to take charge.³⁷² Moreover, Willbanks reports, “This situation was so bad at several points during the siege that some advisers felt that the city would probably have fallen if the NVA had left the road open to the south so the ARVN troops could have escaped. In many cases, troops who did not wish to be there had no choice but to fight in order to survive”—hardly a ringing endorsement of ARVN cohesion.³⁷³

It is important to note that this view is not merely an American one. A South Vietnamese general came to a similar conclusion. While praising “the sheer physical endurance of ARVN defenders,” he readily admits that “the enemy’s back had been broken and An Loc saved only because of timely B-52 strikes.”³⁷⁴ For all of these reasons, the fighting in MR-3 does not offer a particularly good test of the intervention argument, although the evidence from the battle there does not cast doubt on the theory.

Ultimately, the ARVN suffered more than 8,000 killed in the Easter Offensive as a whole, and probably three times that number wounded, although the PAVN claimed to have inflicted many more deaths. PAVN casualties probably topped 100,000. Both sides suffered enormous losses of equipment, including in the North Vietnamese case probably half of their artillery and tanks.³⁷⁵

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of South Vietnam

The Easter Offensive is often hailed as an ARVN triumph because the North Vietnamese ultimately failed to take Quang Tri, Kontum, and An Loc (as well as the Delta). But a close look at the evidence suggests that this “victory” occurred despite rather than because of ARVN battlefield effectiveness, and because the PAVN were severely overmatched by U.S. firepower. Most of the ARVN units actually displayed serious deficits in cohesion and basic proficiency, as well as in the ability to conduct complex operations. Furthermore, these problems were directly attributable to the imposition of worst practices.

First, overall unit cohesion in the ARVN continued to be rather poor. All three sectors examined here—MR-1, MR-2, and MR-3—displayed numerous instances in which the PAVN were able to overrun firebases because ARVN troops simply stopped fighting. Indeed, this was generally the pattern by which the North Vietnamese achieved their initial territorial gains. In other instances, ARVN troops used withdrawals or the chaos of large battles as an opportunity to flee their units and abandon their equipment. At An Loc, ARVN soldiers actually looted the homes of their countrymen. Indeed, many attribute what unit

³⁷⁰ Willbanks, *Battle of An Loc*, p. 160.

³⁷¹ Willbanks, *Battle of An Loc*, p. 163.

³⁷² Willbanks, *Battle of An Loc*, p. 163-4.

³⁷³ Willbanks, *Battle of An Loc*, p. 163.

³⁷⁴ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 131.

³⁷⁵ Willbanks, *Battle of An Loc*, p. 150.

cohesion there was at An Loc to U.S. leadership and the lack of a physical exit from the city. While there were clearly individual ARVN soldiers who proved brave and courageous, it is impossible to avoid noting the serious disciplinary problems and deficits in basic cohesion present in most units.

In both I Corps and the 23rd Division, changes in command seemed to improve unit discipline, convincing soldiers that their cause was not entirely hopeless. And in the 1st Division, which had had good leadership and adequate preparation for battle all along due to the differing forms of political intervention applied to it, cohesion was actually quite good. Unfortunately for the ARVN, however, these were exceptions to the rule. Most soldiers in the ARVN seemed to suspect that their leaders were incompetent, their training inadequate, and their side unlikely to prevail, and they saw little reason to lose their lives in order to find out for sure.

Second, where they did stand and fight, most ARVN forces exhibited significant problems with basic tactical proficiency. The best evidence of this problem is actually indirect: the fact that in both MR-1 and MR-2, when better officers assumed command after the initial disasters, they immediately initiated not just refitting efforts but retraining programs. For example, when Truong took over I Corps, he did not simply reorganize the command structure and fix broken equipment; he initiated marksmanship training and basic instruction in handling individual and crew-served weapons. With three PAVN divisions breathing down his back and the imperial capital of Vietnam at stake, it is hard to believe that Truong would have invested the time and effort in these endeavors if ARVN troops had exhibited basic tactical proficiency during the opening stages of the battle. If he had to re-teach soldiers how to fire their rifles and instruct artillery units to learn about counter-battery calculations, it is reasonable to infer that he had detected very basic tactical problems in I Corps during the initial phase of the offensive. Only the 1st Division is recorded to have been tactically proficient throughout the battle.

One could draw similar inferences from Ba's preparations for the defense of Kontum in MR-2 after the initial PAVN victories. His focused not only on improving the command structure but also on more basic tactical activities like firing LAW rockets and forming defensive lines. Again, the implication is that Ba had observed these areas to be deficient during the ARVN's initial defense of MR-2.

Third, beyond basic tactics, the Easter Offensive presented a damning indictment of the ARVN's ability to conduct complex operations. Repeatedly, ARVN forces displayed an inability to combine arms, whether on the offense or the defense. The extensive need for U.S. airpower was both a symptom and a cause of this problem. As one commander noted, "Since U.S. air support was so effective and always available, ARVN tactical commanders tended to disregard their own supporting weapons which were seldom used properly. Eventually the tendency to rely on B-52s or tactical air in the place of organic fires and maneuver became so commonplace that it inhibited initiative and often caused delays in conducting attacks."³⁷⁶

More importantly, the fractured, overly centralized ARVN command structure profoundly hindered the application of low-level initiative in support of a higher-level plan, the real key to complex operations. In both MR-1 and MR-2, the few good officers that did exist repeatedly found that they had responsibility without authority. Command over their forces had to be shared with less competent colleagues, or units received (poor) tactical direction from Saigon.

³⁷⁶ Truong, *Easter Offensive*, p. 172.

Ultimately, even when ARVN soldiers had been re-trained, they showed an inability to actually aggregate their skills into larger operations. For example, Truong had difficulty getting his troops to actually go on the offensive in re-taking Quang Tri, and Kontum nearly fell because ARVN troops defending it allowed a large gap to open in their lines. Again, only the 1st Division seemed able to conduct well-coordinated offensive and defensive operations. This is not surprising, as it was still the only major unit subject to political intervention that embodied best practices.

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of North Vietnam

Although the Easter Offensive inflicted heavy losses on the North Vietnamese and was a strategic failure, most of the fighting reflected well on the PAVN's actual battlefield effectiveness. North Vietnamese political leaders certainly intervened in their military, but in ways that improved cohesion and tactical proficiency. Most importantly, PAVN units also repeatedly demonstrated the ability to conduct complex operations.

First, regarding unit cohesion, there were virtually no reports of PAVN units fleeing the battlefield or abandoning their positions. Indeed, most accounts of the Easter Offensive reflect the surprising tenacity of the PAVN soldiers, even in the face of tremendous U.S. airpower. For example, they were still conducting human wave attacks against An Loc well into the third month of the siege there.

Second, and more concretely, the record of the Easter Offensive is full of examples of the PAVN's clearly demonstrated tactical proficiency. Reports from all sources describe PAVN artillery barrages as highly accurate, its marksmanship as excellent, its anti-aircraft fire as effective, its tank movement as generally adequate, and its anti-tank fires especially impressive. All of this evidence reflects units that had engaged in rigorous and realistic training processes, producing skilled soldiers capable of using their weapons.

Third, and most importantly, the PAVN demonstrated the ability to aggregate basic tactical skills into complex operations at both the small- and large-unit levels. The PAVN were generally able to conduct combined arms operations. For example, they repeatedly proved successful in integrating artillery fires with infantry movement. Although the PAVN did not demonstrate total mastery of armored warfare, displaying some problems integrating the use of tanks with dismounted infantry, it is unclear how much these problems were a function of actual deficiencies in the PAVN and how much was a result of the disorientation and disruption caused by U.S. firepower. Either way, the PAVN's ability to conduct combined arms operations was far superior to that of the ARVN.

Additionally, the PAVN proved able to coordinate the movement of a multi-division force, another task that the ARVN had so far never executed successfully. North Vietnam's sheer ability to get 14 divisions into the field and have them execute three separate corps-level attacks on multiple avenues of advance—all while taking a massive pounding from the air—reflects a unified, decentralized command structure. Moreover, in numerous instances these formations proved able to react appropriately to both opportunities and setbacks on the battlefield, reflecting an important integration of low-level initiative with a higher overall plan. For example, PAVN troops quickly exploited the gaps that they found in ARVN defensive lines around both Quang Tri City and Kontum. All in all, while the PAVN performance was not perfect, it certainly reflected a superior ability to conduct complex operations.

VI. The Final Battles, 1975

Despite their devastating losses in the Easter Offensive and the restrictions imposed by the Paris Peace Accords, the North Vietnamese retained an estimated 170,000 regular troops and 30,000 other soldiers inside South Vietnam after the 1973 withdrawal of U.S. combat forces.³⁷⁷ With the United States finally out of the picture, North Vietnam renewed its drive to conquer the South, culminating in the final series of battles in 1975.

The overall contours of this drive mimicked those of 1972 and even 1968, with many of the same units locking horns over the same real estate. But what is remarkable about these battles is how rapidly Saigon fell and how little actual fighting occurred. Instead of devolving into a stalemate or showcasing another dynamic series of attacks and counterattacks, the battles of 1975 highlighted significant improvements in performance by the North Vietnamese and exposed just how heavily dependent on the United States most of the ARVN truly had been. Stripped of U.S. firepower and command structures, ARVN's poisonous political-military relations exerted their full force, even on units that had previously been exempt, such as the 1st Division. The ARVN did not so much lose the final battles as self-destruct, barely demonstrating itself capable of basic defensive operations and frequently losing all semblance of cohesion.

The PAVN, by contrast, showed that it not only retained its impressive cohesion and proficiency from 1972 but that it had fixed some of the deficits in complex offensive operations that had been evident in the Easter Offensive. Although some accounts of the final battles emphasize the North's numerical superiority or the South's shortages of ammunition and equipment, close examination of the actual course of events suggests that these factors were at best of secondary importance.³⁷⁸ The nature of political intervention in the militaries of the two societies continued to exert a powerful and very direct influence over the course of events. And while it was not the only factor that mattered, it is impossible to explain what happened in 1975 without close attention to it. Indeed, it is important to remember that the fall of Saigon was in no way preordained and came as a surprise to those on the ground. As late as 1974 the United States' own assessment indicated that the ARVN was "strong and resilient," and Hanoi was only slightly more optimistic, predicting that it could not conquer the South until 1976 at the earliest.³⁷⁹

[SEE NEXT PAGE]

³⁷⁷ Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval: an Insider's Account of Saigon's Indecent End Told by the CIA's Chief Strategy Analyst in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 56.

³⁷⁸ Stephen Hosmer, Konrad Kellen, and Brian Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam: Statements by Vietnamese Military and Civilian Leaders*, report R-2208-OSD (HIST) (Santa Monica, CA: the RAND Corporation, December 1978), p. 66-7.

³⁷⁹ Snepp, *Decent Interval*, pp. 122, 131.

THE FINAL OFFENSIVES, 1975		
	North Vietnam	South Vietnam
<i>Battle summary</i>		
Tactical orientation	Offensive	Defensive
Plan	Initial probe into MR-3, followed by major attacks in MR-1 and MR-2, culminating in final attack on Saigon	Defend attacked areas; then execute strategic withdrawal from MR-1 and then MR-2; defend Saigon
Weapons	Armor, artillery, air defense	Armor, artillery
Manpower	200,000, formed into 16 combat divisions, plus numerous independent regiments	300,000, but only 14 combat divisions and 2 independent regiments
Losses	~16,135 KIA ³⁸⁰	~13,847 casualties ³⁸¹
<i>Effectiveness summary</i>		
Unit cohesion?	Yes	No
Tactical proficiency?	Yes	No
Complex operations?	Yes	No
Confirms theory?	Yes	Yes

The Forces on Each Side

As mentioned, the North Vietnamese retained about 200,000 soldiers in the South after 1973, up against about 300,000 ARVN combat soldiers (out of a total ARVN force of about 1.1 million). Although these numbers would seem to have given the advantage to the South Vietnamese, especially because they were on the defensive, it is important to remember that these troops were spread out over a large amount of territory, offering a variety of targets against which the North Vietnamese could mass forces and strike.³⁸² Furthermore, the PAVN had built more actual combat divisions out of their manpower. The ARVN had 14 divisions in total (the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 22nd, 23rd, 5, 18th, 25th, 7th, 9th, 21st, Airborne, Rangers, and Marines), plus several independent regiments and numerous specialty units, while the PAVN fielded sixteen total divisions plus a larger array of additional independent and specialty forces.³⁸³

The final battles in 1975 went through three major phases. First, the North Vietnamese probed a lightly defended province in MR-3, known as Phuoc Long, in January 1975. Then they initiated full-scale attacks on MR-1 and MR-2 during March. Finally, they returned their focus to MR-3, converging on Saigon by the end of April. Each of these three phases will be discussed in more detail below, with particular emphasis on events in MR-1 and MR-2, as these were the sites of the most intense action.

On both sides, the forces and commanders were familiar, with many characters reprising roles from the earlier battles. General Truong continued to command the ARVN I Corps (where the Marines and Airborne were now stationed), in addition to the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Divisions, one armored brigade, and four Ranger groups. Despite this impressive show of

³⁸⁰ These figures are calculated based on Michael Clodfelter, *Warfare and Armed Conflicts: a Statistical Reference to Casualty and Other Figures, 1500-2000* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), p. 743.

³⁸¹ These figures are calculated based on Clodfelter, p. 743.

³⁸² Snepp, *Decent Interval*, pp. 159-161.

³⁸³ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 356.

force, the ARVN were outnumbered in MR-1, as the PAVN had seven divisions there by early March 1975, as well as several additional PAVN reserve divisions just north of the DMZ.³⁸⁴ PAVN divisions inside MR-1 included the 208th, 312th, and 320B Divisions, as well as the 304th, the 325th, and the 324th.

More importantly, the North Vietnamese had vastly improved their road networks in MR-1 (and indeed, throughout South Vietnam), creating new lines of transportation referred to in the ARVN as “Ho Chi Minh east.” These routes essentially gave the PAVN internal lines within South Vietnam, greatly shortening the distances across which the North Vietnamese had to maneuver in order to get within striking distance of key cities, and substantially increasing the speed of re-supply efforts.³⁸⁵

II Corps had new leadership, as General Phu, the former commander of the 1st Division, had been moved to command there. Despite his strong reputation as a combat commander, Phu admitted that he felt unready for this new position, as he had little experience as a “headquarters man.” Moreover, his predecessor, General Nguyen Van Toan, had not left II Corps in good shape. A close friend of Thieu, Toan “had turned the command into a petty fiefdom, parceling out provincial posts and other assignments on the basis of various personal gratuities.... Phu had been left with the vestiges of Toan’s style of command—an inept staff with almost no feeling for the troops.”³⁸⁶

Phu’s troops included the 22nd and 23rd divisions, as well as several Ranger groups.³⁸⁷ The 23rd now had new leadership—Ba was no longer in command, having been replaced by Brigadier General Tuong, about which little appears to be known. Arrayed against these ARVN forces in MR-3 were five PAVN divisions: the NT3, F10, 320th, 968th, and 316th, plus fifteen independent regiments specializing in armor, artillery, antiaircraft fire, and engineering, for a total of more than 75,000 soldiers.³⁸⁸

PAVN forces were led again by General Van Tien Dung, who as a colonel had led forces in Laos during Lam Son 719.³⁸⁹ A protégé of Giap, Dung was a beneficiary of the legendary commander’s belief that professional merit was more important than party status in determining promotions.³⁹⁰ Following the Politburo’s direction to assess the lessons of the Easter Offensive, Dung had overseen a massive review and re-training effort within the PAVN since 1973, with significant emphasis on improving tactical skills from the individual soldier up to large-unit formations.³⁹¹ As the PAVN history of the period reports:

The General Staff directed our units to make use of this time of peace in North Vietnam to conduct a series of training sessions, each session being three or six months long. The mid-level and high-level Military Study Institutes doubled the length of training for their students; basic cadre training was increased from one year to two years; and supplemental training was extended from six months to one year. The infantry divisions implemented a two-phase training plan: basic training for subordinate units in offensive and defensive tactics, and combined training, exercising

³⁸⁴ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 102.

³⁸⁵ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, pp. 70, 112; and Snepp, *Decent Interval*, p. 55.

³⁸⁶ Snepp, *Decent Interval*, p. 193.

³⁸⁷ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 82.

³⁸⁸ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 82.

³⁸⁹ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 362.

³⁹⁰ Snepp, *Decent Interval*, p. 140.

³⁹¹ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 336.

in various types of coordinated operations from company up to regimental level.³⁹²

Under Dung's leadership, the North Vietnamese also had held a variety of realistic exercises emphasizing the use of combined arms warfare at multiple levels of warfare. "In 1974," according to the PAVN history, "units held many staff and command-level exercises at the corps and division level to practice our different combat tactics."³⁹³ These included special exercises by the PAVN 1st Corps "involving an offensive campaign operation aimed at liberating a large city and attacking enemy forces mounting counterattacks on the outskirts of the city. Command and staff cadre at three levels, corps, division, and regiment, participated in the exercise."³⁹⁴ Clearly, while the nature of political intervention in the South Vietnamese military had remained pathological, in North Vietnam the opposite circumstances prevailed; political intervention in and oversight of the military followed best practices, particularly with regard to promotions and training.

The Initial Probe in MR-3

In late 1974 the Politburo developed its plan for the conquest of South Vietnam during 1975-6. A key question for North Vietnamese leaders (not to mention for their Southern counterparts) was whether the United States would intervene militarily to rescue South Vietnam in the event of imminent conquest. The North Vietnamese had seen in 1968 and 1972 that the United States could tip the balance against them, and they sought to probe what the United States would do in the event of a violation of the 1973 agreements.

This experiment began in early January 1975, when two PAVN divisions attacked Phuoc Long province with armor, artillery and infantry. The North Vietnamese had purposely chosen one of the most "weakly defended" areas of the Republic, just outside of MR-2 and very close to their own sanctuaries in Cambodia.³⁹⁵ As predicted, the ARVN forces in the area, part of III Corps, "offered little resistance to the overwhelming Communist forces" and were quickly overrun as they proved unable to mount a coordinated defense. Beyond serving as another "telling manifestation of the GVN's [government of South Vietnam's] inability to carry out combined operations," the lack of U.S. and South Vietnamese response to the loss of this province convinced Hanoi that the time for a broader offensive had arrived. The stage was now set for the real attacks in I and II Corps.³⁹⁶

The Battles in II Corps

On March 10, the North Vietnamese launched a multi-division attack on Ban Me Thuot, the provincial capital of Darlac, at the very heart of the Central Highlands. II Corps forces were responsible for this area but were widely dispersed, with only one regiment of the 23rd Division actually defending the capital.³⁹⁷ Dung had built up a substantial local superiority in numbers.³⁹⁸ Following a powerful artillery barrage, two divisions of PAVN infantry and armor directly attacked the city from three directions, overrunning almost all of

³⁹² Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 351.

³⁹³ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 352.

³⁹⁴ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 352.

³⁹⁵ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 80.

³⁹⁶ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 81.

³⁹⁷ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 82.

³⁹⁸ Snepp, *Decent Interval*, p. 174.

its defensive positions by the end of the day and bypassing what pockets of resistance remained in order to attack targets in the heart of the city.

The South Vietnamese air force also did the PAVN a favor by accidentally bombing the 23rd Division's command post, severing the defenders' communications and disrupting much hope of organized resistance. One Ranger group made it to Ban Me Thuot to try to rescue the 23rd, but no sooner had it arrived than the Division Commander, Tuong, diverted it from fighting to secure a landing zone for the evacuation his own wife and children.³⁹⁹ By the time the Rangers had completed this task, the battle was over, and Ban Me Thuot was in North Vietnamese hands.

Observing this disaster, President Thieu ordered General Phu, the commander of II Corps, to re-take the city by airlifting another regiment of the 23rd into nearby Phuoc An. But this process took much longer than either Thieu or Phu expected. "Even more disastrous," according to the recollections of ARVN generals after the war, was that the troops lifted into the area "were not ready to fight" and began to desert in order to take care of their families" as soon as they arrived. Instead of trying to retake Ban Me Thuot, soldiers from the 23rd took off their uniforms and abandoned their weapons, hoping to blend in with the civilian population and escape.⁴⁰⁰

Phu, who had previously had an excellent reputation as a commander of the 1st Division, expressed grave reservations about the operation to those around him, complaining that he had done it only because of Thieu's order and that he remained deeply "pessimistic about the chances of reoccupying the province capital."⁴⁰¹ By March 14, Thieu must have agreed, because his decision-making soon swung in the opposite direction: instead of trying to save Ban Me Thuot, he told Phu that the remaining forces of the 23rd were to abandon the two large provinces to the north, Pleiku and Kontum, and move to the coast, from which they would supposedly later be in a position to retake Ban Me Thuot. Not only was the 23rd to make this withdrawal immediately, but it was to execute it in secret, leaving behind the civilians in these areas, including the dependents of the 23rd's own soldiers, as well as the RF/PF forces. Moreover, the 23rd was to accomplish the withdrawal using an old back road, Route 7B, that was heavily mined and had been in disrepair for some time.⁴⁰²

Thieu's orders were so bizarre, and so obviously infeasible, that even years after the war many ARVN officers and high-ranking officials had a difficult time explaining them. South Vietnam's Speaker of the House of Representatives later went so far as to suggest that the decision to abandon the highlands might have been purely instrumental, aimed at "creating a state of emergency in the country which would consequently muzzle the mounting opposition" to Thieu's rule and possibly provoke the United States to finally intervene.⁴⁰³ Certainly, this policy—announced at a meeting of top officials at Cam Ranh Bay and therefore known as the Cam Ranh decision—stood in stark contrast to Thieu's long-stand policy known as the "four no's": no negotiations with the North Vietnamese, no North Vietnamese, political activities south of the DMZ, no coalition government with the North Vietnamese,, and no surrender of territory to them.

So entrenched was the four-no's policy that Phu's officers did not believe him when he relayed the orders, and many expressed their preference to stay in Kontum and Pleiku

³⁹⁹ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 84.

⁴⁰⁰ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 85.

⁴⁰¹ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 85.

⁴⁰² Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 90-1.

⁴⁰³ Nguyen Ba Can, quoted in Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 89.

and fight. Perhaps seeing their reactions, or experiencing the same sense of shock himself, or fearing that he would be captured by the North as he had been after Dien Bien Phu, Phu appears to have all but abdicated his command. In an unforgivable stroke of irresponsibility, he took his key staff officers and simply left for Nha Trang on the coast, leaving behind a colonel to execute the withdrawal of 165,000 men, with “no staff, no planning, and no guidance from the JGS staff in Saigon, who themselves were at first unaware of Thieu’s redeployment order.”⁴⁰⁴ When the troops heard the order and realized their dependents were to be left behind and that their leaders had abandoned them, they lost all discipline. Local forces began to riot, and the colonel who had been left in charge had to use his personal pistol just to keep order at the airfield in Pleiku.⁴⁰⁵

Despite attempts to rapidly repair route 7B during the next several days, the withdrawal quickly bottlenecked on the old road, alerting the population to their abandonment and causing an avalanche of refugees to join the withdrawing column (see map 12). The PAVN quickly noticed this inviting target and began to attack it, civilians and all. Years later, military officials present at the scene recalled the disaster and the trauma: “Jammed with civilians and military alike, the road from Pleiku rapidly became a nightmare. Unit integrity completely disintegrated as did all semblance of control.”⁴⁰⁶

Because the withdrawal had occurred so hastily, even the soldiers had little food to bring with them, leading them to literally rape and pillage their way through the countryside. To make matters worse, an ARVN armored unit trying to clear an alternate route was hit by South Vietnam’s own pilots, crushing any remaining morale in the withdrawing column. In some cases, soldiers actually began killing their officers and readily surrendering to the PAVN. “The despair was so great that at one point two or three guerrillas arriving at the scene could make prisoners of a hundred Rangers,” according to witnesses after the war.⁴⁰⁷

Ultimately, “only about 20,000 of the 60,000 troops that had started out from Pleiku and Kontum finally got down to Tuy Hoa [on the coast], and these were no longer fit for combat.... Of the some 400,000 civilians who had attempted to flee..., only an estimated 100,000 got through,” and they were still trickling down by April 1.⁴⁰⁸ RVN officials later called this withdrawal “the greatest disaster in the history of ARVN” and lamented that it “must rank as one of the worst planned and the worst executed withdrawal operations in the annals of military history.”⁴⁰⁹ The PAVN had certainly out-fought the ARVN at Ban Me Thuot, but with his extreme centralization of command, President Thieu’s interventions managed to turn the defeat of a single regiment into what would soon become the collapse of an entire corps.

Indeed, the quick pace of events surprised even Hanoi, where the Politburo soon issued new orders to proceed with taking all of South Vietnam in 1975.⁴¹⁰ With the 23rd Division demolished, the PAVN forces were able to attack the 22nd, situated in the northernmost part of II Corps. Soon the 22nd was trapped from both the north and south, fleeing almost literally into the sea by mid-March.⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁴ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 93.

⁴⁰⁵ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 94.

⁴⁰⁶ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 95.

⁴⁰⁷ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, pp. 95-96.

⁴⁰⁸ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 96.

⁴⁰⁹ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 96.

⁴¹⁰ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 381.

⁴¹¹ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 98.

Meanwhile, the other provinces of II Corps quickly collapsed despite strong resistance from the RF/PF forces remaining behind the ARVN. There was a total breakdown in command and control of units in these areas, with several observers later defining the basic problem as a case of “no one was in charge.”⁴¹² Phu himself never recovered from Thieu’s initial orders to withdraw from the Central Highlands. After his initial abandonment of his Corps, Phu later simply walked out of his headquarters, got in a helicopter, and flew to Saigon. The other senior commanders in central Vietnam soon followed him. North Vietnam controlled almost all of the highlands and the coastal areas of II Corps by early April.⁴¹³

The Battles in I Corps

Simultaneous with their attacks in II Corps, the North Vietnamese also launched an enormous offensive in MR-1 during early March, led by the 324th Division. Under General Truong’s command, the ARVN did a decent job fighting off initial attacks both near Hue and farther south in Quang Tin province, holding the face of the PAVN onslaught. But on March 10, Thieu apparently grew nervous about the possibility of a coup in Saigon and ordered the Airborne to return immediately from southern I Corps to protect him.⁴¹⁴

Apparently, General Truong had become a little too effective for his own good—ever since his success in retaking Quang Tri in 1972, Truong had enjoyed growing national stature, and now Thieu was suspicious that he was a rival for national power. As it later turned out, Thieu’s fears were not entirely unfounded: “Ky, by his own admission, had begun to approach other senior officers about removing Thieu after the loss of Ban Me Thuot,” and it is possible that Truong was among them.⁴¹⁵ In any event, Thieu did not want five divisions within Truong’s orbit, despite the four-plus PAVN divisions threatening MR-1.

Truong, shocked by the military implications of Thieu’s recall of the Airborne, coped as best he could with the sudden change. He moved two of the three Marine brigades in Quang Tri down to Quang Nam to defend the area formerly secured by the Airborne. But all of these rapid and unusual troop movements alarmed the population, causing them to initiate a massive refugee flow south, similar to what had just occurred in II Corps. Indeed, as news of the defeat at Ban Me Thuot and the abandonment of Kontum and Pleiku spread throughout the population of I Corps, the panic worsened. Many near the DMZ believed a secret deal had been struck to partition Vietnam anew, ceding the northern regions to Hanoi.⁴¹⁶

By March 13, these fears proved half-founded as Thieu informed Truong that “he had to give up most of I Corps,” keeping only the city and port of Danang and the immediate surrounding areas. Thieu described the new strategy as “light at the top, heavy at the bottom”: the ARVN would give up much of I and II Corps, withdrawing to fight from the coasts and the areas surrounding Saigon.⁴¹⁷ Soon, however, even this strategy proved futile, as 2 million refugees flooded into Danang, a coastal city of only 300,000 people, clogging the major roads in I Corps.

⁴¹² Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 99.

⁴¹³ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 101.

⁴¹⁴ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 87.

⁴¹⁵ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 120; and Snepp, *Decent Interval*, pp. 239-242.

⁴¹⁶ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 104.

⁴¹⁷ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 89.

On March 19, Truong tried to convince Thieu to reconsider his decision to withdraw all the way to Danang, explaining that such a withdrawal was infeasible due to the refugee situation and that it was better “to stay in Hue and fight” because he had established “good defensive positions around Hue.”⁴¹⁸ Thieu eventually agreed to Truong’s suggestion and reassured him that the Marine Division would remain in I Corps as well, a critical point on which Truong sought information for planning purposes. “After hearing this new decision, General Truong reported he ‘felt good,’” like he could still sustain the defense of his region for some time.⁴¹⁹ Immediately after the meeting, however, the Prime Minister privately informed Truong that “there were indeed plans under way to bring back the Marines.” Truong was “crushed” and filled with despair.⁴²⁰

Matters only worsened the next day when Truong returned to Danang, and the Joint General Staff relayed a new and confusing set of additional instructions. In what remains a matter of historical controversy, Truong interpreted these new instructions as telling him to abandon Hue.⁴²¹ According to JGS officers interviewed after the war, the message was intended only to warn Truong that Saigon had a limited ability to support forces in I Corps and that he had permission to withdraw from Hue to Danang when he felt it necessary. To Truong, however, the ambiguous message came across as meaning Saigon would not support the defense of Hue in the first place and that he must go ahead and withdraw to Danang—an important distinction.

As several high-ranking RVN officials noted after the war:

This misunderstanding was but one manifestation of the serious problems in communication and coordination that existed between the I Corps and Saigon staffs. The JGS did not appear to comprehend the gravity of the situation in I Corps, which it felt was being “exaggerated” by local commanders there. One JGS officer complained of “inadequate” and “inaccurate” reporting from I Corps, while General Truong, on the other hand, faulted the “weak” planning support and command from Saigon. He commented that when the Americans had been in Vietnam, I Corps could rely on U.S. channels. However, with the departure of U.S. forces, coordination was no longer “appropriate” to deal with the situation.⁴²²

This debacle became somewhat moot by the next day. On March 20, two PAVN divisions, the 324th and 325th, cut the road between Hue and Danang, “despite intensive close air support and a determined counterattack by a Marine battalion rushed to the area.”⁴²³ The PAVN also put pressure on ARVN forces north of Hue, threatening a total envelopment of the city. In the face of these developments, “the cohesion of the South Vietnamese forces began to give way. The I Corps Chief of Staff stated that ‘everything was out of control’ and that the commanders ‘reported back that they could not control their troops, that the troops deserted, that they did not have enough supplies and that they could not control the situation. They reported that they had to abandon Hue.’”⁴²⁴

⁴¹⁸ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 107.

⁴¹⁹ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 107.

⁴²⁰ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 107.

⁴²¹ The details of this miscommunication appear in Lam Quang Thi, *The Twenty-Five Year Century: a South Vietnamese General Remembers the Indochina War to the Fall of Saigon* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2001), chapter 14.

⁴²² Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 108.

⁴²³ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 108.

⁴²⁴ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 108.

As had been the case in the withdrawals already attempted, this move away from Hue was a disaster for the South Vietnamese, and the PAVN history notes that “under the pressure of our attacks, enemy troops in Hue collapsed into disorder.”⁴²⁵ The Navy and Marines that were supposed to provide evacuation for ARVN forces by sea failed to arrive at the right locations on time. Many 1st Division soldiers were drowned in rising tides in the areas where they were supposed to await evacuation, while others were killed by PAVN forces because the Marines had not secured the rendezvous points as planned. “Furthermore, command over the withdrawing troops was inadequate and, in the words of General Truong, there was ‘not good discipline’.”⁴²⁶

All told, “less than half of the troops scheduled for evacuation... arrived in Danang, and those that did make their way there were completely disorganized. Upon arriving in Danang, the 1st Infantry remnants dispersed in an effort to find their dependents and were no longer of fighting value.”⁴²⁷ Amazingly, despite the JGS message of the previous day, “Hue’s abandonment apparently came as a surprise to President Thieu.”⁴²⁸

Meanwhile, the battle was not over in the southern part of I Corps. There the PAVN overcame the 2nd Division’s defenses and cut all routes to Danang, splitting the Corps area in half. The 2nd Division was totally surrounded and had to be evacuated by sea. Only about 2,000 of this Division’s troops ever made it to Saigon.⁴²⁹

With the 1st and 2nd Divisions utterly dismantled, the PAVN’s five divisions in I Corps could now turn their combined might on the remaining 3rd Division, two Marine brigades, and various RF/PF units in and around Danang. Not only were these forces outnumbered, but the city behind them was out of control with refugees, looting, lack of sufficient food and water, and nowhere near enough police. “Realizing the situation was becoming unmanageable, and unwilling to stop the flow of refugees for humanitarian reasons, General Truong urgently requested assistance from Saigon, both for transportation to move the refugees out of Danang and for food and other vital provisions. However, except for a few transport flights, no help was forthcoming.”⁴³⁰

Desertions by both officers and enlisted men increased rapidly as it became a situation of every man for himself and his family.⁴³¹ The North Vietnamese history of the battle claims that all of the Marine units in Danang simply abandoned their defensive positions.⁴³² Not mentioned in this history is that the PAVN also began shelling Danang, including areas teeming with civilians. Observing the carnage, Truong asked Thieu for permission to withdraw, but Thieu again equivocated and refused to make a decision. After PAVN artillery cut communications with Saigon, “General Truong made the decision on his own to withdraw.”⁴³³

In one of the many great ironies of 1975, the Marines, whose recall to Saigon had prompted much of Truong’s despair, were virtually destroyed as a fighting force in the withdrawal. Less than half the division made it out by sea. Similarly, out of the 12,000-man 3rd Division, only about 5,000 men made it to the evacuation point, and of them only a

⁴²⁵ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 383.

⁴²⁶ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 109.

⁴²⁷ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 109.

⁴²⁸ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 110.

⁴²⁹ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 110.

⁴³⁰ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 110.

⁴³¹ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 111.

⁴³² Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 391.

⁴³³ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 111.

thousand could board the single ship that arrived. In an odd contrast to the many previous years of high casualties, total South Vietnamese combat losses in I Corps in March are estimated to have been only 1,000-2,000 soldiers. As the ARVN chief of staff observed after the war, “I have to say there was no big battle. Only small engagements so the losses were not much. Maybe a thousand, maybe two thousand. But not much because no big battles.”⁴³⁴

The Battles in and around Saigon

With the rapid collapse of I and II Corps in March, the PAVN was able to turn its full force against the remaining ARVN forces in and around Saigon. So much of the ARVN had self-destructed that the North Vietnamese advantage in numbers was by now overwhelming. As a RAND history put it:

Except for the two Airborne brigades previously withdrawn from I Corps and the few units that could be reconstituted from the estimated 18,000 or so demoralized troops who had been successfully extracted from the northern Corps areas, the defense of South Vietnam now rested with the six divisions and two armored brigades and the various Ranger groups, Regional Forces, and Popular Forces organic to III and IV Corps. However, most of these indigenous units were themselves already hard pressed and tied down by local Communist forces and could not be disengaged to form reserves to meet the fresh enemy divisions moving down from the north.⁴³⁵

As a result, PAVN forces were able to quickly converge on the capital, which had only about two divisions’ worth of troops defending it—a hodgepodge of Airborne, Rangers, Marines, RF/PF, and stragglers from I and II Corps. But in addition to being poorly organized, these forces were demoralized, ill-disciplined, and “no longer wanted to fight.”⁴³⁶ They stood in stark contrast to the PAVN divisions, most of which had yet to see hard fighting and “were up to strength, fresh, and obviously buoyed by their enormous successes in the north.” Indeed, the collapse in the north had happened almost too fast for the PAVN to fully exploit it.⁴³⁷

By the end of April, after overcoming some final ARVN resistance in Ninh Thuan and Long Khanh provinces, the PAVN had assembled thirteen divisions on the outskirts of Saigon, plus four more in reserve.⁴³⁸ On April 21, Thieu resigned in favor of the vice president, Tran Van Huong. A week later, on April 28, General Duong Van Minh, known as “Big Minh,” replaced Huong, as he was said to be the only leader acceptable to the North. Minh attempted to negotiate a ceasefire, to which North Vietnam responded by strafing the presidential palace with captured South Vietnamese aircraft. With its overwhelming numbers, perhaps as great as 4:1, the PAVN overran Saigon quickly in a mechanized attack from five directions, targeting key government sites and facing almost no organized ARVN resistance.⁴³⁹ On April 30, Minh unconditionally surrendered. The war was over.⁴⁴⁰

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of South Vietnam

⁴³⁴ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 114.

⁴³⁵ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 116.

⁴³⁶ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 117.

⁴³⁷ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 118.

⁴³⁸ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 118.

⁴³⁹ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 410.

⁴⁴⁰ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 123-5.

As mentioned, what is so striking about the South Vietnamese performance in 1975 was how little fighting actually occurred. The ARVN essentially self-destructed, with such a collapse of cohesion as to make considerations of tactical proficiency and the ability to conduct complex operations almost irrelevant to evaluation of the campaign. In both MR-1 and MR-2—the two key arenas in which the ARVN had at least a fighting chance to resist the North Vietnamese—ARVN soldiers repeatedly chose to stop fighting, take off their uniforms, drop their weapons, and blend in with the fleeing civilian population. Although even the best armies sometimes need to withdraw from engagements in which they are outnumbered, the ARVN's retreats were so disorderly that most of the forces were never reconstituted as combat units.

Furthermore, in both MR-1 and MR-2, the mass exodus began after the intervention of President Thieu, overruling his field commanders and giving them unrealistic orders to execute. This extreme centralization of command obviated the influence of the good commanders who did exist in the ARVN and the preparations that they had made to fight, particularly in I Corps. For example, Thieu's order to withdraw the Airborne and Marines from MR-1 due to coup fears crippled the ability even of the very good corps commander, General Truong, to keep his units intact and to fight from prepared defensive positions.⁴⁴¹

Likewise, Thieu's absurd order to withdraw immediately from the Central Highlands essentially caused his corps commander General Phu to give up. Phu had clearly demonstrated himself to be capable in the past as a division commander. Although some South Vietnamese officials interviewed after the war condemned Phu's behavior in 1975, most officials believed the real blame lay with Thieu. In their view, "the withdrawal operations should never have been left in Phu's hands in the first place." It was not reasonable to think "that II Corps could withdraw forces already under enemy pressure and preserve their morale and combat effectiveness, much less retake Ban Me Thuot."⁴⁴²

Furthermore, in both MR-1 and MR-2, the negative impact of Thieu's unrealistic orders was further compounded by the subsequent lack of clear procedures for communicating those orders from the President to the JGS to field commanders, and for sending information about the battlefield back up the chain.⁴⁴³ Especially in MR-1, the corps commander remained confused about when and where the President planned to withdraw various forces, particularly with regard to Hue and Danang. South Vietnam's worst practices in information management—a weakness that the Americans had been able to paper over in previous battles—crippled whatever fighting power the ARVN had now that it was on its own.

While one can speculate about what would have happened in 1975 absent these worst practices—whether and for how long the ARVN might have been able to hold out against the PAVN, and what sorts of costs it might have imposed on the PAVN in the process—such conjectures remain just that. The nature of Thieu's political interventions obviated the impact of any good practices he had previously exercised, leading to a force that was fundamentally not cohesive and unable to resist the PAVN advance.⁴⁴⁴ As soon as troops in the field saw their leaders abandoning them and realized the lack of competent planning for their resistance, they gave up. The collapse in MR-1 and MR-2 made the actual

⁴⁴¹ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 112. The same conclusion is reached in Smith, *The Siege*, p. 175.

⁴⁴² Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 96.

⁴⁴³ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 96.

⁴⁴⁴ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 79.

conquest of Saigon a foregone conclusion, allowing the PAVN to achieve an overwhelming superiority in numbers which alone would have guaranteed that the capital eventually fell.

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of North Vietnam

The final offensives illuminated an even greater contrast in North and South Vietnamese capabilities than had appeared during the earlier years of the Vietnam War, when the United States had been able to compensate for what turned out to be critical flaws in the ARVN's battlefield capabilities and to keep heavy pressure on the PAVN. The PAVN continued to demonstrate strong cohesion in 1975 and actually improved its tactical proficiency and ability to conduct complex operations compared to earlier battles.

First, regarding unit cohesion, there are again virtually no reports of PAVN units abandoning their positions, fleeing the battlefield, or demonstrating poor discipline. Granted, the battles of 1975 did not offer the greatest test of North Vietnamese cohesion, because the PAVN usually had local superiority in numbers and was essentially winning from the beginning—a fact of which its soldiers were well aware and which buoyed morale. Nevertheless, soldiers also had “high resolve” because they knew that they were led and well trained by competent officers.⁴⁴⁵ As the PAVN's own history described it, “All units participating in the campaign had been well prepared and their morale was high.”⁴⁴⁶

Second, tactical proficiency in the PAVN was as good as it had ever been, which is to say, excellent. The results of Dung's intensive training program were evident, with virtually all ARVN officials agreeing after the war that the enemy “had greatly improved his proficiency in using his equipment, especially armor.”⁴⁴⁷ Another example of just how well honed PAVN tactics were came in the area of air defense, where North Vietnamese soldiers displayed extraordinary fire discipline, reflecting very careful and specialized attention to tactics. Reports the PAVN history of the campaign: “Our anti-aircraft artillery troops waited until enemy aircraft dove down to a low level before opening fire,” which made such fire particularly effective.⁴⁴⁸

Most importantly, however, the PAVN proved itself able to aggregate cohesion and tactical competence into very difficult combined-arms operations. The PAVN had mastered the art of using tanks for maneuver, repeatedly demonstrating the ability to bypass obstacles on the outskirts of major South Vietnamese cities and move directly to key targets inside, all the while closely coordinating armor movement with infantry. Indeed, the PAVN history notes, “Our infantry stuck close to and support our tanks while they overran enemy pockets of resistance.”⁴⁴⁹ They also repeatedly demonstrated the ability to coordinate artillery with infantry and armor.⁴⁵⁰

Moreover, the PAVN demonstrated the ability to combine low-level initiative with a higher-level coordinated plan. Although the Politburo had set the overall goals of the campaign for 1975-76, the PAVN repeatedly showed the ability to react in response to events, such as the quick collapse in MR-1 and MR-2. Although the PAVN leaders had planned to fight large battles for some of the cities in these areas, they showed the ability to adjust when ARVN units began withdrawing, and the PAVN soldiers instead pursued the

⁴⁴⁵ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 393.

⁴⁴⁶ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 364.

⁴⁴⁷ Hosmer et al, *The Fall*, p. 65.

⁴⁴⁸ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 372.

⁴⁴⁹ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 372.

⁴⁵⁰ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 371.

retreating ARVN columns and disrupted their ability to evacuate by sea. As the PAVN's own history put it, there was "unanimity of thought from the top to the bottom regarding the opportunity we faced and the tactics to be employed," but significant room for commanders to execute their plans within the framework of the overall attack.⁴⁵¹ Indeed, the PAVN history emphasizes that in 1975 its soldiers truly demonstrated "their ability to conduct combined-arms combat within the context of large-scale campaigns"—the goal that had been set after 1972.⁴⁵²

VIII. Potential Disconfirming Evidence: Instances of Unexpectedly Good South Vietnamese Performance and/or Poor North Vietnamese Performance

Although the battles already discussed provide substantial support for the theory, what about disconfirming evidence? In order to test the theory as rigorously as possible against the empirical record, the research strategy deliberately sought out instances in which the ARVN performed unexpectedly well or the PAVN performed especially poorly. While this sort of evidence would not necessarily support alternative explanations, it would still cast doubt on the intervention theory. This section therefore analyzes the four biggest potential outliers in the empirical record: the North Vietnamese raid at Phuoc Chao in 1962; the ARVN Operation Dan Tien, also in 1962; the ARVN incursion into Cambodia in 1970; and the resistance by the ARVN 18th Division at Xuan Loc during the final battles of 1975. The analysis generally finds that these exceptions cast only limited doubt on the theory.

Phuoc Chao, 1962

Phuoc Chao offers an instance in which ARVN forces successfully repelled an attempted raid on an outpost 25 miles south of Quang Nam, in I Corps, despite being outnumbered. Guarding the outpost were barely one hundred South Vietnamese soldiers—one regular infantry company, one platoon of the Civil Guard, and one platoon of Self-Defense Corps.⁴⁵³ They were armed with rifles, submachine guns, heavy machine guns, one 60-mm mortar, and one 81-mm mortar. Fortunately they also had the support of 105-mm and 155-mm artillery from two friendly posts nearby.⁴⁵⁴ The men at Phuoc Chao had wisely constructed a defense of their post, building a triangular-shaped bunker connected by trenches surrounded with barbed wire and "taking full advantage of the terrain" (see map 13).⁴⁵⁵

Still, on the day of the raid, November 25, 1962, the North Vietnamese massively outnumbered and outgunned the defenders at Phuoc Chao.⁴⁵⁶ The attacking force consisted of two PLAF regular units, the 60th and 70th Battalions, as well as nine units of regional troops and militia, one intelligence platoon, and one demolition platoon. These troops were

⁴⁵¹ Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 393.

⁴⁵² Military History Institute, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 395.

⁴⁵³ Pham Chung, "Analysis of the Long Range Military, Economic, and Social Impact of the Strategic Hamlet Program," unpublished study for the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, 1964, p. 77, available in the Historian's Working Files and Papers at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC.

⁴⁵⁴ Chung, "Analysis of Long Range..." p. 77.

⁴⁵⁵ Lt. Nguyen Kim Tuan, "Phuoc-Chau: the Viet Cong Paid a Very Expensive Price for Their Unrealistic Estimate," *Infantry*, vol. 54, no. 4, July-August 1964, p. 29; and Col. Bryce F. Denno, "The Viet Cong Defeat at Phuoc Chao," *Marine Corps Gazette*, vol. 49, no. 3 (March 1965), p. 36.

⁴⁵⁶ Tuan, "Phuoc-Chau," p. 30.

armed with rifles, submachine guns, light machine guns, 57-mm recoilless rifles, three 60-mm mortars, three 81-mm mortars, and three heavy machine guns.⁴⁵⁷

According to documents captured after the battle, “The Viet Cong attack plan, as usual, was carefully prepared. They knew all the details concerning the terrain of the post, gun positions and defense constructions, the system of trenches, the strength, weapons, and equipment of the defenders, the reinforcement route, and the capacity of the artillery support of nearby friendly posts.”⁴⁵⁸ The attackers envisioned a two-pronged attack with a reserve unit blocking a third area that could have served as an escape point for the defenders.

Nevertheless, the ARVN skillfully defended Phuoc Chao, driving back the PLAF assault. First, the commander of the post, 2nd Lt. Quang Trinh, correctly guessed that an attack was imminent due to the odd behavior of local villagers right before the attack, as well as the fact that the village dogs were barking all night.⁴⁵⁹ Then the ARVN received a stroke of luck: in the early morning hours as the attack was just beginning, one of the PLAF soldiers accidentally stepped on a mine, giving away the exact direction of the coming attack. As a result, the North Vietnamese were suddenly “compelled to make the attack even though necessary avenues of approach had not been cleared,” nor had they emplaced their heavy weaponry to protect the infantry’s approach.⁴⁶⁰

The Phuoc Chao defenders unleashed their fire, repelling the attack using their organic weapons as well as artillery called in from the other two posts.⁴⁶¹ According to an ARVN analysis:

Thanks to pre-selected fire positions, all BARs [Browning Automatic Rifles] and machineguns effectively covered all essential avenues of approach. The troops in the post moved along communicating trenches and rapidly concentrated at the side which faced the strongest enemy pressure. Simultaneously, upon request of the post commander, the 105 mm and 155 howitzers delivered heavy fire on enemy assaults waves and reserve elements. Several artillery salvos were adjusted accurately and exploded on targets located 40 to 50 meters outside the post.... All the 105mm and 155mm artillery fires had been prepared and adjusted beforehand. Moreover, at the moment of the attack, the post commander calmly made radio contact with the artillery and adjusted the 105mm artillery fire on the Viet Cong assault waves. The artillery fires broke up all Viet Cong assault efforts.⁴⁶²

Indeed, the PLAF forces seemed to collapse once their initial plan went awry. The ARVN analysis notes that the “attack forces were not properly coordinated. When his main effort was brought to a standstill by our small arms and artillery, the VC commanders could not reorganize their troops.... The VC commanders were in a state of chaos. No further efforts were made to change the direction of the main attack or to commit the reserve with a view to maintaining the momentum of the attack.”⁴⁶³ PLAF fire support was also described as inaccurate and poorly coordinated, contributing to very high casualties and a disorderly

⁴⁵⁷ Chung, “Analysis of Long Range...,” p. 77-8.

⁴⁵⁸ Chung, “Analysis of Long Range...,” p. 80.

⁴⁵⁹ Tuan, “Phuoc-Chau,” p. 30.

⁴⁶⁰ Tuan, “Phuoc-Chau,” p. 30; and Denno, “Viet Cong Defeat,” p. 39.

⁴⁶¹ Chung, “Analysis of Long Range...,” p. p. 78.

⁴⁶² Tuan, “Phuoc-Chau,” p. 31.

⁴⁶³ Tuan, “Phuoc-Chau,” p. 33.

withdrawal.⁴⁶⁴ Meanwhile, ARVN small arms marksmanship and artillery accuracy was said to be excellent, with Lt. Trinh engaging in careful adjustment of the latter.⁴⁶⁵

Clearly, this engagement demonstrates that the North Vietnamese did not always perform flawlessly, nor was the ARVN always a force of bumbling incompetents, even in the regular infantry divisions and Territorial Forces. The PLAF proved unable to recover from the extraordinary stroke of bad luck they experienced with the early detonation of the land mine, and the tactical leadership of Lt. Trinh was no doubt excellent, producing a very cohesive and proficient defense of Phuoc Chao.

Indeed, the U.S. after-action report praised “the willingness and aggressiveness of the individual Vietnamese soldier” at Phuoc Chao, as reflected by his high volume of fire, and spirit throughout the defense.” The ARVN had exemplified a “well coordinated and integrated close defense plan” that received attention not only in official channels but in U.S. and South Vietnamese military journals of the time.⁴⁶⁶

The very prominence of the events at Phuoc Chao, however, raises questions about how representative it was of the overall fighting effectiveness of the ARVN. Why were the actions of a mere one hundred men in a strategically insignificant outpost still being written up and circulated throughout the army several years later? Perhaps because the battle was such an outlier. The events at Phuoc Chao certainly show that there were exceptions to the pattern of ineffectiveness displayed in the rest of the ARVN. Trinh’s unit did display cohesion, tactical proficiency, and the ability to conduct a combined arms operation on the defense, despite being subject presumably to the same forms of political intervention as the rest of the army. Nevertheless, the events at Phuoc Chao seem to have been rare and Trinh’s approach to command not repeated elsewhere.

Operation Dan Tien 44, 1962

Operation Dan Tien 44 represents another instance in which the ARVN conducted itself fairly well and North Vietnamese forces seem to have disintegrated. The engagement occurred in an area about 100 km southwest of Saigon on September 18, 1962. Reports had indicated that two enemy companies were in the area, so the 7th Division Headquarters (the same division later involved at Ap Bac in January 1963) sent two infantry battalions, seven Civil Guard companies, a Ranger Company, part of a mechanized infantry company, and several swimmer-support boats “to drive the VC into a killing zone by attacking from all sides” in an area surrounded by canals.⁴⁶⁷ The ARVN also had support from fixed wing aircraft, nine helicopters, and two artillery platoons (see map 14).

With this overwhelming concentration of firepower, the ARVN did manage to intercept the North Vietnamese, killing at least 100 as they tried to escape. The three M-113s appear to have inflicted most of the damage, with the other units in blocking positions. Some of the North Vietnamese forces still “stood and fought as best they could with machine guns, automatic rifles, and individual weapons” in the face of the attack.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁴ Tuan, “Phuoc-Chau,” p. 34.

⁴⁶⁵ Tuan, “Phuoc-Chau,” p. 35.

⁴⁶⁶ Capt. Graham D. Vernon, “After Action Report,” November 26, 1962, p. 4, available in the Historian’s Working Files and Papers at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC.

⁴⁶⁷ Memo, Senior Advisor (Lt. Col. John Paul Vann), 7th Infantry Division for Chief, U.S. Army Section, MAAAG, Vietnam, September 24, 1962, sub: After Action Report (Dan Tien 44), p. 1, available in the Historian’s Working Files and Papers at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC.

⁴⁶⁸ “After Action Report (Dan Tien 44),” p. 1.

Nevertheless, their resistance was largely futile, and the ARVN suffered only 3 wounded in action while taking dozens of POWs.⁴⁶⁹

This engagement was clearly a success for the ARVN and demonstrates that its infantry and armor units—even those that would later perform so poorly at Ap Bac—could remain coherent and execute basic tactics under certain circumstances. But it is important to consider what those circumstances were. First, the ARVN benefited here from a massive advantage in both numbers and firepower. Second, the North Vietnamese were clearly caught by surprise and were attempting only to escape; they were not trying to hold territory as they later would at Ap Bac.

These two factors appear to have made the situation so favorable for the ARVN that they were able to perform with cohesion and some tactical proficiency. Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese still displayed unit cohesion but had serious problems in executing proficient tactics. This outcome suggests that although political intervention remains an important variable in explaining effectiveness, it is not the only one that matters. Extreme values of other relevant variables, such as firepower, numbers, and operational objectives, clearly overwhelmed the importance of politics in this engagement.

The Incursion into Cambodia, 1970

The ARVN incursion into Cambodia is often cited as an instance of successful ARVN performance, one which could potentially confound the predictions of the intervention theory.⁴⁷⁰ Close examination of the operation, however, reveals that claims of ARVN effectiveness here are significantly overstated.

First, for the most part Hanoi chose not to contest the incursion, making ARVN's performance look better than it was because it faced little resistance. Second, where the North Vietnamese did resist, the ARVN relied heavily on U.S. fire support to respond. Indeed, much of the actual operation was conducted by U.S. forces, making it a poor test of the ARVN's independent capabilities. Finally, to the extent that some ARVN units did perform well in Cambodia, independently and competently countering actual North Vietnamese resistance, this seems attributable to different political intervention practices governing those particular units—arrangements that bypassed many of the worst practices seen in the rest of the ARVN. As a result, to the extent that the operation in Cambodia is a valid test of the theory, it actually lends some support to the intervention theory.

The incursion into Cambodia during April-June 1970 had one overarching goal: to end the North Vietnamese use of Cambodia as a base for attacks into South Vietnam. Although both the United States and South Vietnam had itched to deal with this part of the Ho Chi Minh trail for years, the situation came to a head in March 1970.⁴⁷¹ That month Cambodian General Lon Nol ousted his country's ruler, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who had previously turned a blind eye to North Vietnam's activities on Cambodian territory. Lon Nol now closed the port of Sihanoukville, through which the North Vietnamese had regularly infiltrated men and materiel to the South, and demanded the removal of all North Vietnamese forces from Cambodia. In response, the PAVN launched attacks on Cambodia

⁴⁶⁹ "After Action Report (Dan Tien 44)," p. 1 and subsequent unnumbered pages.

⁴⁷⁰ Brig. Gen. Tran Dinh Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, Indochina Monograph (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1978), p. 169-70.

⁴⁷¹ This trail had existed since the French-Viet Minh War, beginning as a system of jungle trails and mountain paths running from North Vietnam into Laos and then further south into Cambodia. Since 1959, the trail had been greatly expanded, with approximately 50,000 troops devoted to running supplies along it and another 100,000 laborers contributing to its construction and maintenance. Tho, *Cambodian Incursion*, p. 18.

itself, creating the prospect that North Vietnam might gain control over the entire country, providing an even greater sanctuary from which to launch attacks on South Vietnam.⁴⁷²

Between this immediate risk and the long-standing threat from the Ho Chi Minh trail, the imperatives for intervention grew. In particular, U.S. and South Vietnamese planners concentrated on two areas that they believed had to be targeted in any cross-border attack. The first was known as the Fishhook, a Cambodian salient that jutted into South Vietnam about 50 miles northwest of Saigon and was believed to contain enemy bases, supply points, and the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN). The second area of attention were known as the Angel's Wing and the Parrot's Beak, also located west of Saigon. The North Vietnamese had launched their 1968 attacks on Saigon from the permanent bases and training centers located here (see map 15).⁴⁷³

Initially U.S. forces lacked authorization to operate in Cambodia, so the first two spearheads of the incursion involved only ARVN forces. The attack began on April 14, when two ARVN infantry-armor task forces from III Corps raided the Angel's Wing area in an operation known as Toan Thang 41. These task forces almost immediately encountered resistance, which they repelled with the help of South Vietnamese artillery and tactical air.⁴⁷⁴ Finding large stocks of North Vietnamese supplies as they moved farther into Cambodia over the next several days, the task forces occasionally encountered the enemy and apparently managed to inflict considerable casualties while taking few of their own. On April 20, the ARVN IV Corps launched a second raid farther south, also encountering some resistance and uncovering larger stocks of ammunition.⁴⁷⁵

Nevertheless, it was clear that for the most part, "the enemy had deliberately avoided engagement" in response to these two initial thrusts.⁴⁷⁶ The North Vietnamese were picking their battles, choosing to expend their combat power deeper in Cambodia against Lon Nol's regime, rather than near the border defending their caches and bases. Their main objective in encounters with the ARVN task forces was to escape. In fact, most ARVN casualties during the incursion came from mines and booby traps, not from direct encounters with PLAF or PAVN units.⁴⁷⁷ As a result, it is hard to draw particularly reliable inferences about ARVN battlefield effectiveness from these two initial thrusts. Almost any offensive operation would appear effective in the absence of a defender.

After April 30, President Nixon authorized U.S. forces to operate across the border, resulting in three additional attacks into Cambodia. These included 1) an additional series of operations by III Corps and the U.S. Field Force II out of MR-3; 2) additional operations by IV Corps and the Delta Military Assistance Command out of MR-4; and 3) a series of operations by II Corps and the U.S. Field Force I farther north out of MR-2.⁴⁷⁸ But these operations, too, encountered minimal resistance.⁴⁷⁹

ARVN operations from this period forward also were essentially joint, meaning at a minimum that U.S. advisors were on the ground with ARVN units up to 30 km inside

⁴⁷² Tho, *Cambodian Incursion*, pp. 30-34.

⁴⁷³ Tho, *Cambodian Incursion*, p. 40.

⁴⁷⁴ Tho, *Cambodian Incursion*, p. 46.

⁴⁷⁵ Tho, *Cambodian Incursion*, p. 49.

⁴⁷⁶ Tho, *Cambodian Incursion*, p. 47.

⁴⁷⁷ Tho, *Cambodian Incursion*, p. 174.

⁴⁷⁸ Tho, *Cambodian Incursion*, p. 51.

⁴⁷⁹ John M. Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign: the 1970 Offensive and America's Vietnam War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005), p. 79; and Tho, *Cambodian Incursion*, pp. 75, 100.

Cambodia and that ARVN units were heavily backed with U.S. firepower.⁴⁸⁰ In fact, between April 30 and June 30, “U.S. tactical air flew a total of 6,017 combat support missions, or an average of 210 missions per day.”⁴⁸¹ This amounts to a flight taking off in support of the operation about every 7 minutes, 24 hours per day, for nearly a month, suggesting that U.S. airpower was more than a merely peripheral feature of the battlefield. All of this makes it questionable whether one can discern much about ARVN’s own effectiveness in these operations.

Moreover, tactical air power was not the only source of U.S. firepower on the battlefield. U.S. artillery and helicopter gunships were in near-constant use, and both South Vietnamese and U.S. accounts make it clear that U.S. advisors were crucial to conducting the actual fire support coordination.⁴⁸² “ARVN’s reliance on U.S. fire support coordination meant it appeared better at such essential skills than it actually was,” according to one historian of the incursion.⁴⁸³

That said, even with extensive U.S. support, the ARVN did not prove especially effective, displaying many of the same battlefield deficiencies as in the other battles already examined. For example, one Vietnamese officer later wrote that the ARVN’s tactics had been “generally sound; however, problems developed in combined arms coordination, employment of mechanized and armored forces, use of supporting artillery and other fire support means, and first and second echelon maintenance. . . . U.S. advisors contributed significantly to increased effectiveness of ARVN tactical units. . . .”⁴⁸⁴

Indeed, many of the specific ARVN deficiencies during the incursion were nearly identical to the problems on display at Ap Bac more than seven years earlier. For example, the ARVN experienced significant problems integrating the use of M-113 APCs and dismounted infantry, including Ranger units, resulting in situations where the APCs could not fire without hitting their own soldiers.⁴⁸⁵ Airborne units were criticized as displaying poor coordination and a lack of aggressiveness.⁴⁸⁶ ARVN infantry units did not demonstrate the ability to correctly call in the appropriate types of fire support to attack different types of targets most effectively while avoiding friendly casualties.⁴⁸⁷

Interestingly, the one ARVN commander who receives consistent praise in both South Vietnamese and American accounts of the incursion is General Do Cao Tri, the III Corps commander. He was considered “very able.”⁴⁸⁸ Tri receives credit for the cohesion and tactical proficiency the ARVN sometimes displayed when North Vietnamese forces did resist, particularly in the city of Kampong Cham, deep inside Cambodia and beyond the reach of U.S. advisors.⁴⁸⁹

⁴⁸⁰ Tho, *Cambodian Incursion*, p. 57.

⁴⁸¹ Tho, *Cambodian Incursion*, p. 173.

⁴⁸² Tho, *Cambodian Incursion*, p. 179; and Shaw, *Cambodian Campaign*, p. 56.

⁴⁸³ Shaw, *Cambodian Campaign*, p. 57.

⁴⁸⁴ “Report to the Commander, United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam from the Headquarters, II Field Force Vietnam, Subject: II FFORCEV Commander’s Evaluation Report—Cambodian Operation,” July 31, 1970, p. 8, available in the Historian’s Files and Working Papers at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC.

⁴⁸⁵ Tho, *Cambodian Incursion*, p. 56; and Shaw, *Cambodian Campaign*, p. 54.

⁴⁸⁶ “Report to the Commander,” Annex L, p. 2.

⁴⁸⁷ ““Report to the Commander,” Annex L, p. 3.

⁴⁸⁸ Shaw, *Cambodian Campaign*, p. 50. This view is echoed in Vien, *Leadership*, p. 126.

⁴⁸⁹ Shaw, *Cambodian Campaign*, p. 55.

But what was the key to Tri's apparent effectiveness? "Bypassing the much politicized division commanders and their staffs, who played almost no role."⁴⁹⁰ Tri deliberately formed his task forces in such a way as to evade the damaging political intervention that the ARVN normally faced; each was led "by a handpicked and experienced colonel," not by the divisional commanders and staffs promoted on the basis of political loyalty as described in Chapter 2.⁴⁹¹ While the evidence from the incursion overall must be taken with a heaping mound of salt, the evidence from III Corps certainly suggests that ARVN commanders themselves believed that their leaders' typical forms of political intervention damaged battlefield performance.

In any event, despite the ARVN's uneven performance and the incursion's deep unpopularity in the United States, the operation achieved its overall military objectives. It devastated a major hub of North Vietnamese combat power, resulting in astounding losses for Hanoi: 11,393 men killed, 22,916 individual weapons captured, 2,509 crew-served weapons captured, 11,700 bunkers or other structures destroyed, and 7,023 tons of rice lost. The ARVN and U.S. forces also captured enough rocket-propelled grenades to supply 144 full-strength PLAF/PAVN battalions; as well as more than six times the average number of rockets fired monthly into South Vietnam; and the equivalent of seven months' expenditure of PLAF/PAVN small arms ammunition.⁴⁹²

Many observers credit these staggering losses with delaying the Easter Offensive, and indeed, defenders of the operation are quick to note that "the Communists were unable to launch any significant operations from the Fishhook and Parrot's Beak for the next two years."⁴⁹³ More broadly, the incursion probably also hurt enemy morale and helped shore up the Lon Nol regime in Cambodia, for a time at least.⁴⁹⁴ Nevertheless, it was not the shining moment of ARVN battlefield effectiveness often claimed, and in fact lends some support to the notion that the nature of political intervention in the South Vietnamese military remained a key constraint on performance.

Xuan Loc, 1975

The ARVN 18th Division's defense of the town of Xuan Loc northeast of Saigon during April 1975 does constitute an outlier that the intervention theory has difficulty explaining. While Thieu's extreme centralization of command caused the rest of the ARVN—even very good units, like the 1st Division—to self-destruct during the final battles of the war, the defenders at An Loc displayed a surprising ability to remain cohesive, proficient, and capable of complex defensive and offensive operations. It is no exaggeration to say that if the rest of the ARVN had fought as well as the 18th Division did at An Loc, the war might have ended differently. It certainly would have ended later.

For 11 days in 1975, a single ARVN division and a group of provincial forces at Xuan Loc, in the province of Long Khanh, managed to hold off a series of massive combined-arms attacks by an entire corps of PAVN infantry, armor, and artillery, inflicting many more casualties than they took.⁴⁹⁵ The commander of the PAVN 4th Corps, a man who

⁴⁹⁰ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 88.

⁴⁹¹ Shaw, *Cambodian Campaign*, p. 54.

⁴⁹² *Army Activities Report: Southeast Asia*, July 1, 1970, pp. 32-3, available in the Historian's Files and Working Papers at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC.

⁴⁹³ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 84.

⁴⁹⁴ Tho, *Cambodian Incursion*, p. 69.

⁴⁹⁵ George J. Veith and Merle L. Pribbenow II, " 'Fighting Is an Art': the Army of the Republic of Vietnam's Defense of Xuan Loc, 9-21 April 1975," *The Journal of Military History*, vol. 68 (January 2004), p. 164.

had fought both the French and Americans, later described it as “the fiercest battle of his thirty-year military career.”⁴⁹⁶

Knowing that Xuan Loc was a vital corridor to Saigon, the commander of the ARVN 18th, Brigadier General Le Minh Dao, closely studied the terrain before battle, correctly guessing that the North Vietnamese were likely to use the same routes of advance upon which they had relied in 1968. Dao created what he called “the meat grinder” in response—essentially a series of interlocking fields of artillery fire through which the invaders would have to pass. His artillery chief, Colonel Ngo Van Hung, was meticulous in establishing these fields, ordering a bulldozer “to dig revetments to protect the guns and bunkers to pull back into after they fired. He personally registered all of the howitzers.”⁴⁹⁷

Additionally, “Dao expanded the existing system of bunkers and trenches not only for his artillery, but for the city defenders as well. He wanted to render the NVA counterbattery fire ineffective. His efforts ultimately were very successful, and he later remarked, ‘Their artillery could never find us.’”⁴⁹⁸ Dao also stockpiled as much ammunition as possible and “was not passive in the face of the increased communist patrolling” prior to the attack. He used his own reconnaissance platoons to sweep the areas around Xuan Loc and made a special point of flushing them from nearby hills that could have been used as observation posts over the city.⁴⁹⁹

The battle began on the morning of April 9, when the PAVN opened fire with a massive bombardment of artillery shells, mortar, and rockets. But the PAVN actually missed most of the ARVN defensive positions, which were well hidden in their bunkers and trenches.⁵⁰⁰ One history relates:

Believing the South Vietnamese troops would run as soon as the artillery barrage lifted, the North Vietnamese soldiers confidently pressed forward. Instead, the men of the 18th ARVN held fast. The eastern side of the town was fairly open ground, and Dao had prepared for a combined tank and infantry attack by constructing strong defensive works. The assault elements of the 7th would have to move uphill across open fields, penetrate eight barbed wire barriers, navigate several minefields, and scale an earthen berm before finally reaching the ARVN trench lines.⁵⁰¹

The ARVN successfully impeded the PAVN armor advance with coordinated use of rockets, anti-tank mines, and even air strikes.⁵⁰² As a PAVN account later noted, “None of the assault waves... were successful. Our troops struggled with the enemy for control of each section of trench, every house, every city block.”⁵⁰³ Although some PAVN troops eventually penetrated the city, the ARVN inflicted heavy losses on them for doing so. By the afternoon of the first day, “the PAVN had suffered close to seven hundred dead and wounded, the ARVN no less than fifty. The 18th continued to firmly hold its positions. For the first time in five weeks the ARVN had not buckled, but instead had fought back with a tenacity that surprised even Western military observers.”⁵⁰⁴

⁴⁹⁶ Veith and Pribbenow, “‘Fighting Is an Art,’” p. 165.

⁴⁹⁷ Veith and Pribbenow, “‘Fighting Is an Art,’” pp. 183-5.

⁴⁹⁸ Veith and Pribbenow, “‘Fighting Is an Art,’” pp. 183-5.

⁴⁹⁹ Veith and Pribbenow, “‘Fighting Is an Art,’” pp. 183-5.

⁵⁰⁰ Veith and Pribbenow, “‘Fighting Is an Art,’” p. 187.

⁵⁰¹ Veith and Pribbenow, “‘Fighting Is an Art,’” p. 188.

⁵⁰² Veith and Pribbenow, “‘Fighting Is an Art,’” p. 188.

⁵⁰³ Veith and Pribbenow, “‘Fighting Is an Art,’” p. 189.

⁵⁰⁴ Veith and Pribbenow, “‘Fighting Is an Art,’” p. 191.

Dao then initiated several counterattacks, again pounding PAVN armor and infantry with air strikes and artillery. The ARVN even managed to retake much of the city by April 10. These events repeated themselves several times, as the PAVN proved willing and capable of continuing the attacks, while the ARVN proved adroit at continuing to defend and counterattack.⁵⁰⁵ PAVN losses eventually grew to more than two thousand dead in four days of fighting, while ARVN casualties were in the low hundreds.⁵⁰⁶

Dao eventually realized the need to withdraw, but he executed even this move very carefully, ordering a deception operation by an Airborne brigade so that most of his forces could escape without being detected. “Despite the dangers, the retreat by Dao and the 18th ARVN was masterful,” according to one history of the battle. “Dao’s personal leadership again made the difference. Walking up and down the column all night long, General Dao encouraged his tired troops to keep moving and to protect the civilians that were retreating with them.”⁵⁰⁷ They eventually made a successful retreat.

Clearly, the performance of the 18th ARVN division at Xuan Loc in April 1975 testifies to how much costlier the final battles could have been for the North Vietnamese. There was nothing inherently inferior about the South Vietnamese soldiers—at Xuan Loc they displayed remarkable cohesion despite being outnumbered; impressive tactical proficiency in operating their weapons; and surprisingly effective combined arms operations, including the integration of air support and a very difficult fighting withdrawal.

The question, of course, is why this division suddenly fought so well, after not having an outstanding record in previous years of the war and at the same time that the rest of the ARVN was self-destructing. One notable difference is that, perhaps because of the chaos occurring in the rest of the country at the time, President Thieu stayed out of the way of the division commander at Xuan Loc. He did not suddenly withdraw forces from the commander’s control or order unrealistic withdrawals. Dao presided over a unified command that had actually devolved to him the authority he needed to do his job. As has been shown, the generals in the rest of the ARVN, particularly MR-1 (General Truong) and MR-2 (General Phu) did not enjoy this arrangement in 1975.

Just as importantly, however, Dao himself was clearly a competent leader, one who paid close personal attention to building bonds between his officers and his soldiers, to tactical preparations, and to the execution of difficult operations.⁵⁰⁸ But while it is obvious that “his strong leadership was one of the primary reasons his troops fought so well,”⁵⁰⁹ it is unclear why Dao was in a position of authority. Was it a fluke, simply the result of a random assignment in the otherwise warped ARVN promotion system? After all, even a broken watch tells time correctly twice a day. Or was Dao promoted on merit, suggesting that his power was the result of improved practices in political intervention? In other words, it is clear that Dao’s traits as a commander were key to ARVN performance at Xuan Loc, but it is unclear if Dao was promoted because of those traits or in spite of them. There simply is very little information about the actual nature of political intervention in the 18th Division. As a result, it is hard to know whether the defense of Xuan Loc constitutes evidence for or against the intervention explanation, although it is clearly an outlier in the overall record of the war.

⁵⁰⁵ Veith and Pribbenow, “‘Fighting Is an Art,’” p. 193.

⁵⁰⁶ Veith and Pribbenow, “‘Fighting Is an Art,’” p. 199.

⁵⁰⁷ Veith and Pribbenow, “‘Fighting Is an Art,’” p. 209.

⁵⁰⁸ Veith and Pribbenow, “‘Fighting Is an Art,’” p. 167.

⁵⁰⁹ Veith and Pribbenow, “‘Fighting Is an Art,’” p. 167.

IX. Other Explanations of North and South Vietnamese Effectiveness

What else might have accounted for the variation in battlefield effectiveness between North and South Vietnam? Several alternative explanations seem possible, besides those extrapolated from the theoretical literature on military effectiveness. Some focus on possible additional reasons for poor ARVN performance, stressing the role of ARVN doctrine; the problem of more general ARVN dependence on the United States (also known as moral hazard); and the disadvantages South Vietnam faced in fighting on its home turf. Other explanations focus on potential alternative reasons for superior PLAF and PAVN performance, such as the power of communist ideology. Lastly, some explanations focus on the possibility of more general contrasts between the two states, such as the degree of nationalism, the role of differing organizational legacies, or the role of regional cultures. Here I address each of these alternatives in turn, concluding that while some aspects of them do have merit, they still do not necessarily provide a more powerful explanation than the political intervention theory.

The Role of ARVN Doctrine

Some scholars suggest that the fundamental problem with South Vietnamese military effectiveness was the doctrine the United States imparted to it, which supposedly emphasized large-unit conventional fighting on the model of Korea, rather than the small-unit counterinsurgency force actually needed to win the conflict in Vietnam.⁵¹⁰ Putting aside the very considerable resources the United States devoted to building counterinsurgency (or “pacification”) capabilities among South Vietnam’s Regional Forces/Provincial Forces, this argument mistakenly presumes that the state of South Vietnam’s conventional capabilities was somehow irrelevant to the course and outcome of the war. Indeed, this narrative tends to imply that South Vietnam was reasonably effective at conventional warfare, and it lost the war simply because North Vietnam refused to engage in stand-up battles and instead won the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese population.

As the analysis of battles here has tried to show, the war actually took on a remarkably conventional character after 1968, precisely because the North Vietnamese were unable to win over the South’s population through political means. By 1971, MACV rated 97 percent of villages and hamlets in South Vietnam as either totally or relatively secure.⁵¹¹ While the reasons for this supposed pacification success remain debatable, it does point to the fact that North Vietnam was basically unable to win the war politically or through irregular conflict at the village level.⁵¹² From a relatively early point, the war involved large force-on-force engagements in which regular units fought for control of territory.

In other words, if the problem for South Vietnam were simply that it had borrowed an initially inappropriate conventional doctrine from the United States, that doctrine should have served it well, especially after 1968. Going back to the 1950s, South Vietnamese officials had consistently chosen to emphasize the ARVN’s role as a bulwark against external

⁵¹⁰ Cantwell, “The Army of...”.

⁵¹¹ Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, p. 122. For a discussion of some of the pitfalls of these statistics, see Wiest, *Vietnam’s Forgotten Army*, p. 179.

⁵¹² Anthony James Joes, *The War for South Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1990), p. 154.

aggression rather than as a counterinsurgency force.⁵¹³ While this choice might explain why South Vietnam fared poorly in the war before 1968, it makes the South's performance after that time all the more puzzling.

Ultimately, the problem for South Vietnam was not a mismatch between its doctrine and the nature of the war, but rather that it was unable to implement its doctrine competently in the first place. Many units suffered basic deficits in cohesion and tactical proficiency due to the nature of political intervention in the South Vietnamese military. This reality suggests that the source of South Vietnam's battlefield problems went much deeper than its doctrine alone.

The Role of ARVN Dependence on the United States

Other explanations focus on the more general legacy of South Vietnamese dependence on the United States.⁵¹⁴ Here the United States faced a classic dilemma: if it offered too much assistance, it risked enfeebling its ally in the long term; but if it offered too little, the ally would not survive in the short term. The result was that although the U.S. escalation in Vietnam initially prevented a collapse of the regime in the South, the U.S. presence itself eventually came to constitute a major obstacle to ARVN effectiveness.

Repeatedly, U.S. combat power shielded the South Vietnamese from the consequences of their own mistakes, denying Saigon feedback that perhaps could have led to needed reforms sooner. As late as the spring of 1975, South Vietnamese leaders continued to believe that the United States would never let their government fall to the North, and, indeed, even the North doubted that the United States would stand aside. The United States also had a more general habit, noticeable in the joint operations discussed in this chapter, of taking over the very tasks that were so essential to complex operations, such as communication and fire support coordination. This tendency certainly did the ARVN more harm than good after the precipitous U.S. withdrawal.

Still, it is important not to overstate the legacy of dependence. Chapter 2 showed that the detrimental patterns of South Vietnamese political intervention in the military were well established before a large U.S. presence arrived on the scene. Indeed, it was the battlefield results of these damaging practices that prompted U.S. escalation in the first place. The U.S. presence may then have provided an impediment to needed changes in those practices, but it is hard to argue that moral hazard alone explains South Vietnam's military deficits. Also, the 1st Division had no less involvement with the United States than other divisions, but it still performed much better in battle, suggesting again that poor ARVN effectiveness was not necessarily the inevitable result of the U.S. presence. For all of these reasons, the political intervention variable is still important in understanding the effectiveness of the two militaries.

The Role of Home Turf Disadvantage

Others might argue that South Vietnam faced an extra disadvantage in the war because it fought on its home territory. In other words, the comparison between North and South may not be a fair one, because the South had to fight on the same territory it was supposed to be governing.

⁵¹³ Ronald Spector, *Advice and Support: the Early Years, 1941-1960* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2005), p. 263. This question is discussed further in chapter 18, especially p. 353.

⁵¹⁴ Marc Gilbert, "The Cost of Losing the 'Other War' in Vietnam" in *Why the North Won the Vietnam War*, ed. Marc Jason Gilbert (New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 153-199.

The analysis above shows that one of the motives for South Vietnamese leaders' worst practices was indeed their reliance on the military as a governing agent at the provincial and local levels; after all, this is part of the argument about how worst practices can arise, noted in Chapter 1. But one could just as easily argue that fighting on its home turf should have made South Vietnam's military tasks significantly easier. South Vietnam had the benefit of much shorter supply lines and internal routes of movement, while Hanoi had to divert enormous resources to the Ho Chi Minh trail just to keep its forces fed and armed. Moreover, history is replete with examples of armies that successfully repelled invaders from their home territory. While one can speculate as to the reasons South Vietnam failed to do this, it is hard to convincingly point to sort of inherent "home field disadvantage" as the reason.

One can certainly imagine that had the ARVN been fighting a completely expeditionary war, its ability to be distracted by domestic governance and its potential to pose a coup threat to the regime in Saigon would have been substantially less. In this sense, South Vietnamese "incumbency" may have constituted a sort of precondition to the adoption of worst practices in this particular case. At the same time, however, even if the PAVN had been fighting the war on its home turf, it seems doubtful it would have suddenly adopted worst practices in political intervention. In fact, it is important to remember that the PAVN did have to defend its homeland against massive U.S. bombing campaigns at the same it was fighting in the south, and indeed, it had large military forces stationed in the north. Yet it still never adopted worst practices. As a result, it is important not to overstate the role of any "home field disadvantage" as a deterministic cause of either worst practices or ineffectiveness more broadly.

The Role of Communist Ideology

Other studies emphasize the role of communist ideology in motivating PAVN and PLAF soldiers and also in winning over the population of South Vietnam.⁵¹⁵ According to this argument, the primary driver of PLAF and PAVN effectiveness was the regime's ideological apparatus, which instilled incredible loyalty and inspired immense sacrifice.

Certainly, the North Vietnamese themselves must have believed that their ideology had power, because they invested considerable time in dispensing it to their civilian population and their soldiers. Nevertheless, as Chapter 2 demonstrated, the PLAF and PAVN devoted considerably less time to political indoctrination of soldiers than often assumed, and, when push came to shove, ideology and party credentials almost always to a backseat to rigorous military training.

Furthermore, while communist ideology might help explain soldier motivation and, in turn, some aspects of unit cohesion, an army cannot propagandize its way to competence in basic tactics and complex operations. The development of these skills requires training, good officers, appropriate command structures, and solid information management—all of which Hanoi repeatedly prioritized. Even Douglas Pike, one of the foremost historians of Vietnam and not one to readily dismiss the overall importance of communism in the war, notes the tautology and illogic of explanations that over-emphasize these variables in explaining the fighting prowess of North Vietnam. Pike is worth quoting at length on this point:

⁵¹⁵ William Duiker, *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1995), especially chapter 7.

Americans and others often assumed that the NLF army members were fanatics. Because they performed well in combat, it was argued, they were highly motivated, which meant dedication to an ideological cause. Thus the search was for the essence of this belief. It proved elusive, largely because it did not exist. The best of the military units—the Main Force units—were highly effective because they were composed of professionals. These were not young green Vietnamese farmers, only recently introduced to the rifle, but experienced guerillas who had been fighting most of their adult lives. What impelled them was not ideology so much as professional competence, much like the United States Marine of the French Foreign Legionnaire. The men in the best of these units were very good; their discipline was superb; they know how to use camouflage well, a requirement for survival; they were well skilled in small-unit tactics, especially the ambush in its many variations; they trained hard, rehearsed, and practiced attacks until letter perfect, and then they fought hard. Their mystique should be attributed chiefly to a unit *esprit de corps* that stemmed from the consensus that each man in the unit was a superior and vastly experienced professional.⁵¹⁶

Additionally, the evidence from South Vietnam shows that when Saigon adopted best practices toward particular units like the 1st Division, those units fought much better, too, despite lacking communist indoctrination. While this does not prove that ideology was irrelevant to North Vietnamese fighting power, it again suggests that more mundane variables may have been doing much of the heavy causal lifting.

Finally, the notion that the government of South Vietnam fell because its people were ultimately won over by communism is simply wrong. First, although many South Vietnamese may not have felt a deep affinity for their own government, many were still deeply anti-communist, as the repeated refugee flows in the face of all of the major North Vietnamese advances demonstrated. Despite the many desertions that plagued the South Vietnamese military, for example, virtually none of them resulted in actual defections to the North, and surveys repeatedly demonstrated that public support for communism was low.⁵¹⁷ While some aspects of the communist program, such as social justice and the demotion of landed elites, clearly appealed to the peasantry, the fact remains that Hanoi had to rely on highly coercive tactics to get many peasants to support the insurgency.⁵¹⁸ Meanwhile, Hanoi was never able to spark urban uprisings against the South Vietnamese government either—not in 1968, not in 1972, not even in 1975.⁵¹⁹ While one cannot dismiss the role of communism, it is worth noting that North Vietnam had to win the war militarily through a conventional assault precisely because it was unable to use the power of ideology alone to achieve its goals.

⁵¹⁶ Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong: the Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966), p. 377.

⁵¹⁷ Joes, *The War*, p. 92; and Collins, *Training and Development* p. 60 and pp. 94-5. Conversely, in 1969, 47,000 communist personnel defected to South Vietnam, as did 32,000 the following year. Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, p. 5. Desertions in South Vietnam also dropped substantially in response to basic efforts to improve soldiers' quality of life, such as more ensuring regular mail delivery, better food, clothing, and medical care, occasional entertainment, and better care for dependents. These drops further suggest that most desertions did not have a political motivation. Vien, *Leadership*, p. 70.

⁵¹⁸ Lanning and Cragg, *Inside the VC and the NVA: the Real Story of North Vietnam's Armed Forces* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), chapter 3.

⁵¹⁹ Joes, *The War*, pp. 132-3.

The Role of Nationalism

Nationalism is another factor often cited in explanations of the varying fighting power of North and South Vietnam. According to this perspective on the war, the North fought better because only Hanoi was able to claim the nationalist mantle of independence, while South Vietnam appeared to be a puppet regime tainted by its association with the United States.

Nationalism was an undeniable advantage for North Vietnam, one that Ho and his followers carefully cultivated throughout their decades of revolutionary struggle. The key question, of course, is how did nationalism impact events on the battlefield? It probably helped guarantee North Vietnam a steady supply of manpower, but, as we have seen, a shortage of manpower was not the primary driver of South Vietnam's effectiveness problems during the war.

More importantly, perhaps, nationalism may have helped North Vietnamese society deliver more motivated soldiers to the PLAF and PAVN, potentially bolstering unit cohesion. By changing the way that soldiers conceived their interests, nationalism also could have made these soldiers more willing to conduct dangerous tactics or more able to perform difficult operations away from direct supervision by their officers.⁵²⁰

No doubt PAVN soldiers exhibited an unusually strong sense of their normative obligations to perform military service. But we have seen that South Vietnam was also able to generate very motivated soldiers capable of fighting cohesively and skillfully when the nature of political intervention in those units were more like that in North Vietnam. Indeed, even in many cases where cohesion disintegrated, as in 1975, this problem seemed more attributable to the highly pathological ARVN command structure and the officers who ran it than to the political views of the average soldier. This does not mean that nationalism did not provide a boost to the North Vietnamese side, but it does suggest that nationalism is not necessarily always required for battlefield effectiveness.

Still, nationalism may have conferred its biggest advantage on Hanoi indirectly, by convincing the North Vietnamese that their regime was internally secure and that worst practices in political intervention were unnecessary. Likewise, perhaps if South Vietnam's leaders believed their national project had been more successful, they would have been more likely to treat all of the ARVN the way they treated the 1st Division. These are reasonable inferences, but because they involve the personal perceptions and judgments of leaders, it is hard to know whether they are correct. Nationalism or leaders' perceptions of nationalism may have mattered, but at the end of the day one of the primary mechanisms through which differences in nationalism manifested themselves may have been in the nature of political intervention in the militaries of the two states. This possibility merits additional attention in further research.

The Role of Organizational Legacies

Beyond specific arguments about communism or nationalism, one could also generally posit that the entire course of the war was determined long before armed struggle began, because of organizational legacies dating to the pre-war period. In other words, the very processes by which North and South Vietnam came into being arguably exerted powerful effects on their subsequent abilities to build and sustain effective military organizations.

⁵²⁰ This general logic draws on John Lynn, *The Bayonets of the Republic: Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791-94* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984).

After all, the French had killed off most credible, non-communist nationalists who struggled for revolution, leaving the Vietnamese with only two choices by the 1950s. On one side were the communists, the only revolutionary group that had evaded French repression and gained experience and credibility in the process. On the other side were the privileged Vietnamese elite forming the nucleus of the Saigon regime, most of whom had either actively collaborated with the French or sat on the sidelines in the struggle for independence.⁵²¹ One can certainly imagine why many Vietnamese would have preferred the former over the latter, especially since Hanoi deliberately avoided emphasizing its communist ambitions, stressing themes of independence and unification instead.

Similarly, the revolutionary struggle had endowed Hanoi with a vast and sophisticated political network through both South and North Vietnam, providing ready-made infrastructure for its later armed struggle.⁵²² The regime in Saigon could draw on no such base. The units that went on to form the PAVN also had gained significant combat experience fighting the French.⁵²³ It is important to remember, for example, that the famous French defeat Dien Bien Phu occurred in the north, not the south.

All of these facts suggest that the past significantly influenced the fighting power that the two states later generated. At the same time, however, it can be misleading to tell a “just so” story with the benefit of hindsight. North Vietnam was not born with a ready-made fighting organization. Recently uncovered historical evidence emphasizes just how difficult the late 1950s actually were for Hanoi, precisely because of the ways in which it had conducted the revolutionary struggle against the French. Its united front strategy had created such a broad movement that the result was “organizational anarchy” that Hanoi spent years trying to overcome through massive purges in the late 1950s. The leadership in Hanoi was also wracked with internal divisions about how to build socialism in Vietnam and whether to prioritize reforms at home or the struggle for unification with the south.⁵²⁴ North Vietnam was not a ready-made “organizational weapon” as sometimes depicted.⁵²⁵

At the same time, Diem was highly effective in decimating Hanoi’s infrastructure in the South in the mid-1950s, arresting and executing many with only the loosest connection to communism.⁵²⁶ Although these sweeps ultimately created more problems than they solved for Saigon, they also illustrate that North Vietnam’s supposed organizational advantages from the war against the French did not go unchallenged on southern territory. Indeed, party leaders fretted that their organization had been nearly destroyed in the south during this period.⁵²⁷

In short, it is hard to look at the scene in the late 1950s and believe that victory was inevitable for the North, especially in light of the infusion of American aid flowing to Saigon

⁵²¹ Marc Jason Gilbert, “Introduction,” in *Why the North Won the Vietnam War*, ed. Marc Jason Gilbert (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 14.

⁵²² Robert K. Brigham, “Why the South Won the American War in Vietnam,” in *Why the North Won the Vietnam War*, ed. Marc Jason Gilbert (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 99.

⁵²³ William J. Duiker, “Victory by Other Means: the Foreign Policy of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam,” in *Why the North Won the Vietnam War*, ed. Marc Jason Gilbert (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 53.

⁵²⁴ Tuong Vu, *Paths to Development in Asia: South Korea, Vietnam, China, and Indonesia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chapter 5.

⁵²⁵ This term reflects a view of communist organizations as unified strategic actors, highly disciplined and essentially invincible. It is probably not a coincidence that the term emerged during the Red Scare in the United States. Philip Selznick, *The Organizational Weapon: a Study of Bolshevik Strategy and Tactics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1952).

⁵²⁶ Brigham, “Why the South,” in *Why the North*, ed. Gilbert, *Why the North*, pp. 100-101.

⁵²⁷ Duiker, *Sacred War*, chapter 3.

at the time. One could imagine the story turning out very differently had South Vietnamese leaders made different choices, including choices about intervention in the military—choices that they did, in fact, make with respect to the 1st Division. This is not to say that the past did not matter in shaping their choices, only that events in the late 1950s were still contingent and subject to agency on both sides. As such, the theory of political intervention still seems relevant in explaining the course of subsequent events.

The Role of Regional Culture

Lastly, one might suppose to some sort of other North-South cultural difference could explain the variation in military performance between the two sides. For example, is it possible that the ARVN did not train realistically because of some sort of regional norm against public humiliation or failure? Or that the PLAF and PAVN benefited from a northern culture that lacked these concerns and was therefore better able to embrace communist practices such as the self-criticism session?

While not beyond the realm of possibility, the research here uncovered little evidence of this sort of divide. Many of Hanoi's leaders had actually been born and raised in the south. It is true that Ho Chi Minh and General Giap were northerners, for example, but other influential figures, such as Ho's successor Le Duan, and General Nguyen Chi Thanh, had been born in the south.⁵²⁸ As such, Hanoi was far from immune to any "southern" influences; quite the contrary. Likewise, the south was far from immune to "northern" influences, as nearly a million residents from the north had fled south in 1954. In short, by the 1950s there had been substantial mixing of whatever regional cultures might have existed, suggesting that such norms were unlikely to have exerted systematic influence on the military performance of either side by the 1960s and 1970s.

X. Conclusions and Summary

This chapter sought to test the validity of the predictions generated in Chapter 2 from the theory of political intervention outlined in Chapter 1. First, the evidence from the battles showed that there was, in general, significant cross-national variation in effectiveness between North and South Vietnam, in addition to significant variation within the ARVN itself. The PLAF and PAVN demonstrated unit cohesion, tactical proficiency, and an ability to conduct complex operations much more consistently than did the ARVN. These facts alone suggest that the existing explanations of military effectiveness focused on the roles of wealth, regime type, culture and society, and civilian control cannot adequately account for all the observed variation. North and South Vietnam were very closely matched along these broad, static dimensions, making them implausible candidates to explain the divergence the two states displayed on the battlefield.

Second, the battlefield evidence generally provided strong support to the predictions needed to affirmatively confirm the theory of political intervention. Regular ARVN units, including infantry divisions, the airborne, the Rangers, the Marines, and the armor squadrons, usually performed poorly, often demonstrating virtually no effectiveness. This trend appeared clearly in the battles at Ap Bac, at Binh Gia, during the Tet Offensive, in Laos, during the Easter Offensive, and in the final offensives. Moreover, the reasons for these units' poor performance were clearly tied to the way that South Vietnamese political

⁵²⁸ Brigham, "Why the South," in *Why the North*, ed. Gilbert, *Why the North*, pp. 101, 108.

leaders intervened in them with respect to promotions, training, command, and information management.

By contrast, where the nature of political intervention varied within the ARVN, so did battlefield effectiveness. Evidence from the battle for the Citadel at Hue in 1968, the invasion of Laos in 1971, and the response to the Easter Offensive in 1972 all showed that the ARVN 1st Division, including the Hac Bao Company, displayed excellent effectiveness. Frankly, it would have been very difficult for an outside observer to tell which forces were North Vietnamese and which were South Vietnamese based on the 1st Division's performance in these battles. The 1st Division's effectiveness shows that there was nothing inherently inferior about ARVN forces. Using essentially the same human and material resources as the rest of the South Vietnamese military—and facing the same set of disadvantages as well—the 1st Division generated significantly more fighting power because it was subject to best rather than worst practices in political intervention.

Scattered evidence from other units is also suggestive in this regard. For example, changes in leadership, aggressive re-training, and shifts in command led to at least some observable improvements in the performance of I Corps as a whole, as well as the 23rd Division, after the initial losses in the Easter Offensive. While these units did not radically transform over night, they did fight better than before. In combination with the evidence from the 1st Division, the improvements again show that there was nothing inevitable about South Vietnam's battlefield deficits. Where political intervention began to move in the right direction, there were commensurate improvements in effectiveness. These speak to how differently the whole war might have turned out, had South Vietnamese leaders believed that they could or should different forms of political intervention.

Meanwhile, PAVN and PLAF units consistently performed very well in all of the battles examined, displaying good cohesion, tactical proficiency, and a steadily improving ability to conduct complex operations. This is not to say that North Vietnam had no military shortcomings. Particularly in the war with the Americans, Hanoi showed a willingness to accept that casualties that was often counterproductive. Nevertheless, what successes the North did enjoy were, again, clearly tied at least in part to the very different political intervention practices adopted in North Vietnam. Furthermore, they speak to just how different non-democratic regimes can be, even when they have similar post-colonial legacies, similar cultures, similar levels of economic development, and militaries that are subject to frequent political intervention.

Lastly, close examination of the battles detected minimal disconfirming evidence. There were virtually no cases of ineffectiveness in the PLAF/PAVN units. Conversely, in only a handful of instances did other ARVN units besides the 1st Division demonstrate even minimal effectiveness. For example, the Marines did show some surprising cohesion in Laos in 1971, and the 18th Division demonstrated surprising ferocity and competence at Xuan Loc in 1975. But beyond these exceptions, most seemingly surprising instances of ARVN effectiveness turned out not to be very surprising at all—in every case it turned out that they resulted from the avoidance, either deliberately or by chance, of the political intervention practices typical in the ARVN. Probably the strongest evidence to cast doubt on the theory is that the 1st Division did not fight better in 1975.

Still, overall, the evidence from Vietnam suggests that the political intervention theory has substantial explanatory power. Although imperfect, it does a much better job than the existing theories explaining both the cross-national and within-country variation observed in the North and South Vietnamese cases. Indeed, the differences in political intervention in the militaries of North and South Vietnam go a long way toward explaining

variation in the fighting power each army was able to generate from its national resources. As such, the theory of political intervention merits further testing—a task addressed in Chapters 4 and 5.

CHAPTER 4

Political Intervention in the Militaries of Iraq and Iran

During the period 1980-1988, Iran and Iraq fought one of the largest and bloodiest land wars of the twentieth century, a war that ended with hundreds of thousands of people dead and nearly a million more wounded, with hundreds of billions of dollars diverted from the economies of both sides. Despite producing virtually no change in the territorial holdings of either belligerent, the war, by its sheer persistence and scale, fundamentally reshaped the politics of the Middle East and led to profound shifts in U.S. foreign policy.¹

To name just a few of its consequences, the war helped solidify the Iranian revolution while deepening Iran's diplomatic isolation, producing a conundrum that the international community has struggled ever since to resolve. The war provided a firm rationale for the already growing U.S. conventional military presence in the region—the embryo of what became U.S. Central Command. The war made possible the 1986 Iran-Contra scandal, which so damaged U.S. credibility with its Gulf allies that the United States felt pressure to expand its naval protection of their shipping in 1987, protection that has subsequently proven very difficult to withdraw.²

Perhaps most important, the war built the military of Saddam Hussein, drawing in vast arms and providing a rationale for a level of Iraqi conscription never before seen. The resulting military then had the capability to invade Kuwait only a few short years later. The Iran-Iraq War also furnished a reason for Iraq to invade Kuwait, because the long struggle against Iran had led Iraq to accumulate debts to Kuwait that it then seemed to believe could be resolved through conquest. Absent the 1990-1 conflict, one can draw a whole series of fairly uncontroversial conclusions about just how different the region, U.S. foreign policy, and the U.S. position in the world might be, even today.

Crucially, however, it was the merciless persistence and ever-escalating scale of the Iran-Iraq War—almost eight entire years of multi-division battles along a 1300-km border, eventually involving the use of chemical weapons, missile attacks on urban areas, and a campaign against tanker traffic in the Gulf—that produced most of these regional and international consequences. Had either Iran or Iraq been able to bring the war to a swifter conclusion, many of these effects never would have come to pass. Not only would the human and economic costs of the war have been far lower, but the entire architecture of the region and the U.S. role there likely would have assumed a very different form.

The puzzle for observers of the war is why this did not happen. Why did the war last so long, despite some initial Iranian battlefield successes that suggested it might end quickly? Why was neither side able to decisively end the conflict on the battlefield prior to 1988, the year that a quick series of Iraq counteroffensives finally did so? Why was neither side able to consistently capitalize on the resources and advantages it possessed in order to sustain an effective fighting apparatus? And what explains the surprising shift in the performance of key Iraqi units at the eleventh hour?

As we will see, the existing explanations of military effectiveness are unsatisfactory in explaining both the generally poor performance of Iran and Iraq, compared to what one might expect given their national resources and characteristics, as well as the limited early successes of Iranians and the late triumphs of the Iraqis. In this chapter and the one that

¹ Gary Sick, "Trial By Error: Reflections on the Iran-Iraq War," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 43, no. 2 (spring 1989), p. 230.

² Sick, "Trial By Error," p. 240.

follows, I argue that only by understanding the nature of political intervention in the two militaries is it possible to resolve the puzzle of the two countries' battlefield performances, and in particular to explain the within-country, over-time variation seen in particular units of both militaries, particularly on the Iraqi side.

In the Iraqi case, the country entered the war with an almost ideal-typical set of worst practices with respect to political intervention in the military. Saddam Hussein oriented the military toward protecting him from various internal threats, including Kurdish uprisings, Shia conspiracies, and coups. Only around 1986 did Saddam shift to a system of mixed practices that prioritized external combat effectiveness over the performance of these internal tasks, producing enough of an improvement in battlefield effectiveness among his expanded Republican Guard units to end the conflict.³

Iran's leaders also generally adopted worst practices with respect to political intervention in the military, orienting their armed forces toward domestic tasks that included revolutionary consolidation, the suppression of ethnic rebellions, and coup protection. Although the details of many of these policies differed from those in Iraq, their overall contour was surprisingly similar not only to the early Iraqi policies but also to those of the Shah.

That said, in the early years of the war Iran did benefit from the slightly better practices in political intervention that the Shah had employed, not all of which Iran's revolutionary leaders had yet been able to dismantle. In particular, Iranian units drawn from the pre-revolutionary regular army, which had received American training during the 1970s, displayed noticeably better tactical proficiency in the initial battles than the revolutionary masses roused by Shia clerics to become martyrs.

Unfortunately for Iran, however, its leaders never successfully integrated pre-revolutionary and revolutionary armed forces, and in fact mistakenly credited the revolutionary forces rather than the legacy regular units with stopping and turning back the initial Iraqi invasion. As a result, Iran's leaders actually solidified their imposition of worst practices as the war went on, decimating whatever battlefield effectiveness lingered from the Shah's era. Iran's military strategy instead relied on revolutionary soldiers who were ideologically motivated to be cohesive but who lacked any ability to convert that cohesion into tactical proficiency or complex operations, due to the imposition of worst practices. Iran was thus very vulnerable to the improvement in Iraqi practices that finally occurred late in the war.

It is important not to overdraw these contrasts, of course, especially in the Iranian case where the movement of the political intervention variable was certainly more subtle than in the dramatic shift seen in Iraq. Indeed, the shift in the Iranian case was probably more subtle than the theory presented in Chapter 1 can fully capture. Iranian practices both under the Shah and after him were clearly very bad, but there were at least a few shreds of adequate training before the revolution that exerted their effects early in the war. Overall, however, the evidence from both Iran and Iraq strongly suggests the importance of the political intervention variable in explaining battlefield effectiveness.

This chapter proceeds in three main parts. The first section provides background, discussing the origins and basic course of the Iran-Iraq War and sharpening the puzzle presented by the two sides' battlefield performances. The second section establishes the values of the independent variable with respect to Iraq, relying on the series of coding questions presented in Chapter 1. After providing a brief overview of the history and

³ Following convention, the chapters use "Saddam" as shorthand for "Saddam Hussein," instead of "Hussein."

structure of the country's military, the section marshals evidence about the nature of political intervention in the four key sets of military activities in Iraq: promotion patterns, training regimens, command arrangements, and information management. The section then generates predictions about how different units of the Iraqi military should have performed over time according to the different theories presented in the first chapter, including my own. The third section of the chapter repeats this procedure with respect to political intervention in the military of Iran.

Chapter 5 then turns to the empirical evidence needed to adjudicate amongst these predictions, examining a series of battles between Iraq and Iran during the period 1980-1988. Both Chapters 4 and 5 draw for their evidence on recently declassified and translated documents and audio tapes from the regime of Saddam Hussein, made available at the Conflict Records Research Center of National Defense University; on archival material made available through the National Security Archive and Digital National Security Archive, including transcripts of FBI interviews with Saddam Hussein and intelligence and military documents pertaining to U.S. foreign policy in the region; and on secondary literature on both Iraq and Iran, including already published interviews with ex-officers from both countries.

I. Background: The Iran-Iraq War

The Origins of the War

In order to have some context in which to assess political intervention in the militaries of Iraq and Iran, it is necessary to establish a bit of background about the two states' relationship in the period leading up to the outbreak of war in September 1980. In some sense, the cause of the war was quite narrow and immediate: a border skirmish. But it is hard to see how this dispute could have escalated into the war it became absent some broader differences between the two regimes. Chief among these, Iraq was a staunchly secular regime run by Sunni Arabs, while Iran was a theocracy run by Shia Persians.

In the narrow sense, the war arose from a territorial dispute over the waters of the Shatt al-Arab, where the Tigris and Euphrates meet and separate the two countries in the south (see maps 16 and 17). A 1937 border treaty had given Iraq control of the Shatt up to the river bank on the Iranian side, except for an 8-km stretch in which Iraqi control extended only to the center of the channel. Starting in 1969, the year after the Ba'th came to power in Iraq, "Iran unilaterally renounced the 1937 treaty and systematically began to challenge Iraqi control of the Shatt al-Arab by not flying the Iraqi flag on its ships and by refusing Iraqi pilots."⁴

In 1975, the two countries resolved these disagreements with the Algiers Accord, negotiated on the Iraqi side by the country's second-in-command at the time, Saddam Hussein. This accord adopted the center line as the boundary along the entire river, but in return for this contraction of Iraqi territory, which essentially internationalized the Shatt, Iran agreed to end all support for the Iraqi Kurds, who had been conducting an ongoing insurrection against Baghdad during this period.⁵ The agreement held until 1979, at which

⁴ Sick, "Trial By Error," p. 230.

⁵ "The Implications of the Iran-Iraq Agreement," paper produced by the Central Intelligence Agency, State Department, and Defense Intelligence Agency, May 1, 1975, available at www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB167/01.pdf.

time Iran still occupied some small stretches that were to have gone to Iraq according to the 1975 terms. Although the new regime in Tehran did not formally renounce the Algiers Accord, “neither did it offer assurances that the treaty would be observed. On the contrary, revolutionary leaders almost casually let it be known that they did not consider themselves bound by any of the Shah’s agreements.”⁶

Accounts vary as to the precise series of events that then led to the outbreak of war. Iraq claimed that its invasion in September 1980 was a response to 69 violations of its airspace by Iranian aircraft between April and September 1980, culminating in Iranian artillery fire at three points along the border that were to have been returned to Iraq under the Algiers Accord. After retaking these disputed areas by September, Saddam declared that Iraq would no longer adhere to the Algiers Accord. But Iraq soon reported additional incidents near Basra, Iraq’s second largest city, apparently leading to the all-out Iraqi attack on September 22.⁷ Other accounts trace the invasion to skirmishes farther north. Regardless, it soon became evident that Iraq had been preparing its invasion for some time, casting doubt on the notion of any single border incident as the sole catalyst for the war.⁸

Indeed, in a broader sense, Iraq’s preparations were not surprising given escalating bilateral tensions during 1979-1980. To put it simply, both regimes were engaged in efforts to shore up their own power, but the very methods by which each chose to do so almost inherently threatened the other. For his part, Saddam had just replaced General Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr as the country’s top leader (a series of events that will be discussed in more detail below). Circumstantial evidence suggests that Saddam’s timing stemmed in part from Bakr’s pending move to join Iraq in a Ba’thist alliance with Syria, which would have made Hafez al-Assad the clear successor to Sadat as leader of the Arab world after the Camp David Accords. It appears that Saddam wanted to claim this mantle as his own, a stance which put him into a somewhat inevitable opposition to non-Arab Iran.⁹

Saddam’s status as a secular Ba’thist and as a Sunni ruling over a majority Shia population also gave him good reason to fear the example of the Iranian revolution. Tehran did nothing to quell this fear when it initiated a propaganda campaign calling for the removal of the “non-Muslim” Ba’thist regime in Baghdad.¹⁰ Tehran radio during this period also proclaimed a leading Iraqi Shi’ite cleric in Najaf, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, the “Khomeini of Iraq.” A wave of anti-government bombings swept the country, apparently with Iranian blessing, and the major anti-government Shia party, al Dawa, began to organize active opposition to the Ba’th regime.¹¹ Anti-government riots broke out in the Shia holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, resulting in the execution of 79 Iraqi dissidents, some of them military officers, in March 1979.¹² Indeed, there is some evidence that Bakr’s hesitation to execute these officers was the final disagreement with Saddam that prompted Bakr’s ouster (discussed in more detail below).¹³

⁶ Sick, “Trial By Error,” p. 231-2.

⁷ Sick, “Trial By Error,” p. 233.

⁸ Anthony Cordesman and Abraham Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War, Vol. II: the Iran-Iraq War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), pp. 30-31.

⁹ Said K. Aburish, “How Saddam Hussein Came to Power,” in *The Saddam Hussein Reader*, ed. Turi Munthe (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2002), pp. 48; and Audeed Dawisha, *Iraq: A Political History from Independence to Occupation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 214.

¹⁰ Efraim Karsh and Inari Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein: a Political Biography* (New York: the Free Press, 1991), p. 138.

¹¹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 25.

¹² Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 26.

¹³ Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: the Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 28-9.

By 1980, Iran was also providing guerilla training to Iraqi Shias and sending them back to Iraq.¹⁴ In April a new wave of bombings swept across the country, culminating in assassination attempts against two high-ranking Iraqi officials. Baghdad responded by arresting and then executing al-Sadr and his sister, a move that so outraged the Shia community that even twenty-six years later, guards present at Saddam Hussein's execution were heard yelling, "Long live Mohammed Baqir Sadr!"¹⁵

As Gary Sick has noted, "In retrospect, it is evident that the events of April 1980 represented the crucial turning point that eventually led to war."¹⁶ Just as the very nature of the Iranian regime in this period seemed to threaten Iraq, so too did many aspects of the Iraqi regime appear threatening to leaders in Tehran. And just as Khomeini stoked Saddam's fears, Saddam stoked Khomeini's.¹⁷ Iraq gave safe harbor—and radio stations—to numerous officials from the Shah's regime, including former prime minister Shapour Bakhtiar and the former commander of Iranian ground forces, General Gholam-'Ali Oveisi, allowing them to broadcast anti-revolutionary messages back into Iran.¹⁸

Interestingly, there is some evidence that these exiles in fact "filled Saddam's head with visions of a weak fundamentalist regime that would collapse if given a shove but that otherwise would subvert Iraq's oppressed Shi'ah population if not stopped immediately."¹⁹ It was an odd logic: the Iranian regime was so strong that it had the potential to unseat Saddam's regime simply through ideological appeal, but so weak that it could be toppled by a quick military incursion that would leave Iran's major cities, including the capital, untouched. Saddam apparently believed he could undo the Iranian revolution by appealing to the Iranian Arabs who lived near the southern sector of the border, just as Iran's leaders apparently believed that they could spread their revolution easily to their co-religionists in southern Iraq.²⁰

Against the backdrop of these fresh tensions and misperceptions, festering for almost two years, the border clashes of September 1980 proved to be one skirmish too many. Both sides were soon engaged in a full-scale war that was to last eight years.

An Overview of the War Between Iran and Iraq

Most of the war took the form of ground combat along the border, which comprised three main sectors, each with different terrain: a northern sector roughly adjacent to Iraq's Kurdish areas consisting of steep mountain ridges with minimal vegetation; a central sector where the border curves inward toward Iraq and the Zagros mountains rise up on the Iranian side, roughly parallel to Baghdad; and an oil-rich southern sector containing extensive marshes and several major rivers.²¹ Although fighting occurred in all three sectors, most of the decisive ground combat occurred in the central and especially the southern sectors, as these were the areas that protected Iraq's capital and its very limited access to the

¹⁴ Hiro, *Longest War*, pp. 35.

¹⁵ "More Arrests Expected from Hussein Execution Video, CNN.com, January 3, 2007, available at <http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/meast/01/03/saddam.execution/index.html>.

¹⁶ Sick, "Trial By Error," p. 232.

¹⁷ Shahrām Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988), chapter 1.

¹⁸ Hiro, *Longest War*, pp. 36.

¹⁹ Kenneth Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), p. 183.

²⁰ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 24.

²¹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 73.

Gulf. Furthermore, the southern sector was home to Iraqi Shia and Iranian Arabs, the two populations to which Tehran and Baghdad, respectively, believed they could appeal.

Though complex and multi-faceted, the Iran-Iraq War (or the Imposed War, as it is known in Iran) consisted of three major phases.²² The first began with the Iraqi invasion of Iran in 1980 and continued into early 1981, at which time Iran initiated a series of counteroffensives to regain lost territory. This phase of the war was fought almost entirely on Iranian territory and lasted into the early summer of 1982. During this time, the war aims of the two sides seemed to escalate. For example, Iraq's deputy prime minister and future foreign minister, Tariq Aziz, publicly declared in April 1981, "Now we don't care if Iran is dismembered." Around the same time, Iran's chairman of parliament and future president, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, declared that "removal of Saddam Hussein's regime is our strategic goal on which we will not compromise."²³

By mid-1982, Iran had regained most of the land Iraq had conquered. A second phase of the war then began when Iran rejected Iraq's attempts at a ceasefire and invaded in July. For the next five years the war took place almost entirely on Iraqi territory and saw numerous Iranian attempts to conquer various parcels of Iraq. Though the Iranians scored some victories in this phase, notably the conquest of the Faw peninsula in 1986, for the most part the fighting devolved into a war of attrition. The Iraqis defended their territory at great cost but were unable to decisively drive out the Iranians, who also suffered extremely high losses in their repeated assaults on Iraqi positions.

In an attempt to break the stalemate, the Iraqis began using chemical weapons as early as 1983, and by 1984 the war had also spilled into the Gulf, with each side attempting to interdict the other's access to oil and shipping. In 1985, Iraq initiated large-scale missile strikes against Iranian cities.²⁴ Such attacks were one of Iraq's only ways to compensate for Iran's immense strategic depth: Tehran was always more than 800 km from the scene of the ground battles, while Baghdad was often little more than 100 km away.²⁵

Finally, in late 1987, the short but crucial third phase of the war began, in which the Iraqis conducted five counteroffensives in quick succession. During the first half of 1988, Iraq regained virtually all the territory it had lost in the previous five years, drove the Iranians back across the border, and called for a ceasefire, which Iran accepted in August. The terms of this ceasefire were essentially the same as those Iraq had offered in 1982 and secured for Iraq virtually no gains over its position at the outset in 1980.²⁶

The war had been a disaster for the participants in almost every sense—social, economic, political, strategic. Iran's total losses were estimated at 200,000-220,000 battlefield deaths and 350,000 to 400,000 wounded, plus approximately 16,000 civilian deaths.²⁷ Iraq's losses amounted to at least 105,000 killed and 400,000 wounded.²⁸ By some calculations, the

²² I borrow this periodization from Gregory Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 57-8. The war is also known as the Qaddisiyat Saddam in Iraq, a reference to the famed battle of al-Qadisiya in 637 AD, in which the Arabs expelled the Persians from Iraq. Dawisha, *Iraq*, p. 234.

²³ Both quoted in Hiro, *Longest War*, pp. 50-1.

²⁴ For background on the Tanker War and War of the Cities, see Hiro, *Longest War*, chapter 6.

²⁵ Remark by an Iraqi general, quoted Kevin M. Woods, Williamson Murray, and Thomas Holaday, *Saddam's War: an Iraqi Military Perspective of the Iran-Iraq War* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 2009), p. 39.

²⁶ The terms had been established in UN Resolution 598, passed in 1987. Sick, "Trial By Error," p. 242.

²⁷ Steven R. Ward, *Immortal: a Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), p. 297.

²⁸ Michael Clodfelter, *Warfare and Armed Conflicts: a Statistical Reference to Casualty and Other Figures, 1500-2000* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), p. 629.

total cost of the war reached over \$1,190 billion.²⁹ This figure included more than \$41.94 billion worth of weapons imported by Iraq and \$11.26 billion imported by Iran.³⁰

Additionally, neither side realized its major goals. The Iraqi invasion consolidated rather than upended the Iranian revolutionary regime, damaged rather than strengthened Iraqi standing in the region, and alienated rather than “liberated” the Arabs of Khuzestan. Similarly, the Iranian invasion in 1982 was also counterproductive: it rallied even Shia Iraqis around Saddam and terrified the rest of the region and the superpowers into much greater support of the Iraqi war effort.³¹

Indeed, international reaction to the war tended to reflect Henry Kissinger’s rumored remark, “Too bad they can’t both lose.”³² Many countries, including the United States, initially declared themselves neutral, but as time went on and it appeared Iran might prevail, they tilted toward Iraq.³³ Egypt, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia all became open supporters, providing various forms of aid, including loans, outright grants, weapons, transit rights for the shipment of weapons, and assistance in getting Iraqi oil to market. Meanwhile, Iran still was able to buy weapons and/or spare parts from North Korea, China, Vietnam, Britain, and numerous European companies.³⁴

U.S. policy continued to be more ambiguous, following the lines suggested in a policy memo from the period that “our interests are best served by a military stalemate.”³⁵ As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, the United States provided some tactical intelligence to the Iraqis and publicly engaged in Operation Staunch to stem the flow of weapons to Iran, but it also secretly funneled arms to the Iranians through Israel in what became known as the Iran Contra affair.³⁶ Remarkably, despite a great deal of indirect external intervention, little changed on the front lines until the abrupt turn of events in 1988.

The Puzzle of Battlefield Effectiveness in Iraq and Iran

The Iran-Iraq War remains puzzling for scholars of military effectiveness. Why did the war last so long, with neither side able to bring it to a decisive end despite some initial Iranian successes? Why did each side seem unable to capitalize on the particular national assets it possessed—Iraq’s tremendous access to international arms, for example, or Iran’s greater strategic depth and larger population? And why did the situation then change so dramatically in 1988, with the Iraqis able to conduct counteroffensives so effectively that Iran suddenly accepted terms it had been rejecting for six years?

Existing theories do not provide a satisfactory answer, for several reasons. First, along many of the dimensions said to matter for the generation of military power, such as regime type and external threats, Iraq and Iran were fairly evenly matched. For example,

²⁹ Hiro, *Longest War*, p. 1.

³⁰ Hiro, *Longest War*, p. 250.

³¹ Sick, “Trial By Error,” pp. 233-6.

³² Chubin and Tripp, *Iran and Iraq*, p. 207.

³³ Discussion Paper, Origin Unknown, “Discussion Paper for SIG on Policy Options for Dealing with Iran-Iraq War,” mid-1982, available at the National Security Archive, the George Washington University, Washington, DC.

³⁴ Vietnam was an ideal supplier because many of Iran’s weapons were American-made, and Hanoi had captured significant quantities of U.S. spare parts when it conquered South Vietnam. Hiro, *Longest War*, p. 72. Britain reportedly provided large quantities of spare parts for Iran’s Chieftain tanks, including engines. Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 120-1.

³⁵ Discussion Paper, Origin Unknown, “Discussion Paper for SIG...”.

³⁶ Hiro, *Longest War*, chapter 5; and Bryan R. Gibson, *Covert Relationship: American Foreign Policy, Intelligence, and the Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988* (Denver, CO: Praeger, 2010), pp. 71-2.

neither regime was democratic.³⁷ Certainly one can argue that their brands of authoritarianism differed, but neither state should have benefited in its battlefield performance from any of the supposed advantages of democratic strategic assessment or liberal political culture. If anything, Iraq should have performed worse given that its POLITY score was consistently more negative than Iran's, yet this was not the case.

Additionally, both states should have experienced strong external pressures to improve their military performance, given the intense human and economic costs of the war. This was not some great game played in distant lands, but a border conflict in populated areas. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, there is some evidence that each side did do better when forced onto the strategic defensive. But it remains unclear whether these slight improvements were due to nationalism or simply the fact that defensive operations are often less militarily challenging than offensive ones.

What is clear is that despite many years of feedback telling both states that their military strategies were failing to deliver their battlefield objectives, neither side demonstrated much improvement until the Iraqi changes in 1986-7. Indeed, the evidence shows that the Iranians drew the wrong lessons from the initial successes they did have in turning back the Iraqi invasion. Overall, this pattern is quite puzzling for realist theories, which would expect a major land war to produce strong incentives for military improvement, especially as war aims escalated and losses mounted.

Along other dimensions said to matter for military power, such as wealth, demography, and culture, the two countries were not evenly matched, but their differences deepen rather than resolve the puzzle surrounding their battlefield performance. For example, Iran was the wealthier of the two states, in terms of GDP, its cash reserves, and the ability to export oil.³⁸ With an estimated 45 million citizens, Iran also had a population roughly three times that of Iraq.³⁹ Its demographic advantages were even more pronounced with respect to the two countries' male and militarily fit populations (see chart below). Yet these advantages never translated into sustained Iranian battlefield effectiveness.

Iranian and Iraqi Military Manpower⁴⁰				
<i>(in millions)</i>				
	1980		1988	
	Iran	Iraq	Iran	Iraq
Total population	39.1	13.6	50.4	17.0
Males aged 15-49	8.6	3.0	11.5	3.8
Militarily fit	5.1	1.7	6.8	2.2

Iran and Iraq also clearly had different national cultures, with Iran reflecting its Persian roots and Iraq its Arab ones. Yet contrary to some theories emphasizing the

³⁷ POLITY scores reinforce this notion. These scores code states based on the presence of institutions and procedures that allow citizens to express preferences about policies and leaders; the existence of institutionalized constraints on the executive; and the guarantee of civil liberties. A score of 10 indicates a completely institutionalized democracy, while a score of -10 indicates a completely institutionalized autocracy. According to POLITY, Iran became more authoritarian as the war went on, with its score dropping from -2 (1980) to -6 (1982-on). It had scored -10 during the time of the Shah. Iraq's score was -9 throughout. Monty G. Marshall and Keith Jagers, POLITY IV Dataset, 2009 version.

³⁸ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 41.

³⁹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 13, 54.

⁴⁰ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 54, based on CIA data.

detrimental effects of Arab culture on military performance, the Iraqis ultimately outperformed the Iranians in the war.⁴¹ These sorts of over-time improvements in particular Iraqi units should not have occurred if a large structural variable such as Arab culture was the systematic driver of performance. Also puzzling for cultural explanations is the fact that for most of the war the Iraqis and Iranians had many of the same tactical problems on the battlefield, suggesting that some underlying similarity, rather than national cultural difference, was important in explaining the course of the war.

Furthermore, civil-military relations in Iran and Iraq were broadly similar, which makes the sub-national variation seen in both states especially puzzling. Both states had long histories of political intervention into the armed forces and military intervention into politics.⁴² Some histories have indeed diagnosed much of the Iranian and Iraqi problems on the battlefield as the result of “civil leaders interfer[ing] directly and constantly in all levels of military activity.”⁴³

Had there been no early Iranian successes on the battlefield and no improvement in Iraqi performance in the final phase of the war, conflictual civil-military relations, as conceived in existing theories and histories, might be a satisfactory explanation for the battlefield performance of both states. But the decline in Iranian effectiveness and the improvement in Iraqi effectiveness—despite a low level of military autonomy in both states throughout—suggest that something besides civil-military conflict or the mere level of civilian control of the military drove the two sides’ performances.

Ultimately, as argued below, what mattered were the actual forms of political intervention in the militaries of the two states. Whatever their other differences and similarities, both militaries performed poorly when uniformly subject to worst practices: in the Iranian case, after about 1982, and in the Iraqi case, before about 1986. By contrast, in the period before these practices were fully imposed on the regular military in Iran and in the period after these practices were lifted on the Republican Guard units in Iraq, military performance by those forces was noticeably better compared both to the opponent’s military and to other units drawn from the same state. The contrast was especially dramatic in the Iraqi case.

II. Political Intervention in the Iraqi Military and Its Predicted Impact on Battlefield Effectiveness

What policies did Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein adopt regarding the military’s promotion patterns, training regimens, command arrangements, and information management? What kinds of outcomes should these policies have produced in terms of battlefield effectiveness, if the theory presented in Chapter 1 is correct? How do these predicted results differ from what we would expect to see if forms of political intervention were irrelevant to explaining battlefield effectiveness, or if other variables were more important?

By and large, Saddam adopted what were identified in the first chapter as worst practices in political intervention, orienting his military toward protection against internal,

⁴¹ Ken Pollack, “The Influence of Arab Culture on Arab Military Effectiveness,” Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Political Science, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1996.

⁴² Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 25.

⁴³ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 413.

non-state threats, rather than potential external dangers. Saddam promoted officers within his military primarily on the basis of political loyalty and sectarian background, and at times actively punished battlefield competence; he severely limited military training; he heavily centralized and deliberately fractured command arrangements; and he restricted horizontal communication within the military and developed an intelligence apparatus directed at his own forces. Only relatively late in the war, when Saddam apparently decided that the Iranians posed a bigger threat to his rule than his domestic enemies, did he alter some of these policies, adopting something close to best practices with respect to Iraqi Republican Guard units.

As a result, overall Iraqi military performance should have been quite poor for most of the war. Ground units should have displayed little if any cohesion and tactical proficiency, and no capacity to conduct complex operations. Only late in the war, after selected shifts in Saddam's forms of political intervention, should there have been improvement in the battlefield effectiveness of Republican Guard units. These forces should have demonstrated greater cohesion, improved tactical proficiency, and some ability to conduct complex operations, particularly compared to their own performance earlier in the war and to the performance of other Iraqi units facing the same sorts of military challenges.

Crucially, the theories based on variables besides political intervention in the military predict that very little of this sort of variation should have occurred. Iraqi wealth, population, regime type, and culture were all essentially static throughout the war. Admittedly, there was some variation in the degree of external threat facing the Iraqis after 1982, although one would think that if this factor alone were responsible for shifts in battlefield performance that these shifts would have occurred much sooner in the war than they actually did.

Overall Iraqi civil-military relations were also relatively static during the war, in the sense that Saddam maintained personal control of the armed forces and heavily curtailed military autonomy throughout. At no time during the war was Saddam uninvolved in military matters. As we will see, throughout the entire conflict Saddam was intimately involved in most decisions about hiring and firing senior officers. From the very outset, he devoted a great deal of his time to receiving and analyzing detailed updates about the war and field reports from his commanders.⁴⁴ It was not unusual to see him inquiring about activities and personnel down to the brigade or even the platoon level.⁴⁵ He also oversaw training regiments, command arrangements, and information management, once noting, "I always have to be the driving force that gets the officers to move."⁴⁶ Even the changes Saddam made late in the war did not reflect a lessening of his personal involvement in military matters, only a shift in the content and purpose of that involvement.⁴⁷ As a result, even the

⁴⁴ "Transcript of a meeting between Saddam Hussein and his Commanding Officers at the Armed Forces General Command," CRRC Number SH-SHTP-D-000-856, November 1980, pp. 1-3; and "Transcript of Saddam Hussein's 28 September 1980 meeting with the Armed Forces General Command," CRRC Number SH-SHTP-D-000-773, September 28, 1980, p. 3.

⁴⁵ "Presidential Direction during War in 1984," CRRC Number SH-AFGC-D-000-686, February-December 1984, pp. 24, 29; and "Handwritten Transcript of a Recorded Meeting of the General Command of the Armed Forces during the 1st Gulf War and Telephone Conversations," CRRC document number SH-AFGC-D-000-393, January 7, 1981, 145 pages; and "Audio Recorded Meeting between Saddam Hussein and Other unknown Iraqi Military Officers regarding Various Military Activities," CRRC Number SH-SHTP-A-000-627, Date unknown but after June 1982, p. 19-20.

⁴⁶ "Audio Recorded Meeting," CRRC Number SH-SHTP-A-000-627, pp. 46-7.

⁴⁷ Charles Tripp, "The Iran-Iraq War and Iraqi Politics," in *The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), pp. 70.

existing civil-military explanations seem to predict much less variation in Iraqi military performance than actually occurred.

Nevertheless, merely detecting variation in Iraqi military performance does not provide evidence in favor of an explanation based on the nature of political intervention in the military. For example, if it were the case that instances of excellent battlefield performance coincided with the imposition of worst practices in political intervention, or that instances of terrible military performance coincided with best practices in political intervention, that would constitute strong evidence against this explanation. But to detect such disconfirming evidence, we first have to know much more about the value of the independent variable in Iraq—about the actual policies that Saddam adopted towards its military.

To do this, the section below briefly reviews the basic structure and history of the Iraqi armed forces since the end of World War I. Then it examines the nature of political intervention in the four areas of interest: promotions, training, command, and information, using the coding questions from Chapter 1. In each of these four areas I outline the general policies that Saddam adopted, while also exploring the exceptions to these policies with respect to Republican Guard units, which began to occur in 1982 and accelerated greatly after 1986. I conclude with predictions about how different parts of the military should have performed in battle at different points in time if my theory is right or wrong, and if the other theories are right or wrong.

Background on Iraq and Its Military

Throughout modern Iraqi history, the country's military posed a recurring dilemma: political leaders relied heavily on the army to protect their regimes against internal opponents, but, simultaneously, the military itself repeatedly proved to be the greatest threat to anyone wearing the mantle of power.⁴⁸ Even prior to independence, during the British occupation after World War I, the Iraqi army had focused primarily on internal missions rather than on combat against other states.⁴⁹ The instability of the early years of independence, including the formation of no fewer than 12 different cabinets during the period 1932-1939, invited praetorianism. Iraq's military launched its first coup in 1936, and by 1941, six more had occurred.⁵⁰

Thereafter, a period of relative stability emerged under the British-influenced Hashemite monarchy, but this, too, ended with a coup in 1958. This time the plotters were the Free Officers, led by nationalist General Abd al-Karim Qasim.⁵¹ Although Qasim succeeded in finally curtailing the British hold on Iraq, he did little to end the systems of patronage and coercion that many Iraqis despised. Also unresolved were the competing claims to political power made by communists, the Shia Dawa party, the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood, and the emerging Ba'th party.⁵²

Unsurprisingly, Prime Minister Qasim himself was soon the target of violence, surviving an assassination attempt in 1959 at the hands of a 22 year-old Ba'thist apparatchik named Saddam Hussein. Saddam fled the country, but in February 1963, Qasim was not so

⁴⁸ Ibrahim Al-Marashi and Sammy Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces: An Analytical History* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 3; and Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), ch. 2.

⁴⁹ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 149.

⁵⁰ Karsh and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein*, p. 7.

⁵¹ Tripp, *History of Iraq*, chapter 4.

⁵² Tripp, *History of Iraq*, chapters 4-5.

lucky. A group of twelve Ba'thists and four Arab nationalist officers shot him dead and declared themselves in charge of the country. Squabbles among this new ruling clique paved the way for a follow-on coup in November 1963, this time orchestrated by General Abd al-Salam Arif, and again with help from two Ba'thist military officers who had grown disillusioned with their earlier collaborators.⁵³

For the next five years, President Arif and, after Arif's death in a helicopter accident, his brother Abdul Rahman Arif, ruled Iraq, again relying on the military as a pillar of the regime. They formed the Republican Guard as an elite unit to protect the palace, and Ba'th members were purged from the officer corps. In fact, the entire party had to go underground, where its security apparatus was now built and managed on a day-to-day basis by Saddam.⁵⁴ Saddam himself was imprisoned during part of this period for plotting with his cousin Bakr against Arif, and he later noted that the era had a profound impact on his political trajectory.⁵⁵ "A leader is not made in a factory in Europe," he observed. "Leadership is developed gradually. This was done underground."⁵⁶

In July 1968, Bakr and Saddam finally saw their chance to regain power, again with help from the armed forces. Collaborating with three disillusioned officers, the Ba'th plotters overthrew President Arif in a bloodless coup.⁵⁷ Within two weeks, Saddam and Bakr also moved to preclude a repeat of the mistakes of 1963. They orchestrated a second coup, dumping their military allies and declaring themselves the country's sole political authority—in Saddam's case, by personally escorting one of the ruling generals at gunpoint to a new assignment as ambassador to Morocco.⁵⁸

This move was the first in a deliberate series of steps to wrench political power away from the armed forces and place it permanently in Ba'th hands. The most important institutional change occurred in late 1969, when Saddam and President Bakr stacked the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) with Ba'thist civilians, turning the country's highest decision-making institution from a military-dominated body to a tool of the party overnight.⁵⁹ Under Saddam's direction, the Ba'th also purged the army of potentially disloyal officers and arrested large numbers of communists, Nasserists, dissident Ba'thists, former politicians, and Western-oriented businessmen, among others.⁶⁰ Several prominent senior officers died of conveniently timed heart attacks or in mysterious car accidents as well.⁶¹

Saddam summarized his objectives during this period when he noted, "The ideal revolutionary command should effectively direct all planning and implementation. It must not allow the growth of any other rival center of power."⁶² He added in an interview around this time that "with party methods, there is no chance for anyone who disagrees with us to jump on a couple of tanks and overthrow the government."⁶³ The regime later codified this view at a 1974 party congress, where a statement noted, "From the earliest days, the Party

⁵³ Tripp, *History of Iraq*, chapter 5.

⁵⁴ Tripp, *History of Iraq*, chapter 5; Karsh and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein*, p. 24.

⁵⁵ FBI Interview with Saddam Hussein, session 2, conducted by George Piro, Baghdad Operations Center, February 8, 2004, p. 6, available at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEFBB279/index.htm>.

⁵⁶ FBI Interview with Saddam Hussein, session 5, conducted by George Piro, Baghdad Operations Center, February 8, 2004, pp. 7, available at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEFBB279/index.htm>.

⁵⁷ Karsh and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein*, chapter 2.

⁵⁸ Tripp, *History of Iraq*, chapter 5; and FBI Interview, session 5, pp. 3-5.

⁵⁹ Karsh and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein*, p. 47.

⁶⁰ Tripp, *History of Iraq*, p. 188; and Karsh and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein*, pp. 40-1.

⁶¹ Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces*, p. 113.

⁶² Dawisha, *Iraq*, p. 212.

⁶³ Dawisha, *Iraq*, p. 212.

urgently had to... consolidate its leadership in the armed forces; to purge them of suspect elements...; ...to establish the ideological and military criteria which would enable the armed forces to do their duty as well as possible and would immunize them against the deviations which the Qassem and Aref regimes and their military aristocrats had committed in the army's name...."⁶⁴

Along these lines, in 1970 Saddam oversaw the formation of the Popular Army. The nucleus of this paramilitary force had already played key roles in the 1963 coup and in the initial consolidation of Ba'th power in 1968. Now Saddam sought to develop the Popular Army as a full-fledged counterweight to the regular military, growing it to a strength of 100,000 men by 1979 and again to 250,000 by 1980. It eventually would reach a size over half a million men during the war with Iran (see chart below).⁶⁵

IRAQI FORCE STRUCTURE⁶⁶		
	1980	1987
Regular army	200,000 4 armored divisions 4 mechanized divisions 4 infantry divisions 1 Republican Guard division	805,000 5 armored divisions 3 mechanized divisions 10 infantry divisions 1 Republican Guard division 2 special forces divisions
Air Force	38,000	40,000
Navy	4,250	5,000
Total regular	242,250	850,000
Popular Army	250,000	500,000
Reserves	250,000	230,000

The Popular Army came in addition to the Republican Guard inherited from Arif. This force would grow from two brigades during the early years of the war to more than two dozen by the end of the conflict.⁶⁷ Many accounts of the Iraqi order of battle, including the *IJSS Military Balance*, actually obscure this growth by counting divisions only, and they often list Iraq as having only 1 Republican Guard division throughout the war (see chart above).⁶⁸

While this may have been true as a matter of nomenclature, experts on the Iraqi military note that the country's divisions—including those from the Republican Guard—often had many more than the typical three brigades under their command. In some cases, divisional commands included up to ten brigades, as is evident even from some very basic arithmetic based on the standard Iraqi order of battle numbers listed above. For example, in 1980, Iraq is listed as having had 200,000 ground troops organized into 13 divisions, producing a rough average division size of about 15,300. But by 1987, Iraq is listed as having had 805,000 ground troops organized into 21 divisions, suggesting an average division size

⁶⁴ Karsh and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein*, p. 189.

⁶⁵ Chubin and Tripp, *Iran and Iraq*, p. 294.

⁶⁶ Data adapted from Chubin and Tripp, *Iran and Iraq*, p. 294.

⁶⁷ Different sources provide slightly different estimates of the number of Republican Guard brigades by the end of the war. Pollack counts 28, while Al Marashi and Salama count 25. *Arabs at War*, pp. 218-219; and *Iraq's Armed Forces*, p. 168.

⁶⁸ "The Middle East and North Africa," *The Military Balance*, vol. 80, no. 1 (1980), pp. 42-3; and "The Middle East and North Africa," *The Military Balance*, vol. 86, no. 1 (1986), pp. 97-8.

of over 38,300. These calculations are not important in their details, except for the more general point they illustrate: Saddam had increased the number of Republican Guard brigades rather dramatically by the final years of the war, in ways that are sometimes obscured by typical division-focused methods of force structure calculation.

Still, in the early years of Ba’th rule Saddam remained behind the scenes, with Bakr the figurehead not only because of his age and title but also because of his continuing links to the officer corps, still a key constituency despite Ba’thist reforms. Saddam had no military background or standing, having failed the entrance exam to the Baghdad Military Academy, which Bakr considered a good thing.⁶⁹ As Efraim Karsh and Inari Rautsi explain, “As long as the Party was in opposition, the primacy of the military faction was indispensable since the army was the only institution which could help the Party regain power. [But] having achieved the country’s top position, Bakr no longer needed a strong military faction. On the contrary, ambitious independent officers around him posed a permanent threat to his position.... In these circumstances, an able and ruthless, yet loyal operator like Saddam Hussein, who was equally determined to break the military’s hold on Iraqi politics, seemed the ideal number two man.”⁷⁰

As the 1970s wore on, Saddam became more prominent and took a number of steps to place the armed forces even more directly under his personal control. With Stalin as his role model, Saddam “uncovered” a number of anti-regime plots within the security apparatus, although only one of these, in 1973, has ever been confirmed as real.⁷¹ Then, in 1976, Saddam had Bakr grant him an honorary military rank of Lieutenant General, equivalent to Chief of Staff of the army. From this position, he appointed numerous relatives from his (and Bakr’s) hometown of Tikrit to key positions in the officer corps, most notably naming a cousin as minister of defense, a position previously held by Bakr. The cousin then used this position to further purge the officer corps of those who might be disloyal to Saddam.⁷²

Saddam launched a major program of military expansion from 1977 to 1979.⁷³ By the end of that year, Iraq’s ground forces were double what they had been in 1973, putting them second in size only to Egypt’s among the Arab states. The regular army now had twelve active-duty divisions, including four armored and two mechanized infantry divisions, totaling approximately 200,000 men.⁷⁴ During the course of the war with Iran, the army eventually would balloon to an astounding 40 divisions encompassing at least 700,000 active-duty soldiers, 250,000 reservists, 4,000 tanks, 3,800 other armored vehicles, 3,500 artillery pieces, and 600 combat aircraft.⁷⁵

By 1979, Bakr—and his sway with the officer corps—had simply become unnecessary to Saddam’s hold on power.⁷⁶ Under murky circumstances, the ailing Bakr

⁶⁹ Karsh and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein*, p. 15. Saddam did, however, receive an honorary degree in 1970.

Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 68.

⁷⁰ Karsh and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein*, p. 35.

⁷¹ Karsh and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein*, pp. 41, 88; and Dawisha, *Iraq*, p. 211.

⁷² Karsh and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein*, p. 88.

⁷³ Karsh and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein*, p. 88.

⁷⁴ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 182; and “Iraq’s Role in the Middle East,” National Intelligence Estimate, Director of Central Intelligence, June 21, 1979, p. D-1, available at www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB167/02.pdf.

⁷⁵ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 207.

⁷⁶ “Iraq’s Role,” p. 7; and Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958: from Revolution to Dictatorship* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001), p. 206.

abruptly resigned in July of that year, leading to Saddam's immediate ascendance as Iraq's president.⁷⁷ He also became the chairman of the RCC, commander in chief of the armed forces, and Field Marshal.⁷⁸ Shortly thereafter Saddam announced the discovery of a Syrian plot against him, leading to a wave of show trials and purges within the party leadership.⁷⁹ These included an extraordinary meeting of the RCC and top party officials on July 18, at which Saddam "exposed" those in the audience who had participated in the supposed plot and called out plain-clothes security officers to arrest them.⁸⁰ Saddam then gave handguns to those remaining and compelled participation in the execution of their former colleagues.⁸¹ Afterwards Saddam distributed videotapes of the entire event to the rest of the party membership.⁸²

It remains unknown regarding this and other similar incidents whether Saddam's fears were genuine or instrumental. Saddam had noted cryptically in 1978 that "the revolution chooses its enemies," suggesting that he might see some political value in manufacturing plots.⁸³ On the other hand, Saddam was probably correct that some in the party did oppose his usurpation of power from Bakr.⁸⁴ Furthermore, it was reasonable for Saddam to have been haunted by the very events that had brought him to the presidency. He is said to have commented to a personal guest in the summer of 1979, "I know there are scores of people plotting to kill me, and this is not difficult to understand. After all, did we not seize power by plotting against our predecessors?"⁸⁵

Saddam also reflected many years later that well into 1980, the primary job of the military was still "countering the sabotage," that is, protecting the regime from internal threats rather than external ones.⁸⁶ In particular, Saddam feared armed rebellion by the Kurds or Shia. One of the only actual military duties assigned to the army prior to the war was "hammering away at largely undefended Kurdish villages."⁸⁷ In addition to the crackdown already mentioned against perceived Shia conspiracies in 1979-80, Saddam executed an unknown number of Kurds and communists whom he worried might have aspirations to unseat him.⁸⁸

Some observers have implied that Saddam's worries might have been mere paranoia. For example, a 1979 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate referred agnostically to a regime that "believes it has a host of enemies among its own people."⁸⁹ Aaded Dawisha has noted that even "at the height of his popularity" in 1980, Saddam "still could not be convinced of

⁷⁷ Karsh and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein*, chapters 4-5.

⁷⁸ Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces*, p. 127.

⁷⁹ The background to these events can be seen in "Correspondence Between the Baghdad and the General Security Directorates requesting confirmation of miscellaneous information on an attempted coup," CRRC Number SH-GMID-D-000-190, June 19, 1979, p. 1.

⁸⁰ Aburish, "How Saddam Hussein...", pp. 51-2.

⁸¹ Aburish, "How Saddam Hussein...", pp. 53-4.

⁸² Dawisha, *Iraq*, p. 214.

⁸³ Quoted in Samir al-Khalil, *Republic of Fear: the Politics of Modern Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 20.

⁸⁴ Aburish, "How Saddam Hussein...", pp. 52.

⁸⁵ Karsh and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein*, p. 2.

⁸⁶ "A meeting, dated 1 May 1991, between Saddam Hussein and the General Command of the Army regarding the enlargement of the Army, and assessment of performance/problems in recent conflict," CRRC Number SH-SHTP-A-000-849, May 1, 1991, pp. 1-2.

⁸⁷ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 60.

⁸⁸ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 28.

⁸⁹ "Iraq's Role," p. 7.

the solidity of his people's support for him and his regime."⁹⁰ Yet one has to wonder if he could not be convinced because the reality was not very convincing. In addition to the tumultuous events of 1979-80, Saddam faced five assassination attempts in 1981, two in 1982 (including one in which the presidential motorcade was pinned down for several hours before being rescued by the army), and another in 1987, all linked to Shia opponents of the regime.⁹¹

Furthermore, at the same time that Saddam relied on the military to protect him against these domestic enemies, Saddam saw the military itself as a potential threat, even after Ba'th civilians had secured essentially all levers of political power.⁹² As one of his generals later reported Saddam to have said, "The Iraqi army was the only force capable of conspiring against me. The only power we fear is this army will take over the party's leadership. The army is like a pet tiger."⁹³

1. *Promotion patterns*

Before and during most of the Iran-Iraq War, Saddam adopted worst practices with respect to promotion patterns in the Iraqi military. During the 1970s, the Ba'th focused almost solely on political loyalty as the key criterion for officer selection and advancement. As one general noted in an interview decades later, "Whereas the saying in the early part of the Ba'th rule had been 'better a good soldier than a good Ba'thist,' it changed to 'better a good Ba'thist than a good soldier.'" ⁹⁴ As this same general noted, Saddam "ordered politicians to serve at the army level and... emphasized the principle... that as long as one was a Ba'thist he can always be a leader, since the Ba'thist is a truly natural leader."⁹⁵

In fact, the regime actively selected against military professionalism in forming its officer corps. The government and officer corps were soon dominated not simply by Sunnis, as had been the case in all previous administrations, but specifically by Tikritis, and in particular those who shared clan or tribal ties with Bakr and Saddam.⁹⁶ This trend only accelerated when Saddam became president. One authoritative study notes that "the emphasis was now on political reliability and unquestioned obedience to orders rather than on serious military professionalism.... Once firmly in charge, Saddam acted to promote a number of lieutenant colonels to major general, and subsequently to the command of divisions, without requiring them to hold any of the traditional or intermediate level command positions."⁹⁷

Audio tapes of Saddam's deliberations with his advisors confirm that he paid close personal attention to senior officer appointments and even to those of many junior officers.⁹⁸ He cared somewhat about the professional qualifications of his potential

⁹⁰ Dawisha, *Iraq*, p. 222.

⁹¹ Hiro, *Longest War*, pp. 51, 68, and 197.

⁹² The details of this shift are masterfully documented in Amazia Baram, "The Ruling Political Elite in Bathi Iraq, 1968-1986: the Changing Features of a Collective profile," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 21, no. 4 (November 1989), pp. 447-493.

⁹³ Quoted in Woods et al, *Saddam's War*, p. 90.

⁹⁴ Quoted in Woods et al, *Saddam's War*, p. 4.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Woods et al, *Saddam's War*, p. 25.

⁹⁶ Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces*, pp. 114-16.

⁹⁷ Woods et al, *Saddam's War*, p. 4.

⁹⁸ "Text Versions of Cassettes Recorded of 1980 Meetings Held among Saddam Hussein and Iraqi Officials Regarding Tactics and Plotting Against the Iraqi Enemy," CRRC Number SH-SHTP-D-000-624, 28-29 December 1980, p. 112, 119; and "Written Transcripts of Audio Tapes of meetings between Saddam Hussein

commanders but also showed notable interest in a candidate's family background, political views, and likelihood that he would provide "support" for Ba'ath objectives.⁹⁹ In one exchange on this topic in 1980, a division commander reported to Saddam that a capable officer had been passed over promotion to brigade commander because "he is not a party member. I am saying it frankly... there is no other reason." Although in this particular case Saddam eventually relented and allowed the promotion of the officer, the very fact that he and his officers had such an extensive conversation about whether the officer could be trusted—despite the fact that all agreed "he is a good officer"—reflects the overriding importance of officers' political credentials early in the war with Iran.¹⁰⁰

Furthermore, Saddam repeatedly purged the officer corps of those he deemed disloyal.¹⁰¹ By the eve of the war, "the high command structure had effectively become Saddam Hussein and his political supporters, none of whom had practical military experience and training.... Much of the high command was chosen more for loyalty than competence."¹⁰² The formation and rapid expansion of the Popular Army epitomized these practices, as "low-grade Popular Army 'brigades' were rapidly created with officers whose own real qualification was party membership and loyalty to the regime."¹⁰³

There is some evidence that these promotion policies began to shift slightly in 1982, probably the lowest point of the entire war for the Iraqis.¹⁰⁴ For example, Saddam purged the Popular Army of its worst commanders, in part to shift blame for the terrible defeats the Iraqis had suffered.¹⁰⁵ Apparently he also ordered the execution of as many as 300 senior officers for poor performance around this time.¹⁰⁶ Saddam then "began promoting officers who had fought well in the first two years of the war" and "began treating Ba'thist and non-Ba'thist officers on a par when it came to promotion."¹⁰⁷

Most importantly, though, Saddam simply reduced the use of the Popular Army on the front lines and focused on enlarging and improving the leadership of the Republican Guard. One of his generals later reported that after 1982, "Saddam began to choose commanders from the best Iraqi armored battalions to command Republican Guard battalions, whereas previously he had chosen only his relatives.... He started picking the best officers, commanding officers, and junior officers within the Iraqi army and put them in the Republican Guard, and he aimed to save this new force for the major counterattack.... This was in line with the recommendations of the general officers to create a special armored force that was well equipped and well trained, led by expert, high-ranking officers, with great experience."¹⁰⁸

It seems, however, that this expansion and improvement in the Guard was still quite limited during the period 1982-1986. The same general who noted some of the early changes

and Senior Military commanders discussing nominations to Ba'ath Party Leadership and Iran-Iraq War Battles," CRRC Number SH-SHTP-D-000-864, September 1982, pp. 123-8.

⁹⁹ "Written Transcripts," CRRC Number SH-SHTP-D-000-864, pp. 130-2.

¹⁰⁰ "Text Versions," CRRC Number SH-SHTP-D-000-624, pp. 107-110.

¹⁰¹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 43-4.

¹⁰² Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 59.

¹⁰³ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 110.

¹⁰⁴ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 133.

¹⁰⁵ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 149; and "Prospects for Iraq," Special National Intelligence Estimate 36.2-83, Director of Central Intelligence, 1983, p. 15, available at <https://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB167/04.pdf>.

¹⁰⁶ Karsh and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein*, pp. 191-2.

¹⁰⁷ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 208; and Hiro, *Longest War*, p. 89.

¹⁰⁸ Woods et al, *Saddam's War*, p. 59.

in 1982 nevertheless commented that even four years later, “a substantial number of Republican Guard commanders were brave but professionally unprepared and often incompetent in the positions they held.”¹⁰⁹ Indeed, there is some evidence that Saddam felt this way as well, as tapes from 1984 reveal him brainstorming about the possibility of bringing generals out of retirement to lead companies, because the junior officer corps was so inept.¹¹⁰

These continuing problems were no doubt also related to training, a subject discussed below, but it is noticeable that after 1986, the merit component of promotion standards was made much more stringent. Though still overwhelmingly Sunni and Tikriti, the top command of the Guards was reconfigured during this year, with its highest post now filled by an officer “known for his courage and achievements” on the battlefield.¹¹¹ Additionally, “initiative on the battlefield was rewarded over political loyalty or blood relations to Hussein, and incompetent officers who were friends or relatives were purged.”¹¹² Saddam then combed the rest of the army to pull out the most “outstanding and exceptional” officers for transfer to the Guard, which expanded to over two dozen brigades by 1988.¹¹³

No doubt it is difficult for any leader to find enough competent generals to command a rapidly expanding army in the midst of war, but the evidence does show that Iraq shifted from worst practices in promotion early in the war to something close to best practices by 1986-7, at least with respect to the Republican Guard units. Interestingly, at the same time that Saddam fully embraced these practices with respect to the Guard, he created a new force known as the Special Republican Guard to continue to protect him in Baghdad. Its soldiers were drawn primarily from the original membership roster of the Republican Guard, prior to the switch in practices.¹¹⁴ During this time Saddam also “tightened up his control of the state apparatus” in non-military domains, transferring or dismissing from government service anyone outside his immediate circle of kinsmen and trusted long-time associates.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, as soon as the war was over, Saddam ousted much of the top Guard leadership from the period 1986-88.¹¹⁶ “What is sad,” explained one general, “is that we had heroes who survived the war, but they were dismissed by Saddam because he accused them of something or another.”¹¹⁷

2. *Training regimens*

Prior to and during the early years of the war, Saddam also adopted worst practices with respect to training. The Popular Army provided only nominal training to its members.¹¹⁸ Soldiers usually received about two months of instruction focused on the use of small arms and low-intensity conflict, with little attention to the use of heavy weapons or combined

¹⁰⁹ Woods et al, *Saddam's War*, p. 14.

¹¹⁰ “A meeting on 18 October 1984 between Saddam Hussein and unknown officials dated in which they discuss military operations and a large secret project,” CRRC Number SH-SHTP-A-000-735, October 1984, pp. 9-10.

¹¹¹ Woods et al, *Saddam's War*, p. 83.

¹¹² Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces*, p. 166.

¹¹³ Saddam's reflections on the process discussed in “A meeting,” CRRC Number SH-SHTP-A-000-849, pp. 4-5. Further details in Pollack, *Arabs at War*, pp. 219-220.

¹¹⁴ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, pp. 219-220.

¹¹⁵ Tripp, “The Iran-Iraq War,” in *Iran-Iraq War*, pp. 233.

¹¹⁶ Karsh and Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein*, p. 185.

¹¹⁷ Woods et al, *Saddam's War*, p. 97.

¹¹⁸ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 69.

arms skills.¹¹⁹ As one history notes, “These People’s Army units were usually led by senior members of the Ba’th rather than professional officers. They were not properly organized, led, or equipped for intense combat.”¹²⁰

This state of affairs was certainly odd, given that Saddam intended the Popular Army to serve as a counterweight to the regular military. There is some evidence that the Republican Guards were given better training prior to the war, although even for them, there were limits.¹²¹ Despite an infusion of modern weapons, for example, very few Iraqi officers received foreign military training in how to use those weapons, because of Saddam’s fear that they would bring communist ideas back with them from the Soviet Union and become subversive.¹²² All of this speaks to the highly contingent nature of leaders’ beliefs not only about threats but about the very practices that lead to military effectiveness. Saddam seems to have held the view that if Iraq simply purchased the right weapons, it could prevail in war, almost regardless of other factors.

Perhaps the greatest indication of how little training the Iraqi military had received prior to the war is that, once the war escalated, Saddam had numerous conversations with his generals about how to correct training deficits.¹²³ Only a month into the conflict, for example, the Director of Military Movements, Staff Colonel Maysar Ibrahim al-Jayouri, subtly warned Saddam, “Our soldier is raw material, we can accomplish miracles with him if he is better used and guided.”¹²⁴ Saddam noted in another conversation, probably in the mid-1980s, “We have formed a large army to be trained,” but “our infantry training is a bit a lagging.... We have been in war ... without training and of course all of you knew before the war we were in need of training. If there was any blame to be placed, it would be for not having the training done before the war started.”¹²⁵

Similarly, Saddam gave specific instructions for improved training of the Popular Army.¹²⁶ During this period he also decided to personally review all training manuals for the army, again reflecting his concern that he had restricted training too much prior to the war.¹²⁷ Nevertheless, as late as 1984, an Iraqi general found it necessary to publish a long defense of the importance of training in an Iraqi military journal. He wrote,

Training and maintenance are essential, basic elements in all circumstances. They are needed to build a qualified human and material base superior to that of the enemy, and to maintain the momentum and impact of that base in various stages of the conflict to achieve decisive results and to effectively remedy shortages and losses stemming from the length of the war. In this regard, emphasis must be placed on not restricting training and maintenance to a certain aspect or area to the exclusion of another.¹²⁸

¹¹⁹ Marashi and Salama, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, pp. 154-5.

¹²⁰ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 426.

¹²¹ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 219.

¹²² Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 44.

¹²³ “Audio Recorded Meeting,” CRRC Number SH-SHTP-A-000-627, pp. 20-1.

¹²⁴ “Meetings between Saddam Hussein and various Iraqi Officials,” CRRC Number SH-MISC-D-000-695, October 12-13, 1980, pp. 700-701.

¹²⁵ “Audio Recorded Meeting,” CRRC Number SH-SHTP-A-000-627, pp. 21-2.

¹²⁶ “Saddam Hussein Discusses Neighboring Countries and their Regimes,” CRRC Number SH-SHTP-A-000-626, date unknown, sometime after 1980 and before 1985, pp. 10.

¹²⁷ “Audio Recorded Meeting,” CRRC Number SH-SHTP-A-000-627, pp. 33-4.

¹²⁸ “Defense in Strong Points, by Staff Brigadier General Abd-al-Zuhrah Shikarah al-Maliki,” in “Military Journal, Vol. 61, no. 3, July 1984 (U),” CRRC Number SH-MODX-D-000-853, July 1984, p. 56.

While perfectly unobjectionable, the very fact that a senior officer devoted the time to write an article explaining the importance of unrestricted training—four years into the war—speaks volumes about the legacy of Saddam’s pre-war policies.

One can draw a similar inference from another article published in the same issue, in which the author observed, “Constant drilling in peace based on the most likely scenario tends to produce good action in warfare. Training alone ensures gradual improvement in all exercises.... The constant execution of realistic procedures in peacetime will make matters proceed automatically and easily in war, which increases the chances of success in battle.”¹²⁹ The very banality of these statements is striking, perhaps suggesting that the Iraqi political leadership had still failed to grasp commonsense training maxims.

Although there were efforts to improve training for particular units starting as early as the fall of 1980, they remained sporadic at best well into 1984-5.¹³⁰ In one recorded conversation with Saddam, for example, an officer carefully approached the topic of seeking foreign help with training, commenting, “We cannot say that the [foreign] officers are smarter than the Iraqi ones.... On the brigade level our officers can hold their own, but in other areas we can do better if some of those [foreign] officers can come here and train us.... As a matter of fact we should have put more emphasis on training our troops.... Education in the military should take a larger scale and requires planning.”¹³¹

As late as 1986-7, Saddam’s advisors still had to work to convince him to ease restrictions on training. In one 1986 conversation, for example, the defense minister noted, “The process of building the warrior and building the human being, it is not a haphazard process, it is not just giving a weapon to a person and train him for two weeks and tell him go ahead and fight, the process of building the fighter is a very difficult one and requires time.”¹³² In another conversation in 1987, a commander struggled to convince Saddam of the need to reconsider Iraq’s training methods, or lack thereof: “if these brave troops were to be given room for training...., if they were to be given three to four months to be trained, our position will be much better. Sir, each battalion needs a month or a month and a half to be trained.... Can you see how it works, sir? ... If you allow me sir, everything will be explained....”¹³³ The general gingerly concluded that, more so than the size of Iraqi forces, the “quality, and the shortage of its training, [were] very important too.”¹³⁴

Finally, in late 1986 and early 1987, Saddam shifted to a system of best practices in training for the rapidly expanding Republican Guard brigades, which were now formed into a new command known as the Republican Guard Forces Command.¹³⁵ According to one recent history, “Saddam made the decision to pull the Republican Guard units out of the front line and begin a wholesale reequipping and retraining effort from squad level all the

¹²⁹ “Security and Safety of the Unit in Peace and War, by Staff Major General Faruq Umar al-Hariri,” in “Military Journal,” July 1984, p. 12.

¹³⁰ Intelligence Appraisal, Defense Intelligence Agency, “Iran-Iraq: the Second Year of War,” December 8, 1982, p. 2, available at the National Security Archive, the George Washington University, Washington, DC; and Cordesman and Wagner, p. 353.

¹³¹ “Audio Recorded Meeting,” CRRC Number SH-SHTP-A-000-627, p. 32.

¹³² “Transcript of a Conversation between Saddam Hussein and High Ranking Officers during the Iraq-Iran war,” CRRC Number SH-SHTP-D-000-607, 25 February 1985, 31 July 1986, p. 6.

¹³³ “Meeting Between Saddam And The Military Corps Commanders,” CRRC Number SH-SHTP-A-000-634, March 28, 1987, p. 12.

¹³⁴ “Meeting Between Saddam...,” CRRC Number SH-SHTP-A-000-634, p. 15.

¹³⁵ Woods et al, *Saddam’s War*, p. 70; and Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 219.

way to division and corps command.... There was a greater willingness at the top to pay serious attention to the recommendations of the more professional officers to build up the Republican Guard's capabilities.... This effort to improve the Republican Guard involved more extensive training at all levels to improve tactical and battlefield proficiency of officers commanding Republican Guard units."¹³⁶

For the first time, the forces actually practiced conducting both smaller-unit and large corps-level offensive and defensive operations in highly realistic, full-size mockups of Iranian defensive positions.¹³⁷ One general recounted years later, "There was an extensive training curriculum, day and night.... Saddam Hussein continuously followed up with us to see how our training was coming, and the readiness of our forces.... We had several active firing ranges and training grounds that would run 24 hours a day."¹³⁸ In fact, many officers no longer wished to serve in the Guard because of these intensive training responsibilities.¹³⁹ Saddam was, of course, able to assuage some of these complaints by increasing the material and financial benefits of service.¹⁴⁰

According to Cordesman and Wagner, Iraq also formed elite naval infantry brigades during this period, which "sometimes trained with the Republican Guard units," and were "aggressively trained... for the two kinds of operations [Iraq] generally had failed to conduct successfully during the period from 1983 to 1987: aggressive infiltration and assault operations and operations in wetlands and across water barriers."¹⁴¹ A few regular army units were also given additional training: the 3rd, 6th, and 10th armored divisions and the 1st and 5th mechanized infantry divisions.¹⁴² Cordesman and Wagner report, "Iraqi armor and infantry were given special training in maneuver and combined-arms operations.... Iraq conducted corps-level exercises in fluid defense and counterattack tactics.... Iraqi artillery units were given special training in concentrating and shifting fire and in providing fire at the call of forward air controllers in the forward area rather than prepared fire."¹⁴³

Although Pollack emphasizes the heavily scripted nature of these training exercises (and the resulting operations), he acknowledges that Iraqi generals also "began to try to encourage junior commanders to be aggressive and innovative in combat and to react more quickly and effectively to enemy moves."¹⁴⁴ In short, Saddam altered the substance of his intervention in Republican Guard training after 1986, shifting from worst practices to at least better practices, if not best.

3. *Command arrangements*

Iraq began the war with worst practices in place regarding command arrangements, evident in at least two major respects. First, Saddam adopted a highly centralized command structure that located almost all battlefield decision-making authority in his personal hands or those of a small inner circle in Baghdad.¹⁴⁵ He went so far as to order that soldiers could

¹³⁶ Woods et al, *Saddam's War*, p. 14.

¹³⁷ Steven R. Ward, *Immortal: a Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), p. 291; and Pollack, *Arabs at War*, pp. 220-1.

¹³⁸ Woods et al, *Saddam's War*, p. 78.

¹³⁹ Woods et al, *Saddam's War*, p. 60.

¹⁴⁰ Woods et al, *Saddam's War*, p. 78.

¹⁴¹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 355.

¹⁴² Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 220.

¹⁴³ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 355-6.

¹⁴⁴ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, pp. 209, 220-1.

¹⁴⁵ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 420.

never retreat unless they were outnumbered by particular force ratios. Several years into the war, Saddam even created a Punishment Corps that operated in rear areas to enforce this policy.¹⁴⁶

Hence those on the battlefield were often afraid to take any action—offensive or defensive—without specific authorization from higher headquarters or their unit’s political officer.¹⁴⁷ Cordesman and Wagner note, “Every level of command tended to refer all decisions upwards. The entire burden of command eventually rested on Saddam Hussein and his immediate staff in Baghdad, a burden of command they lacked both the communications and the expertise to bear effectively.”¹⁴⁸

Second, Saddam intentionally fractured command lines to different parts of the military, ensuring that he personally controlled them but that no one part could ever gain any command authority over the others. For example, Saddam ensured that the chain of command for the Popular Army went outside the armed forces and the Ministry of Defense, so that he could control it independently.¹⁴⁹ The Republican Guard also bypassed the normal chain of command, reporting only to Saddam.¹⁵⁰

According to Al-Marashi and Salama, two academic experts on the Iraqi military, the motivation for these decisions was obvious: “if rebellious military officers were successfully to carry out a coup, they would have to coordinate their actions with these parallel militaries inside of the capital, increasing the chances that their plan would be uncovered. If officers of the regular military tried to move against the leadership without the help of these anti-armies, then they would have to fight their way into the capital, increasing the risks of such a move.”¹⁵¹ Additionally, Saddam engaged in the frequent shuffling of officers to prevent them from forming personal relationships with men under their command that could then be used to foment a coup.¹⁵²

As with the policies on promotion and training, there is evidence that Saddam shifted away from worst practices with respect to the Republican Guard late in the war. The impetus for these changes is evident in conversations between Saddam and his generals a few years into the war. In one such discussion, for example, Saddam explicitly voiced his realization that “it is hard for the higher command to have a good control system when you have a large army with many brigades and it lacks coordination between its units.”¹⁵³ It seems that while tight personal control and extreme centralization of command might have been feasible when the army’s main tasks were palace protection, monitoring the Shia, or shelling the Kurds, it proved paralyzing and dangerous for a multi-division army operating across three major fronts in a conventional war. An Iraqi military journal around the same time observed that “there is a limit to the number of individuals which one supervisor can manage effectively” and that Iraqi lines of command authority needed to be clarified to avoid conflicting orders and “duplicate leadership.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁶ Hiro, *Longest War*, pp. 109.

¹⁴⁷ A taste of these sort of orders appears in “Meeting Between Saddam...,” CRRC Number SH-SHTP-A-000-634, p. 10.

¹⁴⁸ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 80.

¹⁴⁹ Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, p. 126.

¹⁵⁰ Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, p. 156.

¹⁵¹ Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, p. 125.

¹⁵² Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, p. 145.

¹⁵³ “Audio Recorded Meeting,” CRRC Number SH-SHTP-A-000-627, p. 25.

¹⁵⁴ “Defense in Strong Points, by Staff Brigadier General Abd-al-Zuhrah Shikarah al-Maliki,” in “Military Journal,” CRRC Number SH-MODX-D-000-853, p. 60.

In another conversation, a different military officer concurred with Saddam's dawning realization that a more decentralized command structure might allow better coordination across different branches of the Iraqi military. According to this officer, "In other armies they make different branches of the military interact and have the same tasks. Usually the armed forces break soldiers of different branches into working together by forcing them to do joint tasks. As they ease into it, it becomes a routine."¹⁵⁵ Saddam agreed with this officer that Iraqi command arrangements needed to be restructured to "hinder any chances that the enemy would use the lack of coordination or communication for his advantage."¹⁵⁶ He also listened as another officer suggested that Saddam needed to halt the destructive practice of frequently shuffling officers among different commands—an ideal mechanism for preventing coup plots but a detrimental one for unit cohesion and tactical proficiency in wartime.¹⁵⁷ Still, there is little evidence that Saddam made any actual changes to these practices early in the war.¹⁵⁸

Finally, meetings between Saddam and his generals in July 1986 and March 1987 apparently led to the decisions to launch new offensives against Iran with an expanded Republican Guard subject to new command arrangements (as well as new policies in the other areas of interest: promotions, training, and information management).¹⁵⁹ These decisions were all related: Saddam's generals convinced him that Iraq would never win the war merely by continuing a static defense, but the Guards could never conduct anything more complex absent a shift in command arrangements (again, in addition to shifts in promotions, training, and information management). According to a U.S. military assessment of what had happened, "Under the generals' strategy Saddam would be relegated to virtual observer status. In the past, all operations had been tightly controlled from the Palace; this could not be under the new set up. Operations had to be decentralized; from the Palace Saddam could not direct a campaign that was expected to go on for weeks..."¹⁶⁰

The result was a series of significant changes in Saddam's command arrangements. First, he allowed a significant devolution of command authority.¹⁶¹ Ward writes that starting in mid-1986, "the Iraqi dictator limited his micromanagement of operations" and "allowed Iraq's increasingly competent and professional commanders more control."¹⁶² Cordesman and Wagner also report that Iraq's field commanders and fighting officers were given a much stronger voice in directing battles and campaigns.¹⁶³ Saddam recalled many of the political officers, often called commissars, that had formerly been assigned to all Iraqi units above battalion strength, and those who remained found their command authority curtailed.¹⁶⁴

Saddam never ended the fracturing of command, in the sense that the Guard continued to be separate from the Popular Army, which was separate from the regular army.

¹⁵⁵ "Audio Recorded Meeting," CRRC Number SH-SHTP-A-000-627, pp. 9-10.

¹⁵⁶ "Audio Recorded Meeting," CRRC Number SH-SHTP-A-000-627, pp. 9-10.

¹⁵⁷ "Audio Recorded Meeting," CRRC Number SH-SHTP-A-000-627, p. 45.

¹⁵⁸ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 133.

¹⁵⁹ Stephen C. Pelletiere and Douglas V. Johnson, *Lessons Learned: the Iran-Iraq War*, vol. 1 (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, 1990), published as Fleet Marine Force Reference Publication 3-202, p. 20; and Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 259-60.

¹⁶⁰ Pelletiere and Johnson, *Lessons Learned*, p. 37.

¹⁶¹ Tripp, "The Iran-Iraq War," in *Iran-Iraq War*, p. 69.

¹⁶² Ward, *Immortal*, p. 276.

¹⁶³ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 356.

¹⁶⁴ Pelletiere and Johnson, *Lessons Learned*, p. vii; Chubin and Tripp, *Iran and Iraq*, p. 119; and Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces*, pp. 153, 166.

On the other hand, Saddam did not nothing to divide the Guard further, while more than tripling its size. He also encouraged the formation of a functioning general staff system among Guard officers, reversing some of the intra-Guard fracturing that had existed earlier.¹⁶⁵ Additionally, the constant rotation of officers was ended.¹⁶⁶

In these ways, there was a real shift in the nature of the practices governing the Guard, which was the entity actually conducting most of the externally oriented combat by this time in the war. While perhaps still not best practices, these policies certainly were an improvement over the worst practices in place during the early years of the conflict.

4. *Information management*

In general, Iraqi intelligence was more concerned with tracking political developments inside Iraq and the loyalty of the armed forces than with gathering information on the Iranians.¹⁶⁷ During the 1970s Saddam had constructed a vast spy network to report to him on the activities of military officers. Indeed, a rough but credible calculation suggests that in 1980 “one-fifth of the active Iraqi labor force... were institutionally charged with one form or another of violence,” either in the army or in the numerous internally directed policing and intelligence agencies.¹⁶⁸

Another study notes that “when the war started, political commissars, who did nothing but report back to Saddam, were attached to all units. This system was still in place in 1982, an indication of Saddam’s continued distrust.”¹⁶⁹ In fact, in one conversation with his generals, Saddam responded to their disagreement about part of a report by noting,

The Intelligence Officer will settle this matter, because he was eavesdropping on you.... He was assigned to eavesdrop on the Corps, this way we can find out whether the Corps will comply with operation security.... Every time we have a battle going, the Intelligence Officer instruct [sic] technical departments to ensure that the Corps are adhering with guidelines and hear what they are talking, whether such talk will reveal the plans, the Officer would tell the Corps that he regard [sic] them as enemy, so he eavesdrops on their conversations.¹⁷⁰

Internal correspondence from the Iraqi General Military Intelligence Directorate actually noted that after the war started, the government was facing difficulties gathering intelligence from its own population, because Iraq’s citizens were so used to an intelligence apparatus focused on them instead of Iran. One document stressed that the government needed to work to “convince the masses that the staff intelligence directorates were established to watch the enemy and not our various sectors; we should end this sort of stereotype and convince them that intelligence is part of the armed forces and not a dominating department—with the only concern—of watching and looking for adversaries.”¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁵ Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, p. 167.

¹⁶⁶ Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, p. 166.

¹⁶⁷ Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, p. 147.

¹⁶⁸ al-Khalil, *Republic of Fear*, p. 38.

¹⁶⁹ Pelletiere and Johnson, *Lessons Learned*, p. 30.

¹⁷⁰ “A meeting between Saddam Hussein and High-Ranking Officers Discussing Battles in the Iran-Iraq War,” CRRC Number SH-SHTP-D-000-612, late 1980s, p. 7.

¹⁷¹ “GMID Daily Intelligence Reports sent by the Military Attaché in Iran Concerning the Loss of Iran and Iraq Forces, during the War in 1981,” CRRC Number SH-GMID-D-000-883, 5 March 1981-28 April 1981, p. 9.

The same writer also noted that thus far in the war, “intelligence is still not up to the required standard due to some organizational reasons.”¹⁷² Indeed, as late as 1984, an Iraqi military journal published an article emphasizing the importance of basic tactical information, which it described as “the vital nerve in warfare.” The author added that “long ago, it was said ‘Give me information and I will give you victory.’ The basis of warfare is the collection of information before and during the war. Information is indispensable to any commander regardless of his capability or status.”¹⁷³ Again, the fact that an officer had to spell out these facts suggests continuing problems with information flow in the Iraqi military.

Given this climate, Saddam’s officers rarely reported information that they thought he might not want to hear. As one general explained in an interview after the fall of the regime, “Saddam put great pressure on Iraqi commanders on the ground to avoid losses, which led them not to report failures. Withholding losses from reports and thus not receiving reinforcements or other support left commanders in impossible combat conditions. However, this was better than reporting their failures and suffering execution.”¹⁷⁴

Indeed, commanders often exaggerated their claims about battlefield events or chose not to convey important developments up the chain of command.¹⁷⁵ Iraqi officers also were afraid to speak to one another, fearing that they might be accused of coup plotting. As Cordesman and Wagner put it, “The command-and-control system was incapable of transmitting the true tactical situation. Senior Iraqi officers later noted that they often got more timely information from the media than they did from their own commanders at the front.”¹⁷⁶

That said, the problem was a two-way street: political leaders also severely limited the information that battlefield commanders received, even about events occurring directly in their areas of operation. According to Al-Marashi and Salama, “Controlling the dissemination of information served as a means of manipulating the military during the war,” in other words, of preventing military units from collaborating in any potential internally directed actions that might threaten the regime. “Tactical field commanders rarely received timely intelligence down from the chain of command and thus never had a full picture of the nature of the Iranian forces in their theater.”¹⁷⁷

Starting in 1983, Saddam initiated some changes in his information management policies. First, he fired the security chief who managed the spy network in the armed forces.¹⁷⁸ The next year he made some attempts to gather more realistic information from his field officers, evident in their more frequent inclusion in high-level political meetings about the war.¹⁷⁹ Indeed, there is quite a bit of evidence that by 1984-5, Saddam was seeking a more realistic assessment of how to win the war. A memo from Saddam to his commanders dated

¹⁷² “GMID Daily Intelligence,” CRRC Number SH-GMID-D-000-883, p. 18.

¹⁷³ “Accuracy in the Transmission of Information, by Staff Brigadier General Ihsan Qasim Bakr,” in “Military Journal,” CRRC Number SH MODX D 000 853, p. 31.

¹⁷⁴ Woods et al, *Saddam’s War*, p. 38.

¹⁷⁵ Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, p. 147.

¹⁷⁶ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 80.

¹⁷⁷ Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, p. 147.

¹⁷⁸ Pelletiere and Johnson, *Lessons Learned*, p. 30.

¹⁷⁹ Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, p. 153; and Chubin and Tripp, *Iran and Iraq*, p. 117.

February 16, 1984, admits, “We must quietly examine our defensive measures and find out what type of activity we could add to those measures to increase their effectiveness.”¹⁸⁰

Still, only in 1986-7 did Saddam institutionalize major changes in information management. First, he allowed his officers to formulate an alternative strategy to be implemented by the Republican Guards. According to Al-Marashi and Salama, Saddam also finally accepted “the need for combined arms operations, even though in the past these had been discouraged due to political reasons.... To conduct these combined arms tactics, the officers had to convince Hussein to allow cooperation between the military services and devolve command and control authority to the commanders on the field.”¹⁸¹ Saddam complied, slashing “the number of bureaucratic barriers to the rapid transfer of information to field commanders” and lifting restrictions on interservice communication.¹⁸²

While probably still not ideal in terms of information management, these changes certainly represented a shift away from the worst practices that characterized the early years of the war, at least with respect to Republican Guard units. Combined with the other aspects of political intervention already discussed, these policies make it possible to generate predictions about the likely battlefield effectiveness of the Iraqi military.

Predictions If the Political Intervention Explanation Is Right: Confirming Evidence

- Iraqi units should have displayed virtually no effectiveness in the early years of the war with Iran, especially prior to 1982. Their battlefield performance should have reflected minimal cohesion, virtually no tactical proficiency, and no ability whatsoever to conduct complex operations.
- The one exception should have been those units fighting under the coercion of the Punishment Corps, which should have demonstrated improved cohesion, although without tactical proficiency or the ability to conduct complex operations.
- After 1986, there should have been substantial improvements in the battlefield effectiveness of Iraqi Republican Guard units. These units should have been cohesive, tactically proficient, and capable of at least some complex operations, in contrast to regular army and Popular Army units.

Predictions If the Political Intervention Explanation Is Wrong: Disconfirming Evidence

- Iraqi units that demonstrated cohesion, tactical proficiency, and/or the ability to conduct complex operations prior to 1986 would cast doubt on the intervention theory, because they would show that the military was effective even under worst practices in political intervention.
- Republican Guard units that failed to demonstrate cohesion, tactical proficiency, and the ability to conduct at least some complex operations after 1986 would also cast doubt on the intervention theory, because they would show that major shifts in the nature of political intervention did not prompt corresponding changes in battlefield effectiveness.

Predictions If the Alternative Explanations Are Right: Additional Disconfirming Evidence

¹⁸⁰ “Presidential Direction during War in 1984,” CRRC Number SH-AFGC-D-000-686, February-December 1984, p. 41.

¹⁸¹ Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces*, p. 166.

¹⁸² Quotation from Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 356; further evidence in Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces*, pp. 164-6.

- There should have been very little variation over time or across different units of the Iraq military.
- There should have been very little cross-national variation between the performance of Iraqi Republican Guard units and Iranian military units after 1986.

III. Political Intervention in the Iranian Military and Its Predicted Impact on Battlefield Effectiveness

What policies did Iran's leaders adopt regarding their military's promotion patterns, training regimens, command arrangements, and information management? What kinds of outcomes should these policies have produced in terms of battlefield effectiveness, if the theory presented in Chapter 1 is correct? How do these predicted results differ from what we would expect to see if forms of political intervention were irrelevant to explaining battlefield effectiveness, or if other variables were more important?

Iran's revolutionary leaders relied entirely on worst practices in political intervention. They promoted officers based on political and religious credentials; they limited training; they established convoluted and fractured command arrangements; and they restricted horizontal communication within the military and used their intelligence apparatus primarily to spy on their own population and the military itself. Despite the threat of Iraqi invasion and occupation, leaders of the Islamic Republic essentially never budged from the belief that their greatest enemies were internal rather than external. As reflected in the slogan "Revolution Before Victory," counter-revolution, popular uprisings, and coups all remained bigger concerns than combating external attack.¹⁸³

Indeed, in a striking example of the highly contingent relationship between leaders' threat perceptions and their actions with respect to political intervention, even where Iranian leaders created forces that they considered more politically reliable—such as the Revolutionary Guards—they still never adopted best practices toward those units. This stance sets them apart from the Iraqis and the South Vietnamese, whose leaders at least seemed to understand that there were real tradeoffs involved in differing forms of political intervention and who displayed some attempts, however belated or inadequate, to vary practices across different parts of their armies.

It is important to acknowledge that Iran under the Shah had hardly been subject to best practices, either. The Shah intervened intensely and frequently in most major military activities, and in ways that veered largely toward worst practices, as will be discussed below. Although Khomeini constantly emphasized his break with the past, when it came to running his military there were more continuities than admitted.¹⁸⁴ That said, the evidence shows that under the Shah there were at least better practices in place with respect to training, largely due to the alliance with the Americans. This difference was subtle, perhaps more subtle than the theory from Chapter 1 can fully capture, but it does suggest that there should have been a further deterioration in Iranian military effectiveness as the revolution was consolidated and the final traces of the Shah's policies dissolved.

¹⁸³ Chubin and Tripp, *Iran and Iraq*, p. 37.

¹⁸⁴ Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 196, 208-9; and Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 41. On more general continuities between the two regimes, see Eva Patricia Rakel, *Power, Islam, and Political Elite in Iran: a Study on the Iranian Political Elite from Khomeini to Ahmadinejad* (Boston: Brill, 2009), p. xxiv.

Indeed, if the political intervention explanation is correct, Iranian battlefield performance should generally have been quite poor, but especially so as the war went on and the country's revolutionary leaders deepened their imposition of worst practices on the regular forces and undid any lingering benefits of the training that had occurred under the Shah. From the outset, however, newly constituted Iranian revolutionary forces should have displayed little cohesion, no tactical proficiency, and no ability to conduct complex operations.

Crucially, as mentioned earlier, the variables emphasized in existing theories suggest that Iranian battlefield performance should have been essentially static throughout the war and generally better than Iraq's. Because Iran's level of wealth, population size, regime type, national stakes, culture, and level of military autonomy did not vary significantly, there should not have been much of a difference between the performance of legacy units from the Shah's army and revolutionary units formed after his overthrow. Furthermore, Iran's superior wealth, larger population, lower degree of autocracy, and Persian culture all should have provided significant advantages over Iraq on the battlefield.

In fact, the evidence suggests that Iranian battlefield effectiveness varied more and was generally worse than existing theories would predict. What successes its military did have largely reflected a lag effect from the practices used by the Shah, and once the revolution had fully exerted its influence, the Iranian fighting power hinted at in 1981-2 vanished.

To be sure, Iran's subsequent "human wave" attacks enabled it to stalemate Iraq during the period 1982-1986, and the revolutionary forces that executed these operations did reflect a surprising level of ideologically motivated cohesion not predicted by the political intervention theory. But as we will see, the Iranian experience actually underscores the difference between cohesion and battlefield effectiveness, showing that the former is a necessary but not sufficient condition of the latter. Despite the eagerness of Iranian troops to fight and die, political leaders' imposition of worst practices prevented this asset from ever evolving into consistent tactical proficiency or the ability to sustain complex operations.

To examine these claims, the section below briefly reviews the basic structure and history of the Iranian armed forces. Then it examines the nature of political intervention in the Iranian military in the four areas of interest, both before and after the Iranian revolution. The questions used to code the independent variable are listed in Chapter 1. In each of the four areas—promotions, training, command, and information—I outline the general policies that Iranian leaders adopted, while also exploring possible exceptions to these policies. I conclude with summary predictions about how the Iranian military should have performed in battle if my theory is right or wrong, and if the other theories are right or wrong.

Background on Iran and Its Military

Iranians are sometimes described as tending toward paranoia about enemies both foreign and domestic, but the country's history reveals that these fears are grounded in a very real experience of external interference and internal instability. The military has been a central focus of political contestation throughout the existence of modern Iran, serving as both a source of political power and a constant threat to it.

After being invaded by both Britain and Russia, Iran ended World War I as a British protectorate. Fearing instability and Soviet influence after the withdrawal of British troops, Britain supported a 1921 coup led by a young colonel, Reza Khan, who overthrew the last ruler of the Qajar dynasty and in 1925 established Pahlavi rule. Although Reza Shah Pahlavi wore a monarch's crown, his regime was better characterized as a military dictatorship in which the army served as "the keystone of his authority and the focal point around which he

planned to raise the Iranian nation.”¹⁸⁵ Seeing himself as a modernizer in the mold of Ataturk and Mussolini, the Shah enlarged the Iranian army, now called the Artesh, in order to assert central authority over Iran’s many tribes and to undermine the power of Iranian clergy.¹⁸⁶ At the same time, rumors of coup plotting were frequent, and the Shah was careful to promote only those military officers whom he personally knew to be loyal.¹⁸⁷

During World War II, Iran’s good relations with Nazi Germany and ability to block—or provide—a potential Allied supply corridor to the Soviet Union led to a repeat of the World War I invasions. British and Soviet forces again swept through large swaths of the country. Seeing that the Artesh could not hold up against these foreign armies, the Shah accepted Allied terms in August 1941 and abdicated in favor of his 22 year-old son, Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, who took the throne in September.¹⁸⁸

The years after the war brought turmoil to Iran. The young Shah faced growing opposition from both the communist Tudeh party and the Nationalist Front, led by Mohammed Mossadeq, who became the country’s prime minister in 1951. Mossadeq’s growing political popularity eventually forced the Shah to give him control of the war ministry, a position from which Mossadeq immediately began to reduce the military’s size and purge it of the Shah’s supporters.¹⁸⁹

Army officers responded by conspiring to remove Mossadeq. Given Mossadeq’s decision to nationalize Iranian oil—a threat to British profits, which themselves had been one of the main rallying cries of the Nationalist Front—British intelligence soon joined the plotting, as did the Central Intelligence Agency. The result was a 1953 coup in which the army carefully orchestrated Mossadeq’s ouster and restored to the Shah wide-ranging powers more akin to those his father had enjoyed. Over the next several years, the CIA also assisted the Shah in establishing an internal intelligence organization, eventually known as the SAVAK, which assisted in further consolidating the Shah’s rule and ridding the Iranian armed forces of Tudeh supporters.¹⁹⁰

His power thus fortified against threats from the nationalist and communist camps, the Shah spent the next 25 years building the Iranian military into the largest and best-equipped force in the Middle East.¹⁹¹ With extensive aid from the United States, the Shah developed the military as the key pillar of his authority.¹⁹² Keenly aware that both he and his father had come to power through coups, the Shah lavished the officer corps with pay and perks.¹⁹³

During the 1960s and 70s, the military’s role was primarily internal, focused on implementing the Shah’s reform and modernization programs and quelling opposition.¹⁹⁴ Under the Shah, “senior officers were assigned to run provinces, important government

¹⁸⁵ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 134.

¹⁸⁶ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 139; and Sepehr Zabih, *The Iranian Military in Revolution and War* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 3.

¹⁸⁷ Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 149-50.

¹⁸⁸ Ward, *Immortal*, chapter 6.

¹⁸⁹ Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 186-7.

¹⁹⁰ Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 188-191.

¹⁹¹ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 180.

¹⁹² Ward, *Immortal*, p. 202; and Nikola Schahgaldian, *The Iranian Military Under the Islamic Republic* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 1987), p. 13.

¹⁹³ Mark Roberts, *Khomeini’s Incorporation of the Iranian Military*, McNair Paper 48 (Washington, DC: National Defense University, January 1996), p. 6.

¹⁹⁴ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 202; and Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, p. 13.

ministries and large state enterprises, particularly major industrial installations.”¹⁹⁵ Even the last major expeditionary operation mounted by the Artesh, a campaign to help the Sultan of Oman defeat an insurgency 1973, reflected a military that had evolved to perform mostly internal tasks related to state-building or regime protection, rather than to combat external, state-based threats in a conventional war.¹⁹⁶ Nevertheless, the Shah also expressed great worries about external threats to his country, ranging from the Soviets to the Iraqi Kurds to the Egyptians.¹⁹⁷

By 1977, the annual Iranian defense budget had grown to nearly \$9.4 billion.¹⁹⁸ The Artesh now consisted of three armored divisions, three infantry divisions, and four independent brigades (one each of armor, infantry, airborne, and special forces).¹⁹⁹ These forces provided 240,000 active duty men available for combat, in addition to as many as 400,000 men in the reserve.²⁰⁰ Roughly 45,000 Americans also lived in Iran to provide various types of advice and support to these forces.²⁰¹

IRANIAN FORCE STRUCTURE²⁰²		
	1980	1986
Regular army (Artesh)	150,000 3 armored divisions 3 infantry divisions 4 independent brigades 4 air defense battalions	305,000 3 mechanized divisions 7 infantry divisions 1 special forces division 1 airborne brigade Add'l armor brigades Add'l infantry brigades 12 air defense battalions
Revolutionary Guard and militia forces (Pasdaran and Basij)	75,000	350,000 8 divisions Add'l indep. brigades Add'l air, naval assets >300 Basij battalions
Air Force	70,000	35,000
Navy	20,000	14,500
Total active	240,000	704,500
Reserves	400,000	350,000

The year 1978 shattered this equilibrium, however, as a diverse series of popular grievances with the Shah lead to violent uprisings across the country. Exiled Shiite cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini skillfully capitalized on the citizenry’s discontent with enforced secularism, economic inequality, and dependence on the Americans. He also

¹⁹⁵ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 202.

¹⁹⁶ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 203.

¹⁹⁷ “The Evolution of the U.S.-Iranian Relationship,” State Department Report, January 29, 1980, pp. 37-8, 42, 50, available through the Digital National Security Archive, item number IR03556.

¹⁹⁸ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 194.

¹⁹⁹ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 194.

²⁰⁰ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 192.

²⁰¹ “Evolution of the...,” p. 54.

²⁰² All data taken from “The Middle East and North Africa,” *The Military Balance*, (1980), p. 42; and “The Middle East and North Africa,” *The Military Balance*, (1986), pp. 96-7.

cleverly appealed to the military not to defend the Shah's regime, sparking a series of desertions and mutinies. For his part, the Shah proved unwilling to order the sort of harsh crackdown that might have saved his regime, and, indeed, somehow the military had never been specifically trained to put down riots or control crowds.²⁰³ In January 1979, the Shah fled the country.

Khomeini touched down in Tehran two weeks later, and within a matter of days what remained of the Iranian military had returned to its barracks.²⁰⁴ The revolutionaries had clearly triumphed, but the diverse anti-Shah coalition displayed little consensus on what should replace him. Secular nationalists, liberals, leftists, communists, and various Islamists all had different ideas about the shape of the new order.²⁰⁵ Between February and November 1979, Khomeini began to systematically neutralize other centers of power in post-revolutionary Iran. As Zabih has observed, "Khomeini, who had labored strenuously to keep them together as long as he needed their aggregate strength, now turned against them. To do so he applied an old Persian proverb: 'if you want to smash a bunch of sticks, don't do it in one blow. Break them one by one.'"²⁰⁶

Khomeini started by pressuring the new prime minister, Mehdi Bazargan, into accepting members of the clerically-dominated Islamic Republic Party (IRP) into his administration.²⁰⁷ These members then lent further support to the armed groups known as the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, or Pasdaran, springing up around the country in support of Khomeini. During 1979 the country disintegrated into a virtual civil war as the Guards fought against their former allies, especially the Tudeh and the Marxist movements such as the Fedayeen e-Khalq and Mujahedeen e-Khalq (MEK).²⁰⁸ According to Ward, the Fedayeen and MEK at the time "had between fifteen thousand and twenty thousand armed guerrillas, while the Tudeh Party had about seven thousand armed men and women in Tehran alone. Militant Islamic groups aided by cadres of Lebanese Shia and Palestinians had nearly twenty thousand fighters, while another twenty thousand or more armed Iranians were in the streets after the military's armories were looted."²⁰⁹ The Guards also put down ethnic revolts during this period by nearly all the major non-Persian groups in Iran, including the Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, Baluchs, and Azeris.²¹⁰

November 1979 then brought what some have called "the second Islamic revolution" or the "clerical coup d'état."²¹¹ Angered by news of a meeting between Bazargan and U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, Iranian students—probably with direction from the Guards—stormed the American embassy and took hostages in protest. Bazargan resigned, and his government fell.²¹² Khomeini supporters then quickly pushed through constitutional changes granting the ayatollah "absolute power" under the concept of

²⁰³ Ward, *Immortal*, ch. 8.

²⁰⁴ Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 216-224.

²⁰⁵ Afshon Ostovar, "Guardians of the Islamic Revolution: Ideology, Politics, and the Development of Military Power (1979-2009)," Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of History, University of Michigan, 2009, p. 50; and Ward, *Immortal*, p. 222.

²⁰⁶ David Menashri, *Iran: a Decade of War and Revolution* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1990), p. 10.

²⁰⁷ Ostovar, "Guardians," p. 72.

²⁰⁸ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 211; and Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 28.

²⁰⁹ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 226.

²¹⁰ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 26; and Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 233-4.

²¹¹ Ostovar, "Guardians," p. 75.

²¹² Ostovar, "Guardians," p. 75; and Reza Kahlili, *A Time to Betray* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), pp. 52-3.

guardianship, also known as clerical rule. He was now the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and the Guards as well.²¹³

January 1980 brought the election of a moderate, secular intellectual, Abol Hasan Bani Sadr, as president. Having become allies during their anti-Shah days in France, Khomeini backed Bani Sadr and also delegated to him the responsibilities of commanding the military, including the Guards. But the Guards soon rejected Bani Sadr's authority, and, as had been the case with Bazargan, the gulf between Bani Sadr and the radical clerics who supported Khomeini grew too great. Bani Sadr was dismissed in June 1981.²¹⁴ With this step, the Khomeini faction was no longer just a faction; it had transformed into a juggernaut in full control of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the state.²¹⁵

Khomeini had recognized early on that gaining a monopoly on the use of force would be essential to consolidating the Islamic regime. In particular, he had shown immediate concern in the spring of 1979 about the threat posed to the revolution by the professional military.²¹⁶ Although the Artesh's return to the barracks had been instrumental in the Shah's demise, it was not exactly a hotbed of support for the new clerical regime.²¹⁷ Schahgaldian, who interviewed dozens of exiled Iranian officers in the 1980s, notes, "From the very beginning of the Islamic regime, the ruling clerics were intensely aware of the potential threat that the Shah's military posed to their own political survival."²¹⁸ Guard units had been immediately stationed at the exits to Artesh garrisons, ensuring that these units did not move without permission from Khomeini.²¹⁹ These fears probably only worsened as the regime learned of six coup plots in the first half of 1980 alone.²²⁰

Against this sort of backdrop, it is easy to understand why Khomeini had ordered the establishment of the aforementioned Revolutionary Guard in May 1979. This force grew from 30,000 in 1980 to more than a quarter of a million during the war.²²¹ The Guard also helped oversee volunteer militias of young Iranians known as the Basij, who already numbered 75,000 during 1979-80 and would eventually swell to a size of 200,000 at the height of the war.²²² Both of these forces helped ensure that Khomeini had at his disposal a large coercive apparatus committed to the ideals of the revolution.

Crucially, however, Khomeini formed this apparatus with the destruction of domestic enemies in mind. Indeed, anti-regime violence continued in Iran, peaking in a spectacular attack on IRP headquarters in June 1981, followed by the assassination of the president and prime minister in August.²²³ The regime subsequently admitted to more than 2,000 executions of opposition members between June and September. Outside experts suggested the actual number could have been more than 50 percent higher.²²⁴

After this major crackdown, violence against the regime lessened considerably.²²⁵ By 1982, for example, the U.S. State Department described the regime as "in firm control of

²¹³ Ostovar, "Guardians," p. 75.

²¹⁴ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 228; and Menashri, *Iran*, p. 217.

²¹⁵ Hiro, *Longest War*, p. 52; and Menashri, *Iran*, p. 219.

²¹⁶ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 101.

²¹⁷ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 225.

²¹⁸ Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, p. 28.

²¹⁹ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 227.

²²⁰ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 238.

²²¹ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 226.

²²² Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 192.

²²³ Menashri, *Iran*, p. 11; and Gause, *International Relations*, p. 73.

²²⁴ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 117.

²²⁵ Menashri, *Iran*, p. 11.

Iran with no meaningful opposition within the country.”²²⁶ The Defense Intelligence Agency made a similar assessment, noting, “Politically, the Khomeini regime has defeated most of its immediate internal opponents and continues to consolidate control.”²²⁷ Although an additional coup plot was discovered in April 1982, and 1983-4 brought further crackdowns on the Tudeh, in general the regime had stabilized.²²⁸

To the extent that Iran’s leaders considered Iraq a threat prior to the start of the war, this fear had meaning largely within the context of Iran’s own domestic battles. For example, while still in office Bani-Sadr wrote the UN Secretary-General that “from the very beginning of our revolutionary victory..., Iraq has been violating the terms of the Algiers Agreement of 1975, by sending Iraqi agents and armed units across our western and southwestern borders into the provinces of Khuzestan and Kurdistan for the purposes of committing acts of sabotage and assisting counter-revolutionary groups.... Iraq has been a haven for the remnants of the previous regime and other reactionary and criminal elements involved in propagandistic and terroristic activities against the Islamic Republic of Iran.”²²⁹

To be sure, these suspicions were not without merit. As mentioned, Saddam had given refuge to the Shah’s last prime minister and last army commander, who were now broadcasting attacks on Khomeini from Iraq.²³⁰ Iraq also supported anti-Khomeini coup efforts, including the most serious, the Nojeh plot in July 1980.²³¹ But Iraq was perceived as a threat not because of its conventional military capabilities but because of its potential counter-revolutionary political activities inside Iran. Similarly, as Iran expanded the Revolutionary Guards into a force of several hundred thousand by August 1981, it did so primarily with the goals of providing a counterweight to the regular military and protecting the regime from internal threats.²³² It was this evolving force that faced the Iraqis on the battlefield starting in September 1980.

1. Promotion patterns

The idea of officer promotion based on merit rather than political ties was a relatively foreign one in Iran, even under the Shah. Although it managed to acquire an impressive arsenal of modern weapons, the Artesh had been far from a truly professional military in terms of how it selected and advanced its leaders. The Shah exerted his personal control over all promotions at the level of colonel and above to ensure that the armed forces would be good at governance and regime protection, and unlikely to foment coups or stir up other dissent against him.²³³ As Ward argues, “The original sin of the Shah’s armed forces was that political considerations took first priority in managing the officer corps, even if this meant removing capable officers or promoting mediocre ones loyal to the court.”²³⁴ The Shah did not simply hire cronies—he actively fired anyone who appeared competent enough

²²⁶ Discussion Paper, State Department, “Implications for U.S. Interests and Policy of Iranian Invasion of Southern Iraq,” July 14, 1982, available at the National Security Archive, the George Washington University, Washington, DC.

²²⁷ Intelligence Appraisal, “Iran-Iraq,” p. 1.

²²⁸ Menashri, *Iran*, pp. 239, 281-2.

²²⁹ Letter, Islamic Republic of Iran, Albolhassan Bani-Sadr to Kurt Waldheim, October 1, 1980, available at the National Security Archive, the George Washington University, Washington, DC.

²³⁰ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 28.

²³¹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 29; and Menashri, *Iran*, p. 143.

²³² Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 122; and Zabih, *Iranian Military*, pp. 130, 152-3.

²³³ Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 202, 209; and Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, pp. vi, 14.

²³⁴ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 209.

to threaten him. To put it bluntly, “Muhammad Reza quashed ambitious military men.”²³⁵ Generals who demonstrated too much ambition or appeared to be a threat to the regime could expect a far-away diplomatic posting, or worse.²³⁶

This was the so-called professional military that Iran’s new leaders inherited in 1979—already an officer corps consisting of perhaps less than stellar human capital. Fearing the military as a possible source of counter-revolutionary sentiment, Khomeini further decimated the officer corps by initiating a massive wave of purges, perhaps comparable only to those by Stalin on the eve of World War II. Schahgaldian reports that “by the end of 1979 almost all of the hardline pro-Shah officers and those who had been known for their pro-American views were eliminated, regardless of rank, in one way or the other. These reportedly included all of the 14 army division commanders, the eight commanders of the independent army and army air command brigades, and all the military governors.”²³⁷ Starting in 1980, the purges reached into the lower ranks, and “membership with any political group not in favor of the newly instituted clerical regime came to be regarded as a sufficient ground for purge.”²³⁸ According to Ward, extensive purges, even below the rank of major, continued throughout the first half of the 1980s.²³⁹ “The Iranian officer corps may have lost as much as 40 percent of its strength by the eve of the war with Iraq,” he estimates.²⁴⁰

Although Khomeini sought to strip the Artesh of its imperial taint, in a certain sense his policies reflected continuity rather than disjuncture with the forms of political intervention used by the Shah. The definition of political reliability shifted—from loyalty to the Shah to loyalty to the clerical regime—yet it remained a far more important criterion than demonstrated military competence for selection and advancement in the officer corps. The result, as under the Shah, was a climate of distrust and anxiety in the officer corps, and a generally poor human base for handling the challenges of war.²⁴¹

In the new Islamic Republic, officers gained their promotions primarily through family ties to the clergy, who were able to manipulate promotion and selection even of very senior officers.²⁴² In many instances captains and lieutenants were promoted to fill senior billets recently vacated by disfavored colonels and generals: “officials chose to promote junior officers who were not the most capable men available, but those of whose political loyalty they were certain.”²⁴³ The result was an officer corps likely to shore up the new regime but even more poorly situated than its predecessor to handle the challenge of a conventional war against another state.

There is some evidence that these worst practices may have abated slightly as the war went on. Relations between the Artesh and the Pasdaran did improve a bit, and the pace of purges slowed somewhat after 1982.²⁴⁴ Many former officers were called up to service on the front, in some cases from prison.²⁴⁵ There was also evidence that the regime came to value

²³⁵ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 209.

²³⁶ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 209.

²³⁷ Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, p. 21.

²³⁸ Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, p. 22.

²³⁹ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 229.

²⁴⁰ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 229. For more background on the purges, see Zabih, *Iranian Military*, chapter 5.

²⁴¹ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 229; and Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, p. 49.

²⁴² Ward, *Immortal*, p. 228; and Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, pp. vi, 34.

²⁴³ Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, p. 44.

²⁴⁴ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 255.

²⁴⁵ Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, p. 25; and Zabih, *Iranian Military*, pp. 16-17.

the role of competence in making some leadership decisions after 1983.²⁴⁶ There is no evidence, however, of any wholesale, systematic changes in promotion practices. Furthermore, it is important to note that restoring officers from the Shah's military hardly constituted best practices, given the manner in which the Shah had intervened regarding the selection and promotion of officers.

2. *Training regimens*

Under the Shah, military training had at least purported to prepare the armed forces for combat, although the Shah's methods had been far from best practices. Extensive and realistic training at the small- and large-unit levels was not common in the Shah's army, for example.²⁴⁷ The training that did occur tended to consist of set-piece exercises organized by the United States.²⁴⁸ Not wishing to risk mistakes or raise suspicions," Ward writes, "unit commanders showed a marked lack of interest in collective training or in developing their abilities to handle larger combined forces."²⁴⁹

Clearly, training under the Shah was not ideal, but it did exist. After the revolution, even the limited military school system all but collapsed.²⁵⁰ Ward argues, "The clerics were content to allow logistical problems to fester while they focused on the military's political reliability.... Advanced training came to nearly a complete halt."²⁵¹ The purges also caused enormous turnover in the institutions responsible for training, such as they were, and dramatically lowered the standards of instruction. Schahgaldian reported based on his interviews with exiled military officers that "in general, the professional military has become much more lenient both in admission and graduation requirements of most training centers.... They lowered the professional competence of the officer corps."²⁵² Even Iraqi intelligence noted in 1980 that many Iranian units had "not conducted any exercises since the fall of the Shah."²⁵³

To the extent that the new regime did prepare soldiers for the battlefield, the lessons tended to consist of ideological indoctrination rather than realistic, live-fire opportunities to develop and hone actual military skills.²⁵⁴ The military academy now devoted more than a third of all courses to an ideological and political curriculum and was designated as "the arena where military and Islamic tenets are integrated."²⁵⁵ Khomeini's new Political-Ideological Directorate (PID) assigned clerics from the joint staff down to the platoon level to provide ideological and political education, write new training materials, hold daily prayers, and enforce Islamic standards of behavior.²⁵⁶

In short, Khomeini was still more concerned that soldiers accept the ideas needed to consolidate the revolution than that they develop the tactical and operational abilities needed to defend against the Iraqis.²⁵⁷ To be sure, he probably considered the two to be related:

²⁴⁶ Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, p. 44.

²⁴⁷ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 206-7.

²⁴⁸ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 60.

²⁴⁹ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 206.

²⁵⁰ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 42.

²⁵¹ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 245.

²⁵² Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, p. 43.

²⁵³ "Intelligence report about Iran, issued by the General Military Intelligence Directorate (GMID) in 1980," CRRC Number SH-GMID-D-000-842, January 1980-June 1980, pp. 54-9.

²⁵⁴ Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 228, 245.

²⁵⁵ Zabih, *Iranian Military*, pp. 145-6.

²⁵⁶ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 230; Zabih, *Iranian Military*, pp. 143-4.

²⁵⁷ Zabih, *Iranian Military*, p. 15.

soldiers who believed in the ideals of the revolution would also probably be more motivated to evict the “infidel” regime of Saddam Hussein and “liberate” those Shias oppressed under his rule. But clearly, Iran prioritized ideological indoctrination over even very basic training.

Many soldiers reportedly received only a few weeks of instruction of any type.²⁵⁸ This reality appears to have been confirmed by Iraqi interrogations of Iranian prisoners of war.²⁵⁹ Basij training in particular was nominal, usually consisting only of very basic small arms training and perhaps a few hours of exercises in penetrating defensive obstacles.²⁶⁰ Iran did not restore the training systems that had existed under the Shah and conducted little refresher training.²⁶¹

Furthermore, large segments of the Guard were focused on local policing and enforcement of Islamic laws and regulation, the defense of the regime against counterrevolutionary elements, the protection of government buildings and installations, the collection of internal intelligence, the sponsoring of pro-regime rallies, publication of pro-regime literature, and other mobilization of the population in support of the regime.²⁶² Thus to the extent that training did occur, its content was geared toward duties unlikely to have prepared Iranian soldiers for fighting a conventional war against an opposing land army. Even six years into the war, a senior Iranian minister clearly drew this distinction, noting, “The mission of the Guards of the Revolution is to protect the Islamic revolution, which may be from threats other than those across the frontiers.”²⁶³

3. *Command arrangements*

Iran also adopted worst practices regarding command arrangements. Even under the Shah, Iranian command arrangements had been highly centralized and intentionally fractured, in order to maximize the Shah’s personal control of the armed forces. As one study notes, “The Shah ensured loyalty to himself by applying the divide-and-rule principle among his generals, accomplished by exacerbating intense personal rivalries among his generals and placing ‘personal enemies alternately in the chain of command’ to preclude the possibility of a coup.”²⁶⁴

Additionally, the Shah “frequently shuffled commanders to ensure that they could not form power bases or enduring alliances. Under his micromanagement, no regular chain of command developed. Every general viewed himself as responsible to no one other than the Shah, and the field commanders regularly bypassed the SDC [Supreme Defense Council] and their service chiefs to contact Muhammad Reza.”²⁶⁵ The entire system was so dependent on the personal authority of the Shah that his direct permission was required for any general to visit Tehran.²⁶⁶

Scholars have noted that, ironically, this command structure played a role in the revolution itself. According to Ward, “Muhammad Reza could not break his habit of using rivalry and resentments among his senior commanders to prevent the rise of a potential

²⁵⁸ Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 246; and Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 55.

²⁵⁹ “General Military Intelligence Directorate correspondence about the Iranian military sites and plans during the Iraq-Iran War,” CRRC Number SH-GMID-D-000-266, April 1-14, 1987, p. 13.

²⁶⁰ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 94.

²⁶¹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 55-6.

²⁶² Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, p. 75.

²⁶³ Chubin and Tripp, *Iran and Iraq*, pp. 44.

²⁶⁴ Roberts, *Khomeini’s Incorporation*, p. 7.

²⁶⁵ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 202-9.

²⁶⁶ Zabih, *Iranian Military* p. 5.

alternative to his rule. The result was a senior command structure unable to coordinate action to stop the revolution.”²⁶⁷ Roberts has made a similar observation, noting that because “the Shah insisted that the heads of the armed forces heads deal with him directly on all matters and prohibited direct contact among service chiefs,” the military was essentially unable to coordinate effective action in the face of the revolutionaries.²⁶⁸ Hence although it is true that the Iranian revolution later purged individuals loyal to the Shah, in some sense the new regime also perpetuated the underlying command structure the Shah had developed: overlapping chains of command reporting directly to political leaders. Now these leaders were all clerics, but the resemblance was visible.

Certainly, centralized control broke down to a certain extent in the period immediately surrounding the revolution; many military units acted independently with little direction from Tehran.²⁶⁹ Nevertheless, Khomeini was quick to re-assert his personal direction over the military by inserting mullahs throughout the command structures of both the Pasdaran and the Artesh.²⁷⁰ According to Ward, “Clerical supervision was arranged for all Pasdaran units down to the local level.”²⁷¹ During 1980-81, the revolutionary regime was so worried that Bani-Sadr was trying to isolate the regular army from Islamic influences that the Supreme Defense Council, dominated by clerics, insisted that religious commissars be attached to all Artesh units. Even when Bani-Sadr fled Iran, these commissars—with the power to override the commands of regular army military officers—remained in place.²⁷²

In essence, the mullahs had developed “their own separate chain of command through the various religious commissars in the forces and often exercised a command authority which overrode that of the regular commanders.”²⁷³ It became common for senior commanders “to bypass regular command chains and go directly to leading clerical figures in order to resolve internal military problems.”²⁷⁴ In fact, in what must have been a somewhat awkward observation, given Saddam’s command structure, an Iraqi assessment of Iran noted the damaging effect of these conflicting and confusing chains of command: “the units are driven by committees consisting of three persons that are mostly clergymen. This has left a bad effect on the psychological state of the commanders and leaders.”²⁷⁵

Even more striking than these moves towards centralization in Iran’s command structure was Khomeini’s repeated willingness to fracture the command structure, a pattern rooted in the establishment of the Guard in May 1979.²⁷⁶ The emergence of two parallel militaries, each with its own chain of command, created hostility and tension within the country’s armed forces, hindering coordination.²⁷⁷ Again, an Iraqi assessment picked up on the rivalry, noting, “The relationship between the Guards and the Armed Forces is full of tension. The members of the Guards feel that they are the real power of Al-Khomeini. They behaved improperly with the members of the armed forces and degraded them. This has built grudge [sic] and hatred towards them. The statements of Bani Sadr and the

²⁶⁷ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 218.

²⁶⁸ Roberts, *Khomeini’s Incorporation*, p. 4.

²⁶⁹ Woods et al, *Saddam’s War*, pp. 7-8; and Ostovar, “Guardians,” chapter 3.

²⁷⁰ Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, p. vii.

²⁷¹ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 227.

²⁷² Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 420; and Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, p. 30.

²⁷³ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 67.

²⁷⁴ Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, p. 48.

²⁷⁵ “Intelligence report,” CRRC Number SH-GMID-D-000-842, p. 53.

²⁷⁶ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 226.

²⁷⁷ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 420.

commanders of the guards show the size of the exploitation, the chaos that has spread between their flanks, and the differences between their commanders.”²⁷⁸

Furthermore, Iran’s leaders wasted repeated opportunities to rectify the problem and unify their fractured armed forces. A joint military command between the army and the Guard was announced as early as 1982, but real integration never happened, often because of interference from senior mullahs.²⁷⁹ Iran’s senior leaders simply did not wish to resolve the division between the regular army and the Guards.²⁸⁰ The two entities even exchanged some officers, but tensions remained high. According to Cordesman and Wagner, “reports of clashes between clerics, officers of the regular forces, and officers of the Revolutionary Guards continued through 1988.”²⁸¹ The two organizations maintained separate budgets, recruiting systems, and intelligence arms as well.²⁸²

While there is some evidence that the mullahs’ interference in command decisions lessened as the war went on, and that some of the tension between the regular forces and the Guard subsided, these developments seem to have been limited.²⁸³ As a general matter, Iranian leaders persisted in worst practices in command arrangements, requiring centralized religious approval for most military decisions and maintaining military institutions that were deliberately and formally separated from one another.

4. *Information management*

As with the other areas of military activity, the Shah had not developed good practices in information management. Rather than optimize his officers’ ability to gain, share, and use information in wartime, the Shah had developed an elaborate, internally directed intelligence apparatus to report to him on his own forces. According to Ward, the Shah “used multiple organizations, including SAVAK, his own secret intelligence bureau, and military intelligence, to watch the armed forces and each other, ensuring that officers could not confidently make alliances with each other or regime opponents.”²⁸⁴

The Shah also severely restricted horizontal communication among his officers.²⁸⁵ “For example,” according to Schahgaldian, “the three service chiefs, the commanders of the national police force and gendarmerie, and the directors of various security and intelligence organizations all reported directly to the monarch and received orders from him and were permitted to communicate with one another only through the Shah or his own personal staff.”²⁸⁶ While these measures lessened the likelihood of a coup against the Shah, they also all but eliminated the ability of different units within the military to communicate with one another. Additionally, they created a political-military climate characterized by distrust, suspicion, and hesitation on the part of the officer corps to take any action absent direct approval from the Shah.²⁸⁷

²⁷⁸ “Intelligence report,” CRRC Number SH-GMID-D-000-842, pp. 42-3.

²⁷⁹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 420.

²⁸⁰ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 324.

²⁸¹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 420.

²⁸² Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 431.

²⁸³ Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, pp. vii, 31; Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 169; Zabih, *Iranian Military*, p. 213; and Ward, *Immortal*, p. 255.

²⁸⁴ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 209; and Zabih, *Iranian Military*, p. 8.

²⁸⁵ Roberts, *Khomeini’s Incorporation*, p. 6.

²⁸⁶ Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, p. 14.

²⁸⁷ Roberts, *Khomeini’s Incorporation*, p. 6.

Khomeini continued the spirit if not the letter of many of these policies, establishing multiple new organizations with overlapping domestic spying responsibilities. These agencies were intended “partly to keep watch over the regular military and potential opposition groups and partly to keep watch over each other.”²⁸⁸ In this way, Ward argues, the regime was able to generate “a large number of overlapping control mechanisms” that produced multiple independent streams of information about any potential threats in either the regular military or Iranian society writ large.²⁸⁹ Military officers, NCOs, and civilian defense employees could all expect to be monitored closely by a network of clerical spies.²⁹⁰ The same PID representatives who oversaw ideological indoctrination in every unit also “spied on the soldiers and served as snitches.”²⁹¹ In general, the system was set up to manage information about activities inside Iran—not to gather intelligence on state opponents such as Iraq.²⁹²

Additionally, Khomeini continued the Shah’s strict limits on horizontal communication among officers.²⁹³ By and large, officers simply were not allowed to discuss military matters, or anything else, outside politically approved channels.²⁹⁴ For the new government in Tehran, the risk of counter-revolutionary plotting seemed too great. Schahgaldian reported based on his interviews with escaped officers, “It is believed that three or more senior or middle-level officers from different branches or units cannot meet in a group and hope to remain unreported.”²⁹⁵

In sum, Iran’s leaders adopted worst practices with respect to information management, echoing those they adopted with respect to promotions, training, and command. Broadly speaking, Iran’s revolutionary practices represented little departure from the overall practices used by the Shah, with the exception of those governing training. These policies make it possible to generate predictions about the likely battlefield effectiveness of the Iranian military.

Predictions If the Political Intervention Explanation Is Right: Confirming Evidence

- Iranian revolutionary units, notably the Pasdaran and Basij, should have displayed virtually no battlefield effectiveness—poor cohesion, little tactical proficiency, and no ability to conduct complex operations.
- Iranian regular units should have displayed comparatively better battlefield effectiveness early in the war, reflecting the lingering influence of training practices under the Shah.
- The fighting effectiveness of Iranian regular units should have declined over the course of the war as the revolutionary leaders’ worst practices exerted their full force.

Predictions If the Political Intervention Explanation Is Wrong: Disconfirming Evidence

- If Iranian revolutionary units displayed high levels of battlefield effectiveness despite the consistent application of worst practices, this finding would cast significant doubt on the political intervention explanation.

²⁸⁸ Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, p. vii.

²⁸⁹ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 102.

²⁹⁰ Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, p. 32.

²⁹¹ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 230.

²⁹² Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 59.

²⁹³ Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, p. 28.

²⁹⁴ Roberts, *Khomeini’s Incorporation*, p. 41.

²⁹⁵ Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, p. 34.

- If Iranian regular units displayed increasing rather than decreasing levels of battlefield effectiveness over the course of the war, this finding would also cast doubt on the political intervention explanation.

Predictions If the Alternative Explanations Are Right: Additional Disconfirming Evidence

- There should have been very little to no variation over time or across different units of the Iranian military.
- There should have been very little cross-national variation between the performance of Iranian regular units and Iraqi military units in the early years of the war.

IV. Conclusion: Summary and Initial Implications

This chapter has examined the nature of pre-war and intra-war political intervention in the Iranian and Iraqi militaries. The general argument is that for most of the war, leaders in both countries adopted what Chapter 1 identified as worst practices. Broadly speaking, leaders in both regimes promoted officers on the basis of political loyalty and actively selected against competence in the officer corps; they imposed severe restrictions on military training; they adopted highly centralized yet fractured command structures; and they applied restrictions on horizontal and vertical information sharing in the military and hindered political-military communication.

There were, however, two important exceptions to this general trend that provide important analytical leverage for testing the intervention theory against the alternatives. First, the regular Iranian military units that had existed prior to the revolution had been subject to somewhat better training practices than the units formed after the revolution. While the overall nature of the Shah's political intervention practices was quite similar to those of Khomeini, training did constitute a subtle but important area of difference. Under the Shah, training did occur, largely led by Americans. This stands in contrast to the period after the revolution, in which military training broke down almost completely and in which the country's religious leaders began to actively restrict training by the regular forces.

As a result, the theory predicts that there should have been at least somewhat better battlefield effectiveness by the regular forces compared to the revolutionary forces early in the war, and that the effectiveness of the regular forces should have declined over time. In other words, there should have been some lingering effect from the slight better practices in this area dating to the time of the Shah, even though the theory would expect it to disappear as the war went on and the mullahs fully imposed worst practices. Evidence that the regular forces improved over time, that there was no difference between the regular and revolutionary forces at all, or that there was no difference between the Iranian regular forces and the Iraqi forces early in the war, would all cast doubt on the political intervention explanation.

Second, on the Iraqi side, there was also variation, but in the opposite direction. Although he entered the war with worst practices, Saddam shifted away from those forms of intervention around 1986 with respect to his Republican Guard units. As a result, the theory predicts that prior to 1986 Iraq should have displayed little to no cohesion, tactical proficiency, or ability to conduct complex operations. After 1986, however, the performance of the Iraqi Republican Guard units should have begun to improve significantly due to the shifting forms of Saddam's intervention. These units should have demonstrated excellent cohesion, good tactical proficiency, and even the ability to conduct complex operations,

especially as compared to earlier Iraqi performance and to Iranian performance during the same period. By contrast, evidence that Iraqi effectiveness did not improve after these changes, that it improved before they happened, or that Iraqi forces did not perform better than Iranian forces after this shift, would cast doubt on the political intervention explanation and potentially lend weight to the alternative theories.

These predictions will be tested in the next chapter, but even the evidence presented thus far should induce significant skepticism about the structural variables emphasized in existing theories of military effectiveness. The evidence from the Iraqi case, for example, suggests that even within environments of low military autonomy, there are dramatically different ways for political leaders to shape their interventions into the armed forces. Hence the traditional focus on the “level” or “amount” or civilian control may miss much of the variation in political-military relations that actually matters for effectiveness.

The sketch of the Iraqi military presented here also demonstrates that even in Arab, autocratic regimes, significant variation in the nature of political intervention in the military is possible. Another way to put this is that Arab culture, autocracy, and “bad” civil-military relations are not synonymous, interchangeable concepts, but rather distinct variables that can move independently of one another. By the same token, the fact that non-Arab Iran—under both the Shah and revolutionary leadership—adopted forms of political intervention very similar to those used initially in Iraq also casts doubt on the role of culture in pre-determining either civil-military relations or military performance.

Again, none of this is to suggest that structural variables are irrelevant in explaining military performance. Nor does it prove that differences in political intervention actually matter for battlefield effectiveness. The next chapter turns to these questions, examining a series of battles between Iran and Iraq during the period 1980-1988 in order to adjudicate amongst the predictions derived from the intervention theory and the competing theories.

CHAPTER 5

Battlefield Effectiveness in Iraq and Iran

The previous chapter examined the nature of political intervention in the militaries of Iraq and Iran. Leaders of both states were generally found to have adopted worst practices, leading to an overall expectation of low battlefield effectiveness relative to the resources and assets each state possessed. Chapter 4 identified two exceptions to this pattern, though. First, regular Iranian military units had been subject to slightly better training practices during the time of the Shah, which revolutionary leaders had not been able to completely dismantle at the outset of the war. Second, in the final two years of the war a dramatic improvement occurred in Saddam Hussein's forms of intervention with respect to the Iraqi Republican Guard units.

If the theory in the first chapter is correct, then, Iranian regular forces should have displayed at least somewhat better effectiveness in the early years of the war compared to both Iranian revolutionary units and to Iraqi forces during that time—better unit cohesion, better tactical proficiency, and a better ability to conduct complex operations. This differential should have been subtle, though, as the Shah's overall forms of political intervention were still mostly worst practices, and it should have narrowed as time went on and Iran's revolutionary leaders solidified the complete imposition of worst practices on the regular forces.

Meanwhile, Iraqi battlefield effectiveness should have been quite poor for most of the first six years of the war. After 1986, however, Iraqi Republican Guard units should have demonstrated a significant improvement. Once subjected to best practices, or an arrangement very close to it, these units should have displayed much better cohesion, far stronger tactical proficiency, and a much more impressive ability to conduct complex operations. As discussed earlier, the competing explanations would predict that all of this sub-national variation over time and across different military units in Iraq and Iran should not have occurred and, if anything, they would predict only cross-national variation in the form of Iran out-performing Iraq.

To test the validity of these predictions, this chapter examines battlefield evidence from the Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988. Specifically, it focuses on the following eight major battles or campaigns: the Iraqi invasion and initial battles in Iran from September-November 1980; the Iranian counteroffensives from January 1981-May 1982; the battle for Basra in July 1982 and subsequent battles in 1982-3; the battles for the Howizeh Marshes in 1984-5; the battles for Faw and Mehran in 1986; Iran's Karbala offensives from December 1986-April 1987; the second battle for Faw in April 1988; and the Iraqi final offensives during the spring and summer of 1988.

The chapter focuses on these battles largely for the same reasons the Vietnam battles were chosen. First, the battles offer the best opportunity to isolate the fighting effectiveness of the Iraqi and Iranian forces of interest, with minimal involvement by other actors. Notably, these battles occurred in the central and southern sectors of the border, where there was little Kurdish participation in the fighting. This is important, as Kurdish involvement would likely confound the analysis, given that such forces were relatively autonomous from the national governments of both states and subject to differing forms of political intervention. This is not to say that battles in the north were unimportant or irrelevant, only that they do not offer as much analytical leverage over the questions of interest.

Additionally, notwithstanding the substantial fighting in the north, the war was decided primarily in the other two sectors, making the battles there of great substantive significance. Lastly, this series of battles captures both offensive and defensive operations for both Iran and Iraq involving all of the different types of military units about which the theory generates predictions. As a whole, the group allows the cleanest examination of the predictions in Chapter 4. It makes possible the tracking of all the relevant forces across a complete range of comparable activities, which helps ensure that the values of the dependent variable are not simply the products of some other exogenous factor, such as the type of operation at hand.

SELECTION OF BATTLES AND CAMPAIGNS FOR EXAMINATION		
	On the tactical offense	On the tactical defense
Iraqi General Forces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invasion, 1980 • Mehran, 1986 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counteroffensives, 1981-2 • Khorramshahr, 1982 • Basra and subsequent battles, 1982-3 • Howizeh Marshes, 1984-5 • Faw I, 1986 • Karbala offensives, 1986-7
Iraqi Republican Guard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invasion, 1980 • Faw II, 1988 • Final offensives, 1988 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faw I, 1986
Iranian Regular Army (Artesh)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counteroffensives, 1981-2 • Basra and subsequent battles, 1982-3 • Howizeh Marshes, 1984-5 • Faw I, 1986 • Karbala offensives, 1986-7 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invasion, 1980 • Mehran, 1986 • Faw II, 1988 • Final offensives, 1988
Iranian Revolutionary Forces (Pasdaran/Guard and Basij/Militia)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counteroffensives, 1981-2 • Basra and subsequent battles, 1982-3 • Howizeh Marshes, 1984-5 • Faw I, 1986 • Karbala offensives, 1986-7 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invasion, 1980 • Mehran, 1986 • Faw II, 1988 • Final offensives, 1988

After providing some general background on the war, the chapter examines each of these battles or campaigns in turn. As in the Vietnam comparisons, the chapter first presents the context, the forces involved on each side, and the key events. Then it reviews each side's performance according to the questions established in Chapter 1, enabling a coding of the value of the dependent variable for the actor of interest and an evaluation of the validity of competing predictions. It is important to note that each battle or campaign offers the opportunity to observe at least two readings of the dependent variable, because each battle involves forces from both Iran and Iraq.

The analysis generally confirms the predictions of the theory: worst practices in political intervention were a consistent barrier to full battlefield effectiveness in both countries, while the lingering effects of slightly better practices under the Shah led to comparatively better Iranian regular army performance early in the war, and improvements

in Saddam's political intervention produced improvements in Iraqi Republican Guard effectiveness late in the war.

That said, for much of the war Iranian units, particularly revolutionary forces, were far more cohesive than the political intervention theory would predict. The possible reasons for this cohesion and its theoretical implications are discussed in more depth at the end of the chapter, along with case-specific alternative explanations for each side's battlefield performance. It is worth noting at the outset, however, that although some alternative ideational force was clearly driving Iranian cohesion, this cohesion never evolved into tactical proficiency or the ability to conduct complex operations. The nature of political intervention in the Iranian military continued to prevent full battlefield effectiveness. In fact, Iran's "cohesion," exemplified in its suicidal human wave attacks, ultimately contributed to the collapse of its military.

This discrepancy speaks again to the importance of distinguishing between victory and effectiveness, and between necessary and sufficient components of effectiveness. As will become clear in the discussion below, the outcomes of various battles and campaigns in this war often hinged at least in part on exogenous factors: not only ideational variables, but also weather, technology, terrain, alliances, and so on. Still, by looking closely at the three components of the dependent variable—the tasks each side was or was not able to perform—the influence of varying forms of political intervention is apparent. Indeed, the evidence from the war ultimately lends strong support to the theory presented in Chapter 1.

I. Background: the Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988

The battles examined in this chapter occurred in the context of a much larger war, whose details have been covered elsewhere.¹ Nevertheless, a brief overview is useful for context. As mentioned in Chapter 4, ground combat in the Iran-Iraq War comprised three major phases. The first began with the Iraqi invasion of Iranian Khuzestan in 1980, which encompassed battles for the Iranian cities of Dezful, Abadan, Mehran, and Khorramshahr during September-November 1980. Despite the Iraqi advantage of surprise, the operations generally involved surrounding and besieging outnumbered Iranian defenders. Iran began to marshal its forces for offensive action starting in early 1981 and kicked off a major counteroffensive by September of that year. Gradually Iran regained much of the territory it had lost, conducting a series of offensive operations in Khuzestan into the spring of 1982, including the very large battle of Khorramshahr in April and May.

Summer 1982 marked the beginning of the war's second major phase with the Iranian invasion of Iraq. After nearly succeeding in taking the key southern city of Basra in a large battle in July, the Iranians settled into a pattern of annual offensives, as exemplified in the battles of 1983. The years 1984-5 brought a series of inconclusive struggles for control of the strategic Howizeh Marshes, a large swampy area of the border containing significant oil reserves. Most of the fighting during this period amounted to a grinding war of attrition, living up to Chaim Herzog's characterization of the conflict as a "delicate balance of

¹ Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: the Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Edgar O'Ballance, *The Gulf War* (Washington: Brassey, 1988); Gary Sick, "Trial By Error: Reflections on the Iran-Iraq War," *Middle East Journal*, vol. 43, no. 2 (spring 1989), pp. 230-245; and Anthony Cordesman and Abraham Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War, Vol. II: the Iran-Iraq War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990).

incompetence.”² The one exception was Iran’s surprising conquest of the Faw peninsula, Iraq’s gateway to the Gulf, in February 1986. After this momentary victory, though, Iran continued to launch offensives during the rest of 1986-7 with few gains.

Nineteen eighty-eight saw the dramatic third phase of the war, as the Iraqis returned to the strategic offensive, launching a series of operations to drive the Iranians back across the border. In April, the Iraqis decisively regained control of Faw in a large but rapid battle. The Iraqis followed this success with four more quick offensives during May-July of that year, virtually collapsing the Iranian military and forcing Iran to accept a ceasefire in August 1988.

The analysis below focuses on the ground battles, as these were the arena in which the majority of fighting took place and in which the war was decided. A focus on ground warfare also allows for the most consistent comparison between the Iran-Iraq cases and the Vietnam cases. Still, the war was far from a land-only affair, with both sides attempting to use airpower strategically (for example, to bomb the other’s cities or attack shipping) and tactically (for example, to provide support to ground forces). The Iranians also deployed significant naval forces in an attempt to strangle Iraq’s access to the Gulf. For their part, the Iraqis used chemical weapons early and often, eventually mounting them on long-range missiles targeted at Iranian population centers. The Iranians also engaged in some missile attacks on Iraqi cities.³

Third parties did participate in the war. In addition to the Kurdish involvement on both sides of the conflict, the United States eventually deployed significant naval forces to keep shipping open in the Gulf. Indeed, the war’s end probably came a bit more expeditiously because the United States trounced the Iranian navy in an apparently unrelated skirmish the very day after the Iraqis retook Faw in 1988.⁴ Overall, however, most of the war was fought on the ground by the armies of Iran and Iraq, and it is on these interactions that the chapter focuses.

II. The Iraqi Invasion: September-November 1980

The Iraqi invasion of Iran and Iran’s initial defense of its territory offer an important opportunity to observe the battlefield effectiveness of both states in their first large-scale interaction. In addition to providing a chance to observe both countries’ cohesion and tactical proficiency, the campaign shows the Iraqi military attempting to conduct offensive complex operations. The Iraqi campaign plan envisioned a series of lightning strikes against key Iranian targets across the border and was to have relied on a combined arms force of armor, artillery, infantry, and some airpower.

As will be discussed below, the invasion and defense against it provide some initial confirmation for the theory. Despite having a significant advantage in manpower and catching the Iranians almost completely by surprise, the Iraqis’ advance was slow, clumsy, and very costly in terms of casualties and equipment losses. While the Iraqis were minimally

² Chaim Hertzog, “A Military-Strategic Overview,” in *The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), pp. 255.

³ Shahram Chubin, “Iran and the War: from Stalemate to Ceasefire,” in *The Gulf War: Regional and International Dimensions*, eds. Hanns W. Maull and Otto Pick (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), p. 12; and Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 380.

⁴ Kenneth Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), p. 228.

cohesive, they displayed serious tactical shortcomings and little competence in complex operations.

The Iranians did not perform much better. Although both regular and revolutionary forces displayed surprising levels of cohesion, only the regular forces displayed any tactical proficiency, and neither attempted to conduct complex operations. Close examination of battlefield events suggests that both sides were more lucky than good, owing the gains they made more to the mistakes of the other side than to their own performance of key tasks.

The Forces on Each Side

When the war began in September, Iraq's twelve active-duty divisions were deployed at various points along its eastern border: five in the north, near the Kurdish areas; two in the central front, roughly opposite Baghdad; and five in the south opposite Khuzestan, the oil-rich, Arab-populated area of Iran that also offered excellent access to the Gulf. The Iraqi battle plan, such as it was, envisioned an initial Israeli-style air attack followed by four armored thrusts into Iranian territory: one each in the northern and central sectors, and two major multi-division efforts in the southern sector (see map 18).

In addition to its substantial inventory of tanks and other armored vehicles, Iraq had ample artillery and anti-tank guided missiles to assist in the assault.⁵ Saddam's spending spree in the 1970s had ensured that much of this arsenal was of high quality, too. The Iraqis possessed advanced T-72 main battle tanks, the best Soviet export at the time; BMP-1 infantry fighting vehicles; and MiG-23 Floggers in addition to older SU-22 Fitter fighter-bombers.⁶

Arrayed against this juggernaut was one Iranian infantry division in the far north, an infantry division slightly farther south covering the threat from Iran's Kurds, an armored division in the central sector, a brigade at Qasr-e Shirin, a brigade at Mehran, and an armored division at Ahwaz (see map 18). Iran had one more armored division and an airborne division in reserve.⁷ In essence, though, it had two divisions and two brigades opposite the main lines of Iraqi attack in the south, the key sector.⁸ These Iranian forces were significantly understrength, however. Most combat units stood at only 30-50 percent of their authorized manpower due to the upheavals of the revolution and the purges described in Chapter 4.⁹ Available manpower consisted primarily of Pasdaran, that is, units from the Guard, not from the Artesh, or regular military.¹⁰ Iran's armor was mostly Chieftain and Patton tanks.

[SEE NEXT PAGE]

⁵ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 86-7.

⁶ Steven R. Ward, *Immortal: a Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), p. 248.

⁷ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 88.

⁸ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 248.

⁹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 88.

¹⁰ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 89.

THE IRAQI INVASION OF IRAN, FALL 1980		
	Iraq	Iran
<i>Battle summary</i>		
Tactical orientation	Offensive	Defensive
Plan	Air attack followed by multi-pronged invasion, including major assault on Khuzestan	Some ambushes and roadblocks followed by retreat to more easily defended urban areas
Weapons	2,750 tanks, 1,400 artillery pieces, 4,000 APCs, 340 fighter-bombers	500 operational tanks, 300 artillery pieces, <100 aircraft ¹¹
Manpower	In southern sector: three armored and two mechanized infantry divisions	In southern sector: Two under-strength divisions, two under-strength brigades, lightly armed border forces
Losses	10,000	15,000 ¹²
<i>Effectiveness summary</i>		
Unit cohesion?	No	Mixed
Tactical proficiency?	No	Yes, among the regular forces
Complex operations?	No	No opportunity to observe
Confirms theory?	Yes	Somewhat

The Battles

The Iraqi attack on September 22, 1980, began with a series of air strikes that attempted to mimic the pre-emptive Israeli operations in 1967. Although Iraq's strikes inflicted negligible damage on the Iranians—in part because the Shah had hardened and dispersed his air bases according to American standards, and in part because the Iraqis planned and executed their attacks poorly—the Iraqis proceeded with their invasion. They crossed the border at several points along a 700-km front even as the Iranian air force was launching retaliatory attacks overhead on targets in Iraq.

At the northernmost points of the invasion and in the central sector, the Iraqis were able to overrun the towns of Qasr-e Shirin and Mehran within the first day. Penetrating Iranian territory to depths of 45 km in some places, the Iraqis faced only disorganized and scattered resistance. They soon spread out in a 50-km front along the central sector, guarding potential routes to Baghdad.¹³

It was in the southern sector that the Iraqis launched their major offensive thrust. Deploying three armored and two mechanized infantry divisions, they quickly reached the outskirts of two major cities, Khorramshahr and Abadan. Along the way, the Iranians had formed some initial roadblocks and ambush attacks, but the Iraqis broke them with heavy artillery and anti-tank missiles. Recognizing their odds, the Iranians rapidly withdrew to more defensible urban terrain—a feat made far easier by the fact that Iraqi forces never went after Iranian rear areas or vigorously pursued retreating Iranian forces.¹⁴

¹¹ Order of battle data taken from Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 186.

¹² Loss figures from Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 108.

¹³ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 249; and Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 85.

¹⁴ Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 249-251.

The Iraqis soon found themselves facing a four-week battle in Khorramshahr, a town of 70,000 where 3,000 Artesh soldiers and thousands of Guards had holed up, burrowing into the classic advantages of an urban defense despite having little more than rifles, grenades, and Motolov cocktails.¹⁵ Their defense was then aided by the Iraqi decision to “soften up” the city of 70,000 with heavy artillery fire before entering. This Iraqi tactic not only angered the local population, rousing them to their city’s defense, but later made it far more difficult for Iraqi armor to move through the city.

Indeed, Cordesman and Wagner note, “Iraq rapidly found that it could not send tanks unescorted into the city and that it had to send in infantry support.” But since Iraqi forces had received no training in urban warfare, “they moved far too cautiously in maneuvering through the less-defended parts of the city and repeatedly became the victims of Iranian ambushes. Neither Iraqi armor nor infantry conducted aggressive reconnaissance, and both tended to wait until massive firepower could be brought to bear. Iraq was forced to slowly secure the perimeter of the city with the armored division it had initially committed to the attack and then rush a special forces brigade and Republican Guard brigade through a quickly improvised course in urban warfare. This process took several weeks,” giving the Iranians further time to reinforce their meager units in the city.¹⁶

Although Iraq eventually took the city with its Republican Guard brigade—which was quickly returned to Baghdad after the fight—doing so required a street-to-street grind at the price of 8,000 Iraqi casualties and 100 Iraqi tanks and armored vehicles.¹⁷ As Ward notes, “The Iraqis paid a heavy price for moving into urban terrain.”¹⁸ One Iraqi general similarly recalled that “the Iranians displayed ferocious resistance during the urban fighting, to the point where it became difficult and costly for us to occupy [Khorramshahr]. They would always attempt to retake their last bases even after we had pushed them over the bridge. They would hold every point to the bitter end, so they were able to inflict heavy losses on our forces.”¹⁹ The Iranians suffered an estimated 7,000 killed or wounded, with some reports indicating that the Guards shot Artesh soldiers who attempted to flee the battle.²⁰

In addition to halting the overall Iraqi advance, the battle for Khorramshahr diverted Iraqi efforts to besiege another crucial city in the south, Abadan.²¹ An oil refining town of 300,000, the city was defended by about 10,000 Iranian fighters, including an armored brigade with 50 tanks about 5,000 Pasdaran.²² Even though Iraq started shelling the city on September 22, it did not attack until October 10, giving Iran ample time to organize and reinforce its defenses. Although the initial Iraqi entry to the city required a difficult crossing over the Karun River, demonstrating an impressive feat of combat engineering, once inside Iraq found itself fighting street by street as in Khorramshahr. Apparently unwilling to incur further losses, Iraq never took the entire city, and the Iranian garrison there remained.²³

¹⁵ Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 251.

¹⁶ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 93.

¹⁷ Ibrahim Al-Marashi and Sammy Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces: An Analytical History* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 157.

¹⁸ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 251.

¹⁹ Kevin M. Woods, Williamson Murray, and Thomas Holaday, *Saddam's War: an Iraqi Military Perspective of the Iran-Iraq War* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 2009), p. 47.

²⁰ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 252; and Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 93.

²¹ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 252.

²² Ward, *Immortal*, p. 251.

²³ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 94-5.

In fact, September 1980 proved to be the high point of Iraq's territorial gains in the war. After gaining control of Khorramshahr and making these inroads at Abadan, Iraq never extended its grasp farther into Iran.²⁴ Pollack attributes this outcome in part to the superior skill of Iranian regular army armor crews compared to their Iraqi counterparts (and, it can be inferred, compared to the Revolutionary Guard). "In armor duels," he notes, "small numbers of Iranian tanks regularly outfought larger Iraqi units."²⁵ Pollack points in particular to an instance in which an understrength Artesh tank battalion, reinforced by Revolutionary Guard, fought off an Iraqi armored divisions' advance on the town of Dezful. Iranian armor was better because its crews actually maneuvered and their fire was more accurate.²⁶

In contrast, "the three Iraqi armored forces which originally invaded the south remained virtually in place" during October, and "these forces did not conduct any significant offensive operations... and only began to move forward in early November."²⁷ By that point, Iraq near faced parity in manpower, even though it retained a significant advantage in heavy weapons. By the end of November, all Iraqi forward momentum had evaporated, and the rainy season forced a pause in the fighting.²⁸ Iraq had still failed to take any major cities in the south besides Khorramshahr, and, crucially, it had neglected to seal the passes of the Zagros mountains, enabling the Iranians to reinforce their positions at will.²⁹ On December 7, 1980, Saddam announced that Iraq would henceforth pursue only defensive goals.³⁰

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of Iraq

Iraqi forces generally displayed poor battlefield effectiveness during the invasion of Iran, an outcome consistent with the predictions of the theory in Chapter 4. First, Iraqi cohesion seems to have been adequate at best. Pollack gives the Iraqis high marks for remaining solid during the vicious house-to-house fighting in Khorramshahr, relating that they displayed "tenacity, courage, and endurance in combat."³¹ It is also true there are no reports of Iraqi units collapsing and deserting the battlefield.

Nevertheless, the virtual halting of the invasion after only one week of minimal Iranian resistance, the need to call in Republican Guard brigade from Baghdad, and the decision not to fight in Abadan because of concerns about casualties all suggest that Iraq's senior officers probably had concerns about the cohesion of their units.³² In other words, while the battle does not provide as much observable evidence of breakdowns in cohesion as one might expect, it does provide several instances of deliberate Iraqi choices to avoid situations where those breakdowns likely would have occurred, casting some doubt on whether Pollack's praise of the Iraqi units in Khorramshahr applies to the invasion as a whole. Cordesman and Wagner argue, "The Iraqi Army lost concentration, cohesion, and momentum as it advanced, and combat and service-support elements did not thrust forward

²⁴ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 95.

²⁵ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 190.

²⁶ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 190.

²⁷ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 95.

²⁸ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 96.

²⁹ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 193.

³⁰ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 253.

³¹ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 193.

³² Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 89-90.

aggressively.... Some combat elements halted when they met relatively light opposition.”³³ All of this makes it hard to rate the Iraqi forces as broadly cohesive.

Second, Iraq demonstrated a number of very basic tactical shortcomings in the invasion. Despite having a huge initial advantage in numbers (as much as 6:1 in some places) and a sustained edge in technology, the Iraqis continued to display serious problems turning these advantages into fighting power.³⁴ In addition to the inaccurate and virtually irrelevant air strikes conducted at the outset, Iraqi artillery units repeatedly made simple fusing errors that limited their weapons’ impact, and artillery crews remained in static positions that left them highly vulnerable to counterbattery fire.³⁵ Iraqi infantry did not conduct reconnaissance patrols, and reserve units were rarely committed in an efficient manner.³⁶ Tank movements were slow and overly cautious, their fire often inaccurate. As Pollack notes, “Tank crews could not fire on the move and had very poor marksmanship even when stopped. Iraqi tank commanders did not use the mobility of their vehicles to maneuver against the enemy.”³⁷ All of these behaviors suggest a fundamental lack of skills in the use of most combat arms.

Third, the Iraqis demonstrated virtually no ability to conduct complex operations. There was little to no combined arms activity during the invasion. The Iraqi air forces and ground forces worked in virtually total isolation from each other. Iraqi armor, infantry, and artillery showed little ability to coordinate attacks on the cities of Khorramshahr and Abadan. The Iraqis repeatedly missed chances to maneuver, relying on their tanks more as big guns than as tools of offensive speed and shock.³⁸ As Ken Pollack has observed, “Iraqi armored and mechanized formations never used their mobility to bypass Iranian positions, nor did they envelop Iranian defensive positions, nor did they use their shock power simply to overrun what were usually small numbers of ill-trained Iranian infantry with little or no antitank weaponry.... The Iraqis never tried to seize key terrain to cut off Iranian lines of communication and retreat. Iraq did not once employ airborne or helicopter-borne troops to conduct a vertical envelopment of Iranian positions to speed the passage of their mechanized forces.”³⁹

In short, in what should have been an ideal environment for conducting complex operations, the Iraqis simply did not deliver.⁴⁰ Their operations showed virtually no initiative and no coordination across different units, as evidenced by the almost complete halt of operations after the initial week of advances. A former Iraqi general noted years later, “Our troops were just lined up on the border and told to drive into Iran. They had an objective, but no idea how to get there or what they were doing, or how their mission fit the plan, or who would be supporting them.”⁴¹ Indeed, it turned out that the entire invasion plan was based on an old British staff exercise organized at the Baghdad War College in 1941.⁴²

Interestingly, combat engineering was the one bright spot in the Iraqi invasion. For example, an entire armored division was able to cross the Karun River under cover of darkness during the advance on Khorramshahr—an impressive feat—and Iraqi units were

³³ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 90.

³⁴ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 78.

³⁵ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 81; and Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 192.

³⁶ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 97.

³⁷ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 97; and Pollack, *Arabs at War*, pp. 190-1.

³⁸ Cordesman and Wagner, *Arabs at War*, pp. 90, 97.

³⁹ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 187-9.

⁴⁰ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 186.

⁴¹ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 184.

⁴² Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 78.

generally well supplied, reflecting a good logistics system.⁴³ The Iraqi skills in this area suggest that its other military deficiencies may have been less the product of large structural factors like culture and economic development, which arguably should have impeded capability across the board, and more the result of deliberate political choices by the regime about which skills were and were not safe for the military to have. One can imagine that the ability to build pontoon bridges and efficiently deliver spare parts and fuel might have been considerably less threatening to Saddam's hold on power than the ability to conduct tank maneuvers or coordinate air strikes.

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of Iran

Iran's battlefield performance was mostly consistent with the theory, although not entirely. Overall cohesion in the Iranian forces was better than predicted by the political intervention theory, suggesting that other variables were driving this aspect of Iranian effectiveness. Still, the Iranian regular forces demonstrated notably better tactical proficiency than either the Iraqis or the Iranian revolutionary forces, a contrast that provides some important confirmation of the predictions from Chapter 4.

First, regarding cohesion, the Iranians' general decision to retreat to the cities in the face of the Iraqi advance was probably a wise move given the balance of forces, and it does not appear to have been the result of soldiers deserting their units. The Iranians also did display at least some cohesion in the defense of Khorramshahr. Clearly, the residents of the city and at least some of the military forces put up a stiff defense, as evidenced by the street-by-street fighting. Still, the reports that Iranian Guard units had to fire on other soldiers attempting to flee the fighting suggests that the will to fight was uneven.

Second, Iran's tactical performance was also mixed, but in ways that conform to the predictions from Chapter 4. Clearly, Iranians from both regular and revolutionary units had some success in forging basic urban defenses. More importantly, though, in tank battles the Iranian regular forces clearly showed tactical skills, conducting basic maneuvers and exhibiting good marksmanship. In several instances, this proficiency was the key edge that actually halted the Iraqi invasion, and it is consistent with the prediction that regular forces should have displayed some lingering benefits from their years of training under the Shah. However pro forma such preparation might have been, it still gave them a clear edge over both Iraqi forces during this period and Iran's own recently constituted revolutionary forces.

Lastly, the Iranians did not really attempt perform complex operations during this period. On the one hand, this might be considered reasonable, given the balance of forces and the sheer surprise of the invasion (although numerous indications had suggested that a major Iraqi attack probably was imminent).⁴⁴ On the other hand, it seems plausible that the Iranian forces could have done far more to attack the Iraqis' vulnerable fixed positions.⁴⁵ While the initial battles of the invasion do not show an outright failure to conduct such operations—the strongest possible evidence to confirm the political intervention explanation, which would expect no ability to conduct these operations among the revolutionary forces, and little ability to do so even among the regular forces—the lack of an attempt at least does not disconfirm the theory.

⁴³ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 187-9.

⁴⁴ Alert Memorandum, Director of Central Intelligence, for the National Security Council, "Iran-Iraq," September 17, 1980, p. 3, available at the National Security Archive, the George Washington University, Washington, DC.

⁴⁵ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 111.

III. The Iranian Counteroffensives, January 1981-May 1982

As 1981 dawned, Iraq held the city of Khorramshahr, and its forces were in a position to threaten the towns of Qasr e-Shirin, Susangerd, Dezful, Ahvaz, and Abadan. After the initial shock of the Iraqi invasion, however, Iran launched an escalating series of counteroffensives to regain its lost territory and prevent further incursions. This campaign included battles at Ahvaz in January 1981, Qasr e-Shirin in March, Abadan in September, Bostan in November-December, Dezful in March 1982, and Khorramshahr in April-May. Although these battles varied in their details and are discussed individually below, as a group they offer a useful opportunity to observe Iran on the offense, trying to re-take territory, and Iraq on the defense, trying to hold territory. This campaign is also useful because it occurred on the same terrain and with roughly the same forces and weapons as the invasion, but with the tactical orientations of the two sides reversed.

Overall, the battles confirm the theory. The Iraqis displayed routine deficits in cohesion and basic tactical proficiency and failed repeatedly to conduct complex defensive operations. Over and over, their inability to maneuver, protect their flanks, conduct reconnaissance, or engage in combined arms activities led them to cede territory to the Iranians, often at a huge cost in terms of casualties and prisoners of war. At the same time, Iran's territorial gains would have been possible only against an opponent such as Iraq. Iranian human wave attacks did evince cohesion, but Iran's overall effectiveness was poor relative to what it could have achieved. The one exception were the Iranian regular forces, who demonstrated some solid tactical proficiency and even a minimal ability to conduct complex operations.

The Forces on Each Side

By the end of 1980, Iran had already begun to erode Iraq's sizeable local manpower advantage. What had been a 6:1 Iraqi superiority shrank to no more than 2:1 as Iranian volunteers flooded into the southern sector where most of the major battles occurred.⁴⁶ In fact, Ward reports that "more Iranians volunteered to fight Iraq than could be absorbed by the Guard and army, and large numbers were sent instead to eastern Iran to battle drug smugglers."⁴⁷

Over the course of 1981 and into the 1982 battles, as the campaign of Iranian counteroffensives continued, Iran had actually gained a manpower advantage, marshalling nearly 140,000 troops in the southern sector. About 60,000 of these were from four Artesh divisions, while the other 80,000 were Guard and Basij forces. Against them stood about 80,000 Iraqi soldiers, mostly from the original invasion force and consisting of three infantry divisions, two armored divisions, and one mechanized division, in addition to some independent infantry brigades.⁴⁸ In general, there does not appear to have been any major shift in the weapons employed by the two sides. The arms used in the 1981-2 campaign were roughly the same as those used during the 1980 battles, with the exception of Iraq's acquisition of some new Mirage fighters.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 193.

⁴⁷ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 248.

⁴⁸ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 256.

⁴⁹ Hiro, *Longest War*, p. 59.

THE IRANIAN COUNTEROFFENSIVES, 1981-2		
	Iraq	Iran
<i>Battle summary</i>		
Tactical orientation	Defensive	Offensive
Plan	Hold territory gained during invasion through static positional defense of salients	Re-take territory lost to invasion through human wave infantry attacks followed by mechanized exploitation of breakthroughs
Weapons ⁵⁰	Roughly the same as during the 1980 battles, with the addition of some Mirage fighters	Roughly the same as during the 1980 battles
Manpower ⁵¹	In southern sector by spring 1982: 80,000 men, including 3 infantry, 2 armored, 1 mechanized division; and several infantry and militia brigades	In southern sector by spring 1982: 140,000 men, including 4 army divisions comprising 60,000 men, plus 80,000 Guard and Basij troops
Losses ⁵²	At least 54,000 KIA; 45,000 POW	At least 70,000 KIA; 50,000 WIA; 5,000 POW
<i>Effectiveness summary</i>		
Unit cohesion?	No	Yes
Tactical proficiency?	No	Yes, among regular forces
Complex operations?	No	Minimal, among regular forces
Confirms theory?	Yes	Somewhat

The Early Battles, January-September 1981

As early as January 1981, Iran launched counteroffensives at various points along the border, including near Qasr e-Shirin, Mehran, Ahvaz, and Abadan, which continued to suffer under an Iraqi siege. In several areas the Iranians managed to push the Iraqis back by a few kilometers, but generally speaking, these operations “were marked by hasty and inadequate preparations” driven more by Iran’s domestic political need to appear to be responding to the invasion than by strategically sound military imperatives.⁵³

Indeed, the battle for Abadan rapidly became a disaster for the Iranian armored forces, which had chosen to attack across a river plain not easily traversed by armor at this time of year.⁵⁴ The first brigade sent into the fight quickly bogged down in the mud and became an easy target for the Iraqi defenders. According to Cordesman and Wagner, “If Iran had halted at this point, its losses would have become acceptable, but Iran did not stop its attack or attempt a different line of advance. Instead, the Iranian commander committed his second brigade against virtually the same Iraqi defenses the next day,” allowing Iraq to grind

⁵⁰ Hiro, *Longest War*, p. 59.

⁵¹ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 256.

⁵² Significant data on losses for both sides is missing, but these estimates are based on adding the figures reported in the text below.

⁵³ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 253.

⁵⁴ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 112-3.

down yet another brigade's worth of Iranian armor using infantry equipped with anti-tank weapons, artillery, and some armor. The process was repeated a third time the next day, virtually destroying an entire Iranian armored division.⁵⁵ Iran was saved only by the fact that the Iraqi units did not pursue their retreating opponents.⁵⁶

Unfortunately, Iran's leaders considered this disaster further evidence that Iranian regular forces were worthless and unreliable. Accordingly to Cordesman and Wagner, after this battle Iran's leaders actually accelerated their imposition of worst practices: "Iran ceased giving proper emphasis to acquiring and training high technology forces and trying to build upon its past cadre of military professionals. Priority clearly shifted to the Pasdaran."⁵⁷ Indeed, the country's only major remaining secular leader, commander-in-chief Bani Sadr, was publicly blamed for Iran's military losses and soon forced to flee the country.⁵⁸

The Battle for Abadan, September 1981

Iran and Iraq had some smaller engagements over the rest of the spring and summer, but Iran turned most of its attention to planning a major effort to relieve the besieged city of Abadan. On September 2, Iran began with a feint, launching a 30-40,000-strong mixed force of armor, artillery, and infantry toward Basra, a major Iraqi city in the south. This deployment had its desired effect, convincing the Iraqis to keep their reserves around Basra rather than using them to defend their gains on Iranian soil farther south. Iraq already had about 50-60,000 soldiers near the cities of Abadan and Khorramshahr, and probably considered these deployments sufficient to protect its gains. Little did the Iraqi garrison realize that the Iranians had managed to ferry 15-20,000 soldiers down the eastern side of the Karun River to shore up the 9,000 Artesh and 4-6,000 Guard soldiers already in Abadan. This stealthy move soon gave the Iranians a sizeable local advantage over the five Iraqi brigades guarding the eastern end of Abadan.

On September 26, Iranian forces inside and outside the city attacked. According to Cordesman and Wagner, "Iraqi forces fought hard but did not receive effective reinforcement or artillery and air support, although Iraq had some 150-200 major artillery pieces within range." Iranian forces also managed to infiltrate behind Iraqi lines, leading to the isolation of some units and heavy Iraqi losses. "This seems to have driven their command into a panic, and what started as a tactical withdrawal became a rout. The Iraqi troops abandoned their armor and heavy equipment" and rapidly retreated.⁵⁹ Even a Republican Guard armored brigade sent in to counter-attack "was easily beaten back with the loss of over one-third of its tanks, allowing Iranian forces to capture the Iraqi bridges over the Karun and trapping several battalions before they could flee."⁶⁰

Within three days, Iraq was forced back across the river and had lost dozens of tanks and some 200 armored vehicles and artillery weapons, all while suffering thousands of casualties.⁶¹ Iran is believed to have suffered about 3,000 killed in action.⁶² Still, lacking a numerical advantage, and with minimal armor and almost no air support, Iran had managed

⁵⁵ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 113-4.

⁵⁶ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 254.

⁵⁷ Cordesman, *Lessons*, p. 115.

⁵⁸ An example of this public castigation appears in "Speech, Ali Khamenei, Friday Prayer Sermon, June 19, 1981," available at the National Security Archive, the George Washington University, Washington, DC.

⁵⁹ Cordesman and Wagner, pp. 123-4.

⁶⁰ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 195.

⁶¹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 123-4.

⁶² Hiro, *Longest War*, pp. 53.

to end the siege of Abadan.⁶³ Unfortunately for Iran, the major commanders responsible for this victory were killed in a plane crash on their way back to Tehran, suddenly depriving Iran of the leaders that had successfully kluged together Pasdaran and regular forces during the battle. The crash victims included the Minister of Defense, Chief of Staff, Army Chief of Staff, and the regional commander of the Pasdaran.⁶⁴

The Battle for Bostan, November-December 1981

After a lull in the fighting during October and most of November, an Iranian force of 10,000-14,000 Guard and regular soldiers now attacked the Iraqi salient near Susangerd, south of Bostan. According to Cordesman and Wagner, “The attack was confused... because Pasdaran attacked without waiting for either a regular army artillery barrage or support.”⁶⁵ Still, the first use of the human wave attacks, involving herds of Iranian youngsters, some no more than 12 years old, terrified the Iraqi Popular Army units stationed in the area, which broke and ran when they saw Pasdaran units attacking over the slain corpses of Basij who had thrown themselves on the Iraqi minefields.⁶⁶

The battle was considered a victory for Iran, in the sense that it retook Bostan, but only at the price of heavy casualties. The Iraqis suffered at least 1,000 dead and 500 taken prisoner. In December, the Iranians also launched an attack farther north in Qasr e-Shirin, achieving tactical surprise in a week-long battle. Due to the Iraqis’ failure to react quickly and to make use of their artillery and airpower, Iran succeeded in retaking this area as well. The remaining Iraqi positions in the south now looked vulnerable.

The Battle for Dezful, March 1982

After a relative lull during the winter rainy season, Iran launched new attacks against Iraqi positions in the south in the late winter and early spring, with an eye toward eventually retaking Khorramshahr. By February 1982, Iraq had about six divisions—3 infantry, 2 armored, and 1 mechanized—defending its positions in the southern sector. Against this force of approximately 80,000 men, Iran had assembled four army divisions comprising about 60,000 soldiers, plus 200 tanks and 150 artillery pieces, in addition to 80,000 Guard and Basij troops.⁶⁷

On March 22, Iran attacked Iraqi positions in a salient near Dezful and the nearby town of Shush, using human waves spearheaded by the Pasdaran to overwhelm Iraqi posts manned mostly by the Popular Army. Although initially stymied, these waves eventually achieved breakthroughs, through which regular army units then rushed to attack the Iraqi flanks. Because Saddam had decreed that Iraqi units were not allowed to cede any ground, the Iraqi units had a difficult time reacting to these attacks, devolving into a “disjointed and weak” defense that induced panic in the Iraqi command. The corps commander ordered frontal counterattacks by two Iraqi armored divisions and an armored brigade of the Republican Guard, but these proved futile in the muddy terrain.⁶⁸ Iranian forces then

⁶³ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 124.

⁶⁴ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 125.

⁶⁵ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 125.

⁶⁶ Stephen C. Pelletiere and Douglas V. Johnson, *Lessons Learned: the Iran-Iraq War*, volume 1 (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, 1990), published as Fleet Marine Force Reference Publication 3-202, p. 10.

⁶⁷ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 256.

⁶⁸ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 257; and Hiro, *Longest War*, pp. 55-6.

initiated a double pincer movement to trap the Iraqi forces still in the salient.⁶⁹ As these Iraqi forces were ground up over the next several days, the remaining segments of the Iraqi army fled in disarray.⁷⁰

According to Ward, “Both sides suffered heavy casualties, but Iran scored a major victory. In addition to pushing the Iraqis out of most of northern Khuzestan, Iran inflicted up to fifty thousand casualties, captured fifteen thousand to twenty-five thousand prisoners, and smashed an Iraqi mechanized division, armored division, and large numbers of smaller militia units. In addition to destroying two hundred Iraqi tanks, four hundred other armored vehicles, and several hundred artillery pieces, the Pasdaran captured enough Iraqi equipment and ammunition to start to organize and train its own armored units.”⁷¹

The Battle for Khorramshahr, April-May 1982

Iran’s victories at Abadan, Bostan, and Dezful positioned it to make a final attack on the last major Iraqi outpost in Khuzestan, the city of Khorramshahr. Iraqi forces in the area were formidable, consisting of 70-90,000 soldiers dug into a well-established series of static defenses. As at Dezful, the Iraqis guarded their positions with barbed wire and minefields. But these proved no deterrent to the Iranians, who launched a three-pronged assault on the night of April 30, 1982.

In the north, in the first of the three prongs, an Iranian armored division attacked an Iraqi mechanized and armored division. From the south, another Iranian infantry division and large numbers of Pasdaran crossed the Karun river and overran the Iraqi reserve and Popular Army forces stationed in the area. Then, in the offensive’s third prong, another armored division and additional Pasdaran struck Iraq’s eastern lines, which were being held by several infantry brigades.⁷² As at Dezful, the Iranians generally sent waves of Pasdaran and Basij—there were as many 40,000 massed for the re-taking of Khorramshahr—directly into the teeth of the Iraqi defenses, persisting until the Iraqis grew exhausted or panicked.⁷³ The waves particularly targeted Popular Army units, which broke most easily in the face of the assaults.⁷⁴

Once these Iranian forces managed to rupture the Iraqi lines, regular forces with more firepower and mobility would surge into the gap, exploiting the breakthrough to attack the Iraqi flanks, which, again following orders from Saddam, generally remained in place instead of conducting a fighting withdrawal or conducting any rapid counterattacks in the numerous instances when Iranian flanks were exposed.⁷⁵ The Iraqis did try to conduct a counterattack at one point with one of their armored divisions, but this effort was slow. According to Pollack, “by the time it got moving, the Iranians had penetrated across the front and routed most of the Iraqi frontline formations.” As a result, the Iranians easily parried the counterattack, leading Saddam to call in air strikes, which still had little effect in stopping the Iranian surge into the city. Iraq tried again on May 6 to counterattack with two armored divisions, but Iranian armor succeeded in stopping these forces and pushing them back all the way to the Iran-Iraq border.

⁶⁹ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 257.

⁷⁰ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 198.

⁷¹ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 257.

⁷² Pollack, *Arabs at War*, pp. 198-9.

⁷³ Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 257-8.

⁷⁴ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 131.

⁷⁵ Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 257-8; and Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 130-1.

Realizing its units were trapped, Iraq vacated all of Khuzestan except Khorramshahr itself. Then on May 22, 80,000 Iranian troops assaulted the city, retaking it in two days of intense street fighting.⁷⁶ The Iranians captured as many as 15,000 Iraqi prisoners of war, including many from Popular Army units who showed few signs of combat stress or battle fatigue.⁷⁷ As at Dezful, the Iranians also captured up to two hundred Iraqi tanks, some 200 artillery weapons, and enormous stockpiles of additional equipment and supplies left by the fleeing Iraqis.⁷⁸ Iran had essentially destroyed two Iraqi mechanized brigades and two infantry brigades, although at the cost of well over 5,000 Iranian dead and at least 7,000 wounded.⁷⁹

In sum, during the period March 22-May 24, 1982, Iraq gave up virtually all of the territory it had captured in the invasion. The situation was so bleak that a CIA assessment at the time virtually declared the war to be over, noting, “Iraq has essentially lost the war with Iran... There is little the Iraqis can do... to reverse the military situation.⁸⁰ All told, Iraq suffered as many as 50,000 killed and lost perhaps as many as 45,000 prisoners to the Iranians.⁸¹ Iranian losses were estimated at 70,000 killed in action, perhaps an additional 50,000 wounded, and 5,000 prisoners of war.⁸² Saddam reacted by shooting twelve of his generals and regrouping Iraq’s defenses, while Iranian leaders appear to have credited the Pasdaran and Basij for their victories, reaffirming the attachment to human wave attacks.⁸³

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of Iraq

Iraqi battlefield effectiveness during the Iranian counteroffensives was poor. First, there were numerous indications of cohesion problems. At Abadan, Dezful, and Khorramshahr in particular, the battles essentially ended with Iraqi soldiers fleeing in disorder and leaving behind large quantities of armored vehicles, artillery, and other equipment. The Popular Army units proved particularly likely to break, as seen at Bostan, Dezful, and Khorramshahr. In one sense this outcome was ironic, given that these militia members were chosen entirely for regime loyalty. But in another sense, it was entirely predictable, given the Popular Army’s lack of training and qualified leadership.⁸⁴

Yet another indication of poor Iraqi cohesion, especially by the spring of 1982, was the large number of Iraqi prisoners taken by the Iranians—often, as at Khorramshahr, with few signs that the soldiers actually had fought and been forced to surrender. Saddam was clearly aware of the widespread nature of this problem, as he had issued a decree in April 1981 offering a general amnesty for those who had deserted their units if they returned within a month. Apparently unsatisfied, Saddam reversed course in the spring of 1982, ordering the automatic execution of any soldier found to flee the battlefield.⁸⁵ Both of these

⁷⁶ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, pp. 198-9; and Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 139.

⁷⁷ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 133.

⁷⁸ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 258; and Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 133.

⁷⁹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 133.

⁸⁰ “Implications of Iran’s Victory Over Iraq,” Special National Intelligence Estimate 34/36.2-82, Director of Central Intelligence, 1982, p. vii, available at <https://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB167/03.pdf>.

⁸¹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 140; and Intelligence Appraisal, Defense Intelligence Agency, “Iran-Iraq: the Second Year of War,” December 8, 1982, p. 2, available at the National Security Archive, the George Washington University, Washington, DC.

⁸² Intelligence Appraisal, “Iran-Iraq,” p. 2; and Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 142.

⁸³ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 142.

⁸⁴ Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, p. 15.

⁸⁵ Hiro, *Longest War*, pp. 61-2.

policies point to Iraqi troubles with the most fundamental building block of military effectiveness, cohesion.

Second, Iraq displayed serious tactical deficits. While there is some evidence that the Iraqis were proficient at establishing basic static defenses relying on machine gun and artillery fire, minefields, and barbed wire, their shortcomings were pronounced. Even Saddam, in a meeting with his officials around this time, observed Iraq's continuing basic tactical problems. For example, he stated, "As for the artillery, it is certain that we see some negatives in all the phases. There are negatives in the accuracy, coordination and usage. The concentration is inaccurate and not hitting the target.... In the discipline of artillery I believe it is one of those areas where we are still in need of someone to teach us."⁸⁶ The Iraqis also continued to be surprised by Iranian attacks because most Iraqi units failed to conduct regular patrols, and even where they did, they did not pass on the information they learned.⁸⁷

Given the continued Iraqi advantage in weaponry, one also has to question why the human wave attacks managed to be so successful—either the Iraqis broke and ran, indicating the aforementioned cohesion problems, or they simply did not operate their weapons properly. Indeed, a U.S. analysis at the time pointedly noted, "Our estimate is that equipment shortages have not been a major factor in Iraq's battlefield reverses.... Iraqi failures to date have been due mainly to weak leadership, morale, tactics, and intelligence weaknesses."⁸⁸

Furthermore, Iraq demonstrated virtually no ability to conduct complex defensive operations. Clearly what was needed in response to the Iranian attacks was an elastic defense-in-depth rather than a static positional defense. But Iraq's decision to dig in its forces and forbid any retreats made these units prisoners in their positions and allowed Iran to destroy them piecemeal in battle after battle. Over and over, Iraq displayed no ability to conduct fighting withdrawals or to counterattack by maneuvering its reserves, even in situations where Iranian units were exposed and vulnerable. Part of the problem, again, appeared to be that Iraqi officers in the field lacked the authority to redeploy forward troops or to call on reserves.⁸⁹ Even in situations where the Iraqis reportedly fought hard, as at Abadan, the lack of combined arms integration doomed their efforts to futility.

Certainly one has to question whether Iraq could ever have held such a long front forever. But the nature of the Iraqi command system and, indeed, the commanders themselves, made it impossible to consolidate efficiently to a more defensible set of positions. Instead, the Iraqis' lack of cohesion, tactical proficiency, and complex operations made their retreat enormously costly.⁹⁰ These forces could not be classified as effective.

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of Iran

The period 1981-2 was the peak of Iranian battlefield effectiveness during the war. Not only were its forces surprisingly cohesive, but the regular forces in particular displayed tactical proficiency and, in a few instances, the ability to conduct some complex operations. Again, these latter capabilities seem to have reflected the lingering impact of the training the

⁸⁶ "Saddam Hussein Discusses Neighboring Countries and their Regimes," CRRC Number SH-SHTP-A-000-626, date unknown, sometime after 1980 and before 1985, pp. 20-1.

⁸⁷ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 200.

⁸⁸ Discussion Paper, Origin Unknown, "Discussion Paper for SIG on Policy Options for Dealing with Iran-Iraq War," mid-1982, available at the National Security Archive, the George Washington University, Washington, DC.

⁸⁹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 130-131.

⁹⁰ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 140.

regular forces received in the pre-revolutionary period, and they stand in general contrast to the performance of the revolutionary units.

First, regarding cohesion, all Iranian forces demonstrated more cohesion than predicted by the political intervention theory. The Guard and Basij, in particular, fought with a great willingness to die, as evidenced in the human wave attacks.⁹¹ The ideational sources of this motivation will be discussed in more detail at the end of the chapter, but suffice to say that they did stem entirely from political intervention practices, even in the case of the regular forces.

Nevertheless, it is important not to conflate cohesion alone with effectiveness. It is clear the Iranians designed their offensives as they did precisely *because* they required so little tactical proficiency, something that the poorly trained Pasdaran and Basij units clearly lacked. Iranian “tactics,” such as they were, consisted of walking into Iraqi minefields, cutting through barbed wire, and using children as human shields against heavy weapons fire. While perhaps “effective” in a certain way, this approach did not reflect mastery of modern military skills such as weapons handling, careful use of terrain for cover and concealment, and so on. Furthermore, had these tactics been used against an adversary adept in coordinating its own movement and fire, they would have delivered far less territory to the Iranians.

Second, there was significant variation in Iranian tactical proficiency, and it occurred largely along the lines predicted in Chapter 4. Although the first battle for Abadan was a disaster, this was partly because the regular forces had been pressured to respond to the invasion before they were ready. In general, the Iranian regular army units displayed competence in the operation of their heavy weapons, notably armor. Additionally, the Iranians deserve credit for conducting better reconnaissance than the Iraqis, as repeatedly demonstrated in the targeting of vulnerable Popular Army units.⁹² While no source explicitly identifies the regular forces as being better at this task than the revolutionary forces, one history does single out the Pasdaran as frequently failing to do more than attack whatever Iraqi position was directly in front of them.⁹³ This suggests that it was probably the legacy regular forces who were doing most of the reconnaissance and infiltration seen in the battles, again reflecting a skill differential between the two types of units.

Third, the Iranian regular forces displayed some baseline ability to conduct complex operations as well. Although far from consistent, the regular forces were at times clearly able to exploit the breakthroughs created by the human wave attacks, an action that required coordination across infantry, armor, and artillery.⁹⁴ Furthermore, it was probably not a coincidence that in one of the biggest instances of this type of success, the battle for Abadan in September 1981, “Iranian preparation for the attack had been left largely to regular officers believed to be fully loyal to the regime,” and revolutionary forces “were subordinated to the regular army command.”⁹⁵ Clearly, when regular forces were in charge, even the combat power of the revolutionary forces could be harnessed to greater effect.

It is important not to overstate these contrasts, of course. While one must give credit to the Iranians for their gains, it is very difficult to see how the Iranian methods could have yielded such significant results had their opponent offered even slightly more effective resistance. In other words, it is important not to mistake Iraqi errors for Iranian military

⁹¹ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 200.

⁹² Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 199.

⁹³ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 131.

⁹⁴ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, pp. 199-200; and Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 115.

⁹⁵ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 124-5.

proWess.⁹⁶ That said, the Iranian counteroffensives show that there were some real differences between the pre-revolutionary and revolutionary forces, in part because of the differing nature of the Shah's earlier political intervention with respect to training.

Unfortunately for Iran, however, most of its leaders actually drew the wrong lessons about what had happened, crediting the revolutionary rather than regular forces for Iran's victories. The few leaders who might have told them otherwise perished in the helicopter crash in September 1981. As we will see, these events set the stage for a decline in Iranian effectiveness even among the regular forces in subsequent battles.

IV. The Iranian Invasion at Basra, July 1982, and Subsequent Battles, 1982-3

After regaining its lost territory, Iran invaded Iraq in July 1982, focusing its initial efforts on Iraq's second large city, Basra. The battle of Basra therefore offers the first opportunity to observe the Iranians on the offensive against Iraqis defending their own soil. In what was called Operation Ramadan, Iran launched a major assault to take the city, running directly into the teeth of Iraqi defenses. After a protracted fight, the Iraqis managed to keep Basra. Nevertheless, the costs Iraq paid for this victory were exorbitant, and both sides demonstrated poor battlefield effectiveness, especially in the realm of complex operations, where the Iranian decline was clear. Because the fight for Basra established a pattern that was to govern the ground war during the remainder of 1982 and into 1983, the analysis below briefly discusses additional Iranian offensives that occurred after the attack on Basra, revealing that the two sides' performances there were typical rather than anomalous.

The Forces on Each Side

Despite its devastating losses during 1981-2, Iraq retained a decisive overall advantage in weapons going into the battle for Basra, as would remain the case for the rest of the war.⁹⁷ In 1982, Iraq's advantage in armor and artillery was close to 3:1, and it retained a 4:1 edge in airpower.⁹⁸ The two sides were more evenly matched in terms of the local balance of manpower, with both having something on the order of 70-90,000 men near Basra.⁹⁹ Iraqi forces consisted primarily of its 3rd Corps, while Iranian forces were a mixed force of Artesh, Pasdaran, and Basij.

Contrary to the earlier battles, however, Iraq now fought on its home turf, affording it greater familiarity with the terrain and much shorter and more secure lines of communication, re-supply, and reinforcement.¹⁰⁰ Certain that they would be welcomed by Basra's Shia populace, the Iranians had broadcast news of their impending attack.¹⁰¹ As a result, Iraq had devoted considerable effort ever since its retreat from Iran to establishing defenses along the southern sector of the front. Parallel to the main north-south roads in the area, the Iraqis built huge berms that provided good fighting positions for tanks, machine guns, and cannon. Opposite this line, the Iraqis established a free-fire zone filled with

⁹⁶ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 200.

⁹⁷ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 259.

⁹⁸ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 149.

⁹⁹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 149; and Memorandum, White House, William Clark to President Reagan, "An Iranian Invasion of Iraq: Considerations for US Policy," July 1982, p. 1, available at the National Security Archive, the George Washington University, Washington, DC.

¹⁰⁰ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 149.

¹⁰¹ Hiro, *Longest War*, p. 88.

mortars, mine, and barbed wire.¹⁰² In addition, Iraq converted a small fishery east of Basra into an enormous artificial water barrier. Known as Fish Lake, the water concealed concertina wire, mines, and power lines that could electrocute anyone who tried to cross it (see map 19).¹⁰³

The Iranian plan reflected some awareness of these defenses. It called for two divisions to conduct a diversionary attack across the Iraqis' northern flank, while two mixed army-IRGC task forces would assault the Iraqis' eastern flanks. Eventually the two forces were to link up and encircle the Iraqis between them. Meanwhile, an additional infantry division, the 21st, along with Revolutionary Guard forces, was to swing south of Fish Lake and flank the entire Iraqi position defending the city.¹⁰⁴

THE BATTLE OF BASRA, JULY 1982		
	Iraq	Iran
<i>Battle summary</i>		
Tactical orientation	Defensive	Offensive
Plan	Layered positional defense relying on firepower to mow down Iranian infantry	Cut off Basra from the north, then engage in frontal infantry assault with armor exploiting any breakthroughs
Weapons ¹⁰⁵	>700 tanks; extensive network of dug-in armor, artillery, machine guns, mines, wire, mortars, water barriers, tear gas	200 tanks, 200 APCs, 300 artillery pieces
Manpower ¹⁰⁶	70-90,000 men: five reinforced divisions, plus three more armored divisions in reserve	90,000 men: Revolutionary Guard and Basij, plus six understrength army divisions
Losses ¹⁰⁷	>3,000 KIA, 1400 POW	20-30,000 KIA and WIA
<i>Effectiveness summary</i>		
Unit cohesion?	Minimal	Mixed
Tactical proficiency?	No	No
Complex operations?	No	No
Confirms theory?	Yes	Somewhat

The Battle

The battle for Basra began on the night of July 13-14, 1982, as the Iranians crossed the border with relatively little immediate opposition. After penetrating about 20 km, the Iranians ran into the prepared Iraqi defenses. Iraqi firepower completely halted the Iranians' diversionary attack in the north and one of their two thrusts from the east. But the second thrust from the east broke through the Iraqi lines, causing the Iranians to call off the planned attack by the 21st to the south of Fish Lake and instead call that unit north to reinforce the breakthrough.

¹⁰² Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 149-50.

¹⁰³ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 204.

¹⁰⁴ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 204.

¹⁰⁵ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 204.

¹⁰⁶ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 204.

¹⁰⁷ Hiro, *Longest War*, p. 88.

Rather than providing momentum to the Iranian attack, this decision just created a giant target for the Iraqis, who now attacked the Iranian penetration from three sides.¹⁰⁸ The Iranians were driven back almost to where their attack had begun and soon “lost much of their cohesion.”¹⁰⁹ Iraq also may have relied on tear gas to help break up the Iranian formations.¹¹⁰ But Iraq, too, suffered heavy losses in all three of the divisions encircling the Iranian penetration, primarily because the Iraqis failed to maneuver or to operate in combined arms teams.¹¹¹ The retreat was devastating for Iran as well, costing it major elements of an armored and infantry division, as well as significant amounts of artillery, armor, and soldiers.¹¹²

Rather than pause, the Iranians quickly regrouped and crossed the Iraqi border again on July 21 from a position slightly south of the original avenue of attack. Again, Iranian Basij walked into the Iraqi defenses, clearing paths through the minefields for Pasdaran and army forces. This effort broke through the Iraqi defenses east of Fish Lake, but again Iraqi forces drove back the Iranian penetration with heavy fire from tanks, helicopters, and artillery. This basic scene repeated itself during the last week of July and first days of August, as another Iranian breakthrough was driven back by another Iraqi defensive onslaught.¹¹³

All told, the Iranians took perhaps 20-30,000 casualties and lost up to a quarter of their equipment.¹¹⁴ Iraqi casualties were considerably lower, somewhere around 3,000 killed in action, but the main armored division involved, the 9th, was so badly mauled that “it was disbanded and never reformed—the only Iraqi division to suffer this fate during the war.”¹¹⁵

Subsequent Iranian Attacks into Iraq, 1982-3

The battle at Basra set a pattern that both sides were to repeat during the remainder of 1982 and throughout 1983. During this time, Iran launched additional attacks in the northern sector and against Basra (late 1982), as well as five offensives spread across all three sectors of the border (February-November 1983).¹¹⁶

Reflecting the ascendance of the revolutionary forces, the Iranian approach continued to rely on human wave attacks. As in the initial battle for Basra, these attacks were sometimes able to penetrate the first line of Iraqi defenses but always proved difficult to control and direct thereafter. Iran’s decreasing stocks of armor and mechanized vehicles also made it ever more difficult to exploit the breakthroughs that did occur.¹¹⁷ Even several years into the war, “Iran still was willing to throw thousands of Basij into combat, almost straight from their cities and villages. It provided them with little military equipment and resupply capability and gave its volunteers few instructions other than to advance to their primary objective and obtain supplies from the newly liberated Iraqi Shi’ites.”¹¹⁸

¹⁰⁸ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 205.

¹⁰⁹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 151.

¹¹⁰ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 150.

¹¹¹ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 205.

¹¹² Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 150-1.

¹¹³ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 205.

¹¹⁴ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 151.

¹¹⁵ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 205.

¹¹⁶ These included the Iranian Wal Fajr (By the Dawn) offensives, beginning with battles just north of the Howizeh Marshes in early 1983. Summer 1983 saw an offensive in the central part of the front, near Mehran, and July and October offensives in Kurdistan in the north. Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 261-3; and Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 155, 161, 168, 178-8.

¹¹⁷ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 210.

¹¹⁸ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 185.

Ultimately, despite launching offensives involving tens of thousands of men and suffering casualties that were often three to four times those of Iraq's, Iran's offensives in 1982-3 resulted in virtually no lasting, strategically significant territorial gains.¹¹⁹ Iran never proved able to launch more than one major assault at a time. Consequently, the Iraqis always had an opportunity to shift their forces to the various points of attack along the border. Additionally, Iran's attacks tended to develop slowly, providing Iraq with ample time to react."¹²⁰

For its part, Iraq continued to rely on essentially the same approach that it had employed at Basra. Iraq expanded its large fixed defenses, eventually constructing hundreds of kilometers of closely spaced, raised sand berms that enabled the preparation of fighting positions against human wave attacks.¹²¹ Again reflecting the use of good combat engineering, the Iraqi bunkers and fortifications integrated the use of mines, artillery, armor, and various manmade obstacles, including water barriers.¹²² Iraq also employed chemical weapons for the first time in 1983.¹²³ These tactics allowed the Iraqis to stop the Iranians through sheer attrition—firepower over skill. Rarely did the Iraqis actually rely on maneuver or combined arms operations to surround and destroy Iranian penetrations.

The entire front devolved into trench warfare reminiscent of World War I. By 1983, Iran had suffered about 180,000 killed in the war, with several times that number wounded, and 8,000 taken prisoner. Iraq had suffered about 65,000 killed, with several times that number wounded, and 50,000 taken prisoner. This meant that total battle deaths had already reached almost a quarter of a million men, before the war's halfway mark.¹²⁴

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of Iraq

The battle of Basra, much like the subsequent battles during 1982-1983, was in some sense a victory for Iraq, but one that came at a huge and disproportionate cost. Regarding the first aspect of battlefield effectiveness, unit cohesion, there are no direct references to Iraqi cohesion in accounts of the battle of Basra, so it is difficult to assess. Certainly, this battle and the ones that followed did not generate reports of Iraqi units breaking and running as had the earlier battles in Iran, although the nature of the dug-in Iraqi defensive positions would have made this sort of surrender much less feasible than it had been previously.¹²⁵

Second, Iraqi tactical proficiency continued to be minimal at best. It is clear that the Iraqis did establish basic defenses around Basra using the weapons and equipment that they had available. Yet these defenses depended more on combat engineering than tactical proficiency. The fact that the Iraqis had to use tear gas and, later, chemical weapons to break up the Iranian formations suggests that the Iraqis continued to experience problems in converting their material resources into actual fighting capabilities. As Pollack puts it, "The Iraqis were employing all the weaponry available to a modern army to fight what was basically a light infantry force. They generally outnumbered the Iranians, except temporarily at the point of attack, where the Iranians might muster an advantage in manpower for their human-wave assaults. The Iraqis could bring to bear vastly greater firepower than the

¹¹⁹ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 261.

¹²⁰ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 168.

¹²¹ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 206.

¹²² Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 155.

¹²³ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 211.

¹²⁴ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 177.

¹²⁵ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 153.

Iranians and were considerably more mobile than the Iraqis.¹²⁶ Yet despite all this, the battle for Basra permanently destroyed an Iraqi armored division and cost Iraq thousands of casualties. Strangely, though, Saddam considered the massive Iraqi losses a sign of effectiveness, interpreting it to mean that Iraqi troops were fighting well.¹²⁷

Third, and most importantly, Iraq still displayed no ability to conduct complex operations. Its armor failed to maneuver, and in general its ground forces did not integrate the use of different combat arms, despite the presence of Iranian forces that would have been very vulnerable to these sorts of operations. Iraq eventually was able to prevail simply by the sheer volume of its firepower, but against a more skilled and better equipped foe, even this outcome would have been difficult to achieve.¹²⁸ The only areas in which Iraq continued to excel were supply, transportation, and engineering.¹²⁹

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of Iran

The battle of Basra and Iran's subsequent attacks shone a harsh light on Iranian tactical limitations. It is true that Iranian cohesion continued to be robust, with tens of thousands of soldiers willing to walk into the teeth of Iraqi defenses.¹³⁰ This is certainly surprisingly in light of the political intervention theory. But it is also the case that the Iranian strategy, by its very nature, required little more in the way of basic tactical proficiency than this sort of fearlessness. Many of the Basij were not even armed and simply were required to march across minefields or stand in front of Iraqi tanks.

If this was the tactic, then the Iraqis could have been said to be proficient. Still, even the timing of these very basic infantry assaults proved more than Iranian forces could handle effectively, especially as compared to some of the successes Iran had experienced in the earlier battles where the regular forces had been given more command authority.¹³¹ As Ward notes, "Iran's basic strategy was roughly equivalent to trying to use a hammer to destroy an anvil. The Guard formations allowed the commanders to commit large numbers of infantry in repeated attacks, but the divisions were slow and plodding and lacked the training and mobility needed to counter Iraq's strong armored reserves."¹³²

More importantly, Iranian effectiveness broke down utterly in the realm of complex operations. Iranian fearlessness—that is, the willingness of its soldiers to execute the "tactic" of martyrdom—could not compensate for serious deficits in coordination. Iran's command structure was so fractured that the human wave assaults were poorly integrated with the mobility and fire that Iran did possess. Those willing to walk into minefields tended to be from the Pasdaran and the Guard, while those who operated armor and artillery tended to be from the Artesh. Because these forces were controlled through entirely different command structures, "the ability to shift fires or change attacks to take advantage of opportunities was seriously circumscribed."¹³³ For all the terror they may have inspired, the human waves "could not maneuver quickly or effectively, particularly once forces were committed to battle. Command and control was difficult."¹³⁴

¹²⁶ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 211.

¹²⁷ Woods et al, *Saddam's War*, p. 76.

¹²⁸ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 260.

¹²⁹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 153.

¹³⁰ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 149.

¹³¹ Hiro, *Longest War*, p. 88.

¹³² Ward, *Immortal*, p. 259.

¹³³ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 259.

¹³⁴ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 152.

Furthermore, the reliance on human waves wasted what armor and skilled manpower the Iranians did have. As Cordesman and Wagner note, “There often was no clear role that Iranian armor could play except to provide fire support for the infantry. Iranian armor could occasionally flank an Iraqi force but could not maneuver in depth against Iraqi opposition without infantry support, and the bulk of Iran’s infantry lacked the equipment and skill needed to operate as a mechanized force. Further, Iran’s tactics presented major problems in supply and in exploiting a breakthrough.”¹³⁵

Additionally, the reliance on human waves to breach the Iraqi lines had worked better on Iranian territory than it did once the Iraqis were defending established positions on familiar terrain. The battle of Basra epitomized this problem, but it appeared again and again in 1982, 1983, and 1984. Iran “never brought an end to the feuding and lack of coordination between the Pasdaran and regular force, and it continued to reward loyalty and belief, rather than professionalism.”¹³⁶ A CIA assessment at the end of the year agreed that Iran was basically incapable of offensive operations and would remain so given the way in which Iranian leaders intervened in the military: “the Iranian Army is basically a defensive organization.... The Army will never be fully exonerated under the current regime: political controls have been tightened over the military. Many of the victories on Iranian territory last year, although impressive, were largely attributable to the feeble fighting nature of the Iraqis.”¹³⁷ These factors combined to render a subtle but noticeable decline in Iranian fighting effectiveness compared to the initial battles of the war.

V. The Battles for the Howizeh Marshes, 1984-5

In February 1984, Iran launched four major thrusts into Iraq: one limited attack in the north and three in the south. Two of these latter three attacks were diversions from the real effort, known as Operation Kheiber, which sought to drive into Iraq through the Howizeh Marshes. These marshes, measuring forty miles east to west and thirty miles north to south, straddled the Iran-Iraq border near the intersection of the Tigris and Euphrates (see map 20). Up until this point in the war, the Iraqis had generally assumed that these marshes would always provide a natural barrier to Iranian passage. The swampy terrain had water up to 3 meters in depth, in addition to thick vegetation that impeded visibility and movement. In general, the Iraqis had focused more on keeping the marshes flooded than building defenses to the rear of the marshes or patrolling the area.¹³⁸

As a result, Iran saw a target of opportunity: the marshes, if penetrated, had the potential to provide Iran with nearly direct access to the major road connecting Basra and Baghdad. Iran would be able to sever southern Iraq, the home of Iraq’s Shia, from the rest of the country. Additionally, the southernmost tip of the marshes housed two manmade structures known as the Manjoon Islands that provided easy access to the dozens of active Iraqi oil wells in the area.

For these reasons, Iran launched an amphibious assault on the marshes in 1984. Although there were some differences from the Iranian attacks on 1982-3, in general Operation Kheiber followed Iran’s same offensive formula of human wave attacks backed

¹³⁵ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 147.

¹³⁶ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 152.

¹³⁷ Intelligence Appraisal, “Iran-Iraq,” p. 5.

¹³⁸ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 180.

(or intended to be backed) by some heavy weapons. The operation reflected the continuing limitations of Iran's approach, yielding only very small territorial gains at a huge human cost. Iraq, too, repeated its basic defensive approach in the battle, relying on extremely heavy firepower, including chemical weapons, to mow down Iranian infantry, while engaging in only very limited counterattacks from fixed defensive positions.

Despite this fresh illustration of the stalemate that their tactics produced—a fact that had been relatively clear since 1982—both sides repeated the entire interaction yet again when Iran launched Operation Badr against the marshes in 1985. These two battles thus offer a further opportunity to examine Iran on the tactical offense and Iraq on the defense. They also generally confirm the continuing deleterious effects of each side's forms of political intervention, which hindered the battlefield effectiveness of both combatants. The 1985 battle in particular, taking place on virtually the exact same terrain as the 1984 battle, and illustrating virtually the exact same effectiveness problems evident in 1982-3, suggests just how deliberately each regime continued to sacrifice military performance for its preferred forms of political intervention—or at least how blind each regime continued to be to this trade-off.

The Forces on Each Side

Iran's 1984-5 campaign to control the Howizeh Marshes led to some of the largest-scale ground combat seen anywhere since World War II. The fighting in this sector ultimately involved a half a million men, about 300,000 of them Iranian.¹³⁹ By 1984, Iran had marshaled more than two dozen divisions or independent brigades in the area. Out of this concentration, some 50-150,000 men deployed as a strike force opposite the marshes, with another 100,000 men acting as reserves. The Iranian forces were almost entirely light infantry that planned to cross the marshes using pontoon bridges and small boats. Though Iran had deployed some better armed Artesh units, the Basij and Pasdaran fighters involved lacked virtually any artillery, anti-tank weapons, or other sources of heavy firepower.¹⁴⁰

Iraqi forces in the area initially consisted of only 40,000 men. One can get some indication of how unlikely the Iraqis considered an attack in the marshes from the fact that the seam between the Iraqi 3rd and 4th Corps ran directly through this terrain. Troops from 3rd Corps covered the southern sector, including the Manjoon Islands, while 4th Corps covered the north.¹⁴¹ In early 1984, Iraq's defenses were not nearly as well developed as in other areas of the front, such as Basra. Nevertheless, the Iraqis still retained a significant overall superiority in weapons in this sector, particularly armor, artillery, and airpower. Additionally, Iraq's chemical weapons capabilities had grown to include both mustard gas and Tabun, a nerve agent.¹⁴²

In the 1985 battles, this scenario was largely repeated, although the Iranian force dedicated to capturing the marshes was smaller, perhaps only 45-65,000 men, a mix of Pasdaran and regular army. They were also somewhat better armed, with all the soldiers at least in possession of assault rifles and plentiful ammunition. Additionally, Iranian forces possessed rocket propelled-grenades, rockets, small vessels mounted with recoilless rifles and mortars, some chemical protective masks and clothing, and nerve agent antidote. Iraq still relied on elements of its 3rd and 4th Corps forces to defend the marshes. These forces initially

¹³⁹ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 264; and Hiro, *Longest War*, p. 104.

¹⁴⁰ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 179-181.

¹⁴¹ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 264.

¹⁴² Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 203.

amounted to about two divisions of troops, although they swelled to 60,000 as the fighting in 1985 escalated.¹⁴³

THE BATTLES FOR THE MARSHES, 1984-5		
	Iraq	Iran
<i>Battle summary</i>		
Tactical orientation	Defensive, with some counterattacks	Offensive, with some defense against counterattacks
Plan	Defense of Basra-Baghdad highway and Manjoons	Three-pronged attack through marshes to cut Basra from Baghdad; capture Manjoons
Weapons	Artillery and armor, attack helicopters, mustard gas and Tabun, water barriers rigged with electrocution, mines	Infantry ferried by barges, small boats, rubber rafts; as of 1985, assault rifles, RPGs, rockets, recoilless rifles, mortars, pontoon bridges
Manpower	40,000 in 1984, drawn from 3 rd and 4 th Corps; 60,000 in 1985	50-150,000 soldiers, plus another 100,000 in reserve in 1984; 45,000-65,000 in 1985, with at least 20,000 more occupying islands
Losses ¹⁴⁴	6,000 KIA and 10-12,000 WIA in 1984; 2,500-5,000 casualties and several thousand POWs in 1985	18-26,000 KIA and 20-30,000 WIA in 1984; 11-17,000 casualties in 1985
<i>Effectiveness summary</i>		
Unit cohesion?	Yes	Yes
Tactical proficiency?	No	No
Complex operations?	No	No
Confirms theory?	Yes	Somewhat

The Battle in 1984

After launching some attacks in the north and south that attempted to draw Iraqi forces away from the marshes, Iran launched Operation Kheiber on February 24, 1984. Tens of thousands of Iranian soldiers set forth on a three-pronged amphibious assault, attempting to cross the marshes and build a bridgehead by boat before the Iraqis' artillery and armor could be brought to bear against them.¹⁴⁵ Unfortunately for the Iranians, their attempts to divert the Iraqi forces away from the marshes had not succeeded, and the Iraqis were able to respond almost immediately to the attempted crossing. Although the Iranians initially overran a few marsh villages and a few troops may even have reached the Basra-Baghdad road, Iraqi heavy weapons drove back Iran's light infantry force within the first day of

¹⁴³ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 201-3; and Ward, pp. 265-6.

¹⁴⁴ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lesson*, pp. 182-3, 203.

¹⁴⁵ Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 263-4; Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 180-1.

fighting.¹⁴⁶ According to one source, “The fighting was grim. Iraqi tanks ran over some Pasdaran infantry, and Iraq electrocuted others by diverting power lines into the marshes.”¹⁴⁷

These gruesome scenes did not halt Iran’s efforts, however, and it continued to send waves of Pasdaran into the Iraqi fields of fire. In a virtual repeat of the scenes of 1982-3, Iranian sent unprotected infantry directly into Iraqi tank fire and fixed and rotary-wing aircraft attacks in the marshes. By the end of February Iraq was using artillery and aircraft to deliver chemical munitions as well. Iraq also manipulated flooding in the area to create water barriers to Iranian movement; many Iranians drowned.

By March 1, the Iranians had run short of both supplies and the manpower needed to sustain the human waves, and Iraqi forces were able to isolate and attack the exposed units that remained. Overall, Iran lost somewhere on the order of 12-20,000 men during the fighting, five to seven times the number of Iraqi casualties.¹⁴⁸

Iran’s only territorial gains were the Manjoon Islands at the southern edge of the marshes, which had been virtually undefended. After occupying the islands on February 22, Iran had quickly dug in, built a pontoon bridge back to the Iranian side for re-supply, and brought in artillery. More than 20,000 Iranian soldiers swarmed into the tiny outpost. But by March 6, the Iraqis were ready to contest these gains, fighting bitterly to re-occupy the territory and eventually deploying mustard gas and perhaps Tabun. Iraq recovered about a quarter of the southernmost of the two Manjoon Islands but was unable to dislodge Iran from the rest of it or to re-take the northern island.¹⁴⁹

Having lost huge quantities of equipment and suffered something on the order of 18-26,000 total soldiers killed, and 20-30,000 wounded, Iran now declared Operation Kheiber a victory because of its gains on the islands. During the rest of 1984, Iran converted its pontoon bridge back to Iran into a large earthen causeway to allow for better re-supply, while keeping 250,000-330,000 soldiers at the front for future attacks. Meanwhile, Iraq, having suffered about 6,000 killed in action and perhaps twice that number wounded, prepared to defend the southern island “like a fortress under siege.”¹⁵⁰ Total combatant deaths in the war now reached 320,000: 170,000 Iranian, 150,000 Iraqi.¹⁵¹

The Battle in 1985

Despite its proclamations of triumph, Iranian losses in early 1984 were so severe that it was unable to mount any major offensive action for the rest of the year. Iraq took advantage of Iranian paralysis to launch an offensive to retake the Manjoons on February 28, 1985, but it proved inconclusive. Iraqi firepower had proven adequate for defending territory but was apparently not enough to take it. The Iranians remained where they were.

In March, Iran launched Operation Badr, which was in many ways a slightly more cautious repeat of Operation Kheiber. Again, the goal was to sever the Iraqi south from the rest of the country, cutting through the Howizeh marshes to split Basra from Baghdad. Iran had assembled 75-100,000 troops in the area, with 45-65,000 of these constituting a mixed strike force of Pasdaran, Basij, and Artesh soldiers.

¹⁴⁶ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 264.

¹⁴⁷ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 181.

¹⁴⁸ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 182; and Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 264-5.

¹⁴⁹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 182; and Ward, *Immortal*, p. 264.

¹⁵⁰ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 182-3.

¹⁵¹ Hiro, *Longest War*, p. 105.

Directly against these seven or eight Iranian division equivalents stood, again, two Iraqi divisions from 4th Corps. They guarded the marshes and the approaches to the Basra-Baghdad highway to the west. During 1984-5, Iraq had strengthened its defenses in the area, building a network of bunkers and firing positions ringed with mines, barbed wire, and other obstacles. Iraq had also worked to establish water barriers to further restrict Iranian movement. Despite these fortifications, Iraqi soldiers did not aggressively patrol the areas beyond their immediate fixed defenses, and in many places they had constructed only a single line of defense rather than layered positions that could mutually support one another.

Aware of these deficiencies, the Iranian forces charged into the marshes on March 11, 1985. With the benefit of surprise, the Iranians managed to penetrate the Iraq 4th Corps defenses, again with the use of human wave attacks. Over the next several days, the Iranians drove about 24 km into Iraq, reaching the Tigris on March 14 and stringing several pontoon bridges across it by March 15. Although a small contingent of Pasdaran and Basij forces then reached the road between Baghdad and Basra, Iran again had no ability to support their advance. Iranian armor and artillery were nowhere to be found, leaving what were essentially light infantry forces completely exposed inside Iraqi territory.

The Iraqis by now had drawn in three other divisions, bringing the total Iraqi defensive force in the area to a total of about 60,000 soldiers. Even the Republican Guard division was committed, an unusual step at this point in the war. The Iranian penetration was easily surrounded from the north, south, and west, and by March 17, Iraq had recaptured its original positions in the marshes, albeit at a heavy cost. Iraq suffered 2,500-5,000 casualties, and Iran 8-12,000.

Rather than pull back, Iran on March 19 launched an additional attack with 15-20,000 men directly on the Iraqi positions in Manjoon at the south edge of the marshes, guarded by 3rd Corps. Iran may have hoped that the attack on 4th Corps would have drawn these 3rd Corps forces away, but it did not. The Iranians again drove directly into the Iraqi defenses, suffering enormous casualties. They repeated this tactic on March 21, finally giving up two days later without evicting the Iraqis from their portion of the southern island. Another 3-5,000 Iranians had been killed or wounded, some by Iraqi use of mustard gas and Tabun.¹⁵²

Although Iran attempted to keep up the pressure during the remainder of 1985, both sides were now exhausted. Some additional fighting occurred as year the wore on, and Iraq initiated large-scale missile strikes against Iranian cities, but no further ground combat on the scale of Operation Badr occurred.¹⁵³ Nevertheless, both sides seemed to read the battles of 1984-5 as reinforcing rather than undermining their existing methods of warfare.¹⁵⁴

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of Iraq

The campaign to defend the marshes and regain the Manjoon Islands reflected poorly on Iraqi battlefield effectiveness, evincing many of the same problems that had appeared in 1982-3. First, Iraqi cohesion appears to have been adequate, although by this point that may have had to do with the consequences facing those who broke ranks. Perhaps a response to the large number of Iraqi POWs that had been captured during the first four

¹⁵² Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 200-203; and Ward, *Immortal*, p. 266.

¹⁵³ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 205-8.

¹⁵⁴ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 204.

years of the war, Iraq now had a Punishment Corps, as mentioned in Chapter 4.¹⁵⁵ It operated in the rear areas and existed specifically to coerce those who failed to perform adequately on the battlefield.¹⁵⁶ With this unit at their backs, it is not too surprising that the defending Iraqis now seemed to operate with some what better cohesion than before.

Second, Iraqi tactical proficiency was still lacking. Repeatedly, the Iranians were able to surprise the Iraqis because they did not conduct basic patrols around their static defenses. And although Iraq was able to stop the Iranian advances in most areas—except for the Manjoods—it required enormous amounts of firepower to do so. The fact that Iraq had to rely repeatedly on chemical weapons to halt a light infantry force casts some doubt on the skills of its armor, artillery, and airpower. Iraq's one real tactical success continued to be in the area of combat engineering, which certainly redounded to its benefit in the marshes, where the ability to direct water constituted a major advantage. Nevertheless, with this one exception, it is far from clear that Iraqi battlefield performance reflected an efficient use of its resources.

Lastly, Iraq continued to display virtually no ability to conduct complex operations. Iraq had multiple air and ground combat arms at its disposal in the battles for the marshes, yet it never integrated them into combined arms operations. For instance, there are virtually no examples of the Iraqis using their ground forces to pin down Iranian units that could then be attacked by airpower, even though the Iraqis had near-total air superiority during the battle. When Iraqi aircraft did attack, it was not in coordination with ground forces. The air force “failed to provide air support for Iraqi forces on the front lines.”¹⁵⁷

Moreover, one detailed analysis attributes this sort of coordination failure directly to Saddam's coup concerns, noting, “A number of officers in the Air Force were not from his network of loyal clans and tribes and were not politically reliable. . . . Due to these considerations, Hussein discouraged inter-service cooperation so that the Air Force and the Army could not coordinate a coup. On the battlefield, this arrangement resulted in the ground forces failing to work effectively with the Iraqi Air Force. By the time information from ground commanders on the battlefield filtered through the various political circles to the Air Force, it would be too late for them to perform in an effective manner. An example of such failures occurred during the battle in the Marshes in 1984 when the Iranian military was able to build a massive 17 kilometer pontoon bridge without Iraqi aircraft taking any actions to disrupt this effort.”¹⁵⁸

Additionally, despite the extensive nature of the Iraqi defenses, they remained simple and rigid, rather than layered and flexible. Iraq never adopted a defense-in-depth, even though it clearly had the equipment, weapons, and numbers needed to do so. Most notably, Iraq rarely engaged in offensive action to push the Iranians back across the border. Cordesman and Wagner have noted that even as the campaign became more and more intense, “Iraq continued to fight relatively passively. . . . It failed to give proper emphasis to increasing its infantry and assault capability.”¹⁵⁹ Instead, the Iraqis relied on their technological and fixed positional defenses to simply grind down the Iranians to the point of

¹⁵⁵ By 1984, Iraq held only 7,300 Iranian prisoners of war, whereas Iran held more than 50,000 Iraqis. Hiro, *Longest War*, p. 106.

¹⁵⁶ Hiro, *Longest War*, p. 109.

¹⁵⁷ Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces*, p. 160.

¹⁵⁸ Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces*, p. 160.

¹⁵⁹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 204.

exhaustion. In the one situation where this approach did not work, the Manjoon Islands, the Iraqis had to cede the territory.¹⁶⁰

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of Iran

Despite all the problems with Iraqi battlefield effectiveness, it managed to hold on to most of the marshes because of the continuing problems with Iranian military performance. These, too, were largely a repeat of the battles of 1982-3. Again, Iranian forces did display surprisingly good cohesion, despite the imposition of worst practices in political intervention. But, again, this cohesion was not used in the service of effective tactics, unless walking into prepared defenses counts as a tactic. Even the human wave tactics, such as they were, were not executed effectively. For example, Iran launched these attacks in broad daylight, when they were most vulnerable to Iraqi firepower. The attacks were often not timed to launch simultaneously, giving the Iraqis ample opportunity to concentrate firepower against them. Iranian soldiers also “persisted in their habit of congregating indecisively once they had achieved their objective, providing ideal targets to the well-entrenched Iraqis.”¹⁶¹ All of these errors demonstrate that Iran essentially wasted the one asset it had in spades, which was a ready supply of martyrs. This resource could have posed a far greater challenge to Iraq than it actually did, but the surprising Iranian cohesion did not translate into even limited tactical proficiency, even among the regular forces.

Third, and most important, the Iranian campaigns continued to reflect a total inability to conduct complex operations, consistent with the predictions of the theory. Again and again, even where Iranian human waves achieved a breakthrough, as when a brigade reached the Basra-Baghdad highway in the initial stages of battle in 1984, Iran had no ability to exploit these penetrations as it had in the initial battles of the war. Iranian armor, artillery, and airpower never appeared, leaving its infantry to be attacked and destroyed at the Iraqis’ leisure. Hiro observes that Iran “could not score solid achievements for the same reasons as before: its insufficiently trained revolutionary guards marched against the enemy without adequate combined arms backing and proper resupply facilities,” resulting in a campaign that was nothing short of “suicidal.”¹⁶²

As Ward notes, even where Iran demonstrated some good combat engineering skills in its planning of amphibious operations, it still never developed “a means to bring heavy artillery and antitank guns forward quickly,” and its air force “was unable to provide air cover or offset Iraqi attack helicopters.”¹⁶³ Cordesman and Wagner concur: “The reason for Iraq’s defensive victories in 1983-1984 was the combination of *both* Iraqi superiority in firepower, armor, and air power, *and* of Iran’s failure to properly plan and manage its infantry attacks.... Iran helped defeat itself by consistently exposing its manpower in direct human-wave assaults on heavily held Iraqi positions in broad daylight, without major artillery and air support, and without effective battle management.”¹⁶⁴ In short, while Iranian cohesion was impressive, the overall battlefield result was very much what the political intervention theory would predict, with both revolutionary and regular forces now performing with little effectiveness.

¹⁶⁰ Iraq eventually regained some of this territory in January 1986. Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 217-18.

¹⁶¹ Hiro, *Longest War*, p. 105.

¹⁶² Hiro, *Longest War*, p. 105.

¹⁶³ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 264.

¹⁶⁴ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 185.

VI. The Battles for Faw and Mehran, 1986

Although Iran's attempts to take significant territory in Iraq had met with failure during the previous three years, Iran continued to harbor ambitions of overthrowing the Ba'th regime. In 1986 these took the form of another major offensive, launched against several different targets in the southern sector of the front: the Howizeh Marshes, some islands in the Shatt al Arab waterway, and the Faw peninsula. It remains unclear whether Iran actually intended to capture all of these areas, or whether Faw was its only real target all along. Certainly, the Faw peninsula was prize real estate: it provided Iraq's only access to the Gulf, as well as a foothold into the Shia-majority, oil-rich Iraqi south (see map 21).¹⁶⁵

What is known is that although the other components of the Iranian offensive in February 1986 failed, the Iranians did manage to capture Faw. Many observers point to this battle as representing a major improvement in the Iranians' fighting capabilities. While the Iranian gains there were undeniable, closer inspection of the battle, especially within the context of the overall offensive, reveals more continuity than change in Iranian battlefield effectiveness. Iran did perform somewhat better at Faw than it had in earlier battles—perhaps because the operation was designed by an officer from the regular forces—but even so, the Iranians continued to have serious deficits in tactical proficiency and sustaining offensive complex operations.

Furthermore, a close look at the details of the Faw battle reveals, again, that apparent Iranian effectiveness was as much a product of Iraqi weakness as of real changes in the Iranian military. Indeed, some additional fighting in the immediate aftermath of Faw, in an area known as Mehran across the border in Iran, illustrates just how deficient Iraqi forces continued to be, because of the imposition of worst practices in political intervention.

The Forces on Each Side

In preparation for its offensive, Iran had kept nearly half of its regular army and two-thirds of the Guards deployed in the southern sector. In all, it had about 200,000 troops there at the start of 1986, equivalent to 20-25 divisions.¹⁶⁶ Although the exact numbers are unclear, a sizable portion of this force was devoted to the attack on Faw—probably a corps containing several divisions.¹⁶⁷ Iranian troops had been supplied with some new arms, such as anti-tank missiles, as well as with chemical protective gear.¹⁶⁸ Additionally, Iran had stockpiled large amounts of supplies and bridging equipment in the area and deployed some units that had been specially trained for amphibious assaults and fighting in the wetlands.¹⁶⁹

For its part, the Iraqi army was not lacking for weapons or numbers. It continued to enjoy a qualitative and quantitative overall advantage in all types of arms ranging from armor to aircraft. Additionally, the Iraqi ground forces now totaled 700-800,000 men, in addition to nearly a quarter million reservists.¹⁷⁰ On the peninsula, however, Iraq had stationed only its 26th Division, consisting of Popular Army soldiers, and within the city of Faw itself, it had

¹⁶⁵ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 219.

¹⁶⁶ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 218.

¹⁶⁷ Woods et al, *Saddam's War*, p. 74.

¹⁶⁸ Hiro, *Longest War*, p. 168.

¹⁶⁹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 218.

¹⁷⁰ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 273.

only 1,000 reservists.¹⁷¹ Clearly, despite Iraq's overall superiority, Iran had the advantage of an overwhelming local superiority in the opening stages of the battle.

THE BATTLE FOR FAW, FEBRUARY 1986		
	Iraq	Iran
<i>Battle summary</i>		
Tactical orientation	Defensive	Offensive
Plan	Defend existing positions on the front; regain Faw	Capture Faw, as part of larger southern offensive
Weapons	Armor, including T-72 tanks; chemical weapons; barriers, wire, mines	Anti-tank missiles; pontoon bridges and boats; SAMs and AAA; later, captured heavy weaponry and equipment
Manpower	On Faw: 26 th Division, consisting of Popular Army; 1,000 reservists in the city	On Faw: probably several divisions out of an overall southern front force of 200,000 Pasdaran and Artesh
Losses	8-10,000 casualties, including 30 percent among Republican Guard units; 20-25 aircraft	27-30,000 casualties
<i>Effectiveness summary</i>		
Unit cohesion?	Mixed	Yes
Tactical proficiency?	No	Yes
Complex operations?	No	No
Confirms theory?	Yes	Somewhat

The Battle for Faw

As mentioned, the battle for Faw was but one of several Iranian attacks during February 1986. First, on February 9, Iran had launched several large attacks against the Iraqi 3rd and 4th Corps in the Howizeh Marshes. It is unclear if these were intended to be major offensives in the style of Operations Kheiber and Badr, or merely distractions from the real attack in the south. Either way, they were unsuccessful, and for the same reasons that the 1984 and 1985 efforts had failed. Iraqi forces simply mowed down the waves of attacking Iranians, who seemed to employ the same tactics they had previously.¹⁷²

Meanwhile, the Iranians had also launched an amphibious assault on Umm al-Rasas, a group of islands in the Shatt north of Faw, but the Iraqis managed to turn back this thrust as well. The Iraqi high command apparently believed that this effort and the push in the marshes were all feints designed to divert their attention from Basra, where the Iranians had also initiated a massive artillery barrage.¹⁷³ But the Iraqis were wrong; the real attack in the south was coming from much farther south.

On February 10 the Iranians launched a major amphibious assault on Faw. In the midst of a driving rainstorm, Iran began a massive artillery barrage against the Iraqi lines while also sending forward an infantry division that quickly overran the first line of defenses.

¹⁷¹ Woods et al, *Saddam's War*, p. 74.

¹⁷² Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 219.

¹⁷³ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 220; and Ward, *Immortal*, p. 275.

According to Ward, “The attackers were lightly armed but were trained to use captured Iraqi tanks and ammunition, which they put to immediate use in mopping up the last few positions on the Iraqi front lines before advancing against Iraqi strongpoints and rear area facilities....”¹⁷⁴

As this spearhead punched forward, another 20,000 Iranian troops flooded in behind it, attacking, as usual, straight through the Iraqi defensive obstacles, which included trenches, wire, and mines.¹⁷⁵ Most of these defenses were not well prepared and seemed to reflect a lack of consideration of the peninsula’s strategic importance as Iraq’s economic lifeline and gateway to the oil-rich south. Although some of the Iraqi troops in the city of Faw itself held out until February 14, the Iraqi units outside the city panicked within the first two days of the Iranian attack. Surprised, disoriented by the terrible weather, and outnumbered, these Popular Army forces almost immediately abandoned their positions and equipment.¹⁷⁶

According to one Iraqi general, “Everything was happening so quickly that even after the battle started, the leadership in Baghdad and Basra still believed there was another main attack coming.”¹⁷⁷ Their misperception may also have stemmed from the unwillingness of Iraqi commanders at Faw to report their initial losses up the chain, for fear of punishment.¹⁷⁸ Finally realizing the seriousness of the advance on Faw, however, Iraq sent reinforcements to shore up the remaining lines on the peninsula. But the Iraqis’ initial counterattacks were “poorly organized.”¹⁷⁹ Iraqi armor attempted to attack, but its movement was poorly coordinated with infantry. Iraq also attempted aerial attacks, but the poor weather impeded their effectiveness.¹⁸⁰ Even the Republican Guard division, eventually sent into the fight, proved unable to conduct an effective infantry assault against the dug-in Iranians. The Iraqi troops simply were not ready for close fighting, especially on swampy terrain.¹⁸¹

Through the massive application of firepower, including chemical weapons, Iraq at last managed to break the momentum of the Iranian attack on February 14. According to Ward, “Many of Iran’s losses came from Iraq’s heavy use of chemical weapons. Despite the greater availability of masks and protective gear, the Basijis were poorly trained in using their equipment....” During this intense week, the Iraqis also burned through two hundred of their tanks’ main gun barrels and expended so much ammunition that Baghdad rushed to secure new stocks from international suppliers.¹⁸²

The Iraqi forces were now able to hold their lines, but repeated attempts to counterattack failed.¹⁸³ For nearly a week, the Iraqi forces pounded the Iranians, who by now were fully dug in. Pollack writes, “The Iraqis threw everything they had at the Iranians. They committed the air force in full, flying as many as 200 CAS or BAI [close air support or battlefield air interdiction] sorties per day, in addition to enormous quantities of artillery and heavy doses of chemical agents. However, after three weeks of constant attacks, the Iraqis had made little progress. Iraqi infantry—even the elite units—continued to perform poorly and had to rely heavily on the firepower of their tanks and artillery. Iraqi armor had to stick

¹⁷⁴ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 275.

¹⁷⁵ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 274-5.

¹⁷⁶ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 220.

¹⁷⁷ Woods et al, *Saddam’s War*, p. 74.

¹⁷⁸ Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, p. 160-1.

¹⁷⁹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 221.

¹⁸⁰ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 217; Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 220-1.

¹⁸¹ Cordesman and Wagner, p. 221.

¹⁸² Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 275-6.

¹⁸³ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 222.

to the roads because of the soft terrain, and even where the ground was firmer, they refused to maneuver against the Iranians.... Iraq was unable to suppress or defeat Iranian antitank teams either with artillery fire—slow to respond and inaccurate as ever—or with infantry, who simply did not know how to cooperate with tanks.”¹⁸⁴

Even with the use of mustard gas, Iraq’s inability to maneuver cost it entire battalions in the attempt to regain territory.¹⁸⁵ Iraqi casualties were so extensive that the military was said to have to rely on taxis just to get all the bodies out of the area, and the government engaged in forced blood donation campaigns.¹⁸⁶ Iran, too, suffered immense losses, with an estimated 27-30,000 killed or wounded in just a few weeks of fighting.¹⁸⁷

On March 9-10, the Iraqis made a last stand, attempting to conduct amphibious landings that would outflank the Iranians. But these, too, failed at great cost, and the Iraqis finally ceased their attempts at regaining territory.¹⁸⁸ An uneasy, exhausted stalemate settled over the peninsula, where 20-25,000 Iranians and some 25-32,000 Iraqis now sat in their positions only a few hundred meters apart.¹⁸⁹ Iran now occupied about 200 square km of the peninsula, which it kept supplied through pontoon bridges across the Shatt, where five divisions stood at the ready.¹⁹⁰ Iraqi defensive lines rimmed the edges of the Iranian holdings and were soon connected to the large Iraqi road network in the south, which rapidly brought in more weapons and equipment.¹⁹¹

The Aftermath: Strategy Debates and the Battle for Mebran

Overall, the 1986 offensive had damaged Iraq’s strategic position. In addition to its gains on Faw, Iranian forces had moved to within 10 miles of Sulaimaniyah, a major Kurdish city in the northern sector, and huge concentrations of Iranian troops were still poised to attack again across Faw.¹⁹² Iraq could at best defend these areas but had no ability to hold Iranian targets of similar strategic value at risk.

Neither side seemed to consider the events of 1986 to have been much of a success. In Iran a serious strategy debate ensued, although its details remain murky. What is clear is that Iran’s leaders emerged from it drawing precisely the wrong lessons. In August Khomeini removed from command the architect of the Faw operation, a Shah-era officer named General Ali Seyyed Shirazi. Shirazi had been one of the voices calling for Iran’s legacy forces to have a greater role in the development of strategy, and his removal even more firmly secured this power for the revolutionary forces, particularly the Guard, which was commanded by Shirazi’s rival, Mohsen Rezaei.¹⁹³ As in 1982, Iran’s leaders reacted to the hints of battlefield success delivered by the regular forces with an elevation of the revolutionary forces.

A similar period of debate occurred in Iraq, although with very different results. In Iraq, the events of 1986 had shaken the political-military establishment to its core. A

¹⁸⁴ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, pp. 217-18.

¹⁸⁵ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 222-3.

¹⁸⁶ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 223.

¹⁸⁷ Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 275-6.

¹⁸⁸ Hiro, *Longest War*, p. 169.

¹⁸⁹ Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 275-6; Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 224.

¹⁹⁰ Hiro, *Longest War*, p. 169.

¹⁹¹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 226.

¹⁹² Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 225-6.

¹⁹³ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 245; and Gary Sick, “Trial By Error: Reflections on the Iran-Iraq War,” *Middle East Journal*, vol. 43, no. 2 (spring 1989), p. 239.

diplomatic report from Baghdad in April 1986 noted, “Unity among the three major forces of power, the Baath Party, the army and other armed forces, and the president, has been broken. The army is unwilling to assume responsibility for the failures at al Faw, and there are many voices now openly mentioning the role of the president and his immediate entourage in this failure. Military leaders eager to fight demand that they should be given a free hand....”¹⁹⁴ The report also noted that “the military leaders responsible for events in the south have been relieved, transferred to other posts, or even executed.”¹⁹⁵ A CIA analysis at the time proved prescient in predicting that “the military probably will press Saddam for policy and operational changes to improve Saddam’s war making ability.”¹⁹⁶

Saddam responded to these apparent challenges by doubling down. In May 1986, he ordered four Iraqi divisions to seize the virtually abandoned area of Mehran across the border in Iran, which was guarded by only about 5,000 troops.¹⁹⁷ Saddam then offered to exchange Mehran for Faw, an offer Tehran rejected.¹⁹⁸ Saddam’s real miscalculation, however, had been in rejecting his generals’ advice to seize the heights surrounding Mehran, which were vital to defending the territory. Apparently, Saddam refused to let the general on the scene, Major General Adin Tawfiq, commander of the Army Second Corps, take the heights because it would have required the use of elite forces needed to defend Baghdad.¹⁹⁹

Predictably, the Iranians soon seized the heights and used them to attack the Iraqi concentration of forces in Mehran. General Tawfiq, trying to defend his disadvantaged position, requested air support after he came under attack, but because his request had to be routed through Baghdad due to restrictions on Army-Air Force communication, the approval came after the Iraqi ground forces had already been forced to retreat from the town. Tawfiq was recalled to Baghdad and is believed to have been executed.²⁰⁰ Iran rapidly regained control of Mehran.²⁰¹

Coming on the heels of Faw, this debacle only deepened the crisis within the Iraqi leadership.²⁰² Iraqi generals blamed Saddam’s intervention practices for both sets of losses. Apparently their demands for greater independence led directly to the rather dramatic shift in Saddam’s forms of political intervention in 1986-7, as discussed in Chapter 4, setting the stage for significant improvements in Iraqi battlefield effectiveness in 1988.²⁰³

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of Iraq

Even the Iraqis clearly recognized their poor effectiveness during the 1986 battles, particularly at Faw and Mehran. First, unit cohesion was mixed at best. The cohesion of the units subject to worst practices—the Popular Army units, which had the worst leaders and

¹⁹⁴ Report, Hungarian Embassy Baghdad to Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Varkony, “The Negative Impact of the War on the Iraqi Domestic Situation,” April 24, 1986, available at the National Security Archive, the George Washington University, Washington, DC.

¹⁹⁵ “The Negative Impact....”

¹⁹⁶ Intelligence Assessment, CIA Directorate of Intelligence, “Is Iraq Losing the War?” April 1986, p. 9, available at the National Security Archive, the George Washington University, Washington, DC.

¹⁹⁷ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 228.

¹⁹⁸ Hiro, *Longest War*, pp. 171-2.

¹⁹⁹ Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, p. 164.

²⁰⁰ Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, p. 164.

²⁰¹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 228.

²⁰² Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, p. 164.

²⁰³ Charles Tripp, “The Iran-Iraq War and Iraqi Politics,” in *The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), pp. 232-3.

least training—collapsed completely during the initial Iranian attack on Faw.²⁰⁴ Had they stood and fought, the initial Iranian bridgehead onto the peninsula likely never would have formed. Instead, Popular Army equipment and weapons were actually later used to attack other Iraqi units. Although some of these other units, such as the regular army and Republican Guard, did demonstrate adequate cohesion, it is important to remember that they also had the Punishment Corps at their backs.

Second, Iraqi tactical proficiency continued to display numerous limitations. The amount of firepower the Iraqis required to halt what were essentially light infantry attacks again suggests that Iraqi heavy weapons were not used with a great deal of competence.²⁰⁵ Ward notes that the Iraqis repeatedly “relied on firepower over skill and maneuver.”²⁰⁶ This seemed to be true even as Iraq threw supposedly more and more proficient units into the battle, replacing the Popular Army units with regular army units, and the regular army units with Republican Guard units. None of these forces were able to counterattack successfully, and many were destroyed trying. When it came to close fighting, even Republican Guard units simply were not able to perform well. Only through an escalation to chemical weapons were the Iraqis able to stabilize their position.²⁰⁷

Third, and most importantly, Iraqi units continued to display serious problems with complex operations. Regardless of their particular tactical deficiencies, a broader problem for the Iraqis was simply that their response to the attack on Faw was slow and late. This was in large part because commanders lacked the initiative—or permission—to organize defenses as soon as they detected the Iranian advance. They in fact failed to report up the chain how serious the initial Iranian attacks had been. Had the Iraqis reacted more quickly, the entire battle might have turned out differently. A similar story can be told about the defeat at Mehran, where the lack of independence for the field commander led to rapid Iraqi losses.

Above all, however, coordination remained the Achilles’ heel of Iraqi operations. The Iraqis missed repeated opportunities to conduct combined arms operations that could have smashed the massed Iranian forces at Faw. To be sure, the terrible weather impeded Iraqi air operations, neutralizing a major Iraqi advantage. But even with the combat arms that were in perfectly good working order during the battle—notably armor and infantry—the Iraqis repeatedly failed to integrate their movement. The same was true at Mehran, where Iraqi airpower was not impeded by weather. The Iraqi command structure was so fractured that ground forces were unable to get air support in time to save them from the disastrous position in which Saddam’s leadership had placed them.

All in all, the battles of 1986 continued to reflect very poorly on Iraqi battlefield effectiveness. For all the Iraqis’ advantages in weaponry, their political-military relations continued to exert a very real constraint on the military power they could generate.

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of Iran

Iran did capture territory during 1986, so in some sense it was more effective than it had been previously. Clearly, Iranian forces continued to be very cohesive, beyond what the political intervention explanation would predict. But many of the same battlefield problems that Iran had experienced previously with tactical proficiency and complex operations also recurred in these battles.

²⁰⁴ Pelletiere and Johnson, *Lessons Learned*, p. 51.

²⁰⁵ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 222.

²⁰⁶ Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 275-6.

²⁰⁷ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 223.

At Faw, Iran was never able to advance past its initial breakthrough, although it is notable that the breakthrough itself was an operation planned by an officer from the Shah-era regular forces, General Shirazi. Perhaps not coincidentally, the Iranian crossing of the Shatt was indeed impressive, reflecting a coordinated effort at multiple points and considerable feats of combat engineering and logistical preparation.²⁰⁸ In preparation for the campaign, Iran had apparently trained a small contingent of Pasdaran in amphibious tactics, using the waters of northern Iran as a training ground. Yet it is also important to remember that this crossing was virtually unopposed. The Iraqis were caught by complete surprise, at night, in terrible weather; they were locally outnumbered by the Iranians at a ratio of something like 20:1; and the opposing Iraqi soldiers were drawn from the Popular Army.

As soon as these factors shifted—the Iraqis realizing the scale of the attack, the weather clearing, better trained reinforcements arriving—even minimal, unskilled Iraqi resistance managed to stop the Iranian advance. The Iranians also continued to be far more vulnerable to Iraqi chemical weapons than they had to be, suffering numerous casualties from gas even though soldiers had greater protective gear. While the Iranians may have put more effort into the amphibious aspects of training and preparation for the battle, its troops still had not mastered the very basic use of gas masks, which turned out to be a deadly deficit in the actual fighting. In fact, the impact of Iraqi chemical weapons would have been far worse had the wet weather and high winds not dispersed much more of the gas than was typical.²⁰⁹

As in all of the other battles since 1982, Iran was still never able to use other combat arms to exploit the initial penetration its infantry achieved through Iraqi defensive lines. Hiro notes, for example, that yet again, “Tehran found itself unable to support its infantry with enough tanks and firepower.”²¹⁰ It was this inability to perform complex operations that ultimately limited what the Iranians could achieve on Faw, despite the influence of Shirazi. While they clearly had prepared better for this attack than for others and benefited from a series of favorable circumstances, their fundamental strategy of sending forth waves of martyrs into the teeth of Iraqi firepower had not changed. As a result, Iranian battlefield effectiveness was still far lower than it could have been given the balance of manpower and the other circumstantial advantages Iran possessed at Faw.

VII. The Karbala Offensives, December 1986-April 1987

Iran’s last attempt to take significant territory in Iraq occurred from December 1986 to April 1987, when Iran launched the Karbala offensives, a series of attacks in both the northern and southern sectors of the front. Iran’s primary objective in this campaign was to take Basra, the city it had sought since 1982. Control of Basra offered a foothold to control all of southern Iraq, whose Shia populace Iran continued to see as natural allies. Furthermore, capturing Basra would greatly hinder if not end Iraqi access to the Gulf and, at the same time, position Iran to control much of the region’s oil wealth.

As a result, the Karbala offensives, particularly the Kabala V battle for Basra in early 1987, offer a final opportunity to view Iran attempting to conduct complex offensive operations, with leaders from the revolutionary forces firmly in control of the military. It

²⁰⁸ Woods et al, *Saddam’s War*, p. 74; and Ward, *Immortal*, p. 275.

²⁰⁹ Hiro, *Longest War*, pp. 167-8.

²¹⁰ Hiro, *Longest War*, p. 168.

also offers an opportunity to examine Iraqi attempts at complex defensive operations, as well as complex counterattacks. Generally speaking, both Iran and Iraq evinced the same effectiveness problems that they had displayed in their earlier battles on this same terrain, and it would be hard to call the offensives a victory for either side. Iran certainly did not prevail in taking Basra, but neither did Iraq in evicting the Iranians from their new positions on the Iraqi side of the Shatt al-Arab.

That said, some improvements in Iraqi tactical effectiveness were evident in the Republican Guard units called into the fight. This change, although subtle, suggests that some of the shifts in Saddam's forms of political intervention during 1986 were already beginning to alter the battlefield effectiveness of these units. This variation was an important harbinger of changes that were to become fully evident in the 1988 battles.

The Forces on Each Side

At the time of the Karbala offensives, the two sides were fairly evenly matched in terms of manpower in the southern sector of the border.²¹¹ Iran had massed something on the order of 150,000-200,000 soldiers for the campaign, and Iraq could call upon a similarly sized contingent. It is important to acknowledge, however, that parity in numbers usually puts the attacker, in this case Iran, at a disadvantage, given that offensive action tends to be more manpower intensive than defensive action. In this sense, the balance of forces actually favored Iraq.²¹²

Iraqi forces consisted of army units, although they were later backed by Republican Guard units from Baghdad. Iranian forces were primarily Guard and Basij, although about a third of the forces came from the Artesh.²¹³ As in the earlier battles, these Iranian forces were mostly light infantry, although they were better armed now with anti-tank weapons including new TOW (tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided) missiles. Iraqi forces enjoyed clear superiority in armor, artillery, and fixed and rotary wing airpower.

The Iraqis also made extensive use of defensive obstacles such as mines, barbed wire, trenches, and water barriers, many of which had required extensive combat engineering during the previous several years to create. Chief among these was the aforementioned Fish Lake, a large man-made water barrier between the border and Basra, rigged with sensors, underwater obstacles, barbed wire, and electrocution zones (see map 21).²¹⁴ The Iraqis also had expanded the lake to create two additional channels to the north and south, essentially forming a giant moat guarding eastern routes of advance on the city.²¹⁵ These water barriers provided excellent fighting positions for Iraq heavy weapons. Directly surrounding Basra itself, the Iraqis had also constructed multiple rings of land defenses, converting the city into a virtual fortress.²¹⁶

[SEE NEXT PAGE]

²¹¹ Pelletiere and Johnson, *Lessons Learned*, p. 52.

²¹² Zabih, *Iranian Military*, p. 196.

²¹³ Zabih, *Iranian Military*, p. 198.

²¹⁴ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 249.

²¹⁵ Hiro, *Longest War*, pp. 180-1.

²¹⁶ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 249.

THE KARBALA OFFENSIVES, DECEMBER 1986-APRIL 1987		
	Iraq	Iran
<i>Battle summary</i>		
Tactical orientation	Defensive, then offensive	Offensive, then defensive
Plan	Defend approaches to Basra; push Iranians back from any territory gained	Cross the Shatt, launch a two-pronged assault around Fish Lake, converge on Basra; conduct additional attacks elsewhere to divert Iraqis
Weapons	Armor, artillery, air power, chemical weapons, defensive obstacles including water barriers	Rockets, missiles, anti-tank weapons including TOWs, HAWK anti-aircraft system
Manpower	In the southern sector: 200,000 soldiers, including some Republican Guard units	In the southern sector: 150,000-200,000 soldiers, mostly Pasdaran and Basij
Losses ²¹⁷	8-15,000 KIA	50,000 KIA
<i>Effectiveness summary</i>		
Unit cohesion?	Better in Republican Guards	Yes
Tactical proficiency?	Better in Republican Guards	No
Complex operations?	No	No
Confirms theory?	Yes	Somewhat

The Battle

The Iranians launched the first part of their offensive on the night of December 23, 1986, in an attack known as Karbala-4. Using an initial assault force of around 15,000 soldiers, Iran crossed the Shatt al-Arab along a 25-mile front stretching roughly from Basra to Abadan. Under cover of darkness, specially trained Iranian commandos and frogmen quickly captured several weakly defended islands in the Shatt. A much larger force of up to 60,000 Pasdaran and Basij then used these islands as stepping stones to surge across to the Iraqi side.²¹⁸

Despite this initially successful crossing, Iranian forces made virtually no progress once they attempted to move up the road toward Basra. This was mainly because their battle plan had sent them straight into the teeth of perhaps the most heavily defended area of the entire border. Iraqi minefields and barbed wire guarded huge emplacements of Iraqi heavy weapons in a massive killing zone.²¹⁹ Iran's light infantry simply was no match for these defenses, especially given that the only Artesh support for the Basij and Guard spearheads was artillery fire from the western bank of the Shatt. As in earlier battles, the human waves were also "ill-coordinated" and conducted suicidal frontal attacks during daylight hours.²²⁰

Iran suffered 9-12,000 casualties in the assault and quickly retreated back across the Shatt. The Iraqis, safe behind their defenses, suffered far fewer losses, around 1-2,000. The entire episode was a disaster for Iran, with Cordesman and Wagner noting, "The Karbala-4

²¹⁷ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 261.

²¹⁸ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 247; and Ward, *Immortal*, p. 277.

²¹⁹ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 277.

²²⁰ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 247.

offensive may have been the worst planned and executed major Iranian offensive since Bani-Sadr's ill-fated offensives early in the war. It had much of the character of the hopeless mass infantry assaults that Britain, France, and Germany had launched against well-entrenched defenses in World War I."²²¹

Despite this catastrophe, Basra continued to be the bloody fulcrum on which the Iranians had decided the entire war balanced. In the early days of January 1987, they renewed their campaign with an offensive called Karbala-5. Notwithstanding the recklessness of Karbala-4, Karbala-5 does appear to have benefited at least from some better planning, including some division-level, combined arms exercises in the Caspian.²²² Furthermore, Iran still had about 200,000 men deployed in the southern sector, although only 120-140,000 of these, mostly Basij and Pasdaran, participated in the offensive.

Recognizing that the Iraqis expected an attack on Basra to originate from farther south at Faw—a credible threat, given the events of 1986—the Iranians instead launched a two-pronged attack north and south of Fish Lake, just to the northeast of Basra. Each prong consisted of about 60,000 soldiers, with the idea that they would encircle Iraqi forces and then converge on the city (see map 21).²²³ Launching their assaults on January 9, the first spearheads consisted of about 50,000 troops, mostly waves of Basij followed by Revolutionary Guards.²²⁴ According to Cordesman and Wagner, “their initial battle management was good, and the leaders of the assault included large cadres of experienced officers, NCOs, and troops.”²²⁵

Iran made some initial territorial gains along the border, as the first Iraqi counterattacks proved unsuccessful. Indeed, the Iraqi advantage in armor was of little use in the marshy terrain, and Iraq proved unable to maneuver in the face of the Iranians' light anti-armor weapons.²²⁶ The pressure of the Iranian waves caused some Iraqi infantry formations to disintegrate, eventually allowing the Iranians to puncture two of the major defensive lines around Basra.²²⁷

On January 12, however, the Iranian advance slowed dramatically, for two major reasons. First, Iraq recognized the direction of the main attack and committed its Republican Guard forces to the fight, providing important local reinforcements.²²⁸ Second, the terrain now began to work in Iraq's favor: the closer the Iranians got to Basra, the more established the Iraqi defenses became and the drier the land on which Iraqi armor could operate. Meanwhile, Iranian lines also became longer, stressing access to supplies and ammunition.²²⁹ During January Iraq also massively escalated the air war, bombing major Iranian cities. Iran responded with missile attacks on Baghdad and Basra.²³⁰

By mid-January, Iranian losses in the offensive had risen to 40,000 men total, counting those killed and wounded, and Iraqi losses had reached at least 10,000. Nevertheless, on January 17 Iran committed another 50,000 troops to the battle, and in the following days it managed to make a few additional territorial gains. During January 19-26,

²²¹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 246-7.

²²² Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 248.

²²³ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 278.

²²⁴ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 250.

²²⁵ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 250.

²²⁶ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 250.

²²⁷ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 223; and Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 250.

²²⁸ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 223.

²²⁹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 251.

²³⁰ Hiro, *Longest War*, p. 182.

the Iranians continued to launch more infantry attacks against Basra, in some places getting to within 15 km of the city, but their daily advance was now measured in meters.²³¹ Iraqi artillery and chemical weapons continued to break up the Iranian assaults.

Iraq then attempted a major counterattack, hoping to sever the southern prong of the Iranian attack by driving south from behind Fish Lake. But according to Pollack, “The operation went nowhere. Although the counterattacking force began as a combined arms team, it almost immediately separated into its different components, with the infantry veering off to the southwest, the armor veering off to the southeast, and the artillery failing to effectively support either.” Now it was the Iraqi infantry’s turn to try frontal assaults against well-established defenses, an approach that did little to dislodge the Iranians but greatly increased Iraqi casualties.²³²

In general, Iraq continued to display serious problems in coordinating its fire from artillery and air power. Additionally, the relatively soft ground continued to absorb much of the impact of Iraqi shells and conventional fragmentation bombs. Iraq was expending tens of millions of dollars in ammunition every week and had lost more than a thousand armored vehicles. Several Iraqi officers leading forces in this battle were relieved of command, some probably executed. But Iraq continued to pour in reinforcements, and Iran continued to creep against the Iraqi defensive rings.

By early February Iran had lost probably 17,000 KIA and another 35-45,000 WIA, while Iraq had suffered 6,000 dead and at least twice that number wounded. Iran also claimed to have taken 1,750 POWs, including more than 150 officers. According to Cordesman and Wagner, “Intense fighting continued through the middle of February, and Iraqi troops did not always perform well. A few of Iraq’s secondary positions were virtually abandoned, along with large stocks of equipment and munitions, although Iraqi forces generally inflicted very high casualties for what ultimately were minor losses of territory.” Iran was now within 10 km of Basra but was trapped in the narrow strip of land between the Shatt and Fish Lake. It never broke out.²³³

Iran continued to launch new assaults into early March, but these eventually devolved into a siege of the city. When Iran called off the offensive, Saddam quickly ordered an attempt to retake the lost territory. Iraqi armor, backed by artillery and air sorties, again attempted to drive the Iranians back from their positions surrounding Fish Lake. But the Iraqis failed to maneuver adequately or to coordinate their armored movement with supporting fires.²³⁴ Pollack writes, “Again, the Iraqis were hindered by a major breakdown in combined arms cooperation and the determination of Iraqi mechanized forces to conduct simplistic frontal assaults rather than maneuvering for advantage. In addition, while Baghdad committed heavy air support for the counterattack, the Iraqi Air Force contributed little because its airstrikes were not provided in a timely fashion, were not delivered in sufficient strength to have a substantial effect, and Iraqi pilots were incapable of accurately targeting tactical military targets.”²³⁵

The battle had produced victory for neither side, only a stalemate that they both had to accept.²³⁶ Iraq could defend Basra but not counterattack. Iran could invade Iraq but not

²³¹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 251-2.

²³² Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 223.

²³³ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 252-3.

²³⁴ Hiro, *Longest War*, p. 183.

²³⁵ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 224.

²³⁶ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 279.

take its prize city. In its core elements, Karbala-5 had essentially repeated the duel at Faw the previous year.

During this period, Iran also launched several other attacks, including Karbala-6 in the area north of Baghdad in January 1987 and Karbala-7 in the Kurdish areas in March. In the latter attack, Iran gained control of some territory, which, combined with the ongoing fighting at Basra, appears to have deeply concerned the Iraqi leadership. On March 15, 1987, Saddam called a five-hour meeting with his commanders in Baghdad, which apparently led to the decision discussed in Chapter 4 to expand the Republican Guards, as well as to escalate the tanker war and expand the use of chemical weapons.²³⁷

In April, Iran renewed its attack on Basra in the Karbala-8 offensive, throwing another 30-35,000 Pasdaran directly into the Iraqi defenses. Again, the scene was “a blood bath,” producing some 8-10,000 Iranian casualties in only three days of fighting. Iraq suffered some 2,000 casualties and again managed to keep the Iranians from entering the city. Iran also launched the Karbala-9 offensive during this period in the north, achieving some limited territorial gains there.²³⁸

Overall, however, the period from December 1986 to April 1987 was devastating for Iran, inflicting so many casualties that it would never again be able to launch a “final offensive.” It may have lost as many as 50,000 men during this period. Iraq did not fare much better. It probably suffered 8-15,000 men killed in action and as many as 65,000 total casualties.²³⁹ Iranian troops remained on Iraqi soil.

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of Iraq

Iraqi battlefield effectiveness in the Karbala offensives generally continued to be poor, although some improvements were evident. First, Iraqi cohesion was mixed. It was partly the disintegration of regular army units early in the campaign that caused Baghdad to send in the Republican Guard units. These forces then stood and fought, and their cohesion clearly was better than that of the initial defenders. This is consistent with the predictions of the theory, given some of the improvements in political intervention practices that had occurred with respect to these units starting in 1986.

Second, Iraqi forces continued to display serious deficits in tactical proficiency. Clearly, Iraqi combat engineering was very good, as evidenced in the extensive defensive fortifications that greeted the Iranians upon their advance toward Basra. Iraq's extensive use of water barriers and land obstacles, and its improved road networks, all reflected this strength of the Iraqi ground forces.²⁴⁰

Nevertheless, a close examination of most of the Iraqis' actual methods of fighting reveals continuing problems. Again, the Iraqis required enormous quantities of firepower to mow down what were essentially light infantry forces, suggesting some lack of skill in the basic use of combat arms such as artillery and air power. Indeed, the campaign reveals the Iraqis repeatedly firing enormous quantities of artillery, even though it was obvious that the terrain muted the impact of this weapon. Cordesman and Wagner note, for example, “Iraqi units often wasted their artillery superiority on mass barrages in marsh areas where much of [the] effect of Iraqi shells was lost because of the use of untargeted fire against dug-in forces

²³⁷ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 257, 259-60.

²³⁸ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 260.

²³⁹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 261.

²⁴⁰ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 356.

and the absorptive capability of the soft ground.”²⁴¹ As mentioned, Iraqi pilots also seem to have delivered their ordinance late, inaccurately, and in insufficient quantity. All of these misjudgments and inefficiencies make it difficult to rate the Iraqis as tactically proficient, outside the area of combat engineering. Indeed, Pollack argues “there was little or no discernible enhancement in [Iraqi] tactical competence.”²⁴²

Some accounts do give the Republican Guard forces slightly higher marks for tactical proficiency during the Karbala offensives. For example, Woods et al argue, “The major factor in the Iraqi ability to hold off the Iranian attacks lay in the skill and capabilities of the expanded and improved Republican Guard formations.”²⁴³ Cordesman and Wagner, too, make the general observation that “Iraqi ground forces performed better than in previous years” during the battles of early 1987.²⁴⁴ In their view, “it was already clear that some aspects of Iraqi performance were improving. Iraq’s new elite forces showed increasing capability to act as a strategic reserve.”²⁴⁵ This reading of the evidence would be consistent with the predictions in Chapter 4 that as the form of Saddam’s political intervention in the Republican Guard shifted away from worst practices and toward best practices, these units’ battlefield effectiveness should have improved.

Nevertheless, it is very important not to exaggerate the extent of these shifts by early 1987. Iraqi forces, even the Republican Guard units, still were unable to perform complex operations. The Republican Guards provided greater numbers and firepower, but they hardly could have been said to be fully effective.²⁴⁶ Cordesman and Wagner are careful to note, for example, that Iraq “still could not efficiently counterattack Iranian forces with armor.... Its forces continued to fail to coordinate its ground, air, and helicopter forces efficiently. It still lacked an effective overall command structure, and it consistently committed its technology and firepower piecemeal rather than in a coherent form or in support of some coordinated form of maneuver warfare.”²⁴⁷ Over and over, Iraqi armor and infantry counterattacked separately and in frontal assaults that left them vulnerable to what little capabilities the Iranians possessed. It was for this reason that although Iraq could defend Basra, it was unable to permanently evict the Iranians.

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of Iran

Overall Iranian battlefield effectiveness in the Karbala offensives was relatively poor among both the regular and revolutionary forces. Cohesion was still surprisingly good, but it was used in human wave attacks that reflected little tactical proficiency and no ability to conduct complex operations. While the Iranians did manage to cross the Shatt, it is important to remember that they did so in the face of virtually no Iraqi defenses. As soon as Iranian forces arrived in Iraqi territory, their forces continued to drive straight into the teeth of Iraqi defenses, in broad daylight, with little effort to time the infantry assaults for maximum effect. This resulted in very minimal territorial gains for Iran at the price of a catastrophic loss of human life.

Indeed, these tactical shortcomings finally began to have strategic effects for Iran in 1987, as they severely hobbled Iran’s supply of manpower heading into the battles of 1988.

²⁴¹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 261-2.

²⁴² Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 223.

²⁴³ Woods et al, *Saddam’s War*, p. 15.

²⁴⁴ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 261-2.

²⁴⁵ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 357.

²⁴⁶ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 223.

²⁴⁷ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 261-2.

It is true that the Iranians seem to have done slightly better in the Karbala offensives in terms of their use of amphibious operations, anti-tank weapons, and anti-aircraft missiles.²⁴⁸ But overall, the Iranian forces still reflected their lack of training, leadership by revolutionary zealots, and highly fractured command structure.

This was most clear when the Iranians attempted to conduct complex operations. Virtually all attempts to combine combat arms—for example, by relying on artillery from across the Shatt to support infantry in Karbala-4, or by linking up the two major prongs of its assault on Basra in Karbala-5—met with failure.²⁴⁹ Iranian battlefield effectiveness among both regular and revolutionary forces was therefore generally consistent with what the theory would predict, with the exception of the forces' continued cohesion.

VIII. The Second Battle for Faw, April 1988

In the spring of 1988, the Iraqis returned to the offensive, seeking to take territory from the Iranians in a manner not seen since the first year of the war (see map 22). Iraq chose as its initial point of attack the Faw peninsula, which Iran had taken two years earlier. Faw had both symbolic and strategic significance. Not only had it been the scene of a major Iraqi defeat, but the Iraqis probably recognized that the continuing Iranian foothold there hindered the Iraqis from taking other territory they wished to regain in the south, notably the Manjoods and the areas near Fish Lake outside Basra.

The Iraqi attempt to retake Faw therefore offers a useful opportunity to view an Iraqi attempt at complex offensive operations—the first such attempt since the shifts in political intervention practices toward the Republican Guard that began in 1986 and had accelerated during 1987 and early 1988. If the political intervention explanation is right, the substantial changes in Iraqi promotion, training, command, and information management practices during this period should have led to an observable improvement in Iraqi battlefield effectiveness by April 1988. This contrast should have been especially evident in comparison with Iranian performance, which should not have shifted because there was no major change in Iranian leaders' political intervention practices during this same period.

In fact, the battle provides confirmation of these predictions, showing strong Iraqi cohesion, greatly improved tactical proficiency, and a much better ability to conduct complex operations than seen in the earlier battles. It is important not to overstate the extent of these changes, and also to acknowledge that in this particular battle the Iraqis also had strong numerical and material advantages. However, the Iraqis had had a superiority in weapons and, in some cases, the local balance of manpower at numerous points already in the war, without ever demonstrating the ability to perform complex operations. A close analysis of the fighting at Faw in 1988 makes it clear that the Iraqis were certainly more skilled now at the tasks required in modern battle. Given the nature of their opponent—a military fully subject to worst practices in political intervention, and finally cracking under the enormous human costs of its suicidal tactics—this edge was more than enough to finally deliver a victory to the Iraqis.

The Forces on Each Side

²⁴⁸ Hiro, *Longest War*, p. 181.

²⁴⁹ Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 278-9.

The balance of forces both locally and nationally heavily favored the Iraqis after the Iranian disasters of 1986. Iran's total manpower had fallen to only 600,000, while Iraq now had a million-man army.²⁵⁰ Indeed, Iran had begun to experience serious mobilization problems. Whatever Iranians' beliefs about the revolution, Arab invaders, or the rewards of martyrdom, the enormous casualties and strategic futility of the human wave attacks had become obvious, and far fewer citizens were willing to sign on to military service.²⁵¹

By the spring of 1988, Iran had reduced its presence in the garrison at Faw from some 30,000 troops to only 5-8,000. This may partly have been in preparation for a troop rotation but also reflected the Iranian mobilization problems and the fact that it did not expect an Iraqi challenge at Faw. The Iranian troops at Faw also were far from Iran's best, mostly older soldiers and volunteers rather than Artesh forces.²⁵²

By contrast, Iraq had marshaled something on the order of 100,000 troops for the battle at Faw, mostly Republican Guard, as well as 3rd and 7th Corps forces. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the Republican Guard had not only expanded in size during the last two years but also had been subject to major changes in how its combat leaders were chosen, the rigor and frequency of training it underwent, the nature of its command structure, and the way it managed information. Merit and combat competence had become much more important in selecting Republican Guard leaders; combined arms training had become extensive and much more realistic at both the small- and large-unit levels; command authority had been decentralized much more so than before; and information sharing both between Saddam and his senior officers, and among the different parts of the military, had finally been allowed.

Iraq also had fed large stockpiles of artillery, chemical weapons, and ammunition into the area in preparation for the attack, which was to be a combined arms amphibious assault. For its part, Iran still retained significant stockpiles of armor and artillery in the garrison at Faw, which, after all, had been the site of a major earlier battle. However, Cordesman and Wagner note, "The Iranian defensive positions were surprisingly badly developed. They lacked depth and were not particularly well sheltered or reinforced with tank barriers. The only major sheltered area was the central Iranian command post in the town of Faw. Many defensive facilities had been left unfinished, and there seems to have been little training or preparation for gas warfare."²⁵³

[SEE NEXT PAGE]

²⁵⁰ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 292.

²⁵¹ Woods et al, *Saddam's War*, p. 15; and Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 231-2, 260-1, 324.

²⁵² Hiro, *Longest War*, p. 203; and Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 373.

²⁵³ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 373.

THE SECOND BATTLE FOR FAW, APRIL 1988		
	Iraq	Iran
<i>Battle summary</i>		
Tactical orientation	Offensive	Defensive
Plan	Combined arms amphibious assault to evict Iranians	Fixed defense from prepared positions
Weapons	Artillery, armor, chemical weapons, air support	Infantry, artillery, mines, barbed wire, water barriers
Manpower	100,000 soldiers, headed by Republican Guard units	8-15,000 Pasdaran and Artesh
Losses	1,000	Heavy, but number unknown
<i>Effectiveness summary</i>		
Unit cohesion?	Yes	No
Tactical proficiency?	Yes	No
Complex operations?	Yes	No
Confirms theory?	Yes	Somewhat

The Battle

Saddam carefully planned the attack on Faw in consultation with six senior officers.²⁵⁴ In the month before the attack, they worked to sow Iranian confusion about the likely targets of future Iraqi offensives. Iraqi forces moved around the front, deliberately giving the general impression that most deployments were occurring in the northern sector, where some fighting had already taken place in March. Iraq also chose to launch the attack on April 17, the first day of Ramadan, when Iranian forces would not be in their normal state of alert.²⁵⁵

At five in the morning, the Iraqis launched a massive air and artillery bombardment against the defenders at Faw, subjecting them to both chemical and conventional munitions.²⁵⁶ A multi-part ground assault then began. First, according to Pollack, a Republican Guard naval infantry brigade had “conducted an amphibious assault against the southern coast of the peninsula, flanking the Iranian lines.”²⁵⁷ Then a large contingent of Republican Guards, at least two division equivalents, attacked the southern end of the Iranian lines on Faw. Meanwhile, still more Republican Guard forces pushed up from the foothold on the southern coast, moving into the city itself. At the same time, the regular army’s 7th Corps hammered the Iranians from the north by driving directly down the bank of the Shatt. One division from this corps—the 6th, which, as noted in Chapter 4, had received additional training—eventually broke through the Iranian lines, while another—the 1st Mechanized Division, which also had received additional training—managed to link up with the Guard units that had pushed up from the south.²⁵⁸

Iraqi forces faced considerable fixed defenses as they advanced through minefields, barbed wire, and water barriers. They continued to rely liberally on nonpersistent nerve gas to overwhelm the Iranian defenders. Cordesman and Wagner also discuss the importance of

²⁵⁴ Woods et al, *Saddam’s War*, p. 15.

²⁵⁵ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 370-33.

²⁵⁶ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 292-3.

²⁵⁷ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 225.

²⁵⁸ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 225; and Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 374.

Iraqi artillery in the battle, noting that it was “effective” and “clearly benefited from its improved training in 1987. Iraqi artillery moved more quickly, was more responsive to commanders in the forward area, and did a much better job of shifting and concentrating fires.”²⁵⁹ Additionally, the Iraqi air force flew over 300 sorties in support of the attack, reflecting an improved ability to work with ground forces.²⁶⁰

The Iranians did receive some fire support from the eastern bank of the Shatt, but they were too surprised, outnumbered, and outfought to hold out for long. According to Cordesman and Wagner, “Many Iranian forces put up only a brief defense, and the local commanders showed little ability to rally their troops. Few units showed any of the willingness to die that had characterized Iranian forces in previous campaigns. The Iranian defenders began to pour back across the Shatt, but Iraqi fighters also knocked out two of the three pontoon bridges across the Shatt al-Arab from Iran to Faw. This still allowed Iranian troops to retreat but forced them to retreat in disarray and without their equipment.”²⁶¹ The Iranian leadership also may have been delayed in responding due to a major naval confrontation with the United States in the Gulf on April 18.²⁶²

Although exact figures do not appear in reports of the second battle for Faw, all sources agree that Iranian losses were “heavy” in terms of both men and equipment.²⁶³ Iraqi casualties, too, are unclear based on reports of the battle, but one reliable source suggests that about 1,000 Iraqi soldiers were lost.²⁶⁴ Within 35 hours of the start of the attack, Iraq had restored its control of the peninsula and captured virtually all of the Iranian armor, artillery, and equipment in the garrison at Faw.²⁶⁵ It was, as an American intelligence cable put it at the time, “by far the biggest Iraqi military victory since 1981.”²⁶⁶

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of Iraq

Iraqi battlefield effectiveness at the second battle of Faw was significantly better than it had been at any other point in the war, including during the invasion in 1980. First, Iraqi cohesion was excellent. There were no reports of Iraqi forces breaking and running, despite being on the offense and despite the heavy casualties suffered when surmounting the Iranians’ fixed defenses. The sheer speed of the Iraqi attack also suggests that soldiers had a solid willingness to fight. This was a very different picture from Iraqi cohesion on this same terrain only two years earlier and is consistent with what the political intervention explanation would expect of Republican Guard units at this point in the war.

Second, Iraqi tactical proficiency was clearly better here than it had been earlier in the war. Artillery and airpower were used more accurately and in a more timely fashion, suggesting greater skill. Iraqi forces were able to penetrate Iranian lines quickly, suggesting that the increased infantry training had paid off. The Iraqis also demonstrated obvious proficiency in basic amphibious warfare skills, reflected in their amphibious landings and

²⁵⁹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 374.

²⁶⁰ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 225; and Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq’s Armed Forces*, p. 170.

²⁶¹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 374.

²⁶² Craig L. Symonds, *Decision at Sea: Five Naval Battles That Shaped American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), part 5.

²⁶³ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 292-3.

²⁶⁴ Williamson Murray and Kevin Woods, “Saddam and the Iran-Iraq War: Rule from the Top,” paper presented at the London School of Economics, September 24, 2010, p. 21, available upon request.

²⁶⁵ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 375.

²⁶⁶ Cable, CIA Directorate of Intelligence, “Middle East Brief [Excised] for April 20, 1988,” April 20, 1988, available at the National Security Archive, the George Washington University, Washington, DC.

rapid destruction of the Iranians' pontoon bridges. Despite the fact that much of the war had already been fought on marshy terrain, these capabilities were new.

Third, and most importantly, the Iraqis for the first time in the war showed that they could execute complex operations. The assault on Faw actually integrated different combat arms so that they each supported and enhanced the combat power of the others. Artillery and air power actually responded to the needs of the ground forces, for example. Although the Iraqis had used all these combat arms in previous battles, they had been far less effective in those instances because they had operated more or less independently of one another.

Furthermore, the battle reflected impressive coordination among large Iraqi ground units, something the Iraqis had thus far also failed to demonstrate. The Iraqi plan required synchronized movements among multiple different divisions in order to squeeze the Iranians out of their positions. The fact that the Iraqis actually managed to position (in some cases, through amphibious landings) and move these forces according to plan and without any detection by the Iranians showed significantly greater effectiveness than they had exhibited before. For example, the Republican Guard units driving up from the south did in fact link up with the 7th Corps forces driving down from the north as planned.

Part of the reason that the Iraqis could advance so quickly and execute these sorts of plans was that command decisions no longer had to be routed through Baghdad.²⁶⁷ In other words, commanders—who themselves were more competent than had been the case previously—were actually able to take advantage of the improved training and information sharing that had occurred among their forces in the last year. Certainly, the Iranians' poor performance also accelerated the Iraqi victory at Faw. Some accounts, particularly those written in the period just before the 1991 Gulf War, perhaps have overstated just how much the Iraqis improved by the war's final years.²⁶⁸ But the shifts that had occurred in Saddam's political intervention practices were essential to Iraq's ability to exploit Iran's long-standing deficiencies.²⁶⁹

Furthermore, even Pollack, who is highly skeptical about the military capabilities of Arab armies, notes that Faw was the beginning of a period that saw "a higher degree of effectiveness than the Iraqi military had ever hinted at previously."²⁷⁰ Pollack emphasizes that the Iraqi attacks, at Faw and in the subsequent offensives discussed below, remained heavily pre-planned, even rigid, and argues that at a tactical level the Iraqis "did not internalize any of the concepts that lay behind these carefully scripted moves."²⁷¹ In his view, the Iraqi improvements in effectiveness were mostly the result of a better general staff planning and limited primarily to Republican Guard units.

In short, Pollack's claim is not that there was no improvement in Iraqi performance, only that the Iraqis still did not meet the standard of combined arms maneuver warfare set by, say, the best American divisions during the Cold War or the Israelis in 1967. No doubt this is true, but it also does not deny that Iraqi units subjected to different practices in political intervention after 1986 still performed remarkably better than they had only a short time earlier using essentially the same weapons and human capital, fighting the same opponent on the same terrain, and under the influence of the same broad structural factors such as culture, regime type, and level of economic development. These other variables may

²⁶⁷ Al-Marashi and Salama, *Iraq's Armed Forces*, p. 171.

²⁶⁸ See, for example, Pelletiere and Johnson, *Lessons Learned*.

²⁶⁹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 353.

²⁷⁰ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 229.

²⁷¹ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 231.

not have been irrelevant to a full explanation of all aspects of Iraqi military performance in 1988, but clearly the shift in political intervention produced important shifts in battlefield effectiveness. At least, the Iranians probably found these shifts to be important.

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of Iran

Iranian battlefield effectiveness in the second battle of Faw was poor and reflected a military firmly under the grip of worst practices. First, Iranian forces finally showed serious cohesion problems. On the one hand, their unwillingness to fight and disorderly retreat were probably reasonable; the small contingent at Faw was outnumbered and outgunned, although the small size of the detachment also reflected the larger mobilization problems Iran was experiencing by this point in the war. That said, Iran had faced local imbalances of forces and weapons already in the war, and its units still generally stood and fought. Up until this point, some other factor—nationalism, revolutionary fervor, a quest for Shia martyrdom, or some combination of these—had motivated Iranian soldiers to remain cohesive despite the imposition of worst practices in political intervention. The possible influence of these other factors will be discussed in more detail at the end of the chapter. For whatever reason, though, by the spring of 1988 these factors could no longer compensate for the reality that a great many young Iranian men simply did not want to fight and die in futile infantry attacks.²⁷²

Second, in what little fighting they did in this battle, the Iranians continued to demonstrate serious tactical deficits. Whatever traces of competence the Shah's practices had left behind were clearly gone. For example, despite being ensconced in Faw for two years, their fixed positions were, as mentioned, not especially well prepared. They never managed to use most of the armor and artillery that they apparently did have in the garrison. The Iranian retreat was so disorderly that it also left behind most equipment and weapons. There also had been little preparation for defense against chemical weapons, even though the Iraqis had been using such munitions since 1983.

All of these actions reflect exactly what the political intervention theory would predict of a military subject to worst practices. Lastly, it almost goes without saying that the Iranians were unable to conduct complex operations at Faw, as had been the case in most earlier battles. The Iranian command structure continued to be so fractured due to the divisions between the Artesh and the revolutionary forces that such operations remained virtually impossible.²⁷³

IX. The Iraqi Final Offensives, May-July 1988

The Iraqi victory at Faw was but the first in a string of five major offensives it conducted during the spring and early summer of 1988. The other four occurred near Fish Lake outside Basra; in Mehran in the central sector of the front; at the Manjooon Islands in the Howizeh Marshes; and in Dehloran, also in the central sector (see map 22). In each of these battles, the Iraqis sought to retake territory defended by Iranian forces, providing important additional opportunities to observe attempted Iraqi complex offensive operations and Iranian complex defensive operations.

²⁷² Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 353.

²⁷³ Woods et al, *Saddam's War*, p. 15.

Notably, the evidence from these battles confirms the pattern established in the second battle of Faw: the Iraqi armed forces demonstrated significantly improved effectiveness, while Iranian forces continued to perform poorly. The consistency of the evidence across these multiple additional offensives suggests that the Iraqi victory at Faw was no fluke. Instead, it reflected a sustained increase in the degree of military power that Iraq was able to generate from its national resources—an increase directly attributable to the shifts in the nature of political intervention in the Iraqi military that had occurred since 1986 and especially during 1987. By contrast, continuing Iranian effectiveness problems reflected the country's full adherence to worst practices in political intervention toward the military.

The Forces on Each Side

The overall balance of forces during Iraq's final four offensives was essentially the same as it had been during the second battle for Faw. All of the Iraqi attacks were led by the Republican Guard Forces Command (RGFC), usually acting in conjunction with some armored, mechanized, and/or infantry elements from the regular army corps located near the sites of particular battles. Total Iraqi manpower involved in this series of battles was well over 100,000 men, which gave Iraq a substantial local advantage in all of the battles. Although the exact number of Iranian forces in each of these confrontations is unknown, most reports refer only to division-size or smaller formations. Additionally, the Iraqis enjoyed an overwhelming superiority in armor and artillery—including chemical weapons—in these battles, as will be discussed below.

IRAQI FINAL OFFENSIVES, MAY-JULY 1988		
	Iraq	Iran
<i>Battle summary</i>		
Tactical orientation	Offensive	Defensive
Plan	Evict Iranian forces from Basra, Manjoon Islands and Howizeh Marshes, and Mehran; capture Dehloran	Initially, defend positions; then, retreat
Weapons	Armor, fixed and rotary wing aircraft, artillery with chemical and conventional munitions, pontoon bridges and engineering equipment	Fixed defenses containing mines, barbed wire, water barriers; minimal armor and artillery
Manpower	100,000+: multiple Republican Guard units, including special naval infantry brigade; additional armored, mechanized, and infantry forces from III, IV, and VII Corps	Probably no more than 2-3 divisions at any given point of Iraqi attack, so no more than 1/3 or 1/4 of the total Iraqi forces
Losses	Unknown but usually minimal	Significant, including POWs
<i>Effectiveness summary</i>		
Unit cohesion?	Yes	No
Tactical proficiency?	Yes	No
Complex operations?	Yes	No
Confirms theory?	Yes	Somewhat

The First Battle

Basra remained a key locus of contention, and after re-taking Faw, the Iraqis sought to end the Iranian threat to their second-largest city once and for all. Iran still retained something on the order of five divisions near Basra from the Karbala V offensive in early 1987, creating a large salient south of Fish Lake (see map 21).²⁷⁴ Additionally, according to Cordesman and Wagner, “The Iranian defenses in the area involved a well-designed mix of trenches, sand-mound fortifications, barbed wire, tank snares, and minefields.” Already in early 1988, Iraq had begun to drain Fish Lake in order to dry out the terrain surrounding these Iranian positions and enable easier use of Iraqi armor. The Iranians did their best to re-flood the area but failed.²⁷⁵

In May 1988, Iraq surged more than 100,000 soldiers to the area around Basra, building up a local manpower advantage of at least 3:1 or 4:1 over the Iranian defenders. Iraqi forces included the newly trained and expanded Republican Guard units, including the same special naval infantry forces that had been used the previous month at Faw. They enjoyed an enormous advantage in armor, as high as 15:1 or 20:1, according to Pollack.²⁷⁶ Iraq also created attack routes for these forces to use in moving out of the defenses around the city, which now included even more concentric rings of fixed defenses interlaid with observation and artillery posts.²⁷⁷ Nevertheless, Iraq also managed to conduct some deception operations that convinced Iran the real attack was coming from farther north, leading the Iranian forces around Basra to be unprepared for what was to come.²⁷⁸

On the morning of May 25, Iraq launched a massive attack reminiscent of the assault on Faw a month earlier, bombarding the Iranians with huge quantities of artillery, including chemical munitions. Before Iranian forces had to time to recover or react, Iraqi armored and mechanized forces charged into the Iranian flanks, rapidly enveloping them. Iran initially attempted a counterattack, imposing “significant casualties” on the Iraqis who tried to penetrate their lines. But Iraq called in fixed wing aircraft for close air support and also used them as spotters for its artillery, which provided additional support to the ground forces.²⁷⁹

Within hours, the Iranian forces retreated in disorder, leaving much of their equipment and weapons behind. These included more than 100 tanks and 150 artillery pieces, many of them captured by Iraq without signs of combat damage. In fact, observers who walked the battlefield after the fight found the Iranian positions still filled with soldiers’ personal effects, as well as a great deal of unused ammunition, grenades, bullets, gas masks, and small rockets. There was little sign of the high Iranian casualties that had characterized earlier battles, and indeed, at least 350 Iranian soldiers surrendered without resisting.²⁸⁰ Other reports indicated that Iranian officers and soldiers had commandeered civilian cars and buses in order to flee the battlefield as quickly as possible.²⁸¹ In one fell swoop, Iran had surrendered all of its gains in the area from 1987, achieved at the cost of tens of thousands of war dead.²⁸²

²⁷⁴ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, pp. 225-7.

²⁷⁵ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 381-2.

²⁷⁶ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 225-7.

²⁷⁷ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 381-2.

²⁷⁸ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 225-7.

²⁷⁹ Cordesman and Wagner, p. 382-3.

²⁸⁰ Cordesman and Wagner, p. 382-3.

²⁸¹ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 293.

²⁸² Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 383.

The Second Battle

The next Iraqi attack came in mid-June against the Iranian city of Mehran in the central sector of the front. Again, Mehran had been the scene of an ugly Iraqi defeat in the aftermath of the Faw disaster in 1986. And again, Iraqi forces followed the pattern they had established to reverse their earlier losses, although the battle at Mehran was certainly on a much smaller scale than the fighting at Faw and Fish Lake.

Iraq massed several divisions (along with some soldiers from the Mujahedeen e-Khalq, an Iranian dissident group) and initiated an enormous artillery barrage that, predictably, included extensive use of chemical weapons. Without giving the Iranian defenders time to react to this assault, Iraqi armor rapidly conducted a double envelopment, virtually destroying the two Revolutionary Guard division equivalents defending the town.²⁸³ Iraq easily overwhelmed the Iranian defenses and advanced almost 20 miles into the country. There do not appear to have been high casualties on either side, though the Iranians lost the equipment of their two divisions.²⁸⁴

The Third Battle

Only a week after retaking Mehran, on June 25, Iraq launched a third attack, this time on the Iranian positions on the Manjool Islands in the Howizeh Marshes. The assault followed the same pattern the Iraqis had established in their earlier efforts. Again, Iraq initiated a massive artillery barrage containing both conventional and chemical weapons. Then its Republican Guard forces, including the same naval infantry brigade that had fought at Faw and at Basra, executed an amphibious assault to take the islands, supported by air power and Iraqi tanks that had been carefully pre-positioned in the marshes to provide supporting firepower. After Iraqi infantry had streamed onto the island in small boats and amphibious armored vehicles, combat engineers then rushed in to build pontoon bridges and earthen causeways so that Iraqi armor could move in to defend the islands against any Iranian attempt to retake them.²⁸⁵

Then the Iraqis, led by two Republican Guard division equivalents, initiated a double envelopment of the remaining Iranian forces in the area. Specifically, according to Pollack, “The RGFC’s Hammurabi and Madinah Armored Divisions, supported by the Nebuchadnezzar Infantry Division, swung around to the north and linked up with mechanized formations from the III Corps that had looped around to the south thirty kilometers into Iran.”²⁸⁶ Enjoying an enormous superiority in weapons by this point—Iraq had perhaps 2,000 tanks and 600 artillery pieces, compared to 50-60 Iranian tanks and a handful of artillery pieces—the Iraqis obliterated the Iranian defenders. Iran suffered thousands of casualties, and many of its soldiers surrendered to the Iraqis after putting up little more than token resistance.²⁸⁷ According to Pollack, “The Iraqis mauled six to eight army and Revolutionary Guard divisions in their envelopment, seizing all of their weapons before pulling back across the border.”²⁸⁸

²⁸³ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 227.

²⁸⁴ Ward, *Immortal*, p. 293.

²⁸⁵ Woods et al, *Saddam's War*, p. 88; Pollack, *Arabs at War*, pp. 227-8; and Cordesman and Wagner, p. 389.

²⁸⁶ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, pp. 227-8.

²⁸⁷ Ward, *Immortal*, pp. 293-4; and Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 389.

²⁸⁸ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, pp. 227-8.

The Fourth Battle

On July 12, Iraq launched the last attack, seeking to capture the Iranian city of Dehloran. Located in the central sector of the front, Dehloran had no particular importance except that its capture would clearly demonstrate the full implications of Iraq's new offensive power: it had the capability not only to retake all its own territory but also to drive back into Iran in a manner not seen since 1980.

The Republican Guard Forces Command again led the attack, this time in conjunction with mechanized elements of the army's 4th Corps. In the same pattern used in the other offensives of 1988, Iraq launched an initial artillery bombardment using both chemical and conventional weapons. Then, as in the other battles, "the Iraqis conducted a double envelopment, with the Republican Guard forming one prong and the IV Corps forming the other." In this attack, "the Iraqis met little resistance and drove 40 kilometers into Iran, encircling and routing a number of enemy formations."²⁸⁹ Within hours, all Iranian defenses had "quickly collapsed."²⁹⁰

On July 13, Iraq issued a public threat to invade all of southern Iran if Iran did not abandon its only remaining positions on Iraqi soil, which were in the northern sector. Meanwhile, rather than attempt to hold the 1,500 square miles of territory they had captured, Iraqi forces retreated back across the border. Some 2,500 prisoners and large amounts of captured equipment were in tow. Iran quickly complied with the Iraqi demands for withdrawal, and Khomeini soon accepted a ceasefire. The war officially ended on August 8, 1988.²⁹¹

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of Iraq

Iraqi performance in the final four battles of the war demonstrates that the improvements in battlefield effectiveness evinced at the second battle for Faw were not anomalous. First, Iraqi cohesion continued to be the dog that didn't bark: there were no reports of Iraqi units breaking and running, disintegrating, collapsing, or retreating, as had happened earlier in the war. There were no reports of Iran taking additional Iraqi prisoners, despite the large number that had been taken in other phases of the conflict. Instead, most accounts of these battles stress the speed of Iraqi attack, which suggests that soldiers' willingness to fight was not a problem.²⁹²

Second, Iraqi tactical proficiency continued to be quite good compared to earlier in the war. It is very important not to ignore the significant Iraqi advantages in weapons in these final offensives, of course, but being outgunned was nothing new for the Iranians: Iraq had been better armed in terms of quality and quantity throughout the war, but this edge, even with the use of chemical weapons, had never translated into a war winning advantage until 1987-8. This seems to have occurred because the Iraqis finally knew how to use the weapons that they had. Airstrikes and artillery reached their targets; Iraqi tanks were well positioned to provide fire support to advancing forces; amphibious forces actually gained control of marshy areas so that combat engineers could build the necessary bridges to transport heavier weapons and equipment. These activities all reflect improvements in basic tactical skills that Iraqi forces had repeatedly failed to demonstrate earlier in the war.

²⁸⁹ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 228.

²⁹⁰ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 395.

²⁹¹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 395-8.

²⁹² Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 382.

Third, and most important, Iraq continued to demonstrate a much better ability to conduct complex operations. Cordesman and Wagner, for example, repeatedly characterize Iraqi operations in this period as “effective combined arms and maneuver warfare.”²⁹³ An effusive American military assessment goes so far as to claim that the final Iraqi offensives represented “the perfection of the Iraqi attempt to develop combined arms practices.”²⁹⁴ This sort of praise must be taken with a barrel of salt, given that it was written as the U.S. military prepared to fight a war with Iraq; surely, no American analyst wanted to make the mistake underestimating the capabilities of a soon-to-be adversary. Nevertheless, the American assessment correctly notes that Iraqi forces in 1988 “were the beneficiaries of tested training techniques, experienced cadres, and especially of training time.... As they began operational training for the final campaign, their use of mock-ups—upon which entire divisions trained repeatedly—was highly effective.”²⁹⁵

In other words, there had been real changes in how well the Iraqis were able to integrate different combat arms in operations that required both coordination and initiative—and, crucially, these changes stemmed from the very different forms of political intervention the Iraqis had adopted after 1986, particularly with respect to training. Even Pollack writes that Iraqi forces “conducted fairly deep maneuvers that led to the encirclement of sizeable Iranian forces. The offensives were preceded by highly effective deception operations and benefited from excellent intelligence regarding the disposition of Iranian forces at the start of the battle. What’s more, all of the Iraqi operations moved crisply and efficiently.”²⁹⁶ He continues to stress, however, that the Iraqi improvement was only “relative,” “adequate,” and “modest,” especially given the country’s overwhelming material advantages by 1988.²⁹⁷ Clearly, there is some daylight between his view and the American military’s interpretation that by war’s end the Iraqi military had become “a first-class fighting institution.”²⁹⁸ Still, it is clear that Iraqi fighting effectiveness did grow very substantially in 1988, consistent with the general predictions of the political intervention explanation.

Assessing the Battlefield Effectiveness of Iran

Iranian battlefield effectiveness in the final four battles was at least as poor as it had been at the second battle for Faw. First, Iranian cohesion continued to give out. Repeatedly, Iranian forces put up little resistance and retreated in disorder. While there is no doubt that Iraq had a large advantage in armaments, it is important to remember that the Iranians also abandoned huge amounts of perfectly good military equipment and weapons. The Iraqi government at one point actually put on show all it had captured: thousands of abandoned assault rifles, over 570 tanks, more than 300 armored personnel carriers, over 320 towed artillery weapons, 45 self-propelled artillery weapons, over 300 anti-aircraft guns, and numerous machine guns. According to Cordesman and Wagner, “Virtually all of this equipment was intact and functional, and much of it looked brand new.”²⁹⁹ Clearly, Iranian

²⁹³ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, pp. 76, 382, 388.

²⁹⁴ Pelletiere and Johnson, *Lessons Learned*, p. 48.

²⁹⁵ Pelletiere and Johnson, *Lessons Learned*, p. 48.

²⁹⁶ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, pp. 230-1.

²⁹⁷ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, pp. 230-1.

²⁹⁸ Pelletiere and Johnson, *Lessons Learned*, p. 2.

²⁹⁹ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 396.

effectiveness deficits stemmed from more than a lack of weapons; its forces lacked the will to use those weapons.³⁰⁰

Iranian tactical proficiency and complex operations were almost irrelevant in the final battles. Only in the fighting at Fish Lake did the Iranians even try to counterattack, and their efforts quickly failed. Iranian forces generated virtually no combat power from their resources in the final year of the war—a fact that Iran’s own leadership seemed to acknowledge by finally accepting a ceasefire that gave it essentially the same territory it had held in 1982.

X. Disconfirming Evidence and Possible Alternative Explanations

Although the battlefield evidence discussed above provides substantial support for the theory, it is also important to look carefully for any disconfirming evidence. The Vietnam chapters did this by examining additional battles, in part because the battles initially examined had produced very decisive values of the dependent variable, indicating robust support for the theory: the battles consistently showed that North Vietnamese units fought very well and South Vietnamese units poorly, with the systematic exception of the 1st division. The last section of the chapter therefore tried to seek outliers from this pattern and to evaluate whether they confirmed the theory or lent support to alternative explanations.

In the Iran-Iraq cases, there are no major additional battles that seem to display surprising values on the dependent variable. Rather, in the battles already discussed, the value of the dependent variable was not as always as extreme as the theory would predict. For example, until the last year of the war, Iranian units were consistently more cohesive than the theory would predict. This evidence poses a different kind of challenge to the theory: what allowed for Iranian cohesion, despite the imposition of worst practices in political intervention?

Below, this section tries to answer that question, examining possible ideological sources of Iranian fighting effectiveness. The section also examines another case-specific alternative explanation: that battlefield events were simply the product of the two sides’ material capabilities, including support from outside powers. Overall, the section concludes that all of these factors played some role in the war, but they are insufficient to explain the full timing and range of variation seen in the battlefield effectiveness of the two sides. As such, the political intervention variable remains crucial in explaining the phenomena of interest.

The Role of Ideology

The consistent cohesion of Iranian forces constitutes a striking empirical anomaly. Despite being subject to the results of worst practices in political intervention—incompetent leaders, inadequate training, a convoluted command structure, and poor information sharing—soldiers in the Iranian ground forces rarely surrendered, deserted, or retreated during battles, at least until the last year of the war. More than a million Iranian men were willing not just to stand and fight but to engage in battlefield tactics that all but guaranteed their deaths. Iranian soldiers, particularly those in the Basij, were more than brave or resilient; they were suicidal, completely willing to walk into certain death in the face of Iraqi firepower.

³⁰⁰ Cordesman and Wagner, *Lessons*, p. 395.

Virtually all sources agree that this unusual behavior had ideational sources: an unusual cocktail of religious and revolutionary motivations.³⁰¹ Of crucial significance here was the Shia emphasis on martyrdom as a righteous act—a theme emphasized repeatedly to Iranian soldiers in their training and indoctrination.³⁰² Rather than recoil from the horrendous losses incurred in the human wave attacks, Iranian leaders glorified them in a manner that seemed religiously sanctioned; sacrificing oneself was not just acceptable, but a duty that brought rewards. Iran's leaders also were able to link the war with Iraq to the cause of safeguarding and expanding the revolution, which provided further motivation for Iranian soldiers to stand and fight.³⁰³ All of these ideas combined to form what one observer called “the new Islamic Shia nationalism.”³⁰⁴

Notably, Iranian troops had not fought with this sort of fervor prior to the revolution. For example, in the Iranian deployment to Oman during the 1970s, British observers characterized Iranian performance as relatively lackluster. According to one source, “The Iranians were not fighting to the extent required.”³⁰⁵ Another way to put this is that Iranian cohesion during the Iran-Iraq War had to stem from something besides simply being Iranian or Shia—from something besides general cultural or societal forces. Only after the revolution had taken hold in Iran was the cohesion of the human wave attacks possible. The fact that this fervor then died down as the war went on also casts doubt on broad cultural explanations of Iranian performance.

Furthermore, the human wave attacks—and their consequences for Iran's war effort—also reinforce the idea that unit cohesion is not synonymous with battlefield effectiveness. The former is a necessary but insufficient condition of the latter. In other words, Iran's seemingly limitless supply of martyrs helped it avoid losing the war for a number of years, but it never translated into a war-winning edge, because these forces were still so utterly lacking in tactical proficiency and the ability to conduct complex operations. Moreover, the reason that Iran lacked these latter two capacities still stemmed directly from the nature of political intervention in the military. That said, the cohesion of Iran's very large supply of manpower clearly caused the war to last much longer than it otherwise would have, imposed significant costs on the Iraqis, and therefore represents an important caveat in the assessment of the explanatory power of the political intervention variable. Clearly, certain ideologies may have the power to mute the detrimental impact of worst practices on cohesion, if not on the other aspects of the dependent variable.

The Role of Material Capabilities and Third Party Support

One also might point to the balance of material capabilities and third party support to explain the battlefield effectiveness of the two sides. As has been noted in the analysis above, Iraq had a substantial superiority in both the quality and quantity of arms throughout the war. Not only did revolutionary Iran alienate most of the nations that could have sold it weapons, but many countries, especially in the Gulf, actively feared an Iranian victory and

³⁰¹ For example, Schahgaldian, *Iranian Military*, pp. vi-vii; and Edgar O'Ballance, *The Gulf War* (Washington: Brassey, 1988), p. 211. Some sources indicate that some Iranian soldiers may not have known that they were walking into Iraqi kill zones, but it is hard to believe that the majority of the Iranian ground forces were unaware of what awaited them on the battlefield. Certainly this should have been the case after several years of war. See claims reported in Woods et al, *Saddam's War*, p. 46.

³⁰² Hiro, *Longest War*, pp. 52, 106.

³⁰³ Chubin, “Iran and the War,” in *Gulf War*, p. 6.

³⁰⁴ Sepehr Zabih, *The Iranian Military in Revolution and War* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 17.

³⁰⁵ Zabih, *Iranian Military*, p. 11.

sought to support Iraq. After 1982, even the United States shared intelligence with the Iraqis, although it refrained from direct weapons sales.³⁰⁶ Given these advantages, perhaps the eventual Iraqi victory in the war is not so surprising, irrespective of any changes in the nature of political intervention in the military.

Still, it is important not to overstate the impact of these factors. First, Iraq had an indisputable weaponry advantage for essentially six full years before it demonstrated significant improvements in battlefield effectiveness (see table below comparing the two sides' arsenals of main battle tanks, for example). This gap widened as the war went on, but it hard to understand why a 6:1 advantage (as seen in 1986) would suddenly confer battlefield benefits that a 5:1 advantage (as seen in 1984) had not already provided.

Comparing Arsenals: Main Battle Tanks³⁰⁷			
	1980	1984	1986
Iraq	2,750	4,820	6,150
Iran	1,735	1,000	1,000

Second, while it is true that Iraq received extensive foreign military assistance, most of it was received in the period 1981-83.³⁰⁸ Despite the enormous capital advantage this assistance should have afforded Iraq, however, there was little to no change in Iraqi battlefield performance until much later in the war. In fact, during the period when the Iraqi military began to improve, Iranian defense spending was actually higher than Iraq's (see table below).

Comparing Capital: Defense Spending³⁰⁹ <i>(in Billions of Dollars)</i>			
	1980	1984	1986
Iraq	2.67	10.296	12.866
Iran	4.2	17.370	14.091

³⁰⁶ The United States did sell weapons to Iran, however, in the arms-for-hostages deal known as the Iran Contra scandal. Hiro, *Longest War*, chapter 5. On the tilt in U.S. policy toward supporting Iraq after 1982, see Information Memorandum, State Department, Nicholas A. Veliotes and Jonathan T. Howe to Lawrence S. Eagleburger, "Iran-Iraq War: Analysis of Possible U.S. Shift from Position of Strict Neutrality," October 7, 1983, available at the National Security Archive, the George Washington University, Washington, DC; Memorandum for the Record, National Security Council, Geoffrey Kemp, "Near-Term Options in the Iran-Iraq War," March 26, 1984, available at the National Security Archive, the George Washington University, Washington, DC; Cable, State Department to American Embassy Cairo, "Briefing Material for Ambassador Wisner: Iran-Iraq," August 28, 1986, available at the National Security Archive, the George Washington University, Washington, DC; and PROFS Message, White House, Dennis Ross to John M. Poindexter, "Expanding Intelligence to [sic] Provided to the Iraqis," October 3, 1986, available at the National Security Archive, the George Washington University, Washington, DC; Memorandum, NSC, Ronald C. St. Martin to Robert C. McFarlane, "U.S. Targeting Support re Iran-Iraq War," October 16, 1986, available at the National Security Archive, the George Washington University, Washington, DC.

³⁰⁷ All data taken from Iran and Iraq estimates in "The Middle East and North Africa," *The Military Balance*, vols. 80, 84, 86 (1980, 1984, 1986), pp. 42, 61-2, and 96-7, respectively.

³⁰⁸ Iraq received an estimated \$25-35 billion in foreign military assistance from 1981-3. "The Middle East and North Africa," *The Military Balance*, vol. 84 (1984), p. 62.

³⁰⁹ The table does not include foreign military assistance to Iraq. All data taken from Iran and Iraq estimates in "Middle East and North Africa," *Military Balance*, vols. 80, 84, 86, pp. 42, 61-2, and 96-97, respectively.

Similarly, Iraq had been receiving U.S. tactical intelligence for years before it seemed to perform better militarily.³¹⁰ Until shifts in the nature of Iraqi political intervention allowed for better use of these resources, they did not make a substantial difference. As late as February 1986, in fact, internal U.S. government correspondence on the matter suggested that the Iraqis were “unable or unwilling” to act on the information provided to them.³¹¹ Even many years later, U.S. officials were skeptical about whether Iraq ever really used or needed the intelligence provided to them.³¹² Furthermore, the U.S. secretary of state at the time privately characterized the intelligence sharing as “limited,” though useful.³¹³

These are all additional reasons that the role of outside countries should not be overestimated as a factor in Iraq’s eventually improved battlefield effectiveness. Once the nature of political intervention in the Iraqi military shifted, it was certainly able to take advantage of these resources, but prior to 1986, Iraqi performance looked very similar to how it had looked in 1980.

XI. Conclusions and Summary

This chapter sought to test the validity of the predictions generated in Chapter 4 from the theory of political intervention outlined in Chapter 1. First, the evidence from the battles showed that, in general, there is good reason to be skeptical of existing explanations of military effectiveness. Iranian and especially Iraqi units demonstrated considerable over-time and cross-unit variation in their effectiveness—variation that should not have occurred if theories focused on the effects of wealth, regime type, culture and society, and the general level of civilian control of the military are correct. More importantly, much of this variation, in addition to the cross-national variation also seen, was directly attributable to the nature of political intervention in the two militaries.

First, with respect to the Iranian case, Iranian regular forces that had been subject to slightly better practices with respect to training during the time of the Shah did demonstrate tactical proficiency and a minimal ability to conduct some complex operations in the early years of the war. While the contrast should not be overdrawn, there was a clear differential between their effectiveness and that of Iranian revolutionary forces, which had been subject entirely to worst practices throughout their existence. This difference speaks again to the importance of variation in political intervention, even though it was quite subtle compared to the more extreme values of the independent variable discussed in Chapter 1.

Unfortunately for Iran, its leaders mistakenly credited the country’s early victories to the revolutionary instead of the regular forces, accelerating the imposition of worst practices over the regular forces. Exogenous events such as the disastrous 1981 helicopter crash that killed key military leaders also played a role in completely erasing any legacy of effectiveness lingering from the time of the Shah. As a result, the regular and revolutionary forces

³¹⁰ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, p. 211.

³¹¹ PROFS Message, White House, Bob Pearson forwarding message from Ken DeGraffenreid to Donald Fortier and John M. Poindexter, “Intelligence Exchange with Iraq,” February 24, 1986, available at the National Security Archive, the George Washington University, Washington, DC.

³¹² “Towards an International History of the Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988: a Critical Oral History Workshop,” Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, July 19, 2004, p. 20.

³¹³ “U.S. Intelligence for Iraq,” Background paper, December 15, 1986, p. 1, available through the Digital National Security Archive, item number IG00383.

increasingly converged toward nearly total ineffectiveness as the war went on, at least in terms of tactical proficiency and the ability to conduct complex operations.

Meanwhile, Iraqi units displayed virtually no effectiveness in the early years of the war with Iran. Their battlefield performance reflected minimal cohesion, virtually no tactical proficiency, and no ability whatsoever to conduct complex operations. Indeed, during the years 1982-1986, the war's stalemate reflected the mutual ineffectiveness of the two militaries, both subject to worst practices. After 1986, however, Saddam shifted his practices toward the Republican Guard, and there was substantial improvement in the battlefield effectiveness of those units. They proved to be highly cohesive, tactically proficient, and capable of at least some complex operations. They were notably more effective than they or regular army or Popular Army units had been earlier in the war, and were also more effective than their Iranian counterparts.

In general, then, the battlefield evidence from the war provides strong support to the predictions needed to confirm the theory of political intervention. The timing, nature, and direction of the observed variation in effectiveness was clearly linked to variations in the forms of political intervention. Indeed, the behavior of both Iran and Iraq should induce significant caution about explanations of effectiveness focused solely on weapons (the Iraqi advantage) or numbers (the Iranian advantage). Neither of these advantages was enough to generate good battlefield performance, in the absence of the other crucial inputs emphasized here: promotion structures, rigorous training, command structures, and information sharing. These variables had to be right in order for the material variables to exert their force.

Ultimately, the Iran-Iraq War was a duel between two states, neither of which used the resources it possessed efficiently. Despite some promising early triumphs, Iran was never able to convert its economic, demographic, or supposed cultural advantages into sustained fighting power. For the first six years of the war, Iraq was similarly unable to convert its advantages in weaponry and support from outside powers into the strategic outcome it sought. Only when Saddam altered his political intervention practices was his country able to utilize the assets it possessed to generate combat capability. Interestingly, however, once these practices did shift, Iraq was able to overcome the supposed disadvantages that it faced, namely, a smaller population, a weaker economic base, and Arab culture. These events suggest the powerful effects of the political intervention variable. Indeed, it is impossible to explain why the war lasted as long as it did, imposed the costs that it did, and then ended when it did, absent an account of this factor.

CONCLUSION

Implications for Theory and Policy

The preceding pages have presented one overarching argument: that understanding the nature of political intervention in the military is crucial to explaining why states vary so widely in the fighting power they generate from their national resources. This claim, tested through detailed and carefully controlled case studies, challenges much of the existing consensus on both civil-military relations and military effectiveness.

For more than 50 years, scholarship on both of these topics has been dominated by Samuel Huntington's *The Soldier and the State*, in which Huntington argued that the complete separation of the military from politics was the linchpin of both civilian control and military effectiveness. Insulating the military from politics, he contended, was the only way to foster a professional military ethos that would ensure both deference to civilian authority and fighting prowess on the battlefield.

The ideas and evidence presented in this study challenge Huntington's claims about the very nature of civil-military relations and about how politics affect military performance. Rather than accepting the distinction between militaries enmeshed with politics—Huntington's "subjective control"—and those free of politics—Huntington's "objective control"—this study contends that the complete insulation of the military from politics is actually quite rare. The study focuses instead on the rather large range of variation in military effectiveness seen even among regimes whose armies are highly politicized—armies in which military autonomy is relatively low and political intervention is frequent and intense. The evidence shows that what matters for battlefield effectiveness in these circumstances are the differing *forms* of political intervention in the military, because different forms of civilian or political involvement, even when highly personalist and even when involving the same areas of military activity, can have very different consequences for battlefield performance.

The main findings, summarized below, also strongly challenge contemporary research on the sources of military effectiveness. Some of this research focuses heavily on material factors, such as wealth and demography. But the evidence here shows that states display much more variation in their battlefield effectiveness than analysis of these relatively static inputs would suggest. Indeed, it shows that variations in political intervention in the military condition when states are actually able to convert their material resources into effective fighting power, and when they cannot.

The findings also challenge other recent research on effectiveness, which, while acknowledging the importance of non-material variables, still tends to focus on slow-moving structural drivers of military performance, such as regime type, culture, or the broad level of military autonomy or civilian control. This study in no way denies that these variables influence military performance, but it strongly cautions analysts against drawing any deterministic relationship between these national traits and battlefield performance. The evidence indicates that where states get their forms of political intervention "right," they can perform quite well on the battlefield, despite whatever supposedly detrimental national characteristics they possess. Conversely, even when states possess many supposedly favorable traits compared to their opponents, if they get political intervention "wrong," these assets essentially go to waste.

The political intervention variable does not mean that other variables are irrelevant to military performance, but it sheds powerful light on when and how these factors exert their causal force. It therefore enables a much more refined assessment of battlefield effectiveness than might otherwise be possible. After reviewing the theory and evidence to

support these claims, this conclusion explores the study's implications for policy and scholarship, and outlines areas in need of further research.

Summary of The Theory

In some sense, all forms of intervention are attempts at political control—the attempt to ensure that military is used for politically acceptable ends. The key question is the nature of those ends. Virtually all forms of political intervention generate militaries that are “effective” at doing something, even if that activity has little to do with external conventional combat. Depending on their perceptions—correct or not—of the nature and severity of internal and external threats, political leaders can intervene to make militaries good at state-building, at coup prevention, at suppression of domestic dissidents, at counterinsurgency, or at a host of other tasks.

But they can also intervene in ways that expressly improve conventional military performance. These forms of political intervention constitute a series of what I have called “best practices,” which I have contrasted with another approach to political intervention called “worst practices.” These two extremes are ideal types, with several varieties of “mixed practices” being possible between them.

Taking leaders' threat perceptions as exogenous—and, as I have argued, highly contingent—the study has focused on forms of political intervention in four key areas of military activity: promotions, training, command arrangements, and information management. In brief, the study has posited that political leaders who employ best practices intervene to ensure that military promotions are based on competence and battlefield performance. They actively encourage rigorous, frequent, and realistic military training at both the small- and large-unit levels. They ensure that command authority is decentralized to those in the field rather than concentrated at higher echelons, while also pushing for integrated and unified command structures that allow rapid decision-making and coordination. And they strongly encourage vertical and horizontal information sharing, as well as frequent political-military communication. In combination, these policies ensure the generation of cohesive military units capable of basic tactics as well as the ability to conduct more complex modern military operations, such as combined arms maneuver.

By contrast, political leaders under worst practices intervene in the same areas of military activity, but with very different policies. They ensure that military promotion is based entirely on political loyalty, and they actively select against battlefield prowess in making decisions about whom to hire and fire in the officer corps. They restrict training. They both centralize and fracture command structures, concentrating in their own hands decision-making authority while also circumscribing the range of whatever authority commanders are given. Lastly, political leaders who adopt worst practices heavily restrict both vertical and horizontal communication within the military and engage in little substantive political-military communication. Together these policies decimate battlefield effectiveness, leading to militaries that are unable to forge together cohesive units, much less endow those units with tactical skill or the ability to conduct complex operations.

Between these two extremes lie a range of mixed that can combine different elements of best and worst practices to a greater or lesser degree. Other things being equal, however, the closer a state moves toward best practices, the better its military performance in conventional interstate war will be. Absent these practices, it is virtually impossible for a state to develop a cohesive, tactically proficient army capable of displaying the coordination and initiative necessary for modern, complex military operations—even if that state has significant material advantages such as economic power or a large population. Indeed, the

closer a state moves toward worst practices, the more its military performance can be expected to deteriorate. By contrast, states that adopt best practices are likely to “punch above their weight,” generating maximum fighting power from the resources they possess, however meager.

Summary of the Evidence

The study tested these arguments through two controlled, paired comparisons of states at war, relying on extensive use of primary documents, many of them not previously examined in the study of either civil-military relations or effectiveness: North and South Vietnam (1961-1975), and Iran and Iraq (1980-1988). The study relied on these particular cases because they offered the strongest possible controls for alternative explanations and therefore the cleanest test of the argument. The cases constituted “fair” fights—that is, instances in which dyads were evenly matched along the major dimensions said to matter for military effectiveness. These possible independent variables included wealth; population; regime type; external threat, or the “stakes” involved in losing the war; culture and society; and civil-military relations as generally conceived in the existing literature, that is, as a political environment characterized by either high or low military autonomy. Another way to put this is that the study sought to avoid examining cases whose value of the dependent variable, battlefield effectiveness, was over-determined.

The Vietnam and Iran-Iraq cases were useful in this respect, because the two pairs of states were each closely matched along these dimensions. Most notably, all four states were non-democratic, and all experienced high levels of political intervention into their militaries as they fought large-scale ground wars. Still, there was substantial variation in each state’s battlefield effectiveness over the course of these wars, both cross-nationally and, in the South Vietnamese, Iranian, and Iraqi cases, sub-nationally. According to existing theories of effectiveness, there should have been very little variation of any type across or within these four states.

Instead, the evidence from the cases showed that differences in the nature of political intervention accounted for both the cross-national and sub-national variation in battlefield effectiveness. In the Vietnam cases, South Vietnamese leaders generally adopted worst practices in political intervention, which accounts for their military’s poor performance against the North Vietnamese, despite the fact that the two countries had almost identical levels of economic development, the same size populations, similar colonial legacies, and very high stakes in the war. If anything, in fact, the stakes in the war were higher for South Vietnam, and it should have performed especially well given the massive infusion of American aid it received. But the empirical evidence reveals that the ways in which South Vietnamese leaders intervened in their military consistently foiled battlefield effectiveness. Meanwhile, the forms of North Vietnamese intervention, though no less extensive or “political,” had the opposite effect and maximized fighting power.

Interestingly, where South Vietnamese political leaders varied their forms of intervention—notably, with respect to the 1st Division, which was consistently subjected to mixed or best practices rather than worst practices—battlefield effectiveness was much better (see chart below). Indeed, an analysis of the major battles of the war shows that the 1st Division’s military performance under best practices proved to be virtually indistinguishable from that of North Vietnamese units. This convergence suggests just how differently the war could have turned out, and how much sooner it could have ended, had South Vietnamese leaders believed that they could or should adopt best practices with respect to their entire military rather than a single division. It also suggests the limits of traditional explanations of

the war's outcome, including communist ideology, the benefits and disadvantages of fighting on one's own territory, and the role of outside powers. Even with these other factors in play, South Vietnamese forces could fight surprisingly well when political leaders adopted best practices.

Sub-National Variation Observed in Case Studies		
<i>Country</i>	<i>Change in Practices</i>	<i>Battlefield Impact</i>
South Vietnam	Worst → Best, but toward 1 st Division only	1 st Division much more effective than other units from South Vietnamese army and just as effective as comparable North Vietnamese units
North Vietnam	No change, consistently Best	Consistent effectiveness across virtually all military units
Iraq	Worst → Best, but toward Republican Guard units only	Dramatic improvement in effectiveness of Republican Guard units compared to their own earlier performance, the performance of other Iraqi units, and the performance of Iranian units during the same period
Iran	Worst, with exception of regular army units → Worst, toward all units	Regular units initially more effective than revolutionary forces, followed by uniformly poor effectiveness across virtually all units

In the Iran-Iraq cases, political leaders in both states initially adopted worst practices with respect to political intervention in the military. The result was that for most of the war neither side was able to capitalize on the advantages that it possessed—in Iran's case, superior economic wealth and a three-fold population edge, and in Iraq's case, far stronger allies and a far greater quantity and quality of weapons. Most of the first six years of the war were a bloody military stalemate.

That said, in the early years of the war Iran's regular forces do seem to have benefited from the slightly better practices in political intervention that the Shah had employed, not all of which Iran's revolutionary leaders had yet been able to dismantle. In particular, Iranian units drawn from the pre-revolutionary regular army, which had received American training during the 1970s, displayed noticeably better tactical proficiency in the initial battles than the revolutionary masses roused by Shia clerics to become martyrs.

Unfortunately for Iran, however, its leaders never successfully integrated pre-revolutionary and revolutionary armed forces, and in fact mistakenly credited the revolutionary forces rather than the legacy regular units with their country's early battlefield successes. As a result, Iran's leaders only deepened their imposition of worst practices as the war went on, decimating whatever legacy lingered from the Shah's era. They instead relied on soldiers who were ideologically motivated to be cohesive but who lacked any ability to convert that cohesion into tactical proficiency or complex operations.

With two belligerents both under the full grip of worst practices, the war devolved into deadlock from roughly 1982-1986. Finally, however, in 1986—several long years after the disastrous effects of worst practices had been evident, even to him—Saddam Hussein endeavored to shift the nature of his political intervention into the Iraqi armed forces. Specifically, he adopted something very close to best practices with respect to his Republican Guard units, even as he kept worst practices with respect to other units. The result of this

shift was a relatively rapid improvement in the battlefield effectiveness of the Republican Guard.

Indeed, once subject to different forms of political intervention, these Iraqi units' effectiveness improved so significantly that they were able to beat their larger, wealthier, more populous neighbor in a succession of quick battles that ended the war in 1988. These victories occurred despite the fact that the Iraqi military experienced no great increase in its autonomy, and the fact that it obviously retained its Arab culture, a trait sometimes maligned in the effectiveness literature as hindering military performance.

Put simply, both Iran and Iraq performed poorly when their militaries were uniformly subject to worst practices: in the Iranian case, after about 1982, and in the Iraqi case, before about 1986. By contrast, in the period before these practices were fully imposed on the regular military in Iran and in the period after these practices were lifted on the Republican Guard units in Iraq, military performance by those forces was noticeably better compared both to the opponent's military and to other units drawn from the same state. The contrast was subtle in the Iranian case, dramatic in the Iraqi case, but these distinctions—similar to those seen in the Vietnam comparisons—suggest again the power of the political intervention variable in explaining battlefield effectiveness. Indeed, the cases showed this variable to matter across a very diverse set of national institutions, ranging from one-party communist rule (North Vietnam) to military dictatorship (South Vietnam), and from revolutionary theocracy (Iran) to Ba'hist personalism (Iraq).

To sum up, the cases generally provided strong confirmation of the theory presented in Chapter 1, especially its predictions about the drivers of tactical proficiency and complex operations. The theory was weakest in explaining cohesion, which the cases revealed to have multiple drivers (although in quite a few instances, forms of political intervention were among them). In particular, the North Vietnamese and Iranian cases both showed the overwhelming importance of ideational factors such as nationalism and ideology in generating military cohesion—something not accounted for in the political intervention theory.

By the same token, however, the stark overall contrast in military performance between North Vietnam and Iran actually reinforces the general conception of military effectiveness outlined in Chapter 1: namely, that cohesion alone is not enough. Cohesion is a necessary but not sufficient condition of battlefield effectiveness. Even highly cohesive armies such as Iran's will not generate much fighting power from their resources in the absence of tactical proficiency and an ability to conduct complex operations—both of which the cases did show to be highly dependent upon the adoption of best practices in political intervention.

Implications for the Study of International Relations

The cases examined in this study suggest that non-democratic states do exhibit significant variation in forms of political intervention and battlefield effectiveness, not only cross-nationally, but also sub-nationally. This latter variation in particular suggests the importance of looking beyond structural factors to explain and predict military performance. Indeed, the findings illuminate an important, more agile mechanism—forms of political intervention in the armed forces—that may actually be doing much of the casual work often attributed to regime type. The empirical evidence shows that when autocratic regimes adopt best practices in political intervention, they can perform with surprisingly high levels of effectiveness, certainly comparable to that often attributed to democratic regimes.

Although such instances may indeed be outliers, they constitute a particularly important set of cases for international relations theory. Perhaps no topic has garnered greater attention in recent international relations theory than the study of democracies—but understanding instances of autocratic military effectiveness sheds light on what it is about democracies that may enable them to generally perform better. For a variety of reasons, democracies may be more likely to adopt best practices in political intervention, but where they fail to do so, or where autocracies choose to embrace best practices, the performances of the two regime types may be nearly indistinguishable.

Although existing studies would not deny that autocracies sometimes perform well in war, this study provides the first systematic explanation for when, why, and how this should occur. Indeed, if the democratic peace theory is correct, then virtually all future conflicts will involve at least one non-democratic regime. It is therefore vital to understand how these states are likely to perform. The study here suggests that a close examination of political intervention in these states' armed forces is crucial to accurately explaining and predicting the costs, length, and outcome of such wars.

Additionally, the similarity in Iraqi, Iranian, and South Vietnamese military performance under worst practices, as well as the improvements in Iraqi and South Vietnamese performance under best practices, should cast strong doubt on the role of any particular type of culture in determining battlefield effectiveness. While national culture remains an important factor in conditioning state behavior, the research here shows that it is also important to look at variation in the specific modes of politicization that can operate even within a given cultural setting.

Lastly, this study helps differentiate between the concepts of autocracy and civil-military pathology, which are so conflated that one serves interchangeably as a proxy for the other in some studies. By intentionally excluding democracies from the empirical analysis, the research strategy employed here shows that regime type and civil-military relations are related but distinct variables that can move independently of each other. So while the cases here do not dispute the finding that democracies may have better overall battlefield effectiveness, they should make us very skeptical about the causal logic normally used to support this claim. At a minimum, the North Vietnamese and Iraqi cases suggest that the lack of a liberal political culture does not present any inherent bar to military performance.

Ultimately, states that adopt best practices may not always win their wars, just as states adopting worst practices may not always lose their wars. As mentioned, many factors account for war outcomes. But the actual fighting effectiveness of the belligerents surely matters as well, and understanding the nature of political intervention in the militaries of the two sides goes a long way toward explaining not only war outcomes, but also why wars end when they do, with what costs, and with what settlements.

States that adopt best practices can be expected to fight harder, resist longer, and impose significantly higher costs on their adversaries than might otherwise be expected based on an assessment of their material resources. Conversely, states that adopt worst practices can be expected to collapse more quickly than traditional net assessments based on order of battle data might predict. As a result, understanding the varying forms of political intervention in the military and how these interventions shape effectiveness is crucial to both the academic study of war duration, cost, and termination, and also to the practical policymaking task of assessing fighting power—a topic to which the conclusion now turns.

Implications for Foreign Policy

Underpinning this study is the assumption that there exists a crucial distinction between victory and effectiveness. While the academic study of warfare has often focused simply on war outcomes, the manner in which outcomes are achieved is of vital concern to policymakers. Simply knowing whether a war is likely to be won or not is important, but more often those wielding the levers of the state seek to understand the potential costs of victory. For example, the question preceding U.S. conventional military operations is rarely, “Will this operation ultimately result in victory for the United States?” Given America’s overwhelming material power and the additional benefits it usually enjoys from working with militarily strong allies, its ability to impose its will on weaker states by force is usually not in question, at least if the objective is conventional military triumph. The real question is, “What costs can potential opponents impose on the United States during the fight, even if the United States still gets the eventual outcome it seeks?”

The findings here shed light on this question, illuminating a vital set of factors to be analyzed in assessing potential adversaries. When facing opponents that adopt best practices, the United States can expect military conflict to last longer, cost more, and impose great casualties on the United States. America can also expect that by offering greater resistance, such states may also gain a better final position in any settlement once the war is over, even if such states still lose the war. For example, although the 1999 war for Kosovo is often portrayed as a resounding defeat for Milosevic, the Serbian military’s ability and willingness to hold out for more than nine weeks—rather than the mere days NATO expected—arguably secured for Serbia several significant concessions compared to the deal it would have achieved from the Rambouillet accords.¹ This outcome shows that when weak states fight well, there are very real consequences for U.S. military operations and foreign policy. Again, victory and effectiveness are distinct.

By contrast, when the United States faces adversaries that adopt worst practices, it can expect rapid military collapse on the part of the adversary. Indeed, this is a vulnerability that the United States may be able to exploit—but which also may set the stage for a major security vacuum in the aftermath of a conventional military victory. Many would argue it was this exact scenario that played out in 2003 in Iraq, for example.² Had the United States understood how brittle the Iraqi military actually was, it might have prepared for the post-conflict environment differently, or it might have decided that military operations actually were unnecessary to achieve its goals. At both extremes, a clear understanding of the nature of political intervention in an adversary’s military is essential to solid calculations about whether to go to war, how to fight, and how to prepare for the aftermath.

This logic can also be seen if one extrapolates directly from the empirical cases examined in this study. After all, two of the states examined—North Vietnam and Iraq—actually fought wars against the United States. The contrast in the performance of these two

¹ On expectations about the war and Serbia’s likely performance, see Ivo Daalder and Michael O’Hanlon, *Winning Ugly: NATO’s War to Save Kosovo* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), p. 55; Elaine Sciolino and Ethan Bronner, “How a President, Distracted by Scandal, Entered Balkan War,” *New York Times*, April 18, 1999, p. 1. On Serbian effectiveness, see Benjamin S. Lambeth, “Kosovo and the Continuing SEAD Challenge,” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND report RP-1018, 2002); Darrel Whitcomb, “The Night They Saved Vega 31,” *Air Force Magazine*, vol. 89, no. 2 (December 2006), pp. 70-74; and Andrew Stigler, “A Clear Victory for Air Power: NATO’s Empty Threat to Invade Kosovo,” *International Security*, vol. 27, no. 3 (winter 2002-03), pp. 129-30. On Serbia’s gains in the post-war settlement compared to Rambouillet, see Barry R. Posen, “The War for Kosovo: Serbia’s Political-Military Strategy,” *International Security*, vol. 24, no. 4 (spring 2000), p. 79.

² Kevin M. Woods et al, *Iraqi Perspectives Project: A View of Operation Iraqi Freedom from Saddam’s Senior Leadership* (Virginia: U.S. Joint Forces Command, 2006)

relatively weak, authoritarian regimes against a materially superior, democratic adversary is quite striking, yet it is highly consistent with what we would expect based on the theory.³ For example, the best practices employed by the North Vietnamese enabled them to impose very significant costs in terms of time, resources, and casualties on the United States. North Vietnamese fighting effectiveness also clearly influenced the outcome of the conflict, producing one of the few draws in recent American military history. By contrast, when the Iraqis fought the United States in 1991 (and 2003), Saddam had reverted to worst practices, which helps explain why the coalition managed to achieve conventional military victory so rapidly and at such low costs in both cases, despite the large size of the Iraqi army and (in 1991) the excellent quality of many of its weapons.

The theory also bears on the question of effectiveness in the militaries of U.S. coalition partners and allies. More and more, American military strategy calls for “building partner capacity,” that is, for bolstering the fighting effectiveness of other armies, particularly the armies of non-democratic or nascent democratic states.⁴ For example, the U.S. exit strategies for both Iraq and Afghanistan rely heavily on the building of indigenous army and police forces that can operate independently of the United States. Broader U.S. strategies in both East Asia and the Middle East also depend on building or sustaining the military effectiveness of allies such as South Korea, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Egypt. This is also the U.S. approach to counterterrorism operations in places such as Yemen. The factors identified in this study present an important set of indicators that U.S. policymakers should therefore seek to examine and to influence in these countries.

It is worth noting, for example, that the other two countries examined in this study—South Vietnam and Iran—both received enormous infusions of U.S. weapons and military assistance just prior to or during the wars examined here. Saddam Hussein’s regime also received some indirect support and the provision of tactical intelligence. But the nature of political intervention in the militaries of all three states greatly eroded the potential battlefield value of these U.S. contributions. (Only in the Iraqi case, after the shift in Saddam’s political intervention late in the war, was the recipient of U.S. assistance actually able to generate fighting power.) Indeed, the sheer scale of U.S. assistance to South Vietnam and Iran under the Shah only underscores how important it is to look beyond purely material factors in estimating the likely return on U.S. security assistance. If any regimes should have been able to fight effectively purely through the provision of U.S. aid, surely South Vietnam in the 1960s and Iran in the 1980s should have qualified. Yet their performances were poor, largely because of political-military relations in the two societies.

These experiences suggest again the need to include the political intervention variable in assessments of U.S. adversaries and allies. Furthermore, while the threat perceptions that drive the adoption of leaders’ intervention practices may be opaque, there are good reasons to believe the actual forms of intervention themselves—states’ policies regarding promotion, training, command, and information management—can be visible to policymakers who wish to track them. Indeed, many of the U.S. documents cited in this study suggest that U.S. intelligence agencies do in fact monitor political intervention in these areas, although it is open to question whether the implications of these observations have actually altered U.S. policy decisions.

³ A very useful comparison of the two countries’ air defense efforts against the United States is Stephen Biddle and Robert Zirkle, “Technology, Civil-Military Relations, and Warfare in the Developing World,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (1996), pp. 171-212.

⁴ Robert Gates, “Helping Others Defend Themselves,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 3 (May/June 2010), pp. 2-6.

Areas for Further Research

While this study has tried to answer one set of questions, it has raised others. Perhaps the most important of these is whether there is a systematic driver of leaders' threat perceptions and therefore of the forms of political intervention they will choose to adopt. The evidence presented here makes a strong case that these decisions are highly contingent, and it was for this reason that the case studies focused most directly on the intervention practices and their consequences. Still, this is an area that merits further research. Were it possible to identify such a variable, it would constitute a powerful driver of military effectiveness.

Related to this question, further research should more tightly establish the connection between regime type and forms of political intervention. The general contention here has been that democracies are much less likely to adopt worst practices, but that non-democratic regimes display significant variation in their practices. Still, the research design of this study prioritized understanding the consequences of political intervention rather than the causes and did not establish whether there is a systematic connection to regime type. In other words, the fact that there was variation in political intervention among the non-democratic states examined here does not tell us how frequent this variation is in the broader universe of autocracies. Nor does it tell us whether the suspicion that democracies almost never adopt worst practices is correct. It would be worthwhile to examine instances in which variations in the forms of political intervention may have occurred in democratic states, such as early post-Independence India or Republican France.

Additionally, it would be useful to code a larger universe of cases according to their political control mechanisms, to establish these connections with more certainty. This exercise would not only open the path toward some quantitative tests of the argument, but it would also allow us to test the systematic drivers of differing forms of intervention, if they exist. For example, it might be the case that highly legitimate regimes never adopt worst practices. We would expect democracy and legitimacy to be highly positively correlated (though not perfectly so), meaning that coding the adoption of forms of intervention according to regime type could be informative and could also identify useful outliers—those exceptions that might prove the rule. By the same token, we would expect autocracies to vary significantly in their legitimacy, with some being quite legitimate and others much less so.

Legitimacy is a notoriously difficult variable to define and measure, but exploring the distribution of political intervention across a broader universe of both democratic and non-democratic cases, both quantitatively and qualitatively, might enable more confident statements about its impact on effectiveness than those made possible by this study. Additionally, any findings would help us further understand whether the mechanism driving the apparent democratic effectiveness advantage actually stems from liberal political culture or from some other set of factors that is distinct from but moves closely with democracy itself.

Figures & Maps

FIGURE 1: HYPOTHESES ABOUT VARIATION IN BATTLEFIELD EFFECTIVENESS

HYPOTHESES ABOUT VARIATION IN BATTLEFIELD EFFECTIVENESS			
<i>Theory</i>	<i>Hypothesized cross-national variation</i>	<i>Hypothesized sub-national, over time variation</i>	<i>Hypothesized sub-national, cross-unit variation</i>
Economic Wealth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> States with equal levels of wealth and economic development should produce armies with similar battlefield effectiveness. States with greater wealth and economic development should produce armies with greater battlefield effectiveness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Little variation absent major economic changes. As countries become wealthier, they should perform better. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No variation predicted.
Demography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> States with similar demography should produce armies with similar battlefield effectiveness. States with larger populations should produce armies with greater battlefield effectiveness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Little variation absent major population changes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No variation predicted.
External Threat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> States facing similar external threat environments should produce armies with similar battlefield effectiveness. States facing the highest levels of external threat should produce armies with the greatest battlefield effectiveness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Battlefield effectiveness should vary with shifts in the external threat environment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No variation predicted, although units closer to the threat might be expected to perform better.
Regime Type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> States with the same regime type should generate armies with equivalent battlefield effectiveness. More autocratic states should generally perform worse on the battlefield. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No variation absent change in regime type. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No variation predicted.
Culture, Society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> States with similar cultural and societal traits should generate armies with equivalent battlefield effectiveness. States that possess a purportedly detrimental national characteristic (Arab culture, internal divisions, lack of communal values) should demonstrate lower battlefield effectiveness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Little variation absent major changes in society and culture. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No variation predicted.
Civil-Military Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> States with similar levels of military autonomy or civilian control of the military should perform similarly on the battlefield. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Little variation absent shift in the level of military autonomy or civilian control. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No variation predicted.
Political Intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> States whose leaders adopt similar forms of political intervention in the military should generate similar levels of battlefield effectiveness. States that adopt best practices in political intervention should perform better than those adopting worst practices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As leaders alter their methods of political intervention, changes in battlefield effectiveness should result. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Units in the same military subject to different methods of intervention should vary in their battlefield effectiveness.

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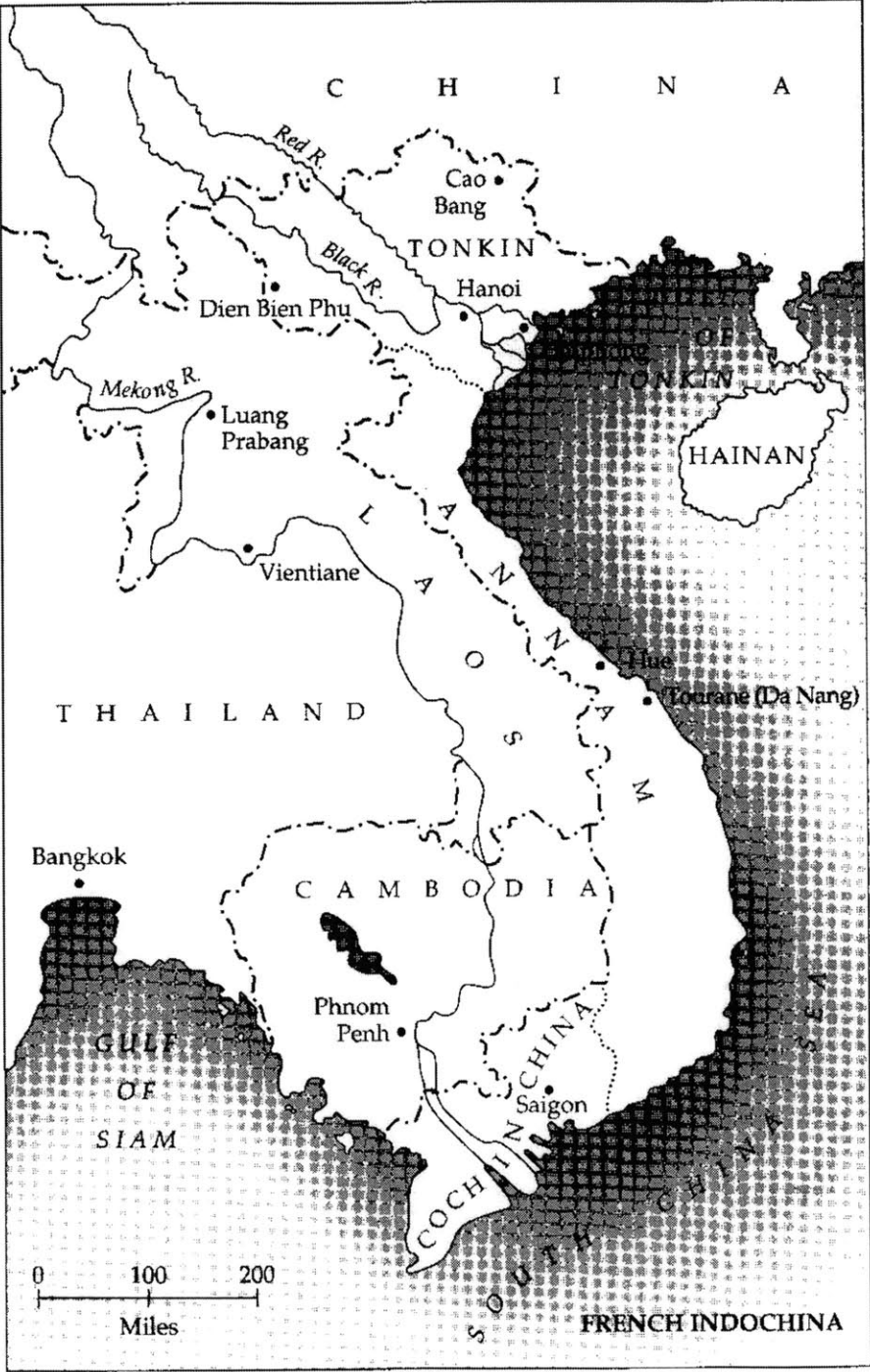
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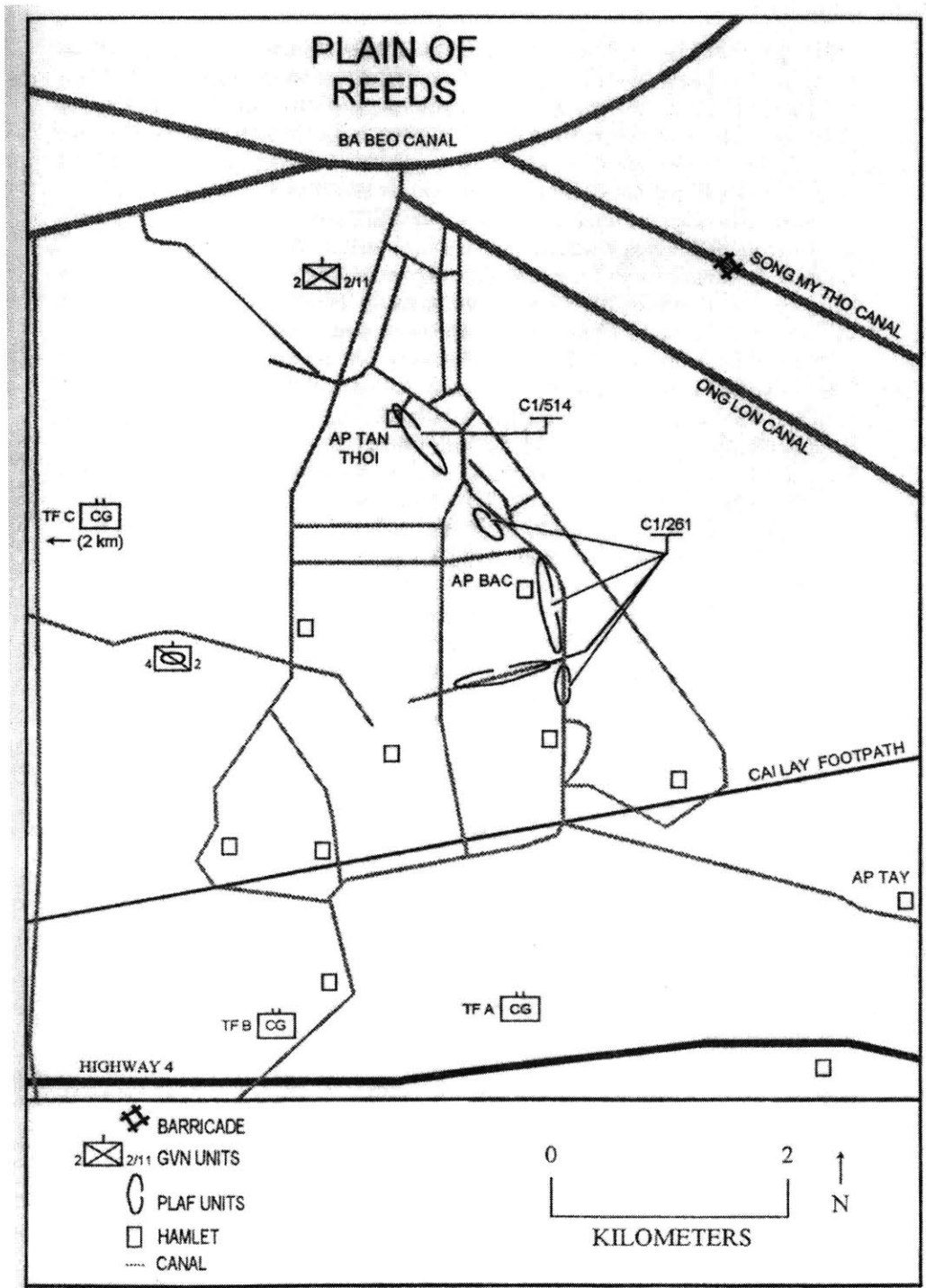
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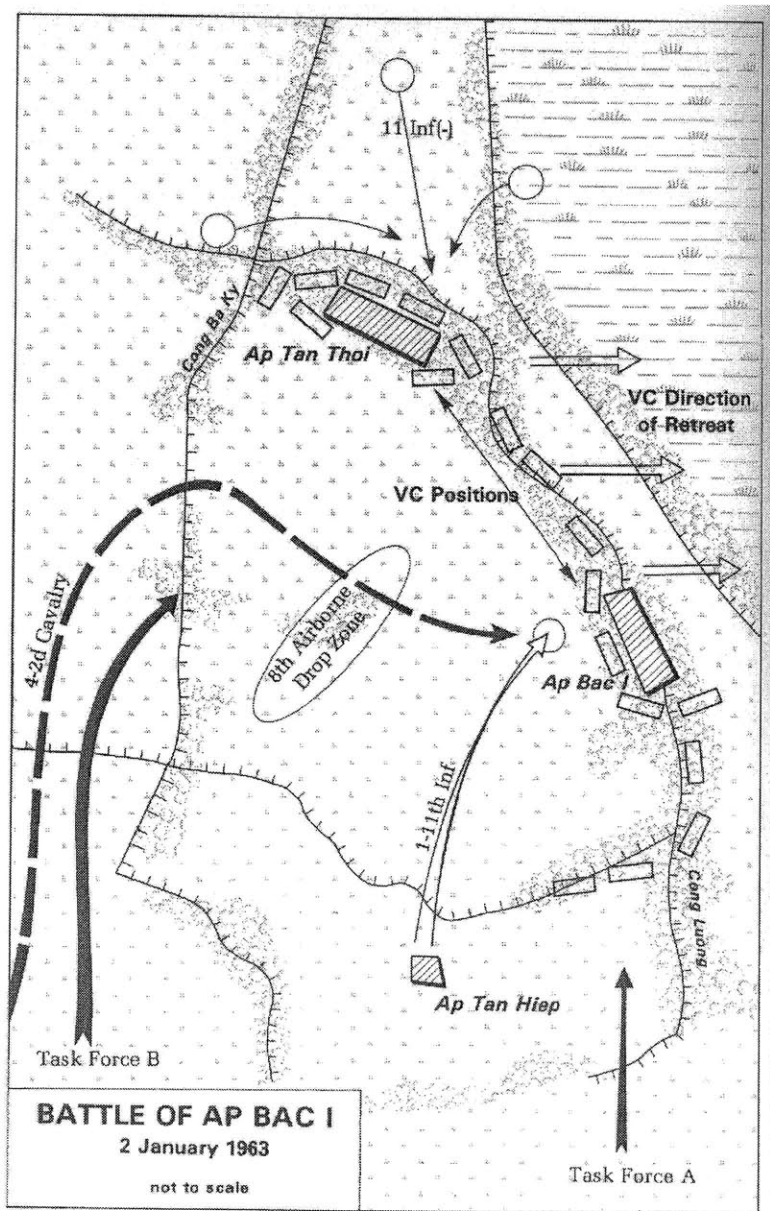
MAP 1: FRENCH INDOCHINA. Map reproduced from: George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002), p. 7



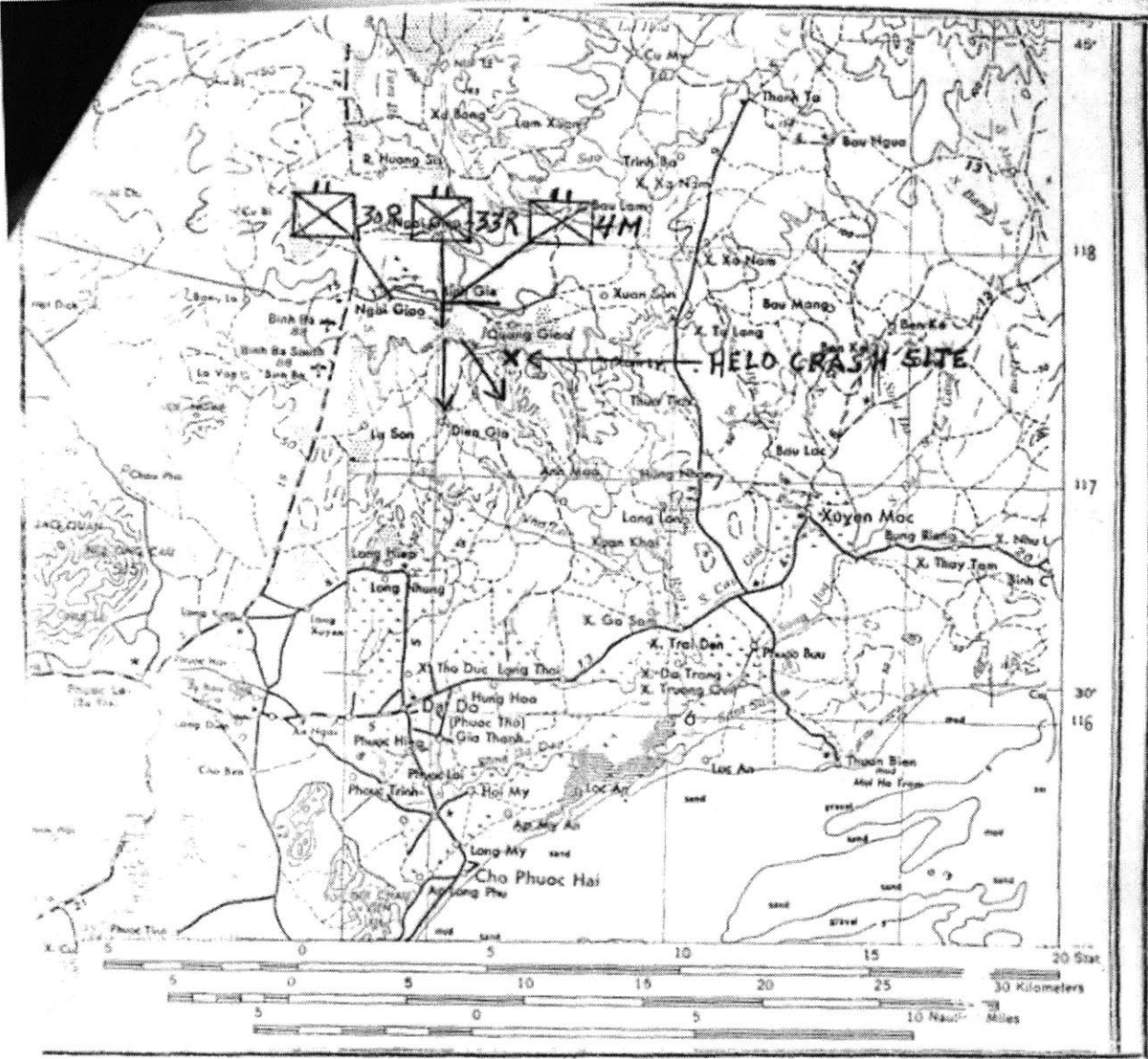
MAP 3: THE FORCES AT AP BAC, 1963. Map reproduced from: David M. Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac: They Did Everything But Learn from It* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), p.77.



MAP 4: ANOTHER VIEW OF THE BATTLE OF AP BAC, 1963. Map reproduced from: General Donn A. Starry, *Armoured Combat in Vietnam* (Dorset, UK: Blandford Press, 1981), p. 26.



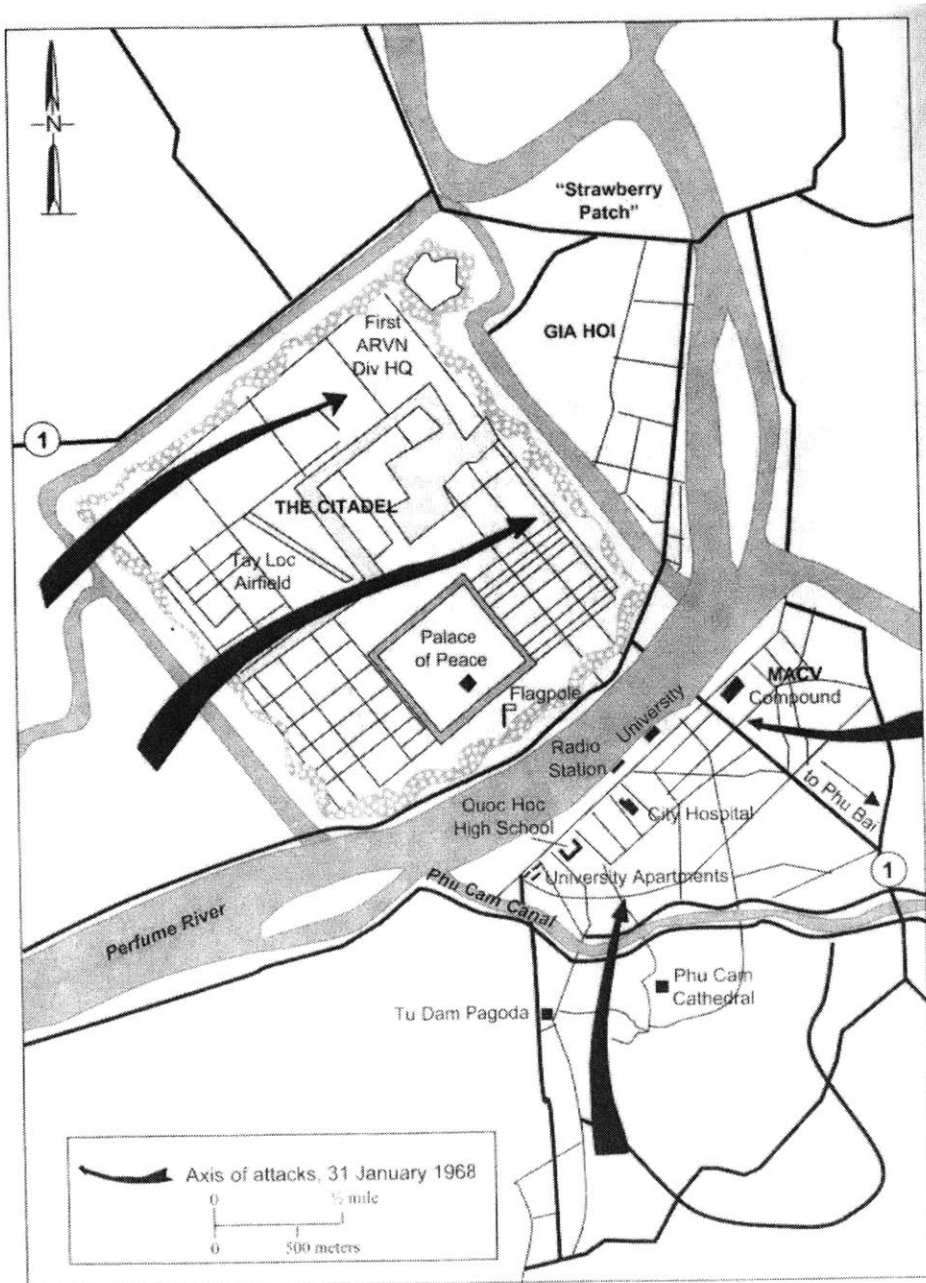
MAP 5: THE BATTLE OF BINH GIA, 1964. Map reproduced from U.S. Army map contained in Earle G. Wheeler, "Memorandum for Mr. McGeorge Bundy, Subject: Binh Gia Engagements, 28 December – 4 January," January 5, 1965, p. 7, available in the Historian's Working Files and Papers at the Center of Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC.



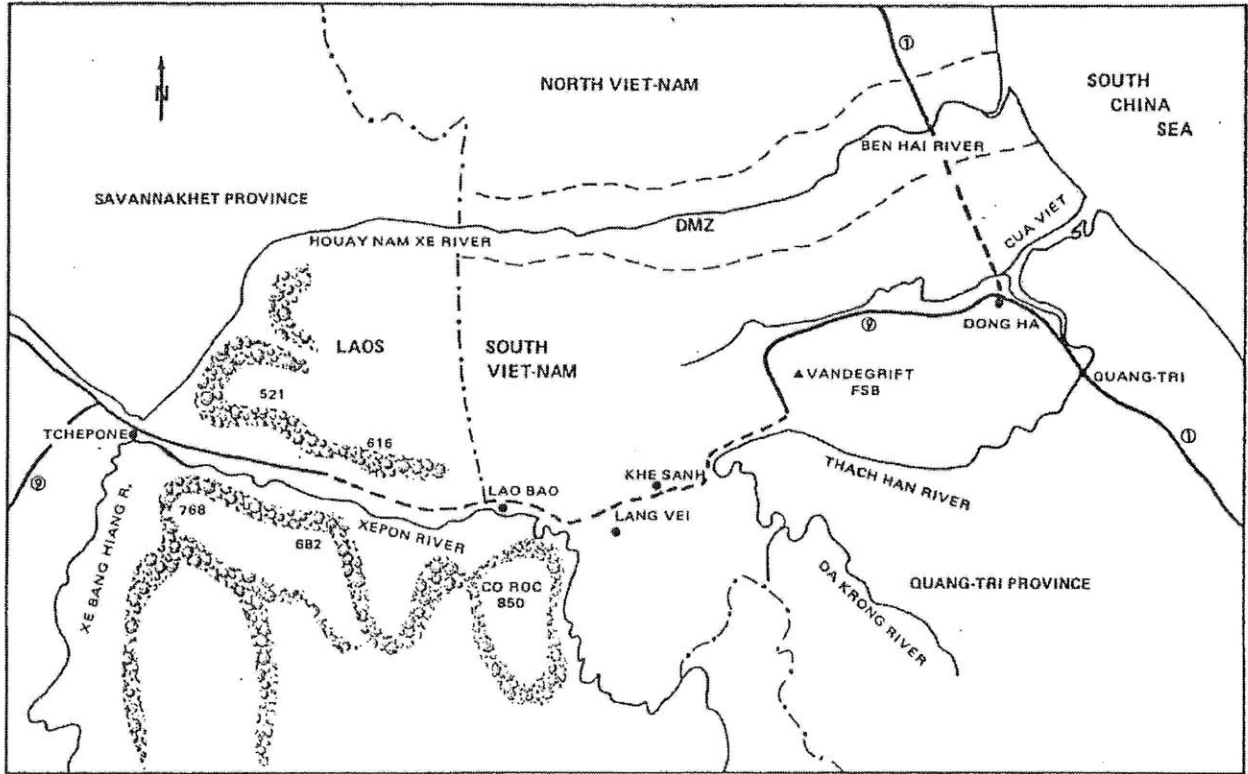
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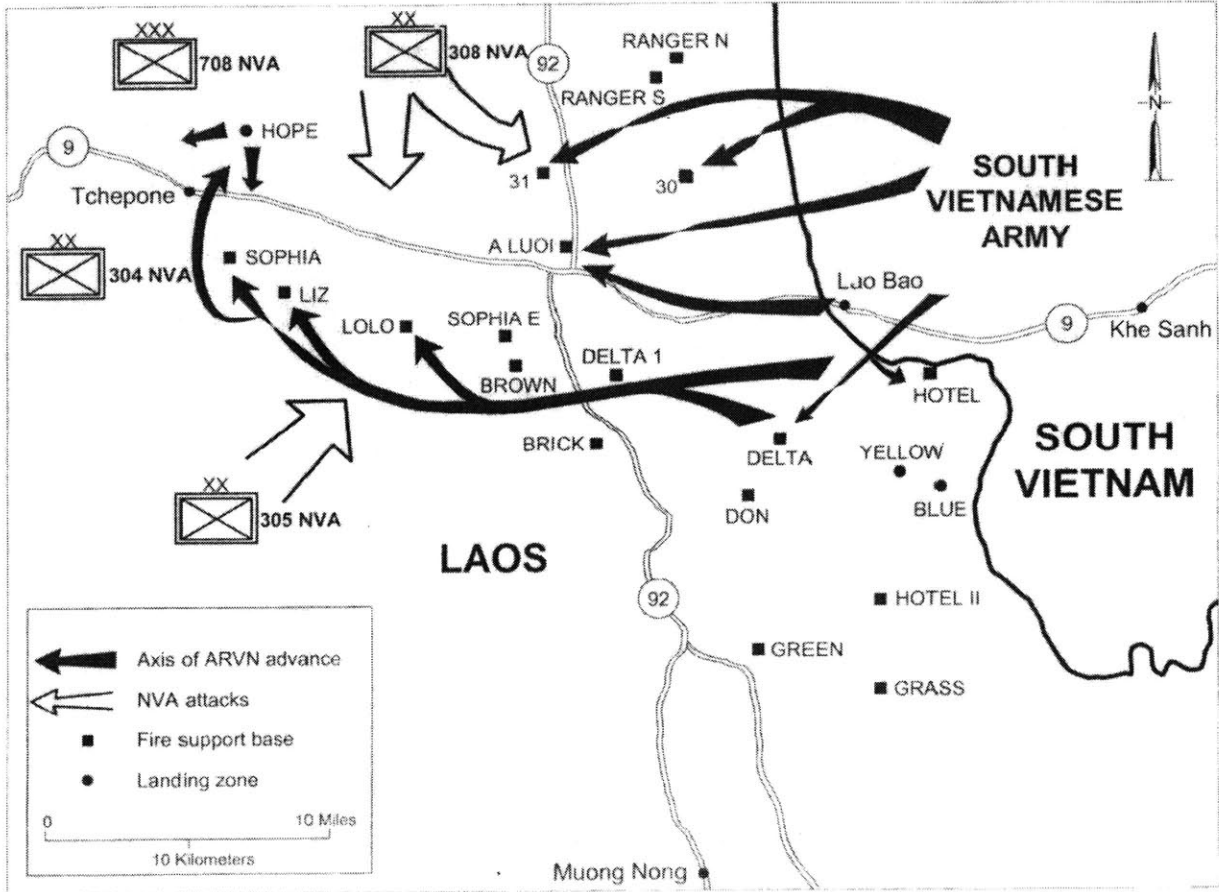
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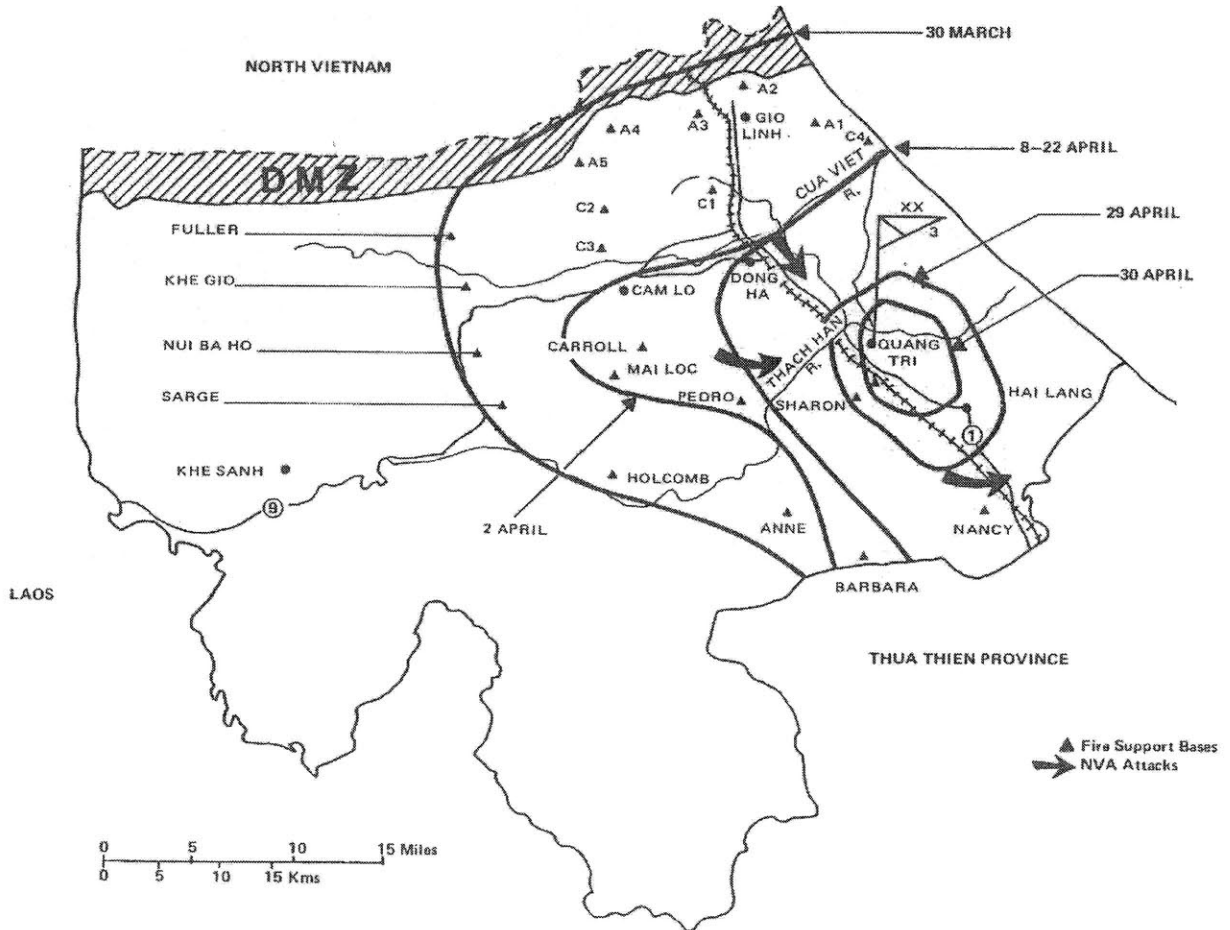
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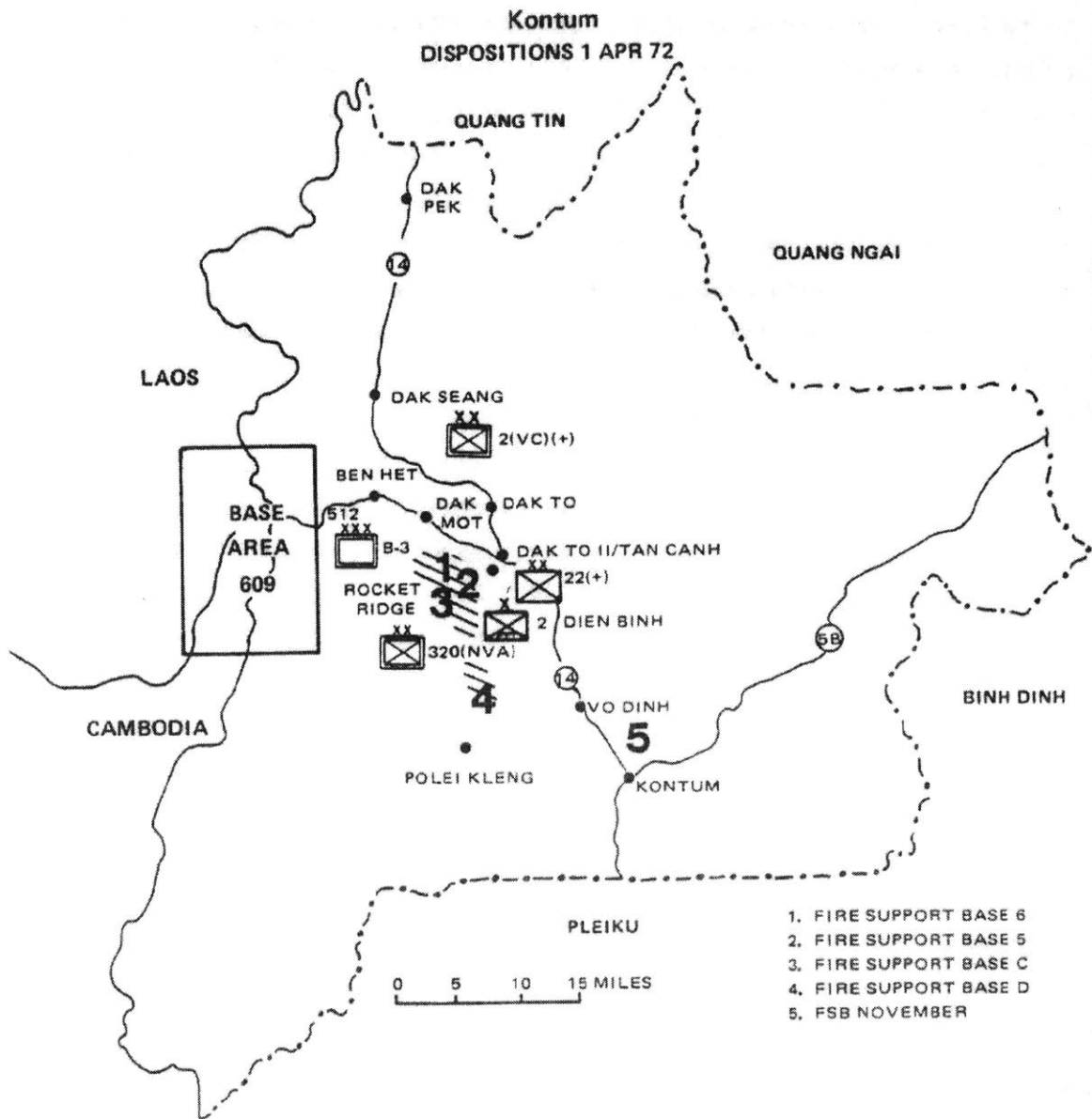
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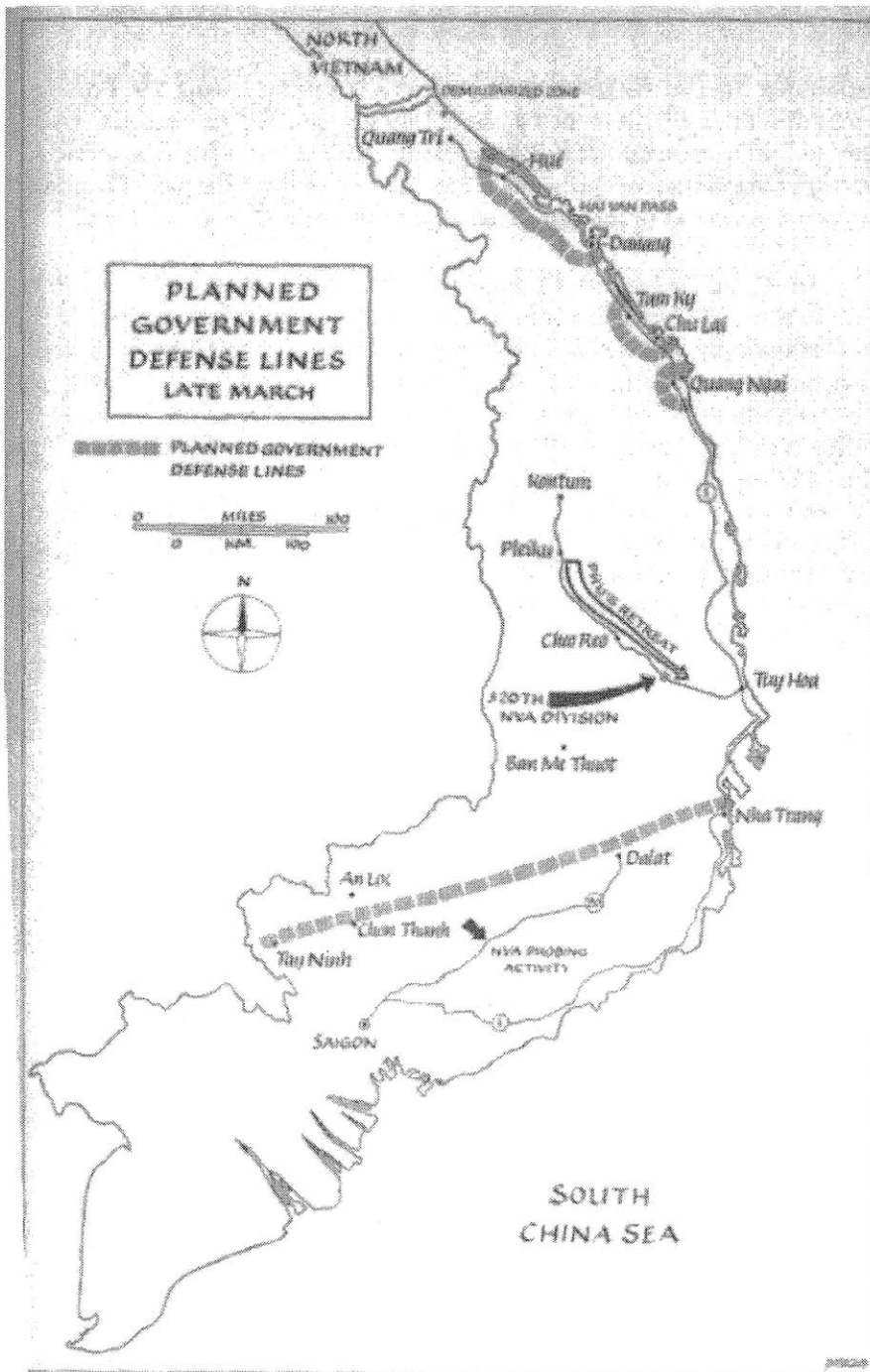
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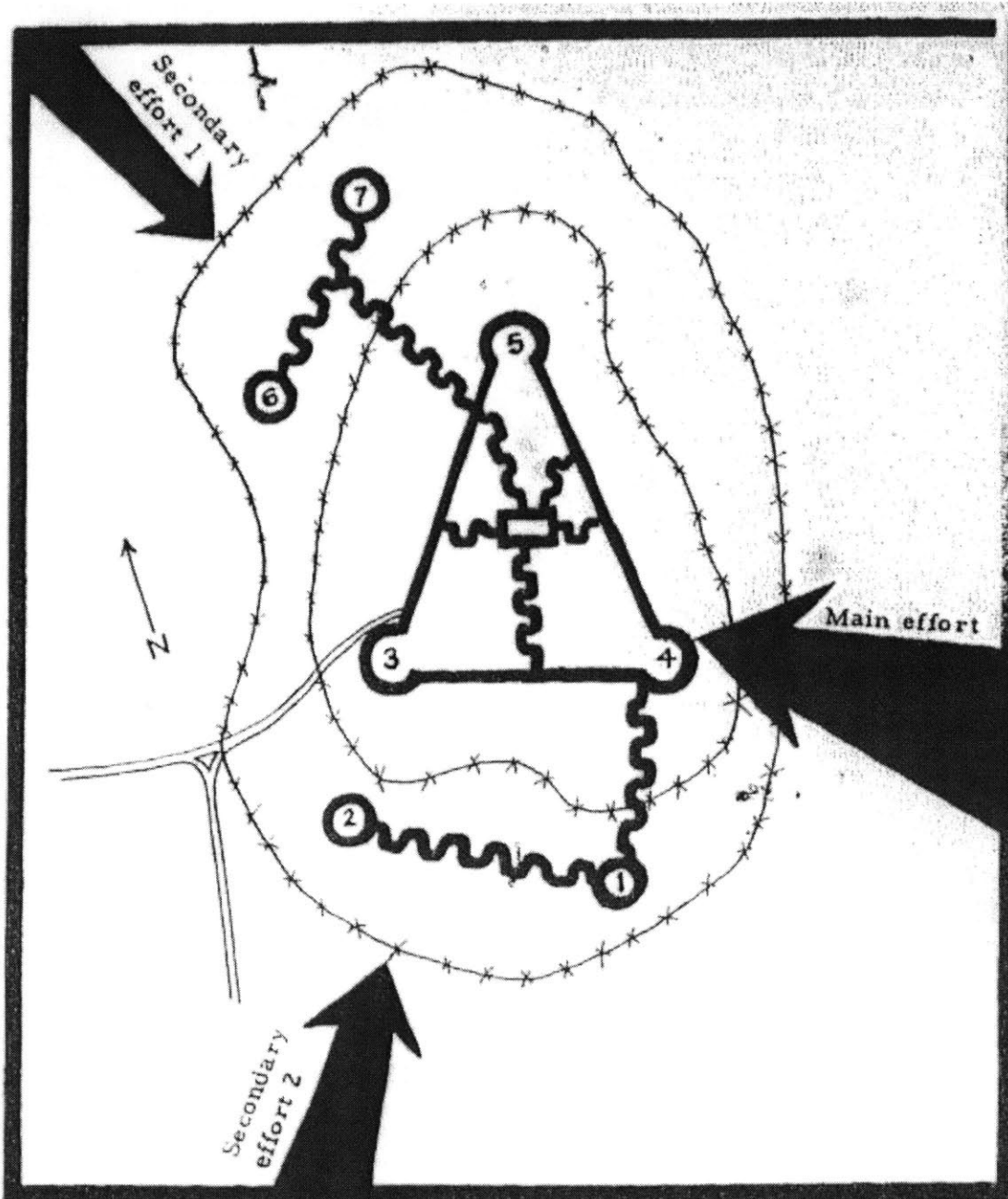
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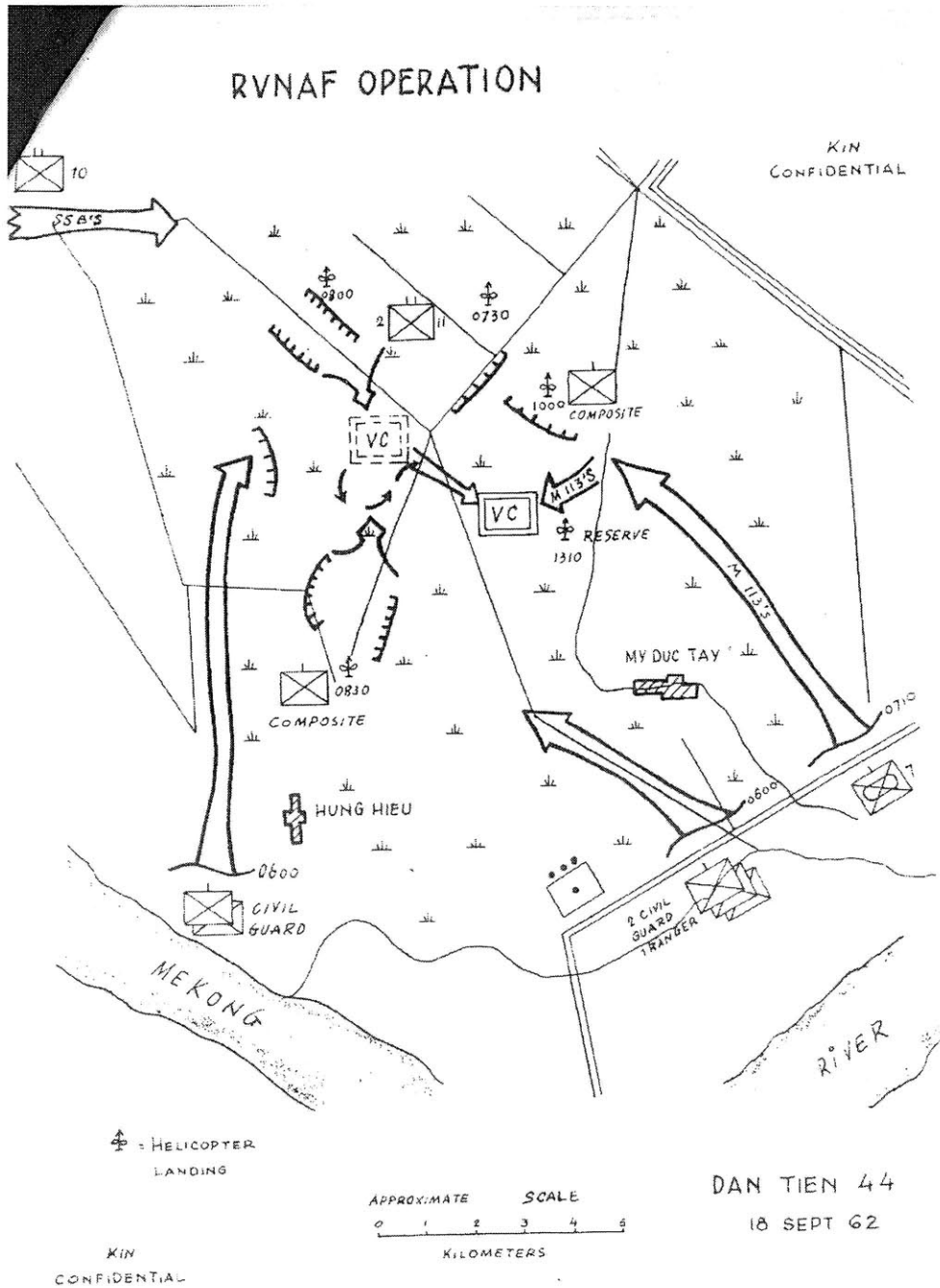
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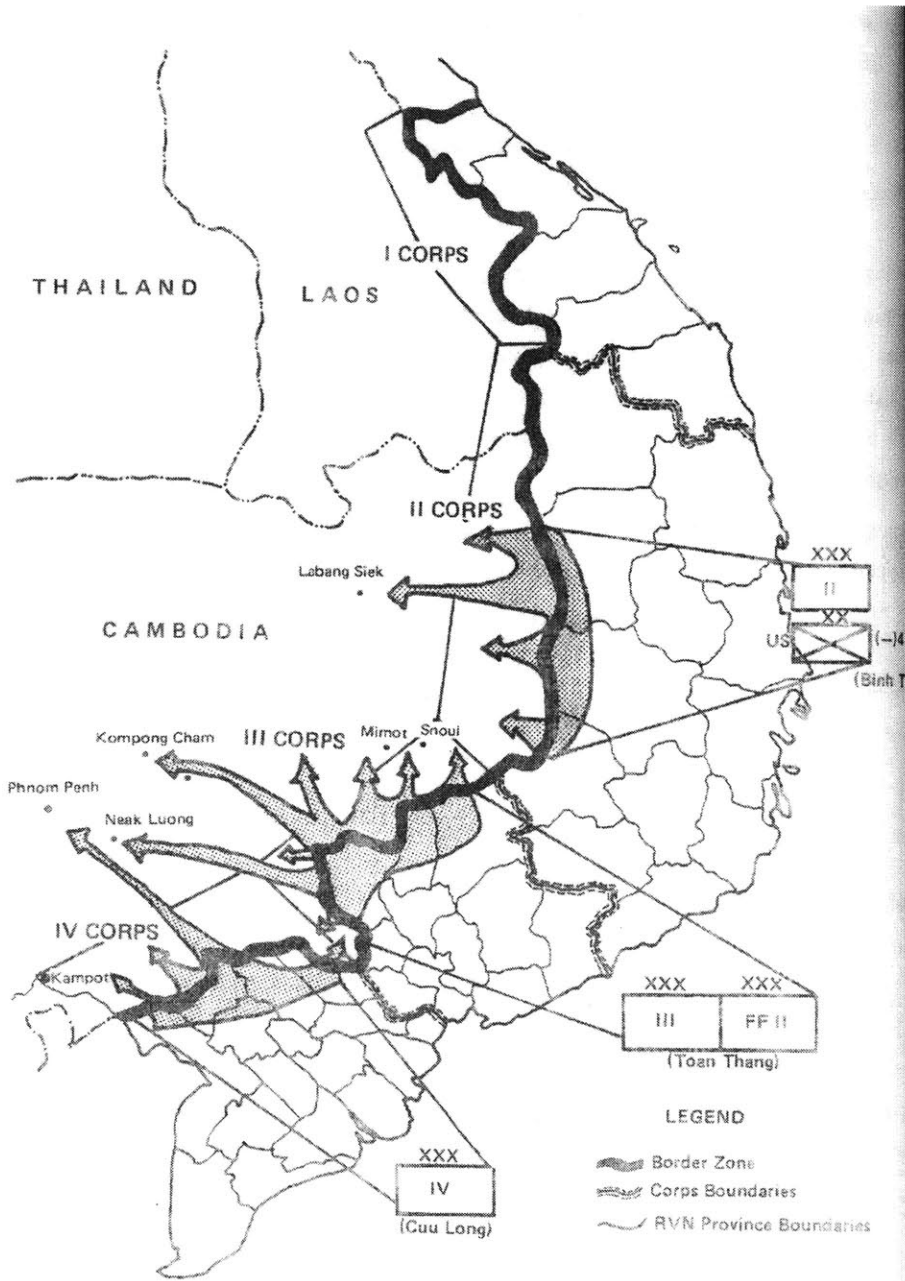
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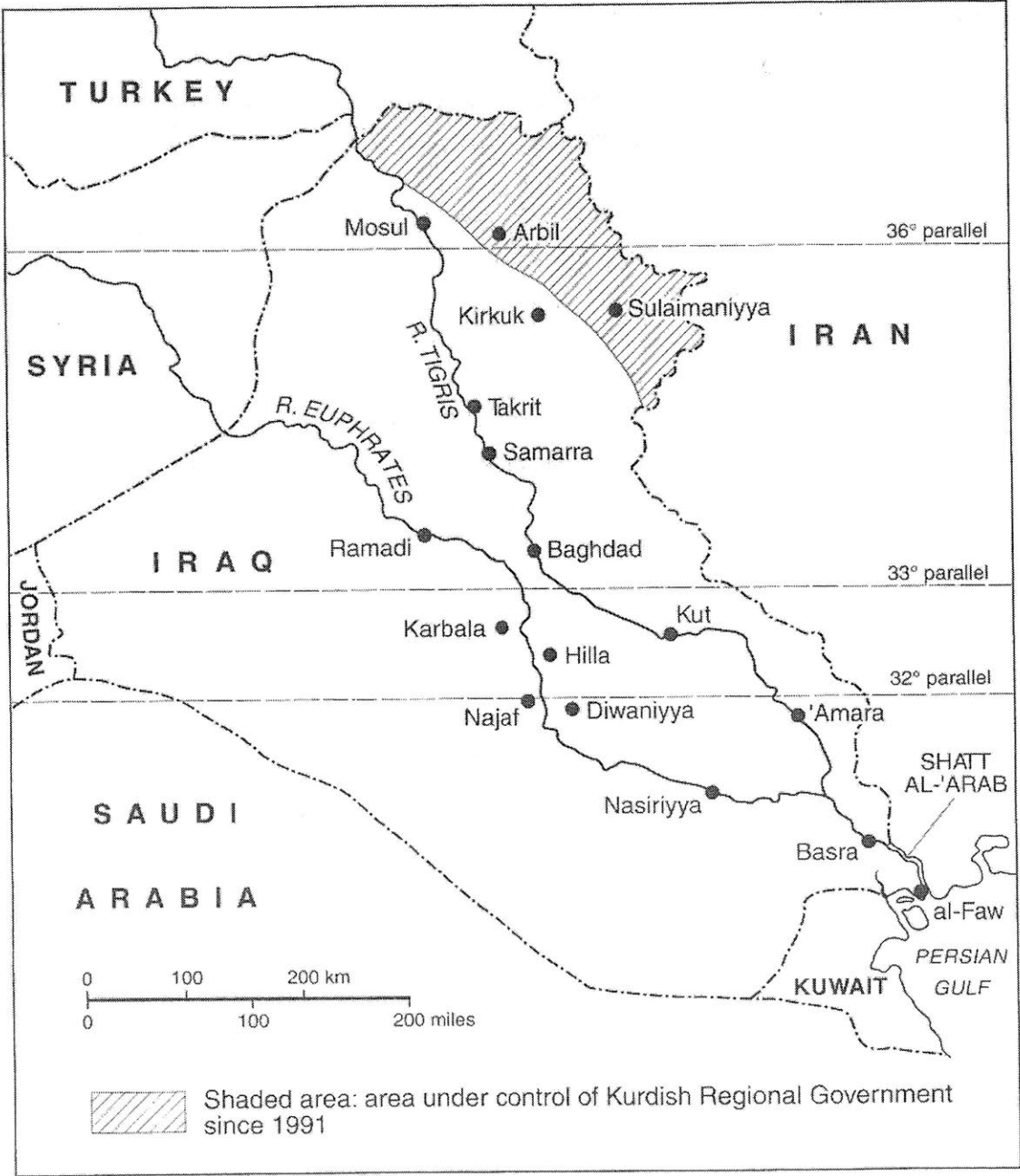
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MAP 15: THE INCURSION INTO CAMBODIA, 1970. Map reproduced from: Brig. Gen. Tran Dinh Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, Indochina Monograph (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1978), p. 52.



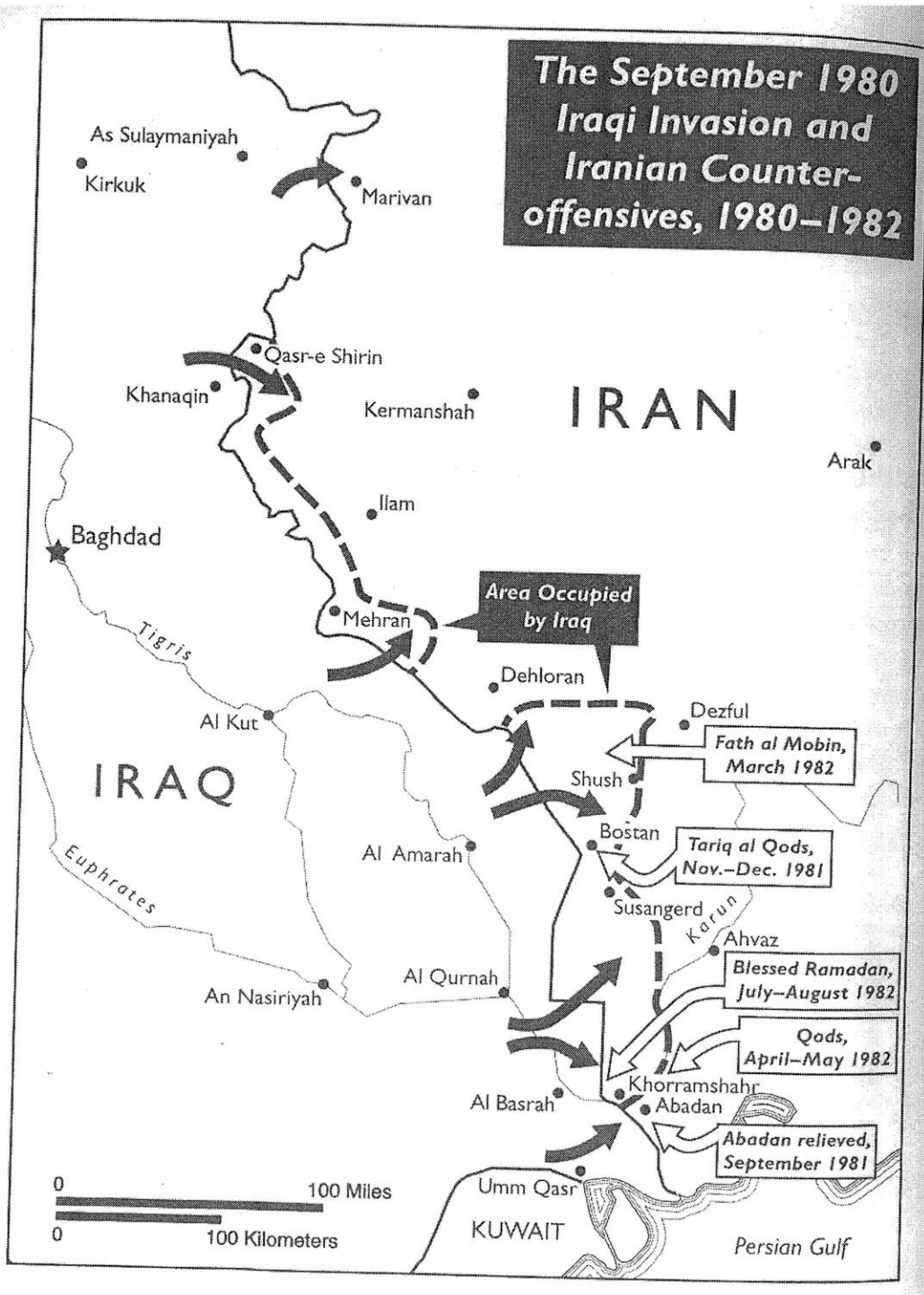
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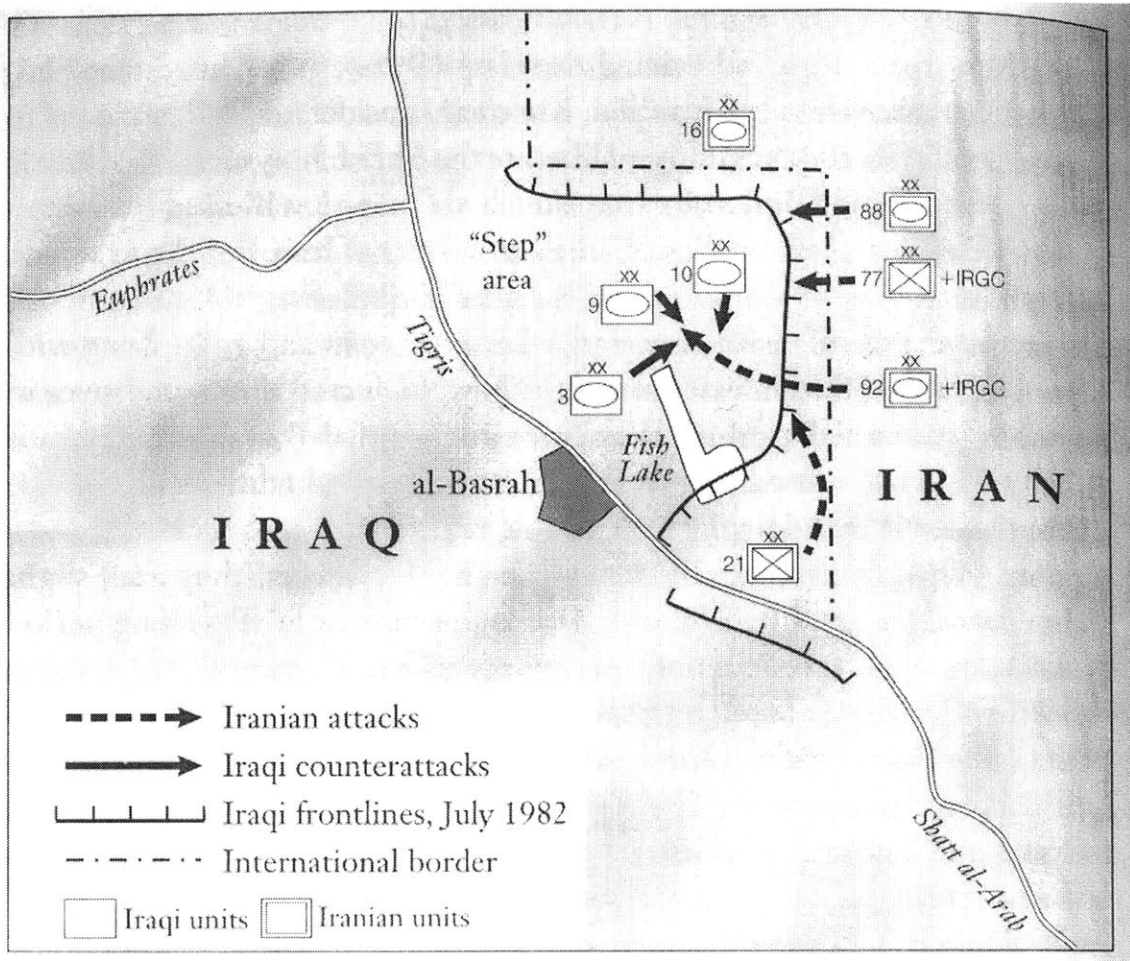
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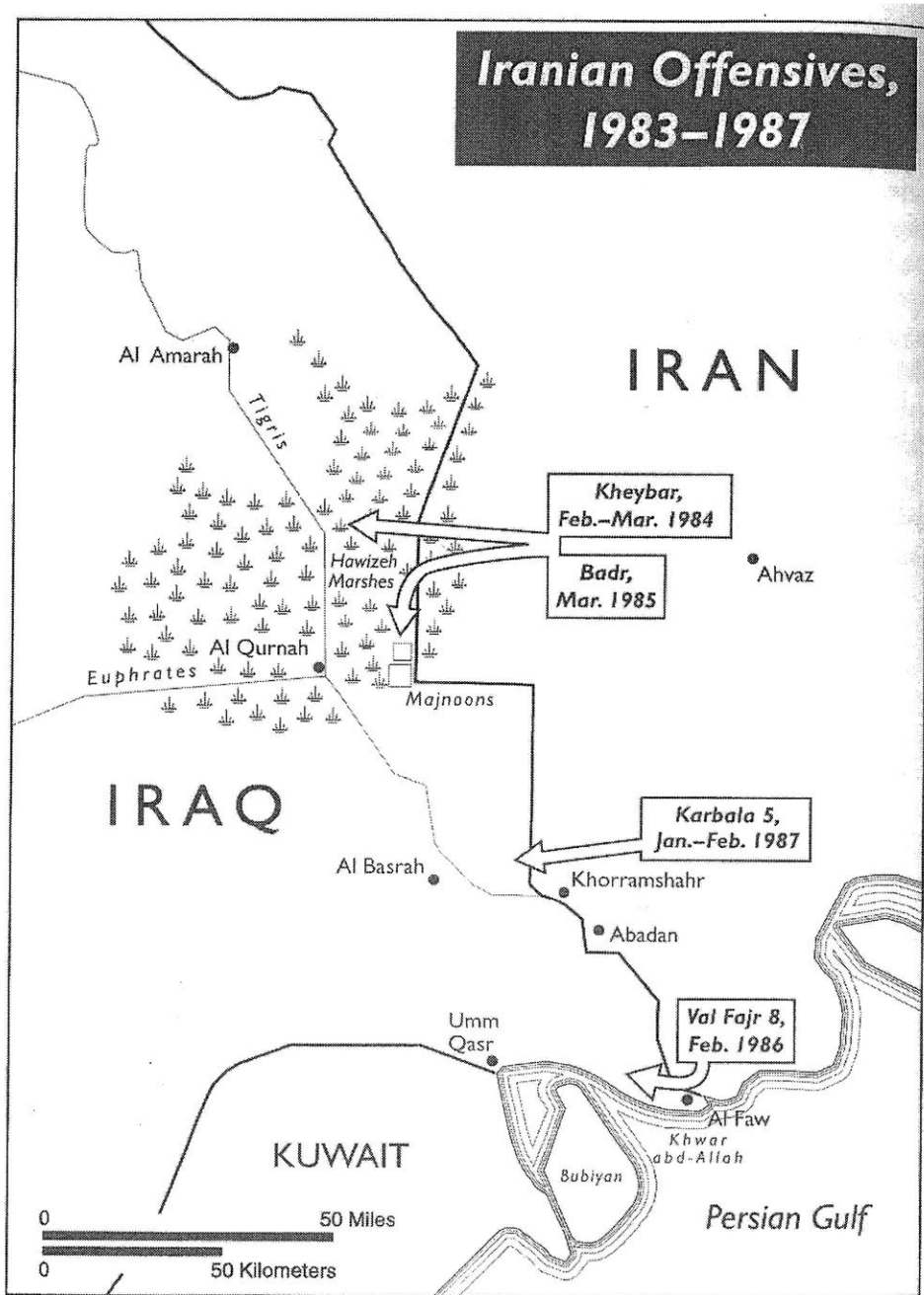
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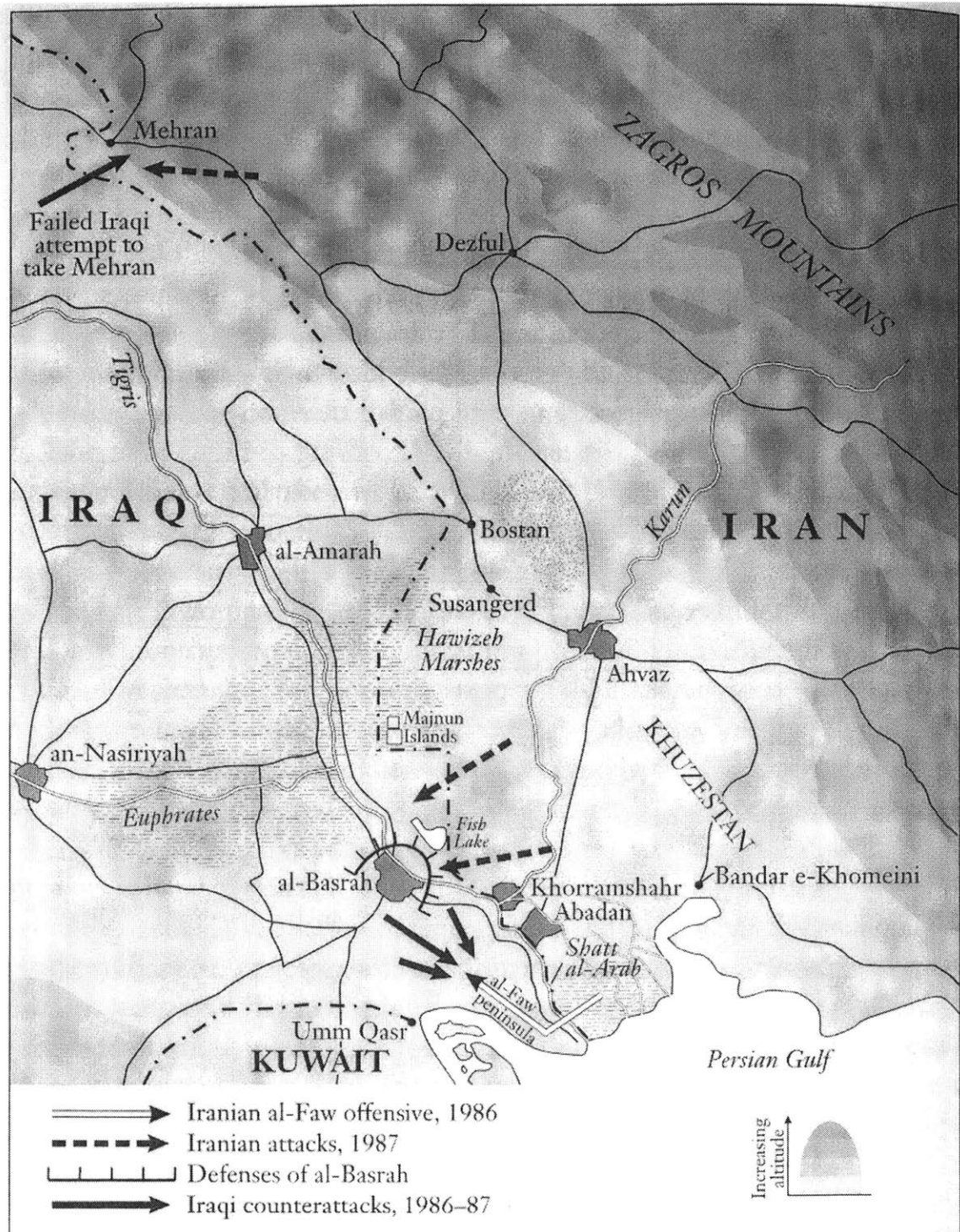
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MAP 21: IRANIAN OFFENSIVES, 1986-7. Map reproduced from: Kenneth Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), p. 222.



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