

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 14 | Number 1

Article 10

7-4-1984

VIETNAM: THE DEBATE GOES ON

John M. Gates

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

Recommended Citation

Gates, John M.. "VIETNAM: THE DEBATE GOES ON." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 14, 1 (1984). <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol14/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

VIETNAM: THE DEBATE GOES ON

by

JOHN M. GATES

At the start of 1983, veteran correspondent Fox Butterfield surveyed what he termed "the new Vietnam scholarship" in *The New York Times Magazine*. Examining the work of "a small group of scholars, journalists and military specialists who have started to look afresh at the war," he noted their challenge to "some of the most cherished beliefs of both the right and the left."¹ One member of the group identified by Butterfield is Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., research analyst at the Army's Strategic Studies Institute and an instructor at the United States Army War College. *Parade* magazine, not to be accused of understatement, claimed that "in military circles" Colonel Summers is "the man of the hour," saying that "in the upper echelons of the Pentagon" his book, *On Strategy*, "is considered 'must reading.'"² Rarely has a military intellectual received such widespread publicity, and no one engaged in the study of the Vietnam conflict can ignore his critique of American wartime strategy.

Summers has presented his argument in a variety of published works, including a recent article in *Parameters*.³ According to Summers, Americans were misled by "the fashionable new model of Communist revolutionary war."⁴ The work of such "counterinsurgency experts" as Sir Robert Thompson "channeled our attentions toward the internal affairs of the South Vietnamese government rather than toward the external threat" posed by the regular military forces of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam

(DRV).⁵ In addition to misperceiving the conflict as a revolutionary war, American leaders also failed to establish clear objectives to guide their country's military commanders in Vietnam. As a result of these errors in strategic analysis, American military forces in Southeast Asia engaged in "faulty military operations in the field."⁶ Failing to identify the true center of gravity in the war, the Americans used the bulk of their power to attack a "secondary enemy," the Viet Cong guerrillas, leaving the enemy's real power untouched. Summers believes that the guerrilla war in South Vietnam was a diversion. The significant communist threat was the army of the DRV, particularly the units of that army held in strategic reserve north of the 17th parallel. Victory came for the DRV in 1975 when those regulars moved south to mount a successful conventional attack on the Republic of Vietnam (RVN).

Colonel Summers argues his case persuasively, and his innovative use of Clausewitz to analyze the war in Vietnam broadens our understanding of the conflict. Unfortunately, two of the basic premises underlying his argument appear to be flawed. First, considerable evidence supports the conclusion that the conflict in Vietnam was always a revolutionary civil war and not a conventional one. Second, a survey of the internal documents produced by the US government demonstrates that the American objective in Vietnam was much clearer than Summers would have one believe. One must thus look elsewhere for an explanation of the

faulty military operations that took place there.

THE FIRST STRATEGIC QUESTION

According to Clausewitz, "the first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish . . . the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature." Determining the nature of a conflict is thus "the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive."⁷ Using these injunctions of Clausewitz as the starting point for his own argument, Colonel Summers asserts that the Vietnam War was not a revolutionary one. "If we apply the theoretical truths of revolutionary war to the actual events of the Vietnam war," wrote Summers, "we find that they do not fit. The Viet Cong did not achieve decisive results on their own."⁸ He presents the fact that the DRV achieved victory in 1975 by a conventional attack on the forces of the RVN as evidence that the revolutionary war model was an improper one. In reality, however, the conventional outcome of the war in Vietnam is anticipated in the major writing of both Asian theorists of revolutionary war and Western "counterinsurgency experts." The fit between "actual events" and "theoretical truths" is really very close.

Mao Tse-Tung, Vo Nguyen Giap, and Truong Chinh all commented upon the need for revolutionaries to move from guerrilla to mobile warfare, and they also identified mobile or conventional warfare as the more important and necessary element for success. Mao, for example, wrote that regular forces were of "primary importance" and that mobile warfare was "essential." He called guerrilla warfare "supplementary" because it could not "shoulder the main responsibility in deciding the outcome."⁹ In 1961, Giap had noted the progression in the Vietnamese "Resistance War" from guerrilla warfare to "mobile warfare combined with partial entrenched camp warfare," and his com-patriot Truong Chinh had written even earlier

that in the final stage of revolutionary conflict "positional warfare" would play "a paramount role."¹⁰ In theoretical terms, the conventional attacks by DRV regulars in 1975 represented the revolution moving into its "final stage."¹¹ According to Thompson, the defeat of government forces by "*the regular forces of the insurgents . . . in conventional battle*" constituted "a classical ending in accordance with the orthodox theory."¹² Summers errs in concluding that the conventional DRV offensive in 1975 demonstrated the inapplicability of the revolutionary war model to the Vietnam War. Revolutionary war theory never implied that the Viet Cong would "achieve decisive results on their own."

More important than evidence of the close fit between revolutionary war theory and the war's end in a conventional military attack is the revolutionary nature of communist goals in Vietnam and their consistency. "The aim," as General Giap so cogently summarized it in 1961, "was to realize the political goals of the national democratic revolution as in China, to recover national independence and bring land to the peasants, creating conditions for the advance of the revolution of our country to socialism."¹³ Most important, the goals were to be achieved throughout the entire area of Vietnam, not only in the North, and the communist leadership of the Vietnamese revolution consistently sought the overthrow of any government standing in their way: the French, Ngo Dinh Diem, the American-supported regime that followed him.

From Ho Chi Minh's 1946 assurance that he considered the people of Nam Bo "citizens of Viet Nam" to the call of the Vietnamese Workers Party to "advance to the peaceful reunification of the Fatherland" in 1973,¹⁴ the communist leaders in Vietnam neither swayed from their commitment to unification nor effectively hid that commitment. One thus wonders how non-communist leaders of the National Liberation Front (NLF) such as Truong Nhu Tang could have believed they "were working for Southern self-determination and independence—from Hanoi as well as from

Washington,” as Summers assumes.¹⁵ The ten-point program of the NLF, distributed throughout the world in February 1961, called for “peaceful reunification of the fatherland,” and the communist-dominated front reaffirmed its goal of a unified Vietnam in subsequent statements. On 22 March 1965, for example, it spoke of “national unification” in strong, unambiguous language: “Vietnam is one, the Vietnamese people are one, north and south are one.” A very long statement of the NLF political program broadcast in September 1967 observed that “Vietnam must be reunified,” calling reunification “the sacred aspiration of our entire people,” and a 1969 statement called “unity” one of “the Vietnamese people’s fundamental national rights.”¹⁶ The NLF consistently spoke of “peaceful” and “eventual” reunification; it did not promise independence or self-determination for the South. The communist commitment to a unified Vietnam could only have remained hidden from people such as Truong Nhu Tang because of their own naiveté, self-deception, or wishful thinking.

Similarly, if Americans were deceived as to the “true intentions” of Vietnam’s communist leaders, they too were primarily victims of their own, not communist, dissembling. As Wallace J. Thies observed, “DRV leaders such as Le Duan and Nguyen Chi Thanh were deeply and passionately committed to the goal of completing the revolution in South Vietnam. It was a goal they had been pursuing for virtually all of their adult lives.”¹⁷ Pham Van Dong attempted to convey the importance of national unification to the United States when he met with Canadian diplomat Blair Seaborn in June 1964, using the French *drame* (signifying an intense unresolved crisis) in an attempt to capture the critical nature of such a “fundamental” issue.¹⁸

Rather than viewing North Vietnam as a complete nation, Vietnamese communists such as General Giap saw it as “a large rear echelon” of the army. It was “the revolutionary base for the whole country,” and it would eventually supply the forces necessary for reunification.¹⁹ American

reports indicating the depth of the communist commitment to a truly national revolution were ignored in the Johnson years,²⁰ but the truth of that commitment kept emerging. The special assessment of the situation in Vietnam prepared for President-elect Richard Nixon at the start of 1969 noted that “Hanoi’s ultimate goal of a unified Vietnam under its control has not changed.”²¹ Nor would it change. Like Truong Nhu Tang, Americans have little excuse for their ignorance of North Vietnam’s “true intentions.”

The real key to understanding the nature of a particular war is not an analysis of the way in which it is fought, but a study of the people involved and their reasons for fighting. If, as Summers admits, the First Indochina War “was a revolutionary war,”²² then the claim that the Second Indochina War was not is illogical. The communist goal was the same in both wars: *revolution*, the overthrow of whatever noncommunist government might exist in any part of Vietnam and its replacement by the communist one headquartered in Hanoi. In the First Indochina War, a Vietnamese movement (led by Ho Chi Minh) fought throughout Vietnam and elsewhere in Indochina to create an independent, unified, communist state. Attempting to prevent the attainment of that goal were the French colonialists and their allies, some of whom hoped that they might eventually achieve independence under a noncommunist government. In the Second Indochina War, the parties on one side of the conflict had hardly changed at all. The movement led by Ho Chi Minh continued its attempt to achieve an

John M. Gates is Professor of History at The College of Wooster in Wooster, Ohio, teaching military, American, and Latin American history. He received a B.A. in history from Stanford University in 1959 and an M.A. from the Stanford School of Education in 1960. He began teaching at Wooster after earning a Ph.D. in history at Duke University in 1967. Professor Gates is the author of *Schoolbooks and Kraggs: The United States Army in the Philippines, 1898-1902* (1973).



independent communist state in a united Vietnam, having failed to achieve that goal in the First Indochina War. The United States and its Vietnamese allies, grouped in the South, sought to contain the communist revolution to the area north of the 17th parallel and create an independent, non-communist state in the South. In Clausewitzian terms, the nature of the two wars was identical: a group seeking communist revolutionary ends was fighting against a group trying to prevent the spread of the revolution.

The communist goal in the Second Indochina War was clearly political, but the means used to implement it varied to fit the situation. Early in the conflict, when communist military power in the South was relatively meager, agitation, propaganda, and small guerrilla action predominated. As weakness appeared in the RVN, the communists used units infiltrated from the North to strengthen their military capability south of the 17th parallel, moving more than once toward mobile warfare. Later, as the war became stalemated, there was a lull in the fighting after unsuccessful communist offensives in 1968 and again in 1972, although communist cadres continued their work to undermine the South Vietnamese government. Finally, with the RVN left unsupported by the United States, the communists moved in for the kill in their final offensive, using everything available to them—what remained of their infrastructure in the South, guerrillas, and regular army units from the North.

Facing dedicated communist guerrillas and cadres determined to overthrow them, the leaders of the noncommunist government in Saigon found themselves involved in a struggle for survival. To counter the communist-led revolution, they had to build widespread support for their government, and that could not be done without pacifying the countryside. A conventional war response that would have contained the major elements of a communist military power within the confines of the northern base was necessary, but alone it was not sufficient to secure the RVN. Behind whatever shield

might have been created to protect it, the Saigon government would need to engage in effective pacification operations to prevent the internal collapse of the RVN. One cannot abandon the model of revolutionary war without seriously distorting the nature of the conflict taking place in Vietnam.²³

By the mid-1960s, however, many Americans, including Lyndon Johnson and his advisors, seemed to have abandoned the revolutionary war model. In a study of "Official Justifications for America's Role in Indochina," Professor Hugh M. Arnold found that the image of the United States engaged in "a simple response to aggression" was "overwhelmingly the most important justification used during the Johnson Administration." According to Arnold, the Johnson government sought to make clear to the American people that the war "was not a civil war or an indigenous rebellion, but an attempt to take over a nation by force of arms."²⁴ This view of the war is basic to Summers' argument also, but the conflict in Vietnam was not a contest between two sovereign states.

After the August revolution of 1945, the Viet Minh established their revolutionary government throughout Vietnam, although the combined action of the British and French, using Japanese forces in addition to their own, soon reestablished a French presence in the South. Nevertheless, as the Declaration of Independence of the DRV made clear, Ho Chi Minh saw himself and his government as representing "the entire people of Viet Nam," and that claim was confirmed by foreign observers at the time.²⁵ A year later, the Chief of the Division of Southeast Asian Affairs of the State Department, Abbot L. Moffat, affirmed the view that the DRV was a government for all Vietnam and not just the North.²⁶ The unity of Vietnam would be reasserted again and again throughout the war. From before the Geneva agreement, which stated clearly that the "military demarcation line" at the 17th parallel was "provisional and should not in any way be interpreted as constituting a political or territorial boundary," to after the Paris agreement of 1973, which reaffirmed

that the parallel was "only provisional and not a political or territorial boundary," leaders of the DRV repeatedly claimed that there was only one Vietnam, not two. Initially that was also the view of the non-communist leaders of the RVN.²⁷

Believing a partitioned Vietnam to be preferable to an entirely communist one, Americans and many of their Vietnamese allies soon came to view the 17th parallel as a border between two sovereign states. As a result, American leaders created an illusory picture of the war, portraying the conflict as the result of the aggression of one sovereign state against another. In reality, it was a civil war between two Vietnamese parties, both of whom had originally claimed sovereignty over all of Vietnam. Although the United States often envisioned a Korea-like solution to the Vietnam problem, it could not create two sovereign states in Vietnam by rhetoric alone. Until the Americans and their allies in the RVN forced the DRV to abandon its goal of creating a revolutionary communist state in all Vietnam, the civil war would continue. From the communist point of view, what Americans called North Vietnamese "aggression" was nothing more than the attempt to complete the process of unifying Vietnam under a revolutionary government begun at the end of World War II.

Since the communist victory in 1975, a number of people, Colonel Summers among them, have spoken of the conquest of South Vietnam by "North" Vietnamese,²⁸ but that too is a distortion. Leaders in the governments of both the RVN and the DRV came from all over Vietnam, not only from the region in which their capital resided. The Diem government, for example, contained many Catholics who had migrated from the North in 1954, and later Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky provided a highly visible "northern" presence in the Saigon government. More important, however, was the "southern" presence in the highest ranks of the DRV leadership. Le Duan, the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Workers Party, was born in Quang Tri, just south of the 17th parallel. Pham Van Dong, the prime minister of the DRV, was born in Quang Ngai. Pham Hung,

a vice-premier of the DRV and member of the Political Bureau since the late 1950s, was from Vinh Long; and Ton Duc Thang, who succeeded Ho Chi Minh as president of the DRV, was born in the Mekong Delta. Nguyen Chi Thanh, the DRV military commander in the South until his death in 1967, was also South Vietnamese. Such biographical information led one author to conclude that "in terms of the birthplace of opposing leaders, it is evident that the Second Indochina War was more of a civil war than was America's war of 1861-1865."²⁹ However much Americans would like to believe it, the war did not end with a conquest of the RVN by alien "northerners" alone. It ended when the noncommunist Saigon government was destroyed by forces of the revolutionary communist government in Hanoi.

THE OBJECTIVE

In a number of critiques of American strategy in Vietnam, one finds the statement that American objectives were not presented clearly. As evidence for that conclusion Summers cited "some 22 separate American rationales" categorized by Professor Arnold, compared to "the *one* North Vietnamese objective of total control over all of Indochina." Summers also quoted General Douglas Kinnard's conclusion that "almost 70 percent of the generals who managed the war were uncertain of its objectives."³⁰ The survey data reported by Kinnard, however, do not indicate so great a problem as Summers would have one believe. Although 35 percent of the respondents to Kinnard's questionnaire classified American objectives in Vietnam as "rather fuzzy," 29 percent found them to be "clear and understandable."³¹ The interpretation of the meaning of the statement "not as clear as they might have been," the response selected by 33 percent, is open to debate. To say that goals could be stated more clearly is not the same as saying one is "uncertain" regarding the objective.

The article by Professor Arnold is also not particularly supportive of the argument that American objectives were unclear.

Although Arnold noted “22 separate rationales,” he made clear that some of the “themes” he identified were “more concerned with means than ends.” More important, a “rationale” is not necessarily an objective. One constant Arnold identified was “the Communism theme,” stressed in both public and private contexts, “in every Administration, and in every year covered by this study.” He concluded that “if one single reason for United States involvement in Indochina can be derived from the analysis, it would have to be the perceived threat of Communism.”³² That is particularly true when one separates statements that deal with the American objective in Vietnam from those that attempt to rationalize or explain that objective.

One sees the clarity of American objectives in the similarity of official statements made during different administrations at widely varying times during the war. In 1948, for example, the 27 September statement on Indochina by the Department of State presented the “long-term” objective of “a self-governing nationalist state which will be friendly to the United States and which, commensurate with the capacity of the peoples involved, will be patterned upon our conception of a democratic state as opposed to the totalitarian state which would evolve inevitably from Communist domination.”³³ In 1951, the American goal for “the nations and peoples of Asia,” as outlined in a 17 May annex to NSC 28/4, remained the same: “stable and self-sustaining non-Communist governments, oriented toward the United States.”³⁴ A decade later, as the United States became more involved in the Vietnamese situation, statements of the US objective remained unchanged: “to prevent Communist domination of South Vietnam; to create in that country a viable and increasingly democratic society.”³⁵ By 1964, with an even greater American commitment, the statement of goals had not altered; the United States still sought “an independent non-Communist South Vietnam.”³⁶ Statements such as these, made throughout the war by the people involved with setting policy, should leave no doubt that any

ignorance of the American goal in Vietnam did not result from a failure to set clear objectives.

As evidence of a lack of clarity in American policy, Summers observed that “when Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford took office in 1968, he complained that no one in the Defense Department could tell him what constituted victory.”³⁷ In fact, in the source cited by Summers, Clifford made no such claim. What he did say was that he was startled “to find out that we had no military plan to win the war.”³⁸ The difference is not unimportant. American leaders knew what would constitute victory—forcing the leaders of the DRV to accept the existence of “an independent non-Communist South Vietnam.” The problem was how to achieve that goal.

Clifford himself was even exaggerating when he stated that the United States lacked a plan to “win the war,” as seen by his own summary of the Pentagon’s answers to his questions. Clifford was told that “the enemy will ultimately be worn down so severely by attrition that the enemy will eventually capitulate,”³⁹ a view that had been prevalent at least since 1965, when Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara reported to the President on his conversations in Honolulu with Ambassador Taylor, General Wheeler, Admiral Sharp, and General Westmoreland. “Their strategy for ‘victory,’ over time,” said McNamara, “is to break the will of the DRV/VC by denying them victory.”⁴⁰ Clifford was not really reacting to the absence of a plan, but to what he perceived to be its inadequacies. Since the war, the dissection of those inadequacies and the search for better alternatives has been an important focus of many works, Summers’ among them, but one should not make the mistake of assuming that flaws in execution resulted from an absence of clear goals.

OPERATIONS

“Because we failed to correctly identify the nature of the war,” argues Summers, “we also failed to identify the center of gravity.” Seeing the conflict as a revolutionary war,

Americans "saw the Viet Cong as the center of gravity" and "massed against this guerrilla enemy in search-and-destroy and pacification efforts." As a result, "our concentration on a secondary enemy frittered away our military resources on inconclusive military and social operations that ultimately exhausted the patience of the American people."⁴¹ Critics of the American approach to the war who take what may be termed a counterinsurgency view would disagree. They have argued that the response of General Westmoreland and other military leaders was not the proper one for a revolutionary war. They are particularly critical of the military de-emphasis of pacification, relegating it to the category of "the other war," and engagement in counterproductive search-and-destroy operations instead. If the critics are correct, then a number of the faulty operations Summers deplors could not possibly have resulted from the military becoming overly involved in a campaign of counterinsurgency.⁴²

Actually two centers of gravity existed. One was the Viet Cong guerrillas and communist cadres in the South; the other was the communist military power in the North. Success in attacking one would not assure the destruction of the other, and either could prevent the United States from achieving its goal. In the early 1960s, for example, the revolutionaries in the South had achieved considerable success without a high level of material aid from the North. In fact, the communists might well have achieved their aim without moving from guerrilla war to regular mobile warfare had it not been for the significant increase in American aid to the RVN. Although Summers is correct to argue that pacification and attacking the Viet Cong guerrillas were tasks that properly belonged to the South Vietnamese, the situation in the 1960s was such that the job could not be done without considerable help from the United States. The evidence that the RVN approached the point of collapse more than once before the commitment of DRV regulars to the war highlights the importance of the American contribution to pacification and

nation-building. Without those efforts, the RVN might have fallen into communist hands much earlier.

By the 1970s, of course, the situation had changed. Then, despite some progress in pacification and the virtual destruction of Viet Cong military power in 1968 and after, the government of South Vietnam was still challenged by the communist military forces in North Vietnam. Containment of North Vietnamese military power, if not its outright destruction, was thus also necessary, and Summers is correct to identify that mission as a logical one for the American forces in the region. Neutralization of those forces and the communist will to use them to force the unification of Vietnam was essential if the American objective in Vietnam was to be achieved, but nothing in the revolutionary civil war model presented here or in the frequently stated American objective of establishing a secure noncommunist state in South Vietnam precluded the acceptance of the strategy advocated by Summers. Instead, it was prevented by the President's desire to keep the war limited, a desire shared by many other Americans during the course of the war.

Although Clausewitz believed that "no matter what the central feature of the enemy's power may be . . . the defeat and destruction of his fighting force remains the best way to begin," he also recognized that in a civil conflict such as that in Vietnam the center of gravity might not be the enemy's military forces, but "the personalities of the leaders and public opinion."⁴³ In the RVN, the crucial element, in addition to the Viet Cong guerrillas, was the population at large, and of particular importance were the people in a position to give support and shelter to the guerrillas. Also important were the non-communists in the NLF and other opposition groups. Detaching them from the communists was essential if the RVN was to emerge as a viable and secure state, and the pacification program was crucial to that end. No strictly military approach would suffice.

The will of the communists throughout Vietnam was very strong, although a

majority of the generals surveyed by General Kinnard admitted that it was "not sufficiently considered" by the Americans.⁴⁴ In retrospect, knowing the tremendous casualties taken by the communists in the course of their resistance since 1945, one cannot assume that the destruction of North Vietnamese military power would have ended the war. The history of conflict in Indochina and the continuation of the fighting long after the US withdrawal indicate that the conquest of the DRV base in the North might have been needed to destroy the communist will to continue the war. From the perspective of many Americans, communist determination in the face of such high costs may appear irrational, but people throughout the world, particularly revolutionaries, have demonstrated a capacity for such fanatical behavior too frequently for it to be ignored.

During and after the war, a number of people have argued against the limitations placed on the use of American forces in Vietnam, chiding civilian leaders for having taken counsel of their fears. As General Kinnard noted, however, the desire to limit the use of American power to avoid widening the conflict to include China, the Soviet Union, or both was one specific objective that the United States achieved.⁴⁵ More important, the critics provide no specific evidence that in the mid-1960s such limitations were unnecessary, while the Chinese commitment of some 30,000 to 50,000 "support troops" to the aid of the DRV after 1965 provides some evidence of the wisdom of the decision to limit the American response in Indochina.⁴⁶

Judging the degree of risk inherent in any strategy after the fact is difficult, and one cannot know with certainty how China or Russia might have reacted in the 1960s to such forceful actions as the Linebacker bombing campaigns or the Cambodian incursion. In the 1950s and 1960s, when American leaders, including some military leaders, asked themselves whether the potential risks of a less-restricted war were worth the possible gains in Vietnam, they invariably answered no. Only after the international environment had changed

significantly did the answer to the question also change. The diplomatic world in which Richard Nixon functioned appeared very different from that facing Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson. In a nuclear world, caution is an important survival mechanism, and critics should think twice before advocating that American leaders act more boldly.

Given the willingness of military leaders to fight a limited war in Vietnam, despite their misgivings, rather than resign, the important question remains a military one. *Within the limitations set down*, what strategy was best to achieve the goal of destroying the enemy's will? Summers joins numerous other authors in a condemnation of the choices made during the war: controlled escalation, limited bombing of the North, counterinsurgency and a war of attrition in the South. But the course of action he and others have suggested, using American military power to isolate the communist base above the 17th parallel, was not possible within the context of the specific limitations set down by civilian leaders in Washington. Without a change of guidelines, the approach Colonel Summers advocates is not really an alternative to the flawed operations that took place.

The supreme irony of the war in Vietnam may be that despite all of the flaws in the American approach noted by a wide variety of critics, by 1969 the United States and the RVN were as well-positioned to attain their objectives as they had ever been. The forces of General Westmoreland had found and destroyed thousands of communist troops, both guerrillas and regulars, and the reorganized pacification program appeared to be making progress in the countryside. The leaders of the RVN may not have won the hearts and minds of the populace, but communist progress in that endeavor had been slowed or stopped. As American aid improved the economic situation in the countryside, the tolerance of people for the Saigon government also increased. Thus, even after all of the perceived failures of American policy and strategy in Vietnam, the war was not lost prior to 1973, nor was it

being lost, except in the crucial American center of gravity, popular opinion. In the United States, on mainstreet and on Capitol Hill, ending the war had become more important than winning it.

Although Summers and others have deemed the American approach to the war strategically bankrupt, by 1968 the DRV had adopted essentially the same approach: to keep fighting until the enemy became frustrated and quit. The critical difference was that the American plan failed while that of the DRV succeeded. The United States hurt the communists, but not enough. In material terms the communists damaged the United States far less. More important was the psychological and political damage done by astute communist propaganda, American errors in applying force (particularly the highly visible reliance on firepower in the South), and specific events such as the Tet Offensive. Limited American military activity proved unable to achieve the objective before American will proved insufficient to sustain the nation in a protracted war. But the problem was not a faulty perception of the war's nature or unclear objectives. In fact, the major problem may not even have been flawed operations, given the absence in America of the kind of commitment to the war that sustained the communists.

The final outcome of the war was primarily the result of historical events outside the realm of strategic thinking. In the United States the anti-war movement created sufficient turmoil that the functioning of government was altered if not impaired, and the Watergate scandal, which must be seen as a war-related event to be understood fully, created an environment that doomed the President's Vietnam policy to failure.⁴⁷ Political weakness in the face of an assertive Congress and a population grown tired of the war prevented Richard Nixon from implementing a program for the protection of Vietnam based on the use of American firepower instead of manpower. The effects of the scandal could not be calculated in advance, but in the end they were decisive. Although clearly in the realm of speculation, the argument that without Watergate President Nixon might have successfully

defended the RVN through the continued use of American air power and aid cannot be easily dismissed.

CONCLUSION

The possibility that without Watergate the United States might have muddled through to a more favorable outcome in Vietnam should not prevent one from subjecting the wartime strategy to searching criticism. Summers' critique, however, does not provide an adequate model for future action. By stressing the need for a conventional military response, he diverts attention from the importance of the unconventional elements that remain primary in revolutionary struggles such as that in Vietnam. In the RVN, the problems of pacification and national development would have remained even if the United States had succeeded in containing the regular forces of the DRV above the 17th parallel. If those problems went unresolved, then internal collapse behind the American shield would have prevented the attainment of the US objective of creating a secure, noncommunist state in South Vietnam. At the very least, as happened more than once in the war, the threat of a collapse in the American rear would necessitate further American commitment and prolong the war, heightening the risk of a collapse of American will.

Any analysis that denies the important revolutionary dimension of the Vietnam conflict is misleading, leaving the American people, their leaders, and their professionals inadequately prepared to deal with similar problems in the future. The argument that faulty strategic assessment and poorly articulated goals doomed the American military to faulty operations in Vietnam only encourages military officers to avoid the kind of full-scale reassessment that failures such as that in Southeast Asia ought to stimulate. Instead of forcing the military to come to grips with the problems of revolutionary warfare that now exist in nations such as Guatemala or El Salvador, Summers' analysis leads officers back into the conventional war model that provided so little preparation for solving the problems faced in

Indochina by the French, the Americans, and their Vietnamese allies. Such a business-as-usual approach is much too complacent in a world plagued by the unconventional warfare associated with revolution and attempts to counter it.

When Fox Butterfield surveyed the authors of the "new" Vietnam scholarship he implied that somehow they had managed to place themselves above the battle and engage in a truly objective analysis of the war. Building upon Butterfield's work, Summers implies that his contribution to scholarship is closer to the truth than previous accounts "written in the heat of passion which too often mirror the prejudices of the times."⁴⁸ One should be wary, however, of any author's claim to objectivity. Although Summers' analysis may lack passion, it is certainly what many people in the Army and the nation want to hear. With the responsibility for failure in Vietnam placed squarely on "academic counterinsurgency experts" and overly timid leaders in Washington, significant military errors become a function of strategic or perceptual errors made at a higher, usually civilian level. In short, the military is absolved of virtually all responsibility for failure. A different analytical framework would make such a shirking of responsibility much more difficult, and readers should be wary of any institutional insider whose seemingly objective scholarship fits so well with what many other members of the institution want to hear.

NOTES

1. Fox Butterfield, "The New Vietnam Scholarship," *The New York Times Magazine*, 13 February 1983, pp. 26-27.
2. "Man of the Hour," *Parade*, 14 August 1983, p. 9.
3. Harry G. Summers, Jr., "A Strategic Perception of the Vietnam War," *Parameters*, 13 (June 1983), 41-46, contains an excellent summary of Summers' argument, as does "Vietnam Reconsidered," *The New Republic*, 12 July 1982, pp. 25-31. A more extensive and detailed presentation is contained in Summers' book, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio, 1982).
4. Summers, "Vietnam Reconsidered," p. 25.
5. Summers, "A Strategic Perception of the Vietnam War," p. 42.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
7. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 88-89.

8. Summers, "A Strategic Perception of the Vietnam War," p. 42.

9. *Mao Tse-Tung on Guerrilla Warfare*, trans. by Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Praeger, 1961), pp. 56 and 113; *Mao Tse-Tung on Revolution and War*, ed. by M. Rejai (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 288.

10. Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War, People's Army* (New York: Praeger, 1962), pp. 103-04; Truong Chinh, *The Resistance Will Win in Primer for Revolt* (New York: Praeger, 1963), p. 116.

11. Van Tien Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory*, trans. by John Spragens, Jr. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), p. 12.

12. Sir Robert Thompson, *Revolutionary War in World Strategy, 1945-1969* (New York: Taplinger, 1970), p. 11. Italics in original. For an overview of revolutionary war strategy and a summary of its strategic phases including mobile warfare, see John J. McCuen, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War* (Harrisburg: Stackpole, 1966), ch. 2, pp. 37-44 in particular.

13. Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War, People's Army*, p. 69.

14. "Letter from Ho Chi Minh to Compatriots in Nam Bo, May 31, 1946," in Gareth Porter, ed., *Vietnam: A History in Documents* (New York: New American Library, 1981), p. 45 and extract of article in *Hoc Tap* (April 1973) in Gareth Porter, ed., *Vietnam: The Definitive History of Human Decision* (New York: E. M. Coleman, 1979), p. 626.

15. Truong Nhu Tang, "The Myth of a Liberation," *New York Review of Books*, 21 October 1982, p. 32.

16. The 1961, 1965, and 1967 statements are from "NLFSV Position Statements" in Part VI B, Negotiations 1965-1967, *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967*, Book 12 (Washington: GPO, 1971), pp. 189, 197, and 233. The 1969 statement is from Appendix 17 of George McTurnan Kahin and John W. Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam* (revised ed.; New York: Dial Press, 1969), p. 513.

17. Wallace J. Thies, *When Governments Collide: Coercion and Diplomacy in the Vietnam Conflict, 1964-1968* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1980), p. 400.

18. George C. Herring, ed., *The Secret Diplomacy of the Vietnam War: The Negotiating Volumes of the Pentagon Papers* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1983), p. 31.

19. *The Senator Gravel Edition: The Pentagon Papers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), I, p. 264.

20. Thies, *When Governments Collide*, p. 418.

21. *Congressional Record*, 10 May 1972, p. 16751.

22. Summers, "Vietnam Reconsidered," p. 26. Italics in original.

23. Harry G. Summers, Jr., "An *On Strategy* Rejoinder," *Air University Review*, 34 (July-August 1983), 93, indicates that the author did not "intend to imply that counterinsurgency tasks like pacification and nation-building were unimportant." Unfortunately the structure, style, and force of his argument lead readers to that erroneous conclusion despite his intentions.

24. Hugh M. Arnold, "Official Justifications for America's Role in Indochina, 1949-1967," *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 3 (September-October 1975), 42.

25. Porter, *Vietnam: A History in Documents*, pp. 30 and 34-35. See also Harold R. Isaacs, *No Peace for Asia* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), ch. 6.

26. Porter, *Vietnam: A History in Documents*, p. 47.

27. A copy of the Geneva agreement is in *Ibid.*, p. 160. For the 1973 Paris agreement see Gareth Porter, *A Peace Denied: The United States, Vietnam, and the Paris Agreement* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1975), p. 322. RVN views appear in Porter, *Vietnam: The Definitive Documentation of Human Decisions*, I, 581, 656.

28. Summers, "Vietnam Reconsidered," p. 26.
29. James Pickney Harrison, *The Endless War: Fifty Years of Struggle in Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1982), p. 30.
30. Summers, "A Strategic Perception of the Vietnam War," p. 44.
31. Douglas Kinnard, *The War Managers* (Hanover, N.H.: Univ. Press of New England, 1977), p. 169.
32. Arnold, "Official Justifications for America's Role in Indochina," p. 48.
33. Porter, *Vietnam: A History in Documents*, p. 73.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
35. *The Senator Gravel Edition: The Pentagon Papers*, II, p. 642.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 412.
37. Summers, "A Strategic Perception of the Vietnam War," p. 44.
38. Michael Maclear, *The Ten Thousand Day War—Vietnam: 1945-1975* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), p. 216.
39. *Ibid.*
40. Porter, *Vietnam: A History in Documents*, p. 310.
41. Summers, "A Strategic Perception of the Vietnam War," pp. 44-45.
42. Richard A. Hunt and Richard H. Shultz, Jr., eds. *Lessons from an Unconventional War: Reassessing U.S. Strategies for Future Conflicts* (New York: Pergamon, 1982) makes clear that the American approach in Vietnam was not in harmony with counterinsurgency theory. See also Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance, 1950 to the Present* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), p. 288 in particular. For a survey of the debate between "The Counterinsurgency School" and "The Hawks" see George C. Herring, "American Strategy in Vietnam: The Postwar Debate," *Military Affairs*, 46 (April 1982), 57-63.
43. Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 596.
44. Kinnard, *The War Managers*, p. 172.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
46. *The Senator Gravel Edition: The Pentagon Papers*, IV, p. 231.
47. Seymour M. Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (New York: Summit Books, 1983), pp. 130, 195, and 637-38. See also P. Edward Haley, *Congress and the Fall of South Vietnam and Cambodia* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1982).
48. Summers, "A Strategic Perception of the Vietnam War," p. 45.

