

HOW THE U.S. FOUGHT THE WAR



Introduction

During April 1975, millions of Americans watched the communist takeover of Saigon on television. Triumphant North Vietnamese troops advanced rapidly on the city while the Army of the Republic of (South) Vietnam (ARVN) fled in panic. Because the airport was no longer safe, helicopters were forced to lift off from the roof of the American Embassy to take those chosen for rescue to aircraft carriers off shore. Some of those not chosen clung to the helicopter's skids in a desperate effort to escape.

This is what the American commitment had come to in Vietnam. Many wondered how the world's mightiest military power had not been able to conquer a small, less developed country in Southeast Asia. Years later, millions of Americans—especially those who fought there—find this very hard to understand or accept.

The Vietnam War was basically different from past U.S. wars. Debates over U.S. war strategy produced more controversy than consensus. William Westmoreland, the Commanding General of U.S. Forces in Vietnam from 1964-1969, commented: "The longest war in our history, it was the most reported and most visible to the public—but the least understood." Marine General Lewis Walt remarked: "Soon after I arrived in Vietnam it became obvious to me that I had neither a real understanding of the nature of the war nor any clear idea as to how to win it."

Vietnam was difficult to grasp for many reasons. In previous wars, one could look at a map of the territory held

by each side, see who was advancing or retreating, and assess the war's progress. But Vietnam was "a war without fronts." Not until the final days in 1975 could anyone look at a map and tell who was winning. From the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) which divided the country, through the mountainous Central Highlands, to the coastal plane and the delta in the southernmost part of the country, the varied South Vietnamese terrain meant that the war itself differed from one area of the country to another.

The nature of the war also changed dramatically over time and is best understood in terms of the following distinct stages: (1) 1961-1964, (2) 1965-1967, (3) 1968, (4) 1969-1970, (5) 1971-1973, (6) 1973-1975. Vietnam veterans use their location and year in country to designate their particular Vietnam War experience.

The 100 or so advisors in place when President John F. Kennedy took office in 1961 grew to 16,300 by the time of his death in November 1963. As the U.S. changed its primary mission to a combat role, the number of troops grew proportionately—from 23,000 to 184,000 by the end of 1965; 385,000 by the end of 1966; 485,000 by 1967; 536,000 by 1968—and reached a peak of 543,000 in early 1969. Then, with Vietnamization, troops declined to 475,000 by the end of 1969; 336,000 by 1970; 158,000 by 1971; 24,000 by 1972; to fewer than 250 personnel by mid-1973.

Vietnam was the longest and most unpopular foreign war in American history. It ranked second in fiscal expense and a close third in casualties. Depending on one's criteria, between 2.15 and 3.14 million Americans served at some time and place in the Second Indochinese War. More than 58,000 died, and more than 300,000 were wounded.

The South Vietnamese provided even more manpower and suffered more casualties. The Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) grew from 514,000 at the beginning of 1965 to almost 1.1 million by the end of 1972. Over this period, some 170,000 ARVN troops were killed, three-fourths of the Allied total. Other countries also sent forces. The South Korean contribution reached a peak of 50,000 of its best troops in 1970. Australia, New Zealand, and Thailand sent smaller military contingents, and the Philippines dispatched a small number of civilian personnel. Total "third nation" forces reached 70,000 in 1969, and had a combined total of 5,000 deaths during the course of the war.

As Chapter 10 makes clear, both the U.S. and Viet-

nam suffered tremendous losses in lives, treasure, and spirit. Stanley Karnow calls it the war nobody won. Certainly America lost. Everybody agrees on the motto "No More Vietnams," but this means different things to different people. That makes it all the more imperative that citizens keep an open mind and try to understand what happened, what went wrong, and what might have been the alternatives.

The Legacy of World War II

The victory over fascism in World War II established the United States as the world's dominant military and industrial power. It was seen as a triumph of the American way of life, a nation growing into true greatness. Americans cheered their brave soldiers returning from the war. However, many felt the war had been won as much in the factories as on the battlefields. In this view, it was the superior capacity of American industry to produce more and better weapons and equipment that prevailed in the long run.

The dominance of corporate leaders among U.S. foreign and military policymakers assured a friendly climate for this point of view. Over the period 1940-1967, the major corporations and investment houses provided 70 of the 91 individuals who held top positions in the Departments of Defense and State, the three military services, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Atomic Energy Commission.

This ethic of technology and managerialism pervaded American society through the 1950s. On the home front an army of "organization men" in "gray flannel suits" supervised the growth of the American economy. On the front lines U.S. soldiers, better trained and better equipped, defended U.S. vital interests around the world.

The military and the new national security policymakers placed high reliance upon technological superiority, particularly America's nuclear arsenal and unsurpassed fleet of jet fighters and bombers. The Korean conflict demonstrated to many the dangers of conventional land war in Asia. Through the mid and late 1950s, air power and nuclear weapons were emphasized at the expense of the infantry. Thus, the U.S. entered the Vietnam era with unquestioned faith in the superiority of high-technology warfare, an arrogance about its ability to "manage" many conflicts across the globe, and little regard for its foes in less developed Asia. All of these factors would contribute to its failure.

The Advisory Role: 1955 - 1960

From 1950-1954, the U.S. poured almost \$4 billion into France's futile effort to defeat the Vietminh guerrillas. President Eisenhower and major U.S. officials criticized the French Army's leadership, organization, strategy, tactics, and training of the Vietnamese. Military leaders especially disapproved of what they perceived as France's lack of will to fight. General J. Lawton Collins said the U.S. had "to put the squeeze on the French to get them off their fannies." One Marine colonel boasted that "two good American divisions with the normal aggressive American spirit could clean up the situation in the Tonkin Delta in ten months." These assertions ignored the determination of the Vietminh and their broad-based political support.

Following the French defeat, U.S. advisors took over the training of the RVNAF and sought to structure the Army of the Republic of (South) Vietnam (ARVN) into a copy of the U.S. Army, capable of fighting a mid-

intensity, conventional war against North Vietnam. The strategy was to use "high volumes of firepower to minimize casualties." Vietnamese General Staff objections that the French were defeated by a guerrilla, not a conventional, army were swept aside. Instruction in counterinsurgency was minimal. American advisors were not trained to speak Vietnamese on the premise that their tour of duty was too short to make that worthwhile. In sum, the U.S. set up a huge official bureaucracy in the midst of a revolutionary political situation with little or no knowledge of the society and culture of the area.

By 1959, the ARVN had seven standard divisions and four armored cavalry regiments, reminding one U.S. advisor of a lighter firepower model of a World War II division. ARVN training was essentially the same as that of U.S. soldiers back home. The American Tables of Organization and Equipment were translated into Vietnamese and issued. ARVN soldiers were put through standard American training exercises, including a 25-mile march with 50-pound pack that was too arduous for the much smaller Vietnamese.

By the late 1950s, the U.S. clearly had adopted South Vietnam as a client state, pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into the country to subsidize the government

TYPICAL ARMY COMBAT UNITS IN VIETNAM

Squad: about 10 men under a staff sergeant

Platoon: 4 squads under a lieutenant

Company: 4 platoons under a captain

Battalion: headquarters and 4 or more companies under a lieutenant colonel or major

Division: approximately 15,000 men, including headquarters, 3 brigades with artillery and other combat support, under a major general

and the military. Betraying their own provincialism, U.S. officials tried to transform Vietnam into a western style society. Although the Geneva Accords (1954) limited outside uniformed military personnel in Vietnam to 342, the U.S. was now up to 700. By the end of the decade, despite this build-up, U.S. advisors still insisted the guerrillas were no real threat.



McNamara and Westmoreland

The Counterinsurgency

The nature of the advisory role changed in the early 1960s. After two years of organizing, the National Liberation Front (NLF) was officially established in South Vietnam in December 1960. President Kennedy feared that Indochina was a prime theater for Soviet-sponsored “wars of national liberation.” Influenced by his reading of *The Uncertain Trumpet* (1960) by former Army Chief of Staff Maxwell Taylor, Kennedy believed that the U.S. must prepare to meet this global challenge.

Kennedy extended Taylor’s proposal for a more “flexible military response” to include low-intensity warfare and assigned this counterinsurgency role to the Army Special Forces. He gave them more money and manpower. Over the objections of Army leadership, Kennedy further authorized the Special Forces to don the green beret to identify themselves as an elite corps.

Given the President’s strong endorsement, the Army was now obliged to give more attention to counterinsurgency. However, the top leadership remained committed to conventional warfare. General Lyman Lemnitzer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (1960-1962), said “the new administration was ‘oversold’ on the importance of guerrilla warfare.” General George H. Decker, Army Chief of Staff (1960-1962), boasted that “any good soldier can handle guerrillas.” General Earle Wheeler, Army Chief of Staff (1962-1964), dismissed the political dimensions of the conflict with the statement “the essence of the problem in Vietnam is military.” Even General Taylor considered counterinsurgency “just a form of small war,” and characterized the Army’s reaction to Kennedy’s directives as “...something we have to satisfy. But not much heart went into the work.”

Kennedy expanded the RVNAF from 150,000 to 200,000 troops and sent more U.S. advisors. American commitment was widened further when the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) was upgraded to Military Advisory Command—Vietnam (MACV) in February 1962.

The President appointed Robert McNamara, former President of the Ford Motor Company, to be his Secretary of Defense. McNamara’s passion for statistical precision made him the perfect model of the new military manager. Vietnam was just another problem to be “managed” successfully. Officials proclaimed that the RVNAF were improving and the political situation stabilizing.

But American senior advisors attached to ARVN units told another story. Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann produced particularly pessimistic reports. Vann believed that ARVN training and the pacification program were failures. He stated that South Vietnamese political and military leaders were corrupt, and even accused the ARVN of avoiding the enemy in the field. His message was that the war was being lost.

Back in the U.S. in June 1963, Vann learned that his and other critics’ reports were being suppressed by MACV headquarters. He scheduled a briefing with the Joint Chiefs, but Chairman Taylor sided with MACV and canceled it. Forced to resign from the Army for

personal reasons, Vann soon returned to Vietnam and, in time, became the highest ranking civilian advisor in the country. Until his untimely death in a helicopter crash in 1972, he was recognized as one of the most knowledgeable individuals about the war.

Lacking appreciation of the revolutionary nature of the challenge, U.S. policymakers were optimistic about solving what they saw as essentially a military problem. Despite talk about winning hearts and minds, U.S. leaders never persuaded South Vietnamese President Diem to undertake the social, economic, and political reforms needed to win support for his government. He failed to address the needs of the many landless farmers and his village security program of strategic hamlets was widely resented.

In November, Diem was killed in a U.S. approved coup. Kennedy was assassinated three weeks later. Lyndon Johnson inherited a political and military quagmire with no end in sight. For the next year and a half, Saigon governments came and went in a series of coups, and the war effort virtually stopped.

The U.S. Enters Into Combat: 1965-1967

Using the authority of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution instead of an official declaration of war by Congress, President Lyndon B. Johnson sent U.S. forces into combat in Vietnam in 1965. Already committed to an ambitious program of social reforms, Johnson was reluctant to jeopardize support by plunging the country into a full-scale war. He also was mindful of strong public opposition to sending American troops to fight in another land war in Asia, especially given North Vietnam's mutual defense pact with China. He expressed confidence that a great power like the United States could manage the war in Vietnam long enough for the ARVN and the South Vietnamese government to establish themselves.

Vietcong soldiers advance along a small irrigation waterway.

