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VIETNAM AND THE AMERICAN THEORY
OF LIMITED WAR

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The idea of limited conventional war fought outside Europe is no longer in bad odor in the United States. It cannot be. Our international obligations and the threats to them are increasingly visible, and both the opponents and the supporters of the American war in Vietnam acknowledge that our failure there should not lead us to renounce those armed forces necessary to defend our interests by means short of all out war. The study of limited conventional war, however, has not revived. Cruise missiles, precision guided munitions, rapid deployment forces, fast logistics ships, cargo airplanes, and other technical issues are frequently debated, because we must decide which of these items to buy each year. The relative utility of certain forces and bases for the defense of the Persian Gulf have also received some attention.¹ But there has been no systematic consideration of the whole idea of limited war. As a result, the concepts we use when we think about this problem are, by and large, the concepts we inherited from a small group of academics and policy analysts who did their most important writing in the middle 1950s. There is, of course, no automatic need for new strategic concepts every decade. Still, in the generation that has gone by since Robert Osgood and Thomas Schelling analyzed this subject, much has been learned while the American strategy of limited war has remained the same. As Osgood wrote in 1979, "the strategy transcended the Vietnam war and not only survived it but continued to expand in application and acceptance."² Much of what their strategy stated was and is true, but much is not, and much about the nature of war was simply ignored. Limited war strategy and the Vietnam war should be examined, not because any political leader or soldier in the 1960s explicitly invoked the names of Osgood or Schelling, but because they often wrote and acted as if they had. A reconsideration of the old strategy in light of what we can learn from historical experience leads to a new strategy to supplement the old. Briefly put, the argument has three parts. First, limited wars are not only political wars, as the original theorists wrote, but strange

wars. Therefore, the general problem of limited war is not only the diplo-
matic one of how to signal our resolve to our enemy, but the military one of
how to adapt, quickly and successfully to the peculiar and unfamiliar battlefield
conditions in which our armed forces are fighting. Diplomatic success will
depend on military success since resolve cannot survive repeated failure on the
battlefield. Finally, the factors that determine whether this adaptation is
successful or not are largely moral factors: the presence or absence of
political courage at the central levels of command, courage to make clear
decisions about the missions and resources allocated to the theater commander;
courage to delegate responsibility to the local commanders. Military courage
is required of the officers, the courage that earns and keeps the confidence of
their men as they die without winning in the early stages of the war, and the
courage to adopt operational changes that necessarily stake the lives of the
soldiers on untried and possibly incorrect tactics. Intellectual ability is
obviously necessary but in some ways secondary; solutions to military problems
have often been recognized but not implemented because men, with very good
reason, are afraid of what would happen if they are wrong. In war the easiest
thing is difficult, not because soldiers are stupid, but because they are human
and do not regard human life as a resource to be expended as needed.

I

Between 1957 and 1960, two books were published by professors that
set the terms of discussion about limited war. Robert Osgood's book was entitled,
simply, Limited War. It is noteworthy for three themes. The first is that in
limited war, politics is primary. What is special about limited war is that
resources and goals are constrained by policy, not capabilities. The object of
the war is political and to be obtained by negotiation and compromise, and not

military requiring the physical destruction of the enemy. Therefore, the special problem of limited war is "more broadly, the problem of combining military power with diplomacy and with the economic and psychological instruments of power...",³ to produce an agreement "that can be accommodated in a negotiated settlement."⁴ This was the novel problem to which the United States had to turn its attention. It is by this seemingly unexceptionable formulation of the question that the study of limited war came to be misdirected. It is true that limited wars deal with smaller problems than those found in total wars. But in both kinds of wars, the objects have been political. Both world wars had explicitly political objectives -- the 14 points, the destruction of an ideology, the maintenance of good post-war relations with our allies -- though we can question whether they were the correct political objectives. War was the extension of politics in these wars just as much as it was in any smaller war. Nor was resource allocation determined by the physical capacity of the nation. The Allied commanders in Italy and Burma were painfully aware that they were fighting "limited wars" in order to permit the operations in other more important theaters. These conflicts are the analogues to the disputes over how to limit the Korean War so as to allow the simultaneous building of our position in Europe,⁵ and those within the American Joint Chiefs of Staff as the Vietnam War drained our military power in the United States and Europe.⁶

Limited wars do have limited political ends, but this is not the element that defines their character. Because Osgood focused on the primacy of politics, he ignored the other elements of limited war. In particular, the military political problems inherent in limited war are slighted. The second theme of his book is that military problems are no proper part of a theory of limited war. This is because limited war is an essentially diplomatic instrument, a tool for bargaining with the enemy. Earlier students

of limited war, whom we will consider later, assumed that limited war was a form of war, a variety of combat. Not Osgood. War was "an upper extremity of a whole scale of international conflict of ascending conflict and scope. All along this scale one may think of sovereign nations asserting their wills in conflict with other nations by a variety of military and non-military means of coercion, but no definition can determine precisely at what point on the scale conflict becomes 'war'...."⁷ War, as such, did not deserve study, Osgood thought, because war was like peace, only more so. This flies in the face of the traditional and common sense view that war is governed by a set of special rules. Even if it does not set its own goals, as Clausewitz wrote, "it has its own grammar."⁸ This startling innovation, moreover, was not reached after a review of the literature on war. Though his later book Force, Order, Justice does review military problems, one may search Limited War in vain for a reference to any serious work of military history. Clausewitz receives his footnotes and there is one reference to a survey of war through the ages, and that is all. Twenty years later, Osgood confirmed his studied distaste for military history in his book, Limited War Revisited. Studying actual wars teaches us nothing, he states. The outbreak of war does not tell us anything about the merits of a given policy of deterrence "since the event might have occurred anyway...." War does not even tell us anything about war fighting theories, since war "is likely to be as inconclusive or misleading as the absence of war...." Consequently, the rough consensus on limited war strategy that has emerged over the years represents logical speculation and inference, shaped more by politics and psychology than by science and evidence.⁹

Osgood is quite correct when he so characterized his work and that of others, but quite mistaken if he means to suggest that inference and

speculation are the best way to study a complex social phenomenon like war. By his criteria, we could never study any concrete social action, since the evidence in this field is always inconclusive and can always be misleading. His deliberate ignorance leads him into small errors. He writes of "the strategy of general war which has dominated the American experience in the twentieth century"¹⁰ while neglecting to mention the limited wars that were successful in the Philippines, Haiti, Nicaragua and Korea and unsuccessful in Mexico. It leads also to large errors. If limited war is to be a diplomatic tool, it must be centrally directed by the political leadership. The special needs of the military should not affect the conduct of the war. The military should be "the controllable and predictable instruments of national policy.... [I]t would be a dangerous error to apply to the whole complex problem of harmonizing military policy with national policy... the far simpler imperatives of the battlefield." If war is just another form of coercive diplomacy, then it should be run by the political leadership in Washington, not by the generals in the field. Indeed, Osgood wrote that the President of the United States "must be provided with a reliable communications, command, and control system that would enable him to tailor force to serve political purposes under varied conditions of combat."¹² The insistence on centralized control of a limited war derives from his definition of limited war. An appreciation of the problems of the battlefield might have modified this insistence on centralization, but this Osgood did not have or want.

The third theme in Osgood's work is the unimportance of domestic politics. When Osgood says that politics is primary, he means international politics, Realpolitik. There are long discussions of American domestic politics, but they all come to the conclusion that even though the American

people will be hostile, because of their national traditions and ideology, to the kind of strategy he proposes, that strategy must still be adopted. American public opinion was both "volatile and rigid," Osgood thought, and so popular opinion and rational statecraft would generally be opposed. But having gone this far, he suggests no methods which might reconcile his strategy and domestic political realities. In one sense, Osgood does well by predicting the unpopularity of the Vietnam war. In another, however, he must take a small share of the blame for recommending a strategy he knew to be politically unacceptable. This failure to come to terms with the domestic side of limited war results in some very odd conclusions. For example, he wrote that "if we anticipate a 'war of attrition' that would be precisely the kind of war in which our superior production and economic base would give us the greatest advantage." He quotes with approval Henry Kissinger's 1955 assertion that "a war of attrition is the one war China could not win."¹³ After a war of attrition in Vietnam produced a wave of popular revulsion we could easily see the error of this statement, but this mistake was apparent even in the 1950s, for example, to the Eisenhower administration.

Thomas Schelling, the other founder of the theory of limited war began from a point of view much less historical and political than Osgood's, but he arrived at much the same conclusions. One starting point he did share with Osgood was the happy belief that the study of limited war in no way depended on any actual knowledge about war. On the first page of the book, The Strategy of Conflict, Schelling makes some distinctions. Of the people who study conflict, there are those that examine the participants in a conflict in all their complexity. Schelling is not one of these people. He assumes conscious, rational behavior "based on explicit and internally consistent

value system." To be fair, Schelling admits that "the results we reach under this constraint may prove to be either a good approximation of reality or a caricature."¹⁴ No knowledge of reality at all is needed for this study of conflict so we should not be too surprised to read that no military knowledge is necessary. After all, Schelling explains, "the theory is not concerned with the efficient application of violence or anything of the sort; it is not essentially a theory of aggression or of resistance or war. Threats of war, yes, or threats of anything else...."¹⁵

The strategy of conflict is about two parties who have interests, some of which are shared and some of which conflict. It is about bargaining, about conditioning someone else's behavior on your own. It is, therefore, about communication of a certain kind. From these simple assumptions proceed all of Schelling's concepts of deterrence, achieved by communicating our resolve to carry out a threat,¹⁶ war limitation by tacit communication, and the other ideas about risk taking, the rationality of looking irrational, and so forth, that are by now second nature to us. But in the end, it does not look that much different from Osgood's strategy. Neither "limited war" nor "the strategy of conflict" are about war, but about diplomacy/bargaining. The conference table and not the battlefield is the center of the action. Schelling assumes rational actors with internally consistent value systems and so assumes the central direction of the conflict by one man who sets goals and who has them carried out by perfectly responsive agents, as Osgood recommends. And there is the same blithe disregard for the problems involved in implementing the strategy given the military and domestic obstacles which reality intrudes. The object of the exercise for both men is to reach the mind of the enemy in the desired ways, to tell him what you want him to hear by means of war, threats of war, or "threats of anything else."

Henry Kissinger's chapter on limited war in his 1962 The Necessity for Choice reiterates this theme of the need to communicate resolve, in order to establish or reestablish deterrence and to communicate restraint, in order to avoid a general nuclear war. Military success is unimportant: a stalemate is all that is necessary to get the combatants to the conference table where solutions are actually worked out.¹⁷ Looking back, Osgood summed up the theoretical consensus by saying "The theory of limited war came to be seen as part of a general 'strategy of conflict' in which adversaries would bargain with each other through the mechanism of graduated military responses...in order to achieve a negotiated settlement...."¹⁸

Political scientists have kept this consensus alive and well for a generation. When Kenneth Waltz recently discussed a strategy for limited war in the Persian Gulf area, the same focus on communications, the same rejection of military considerations, was obvious. Though the United States did face the threat of war with the Soviet Union for Iran, "the problem is not to develop a strategy that will help enable us to fight such a war. Instead, the problem is to develop a strategy that will help us to avoid having to do so."¹⁹ The central assumption here is the same one made before -- a strategy of deterrence, that is, of strategic communication, can be developed without a strategy for successfully engaging in combat. Military forces are not for fighting, but for signalling. "If, in a crisis, we were to put our troops in the oil fields, it would make the depth of our interest, the extent of our determination, and the strength of our will manifest."²⁰ Minor military problems, the fact, for example, that the Rapid Deployment Force could not presently keep itself supplied with water in the desert, are irrelevant.²¹ Robert Jervis, in an article about limited nuclear war, pauses to make the familiar point about the real purpose of conventional forces

fighting in Africa or Asia: "...using large armies...[is] less important for influencing the cause of the battle than for showing the other side that ...things will get out of hand."²² The old disregard for domestic political factors is implicit in the arguments of both men, since it is assumed that resolve is a fixed quantity, that it does not grow or diminish in the minds of the public or the leadership as combat goes well or poorly, as battles drag on or move us perceptibly toward success. Resolution in these theories is not a moral virtue but an ever bright object that only needs to be flashed from time to time.

Other political scientists have begun to notice that all was not well with the theory a limited war. Samuel Huntington suggests that one lesson of the Vietnam war is that limited wars must be acceptable to domestic opinion, and this means they must be short. He is supported by Stanley Hoffman, who asks, naturally enough, what should we do if strategic communication fails?²³ How can we proceed beyond the old strategy?

II

Wars are complex, and the Vietnam war was no exception. Still, it is useful to ask whether the central tenets of the old theory of limited war tended to be confirmed or falsified by the information supplied by that war. In the conduct of the war, was there an emphasis on strategic communication, and a consequent focus on tight central control, and a relative disregard for the military and domestic political problems of waging war? If there was, what consequences can legitimately be attributed to that emphasis? Because the war was so complex, it is helpful to look at four periods of the conflict. There were the initial years, 1961 and 1962, when the American military involvement remained fairly low. 1963, which I will largely ignore, was dominated less by military or diplomatic issues and more by what to do

about Ngo Dinh Diem's own political problems. The period from the summer of 1964 through mid-1965 was the period in which the basic decisions determining the nature our involvement were made, often by default. Finally there were the first six months of 1968 during which our policy was reconsidered. The years 1967 through 1969, during which almost all of the actual American fighting and dying was done will be discussed separately. It is necessary also to ask, what were the causes of our military successes and failures that had nothing to do with the decisions made in Washington. To sum up the answers to these two sets of questions it is fair to say that, first, the greater the costs and risks of a military measure, actual or contemplated, the greater the tendency for the men at the higher levels of government to talk and act as if they were guided by the academic theory of limited war as I have portrayed it. This approach to the problem seemed to minimize risk and offer victory without combat. This is true for the civilians but, to a surprising extent, also true of military men, particularly Maxwell Taylor. The tendency to talk and act this way at high levels was reinforced by the desire to minimize the risk of failure and by civilian distrust of the military. Together, these factors produced inattention and irresolute behavior that hampered the formation and implementation of an effective military strategy. Second, there were local military mistakes committed by the American forces in South Vietnam, that were partially the result of the lack of a clear national strategy but which were also the result of Westmoreland's own desire to avoid the danger of dramatic failure.

Examination of the Pentagon Papers can leave no doubt that in 1961 and 1962, American leaders, from the President on down, did not think in terms of limited war theory. They focussed instead on the military problem of how

to beat a guerrilla enemy in a counter-insurgency war. They realized, to be sure, that such a war could only be won by a combination of military action and political and administrative reform, but they nonetheless thought in terms of a war winning strategy, not in terms of deterrence, signalling, limitations or bargaining. They did realize that other foreign powers were involved in the war, but they thought about signalling them only at those times when the stakes and risks of the war seemed as if they might increase. The rest of the time they concentrated on fighting and winning. In August of 1962, McGeorge Bundy circulated a National Security Action Memorandum that instructed the relevant departments to draw up plans of action consistent with the doctrine of counter-insurgency.²⁴ A bit later that year Michael V. Forrestal, in a memo to the President, evaluated the performance of the South Vietnamese relative to the "strategic concept" of counter-insurgency. After a thorough discussion of the political reforms undertaken or not undertaken by the South Vietnamese, Forrestal dwelt at equal length on the specific problems of the battlefield. In light of the subsequent tendency for the Army to emphasize "search and destroy" missions and for the government tendency to rely on military signals and diplomacy, this memo is startling both for its attention to military detail and for the quality of the military analysis provided by the soldiers advising the Vietnamese. The advisors said that in the operations by the South Vietnamese army "the proportion of 'clear and hold' operations...is too low in proportion to the 'hit and withdraw' operations designed to destroy regular Viet Cong units." Both kinds of action were necessary, but there was too much emphasis on the latter. This is exactly the same criticism that was to be leveled at the U.S. Army five or six years later. The American advisors said the South Vietnamese went in too much for

large unit, "elaborate, set piece operations" that chewed up the countryside, but which the Communists could easily evade. The Vietnamese tended not to patrol at night, and spent too little time on extended patrols. Air power was being misused and was, possibly causing unnecessary civilian damage.²⁵ Many of the mistakes that the American army would later make were visible on a small scale to Forrestal and to the President.

Nor was this memo an aberration. Roger Hilsman, Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research, had organized guerrilla forces in Burma in World War II and had intensively studied the phenomenon of counter guerrilla warfare by the United States in the Philippines at the turn of the century, and by the French and British.²⁶ His memo to Dean Rusk in December 1962 evaluating the performance of the South Vietnamese showed the same attention to military problems, as well as to those of political and administrative reform, and none to signalling the North. Specifically, he warned that the South Vietnamese Army would not have much success unless it "appreciably modifies military tactics (particularly those relating to large unit actions and tactical use of airpower and artillery)."²⁶ The superior method was a "political-military approach for pacifying the country on a systematic, gradual, province-by-province basis. This approach involves large-scale and continuing military operations to clear and hold a given province." The army should be followed by civil action teams and administrative reforms.²⁸ This was sometimes referred to as the "oil spot" strategy, and in March 1964 Robert McNamara was encouraged because the South Vietnamese government had accepted the idea in principle.²⁹

Limited war theory was not, therefore, the framework within which all Americans automatically viewed the problem of violent international conflict. This mode of thought was, however, visible from time to time in this early

period. When an increase in stakes was considered, the question the leaders in Washington asked themselves was not "how will this affect the resolution of combat" but "what signal are we sending the enemy?" This was true, at least in part, of the American military. In May of 1961, Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatrick asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff if they would recommend a plan to send two 1,600 man American combat units to South Vietnam. The Chiefs said yes, they would, because it would:

"Provide a visible deterrent to potential North Vietnamese and/or Chinese communist action,"

"Release ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) from static defense and outposts for CI [counter-insurgency] action,

"Aid training,

"Provide a nucleus for the support of any additional U.S. or SEATO military operation,

"Indicate the firmness of our intent to all Asian nations."³⁰

When we had 685 soldiers in South Vietnam, 3,200 more men represented a small increase in the stakes. The Chiefs wanted to communicate resolve and commitment to our enemies, neutrals and allies, but also considered the plain military advantages.

As the stakes grew larger, so did the perceived importance of an action as a signal. In October of that year, General Maxwell Taylor recommended to the President that 6,000-8,000 combat troops to South Vietnam. The purpose? To show our commitment. "[T]here can be no action so convincing of U.S. seriousness of purpose and hence so reassuring to the people and Government of SVN and to our other friends and allies in SEA...." The fact that an increment of force this small would have little practical military effect was unimportant since a lot of troops were not "necessary to produce the desired effect on

national morale in SVN and on international opinion.³¹ Robert McNamara, moreover, rejected the proposal, largely because it was likely to be an inadequate signal and unlikely to "tip the scales decisively...." "[I]t will not convince the other side (whether the shots are called from Moscow, Peiping, or Hanoi) that we mean business." This could be done "only if we accompany the initial force introduction by a clear commitment to the full objective accompanied by a warning through some channel to Hanoi that continued support of the Viet Cong will lead to punitive retaliation against North Vietnam."³²

Here is the idea of a mix of military action and diplomacy in order to communicate with the enemy favored by the theorists. There is no doubt that others watch our actions and draw conclusions from them, but this is the first suggestion that we should decide what military actions should be taken on the basis of their value as a signal.

This tendency became unmistakable early in 1964. The proximate cause was the disastrous military conditions within South Vietnam. Following the decline and fall of the Diem regime, almost all counter-insurgency efforts, including the strategic hamlet program, came to a halt or went into reverse. Simultaneously, the Viet Cong stepped up their side of the war and by November regiment size Viet Cong units were conducting conventional attacks.³³ Nothing we could do in the short term, other than the immediate dispatch of large numbers of ground troops, could help the actual military situation in the South. McNamara had estimated that it would take 208,000 American troops to make a difference and to deal with the inevitable overt introduction of North Vietnamese troops that would follow in response. Any more than 208,000 would interfere with our plans for the defense of Europe.³⁴ In 1965, Lyndon Johnson was not prepared to lose South Vietnam but he was not prepared to send

208,000 men either. But we could send signals and avoid making a decision. It was a cheap, low risk way out.

This is a harsh judgment, but is justified by the record in the Pentagon Papers. Various measures to coerce North Vietnam were considered. Covert actions against the North were continued despite the judgment of the review committee chaired by General Krulak that the communist leaders were tough and would not respond to this "coercive diplomacy" unless "the damage visited upon them is of great magnitude."³⁵ Walt Rostow disagreed. Limited damage to the North would be enough. It would convey a threat that we would do more. It is reported to have said to Rusk "Ho has an industrial complex to protect. He is no longer a guerrilla fighter with nothing to lose."³⁶ By November of 1964, Rostow was complaining to McNamara that "too much thought is being given to the actual damage we do in the North, not enough to the signal we wish to send." He recommended that any use of force against the North "should be as limited and unsanguinary as possible."³⁷ The State Department had recommended to the President in February that twelve F-100 fighters be sent to Thailand, not for their military utility, (they would have no significant effect on infiltration through Laos, said our local embassy) but "with a view toward its potential deterrence and signalling impacts on communist activities in Laos."³⁸ It was generally acknowledged that the kinds of attacks against the North that were being contemplated would be militarily ineffective. The National Intelligence Estimate explicitly stated, in May 1964, that the combination of bombing and negotiation under consideration "would not seriously affect communist capabilities to continue that insurrection" but it would affect Hanoi's will to some extent, and it would also signal our intention to limit the extent of the war. The Joint Chiefs of Staff were aware of

and unhappy with the coercive diplomacy. "We should not waste critical time and more resources in another protracted series of messages, but rather we should take positive, prompt, and meaningful military action...."⁴⁰

I wish immediately to make two caveats. In retrospect, it seems likely that the full scale bombing effort recommended by the military would not have ended the war on terms favorable to us, and McNamara was justified in his skeptical interrogation of the Joint Chiefs. Would their recommended 94 target plan end North Vietnamese support to the Viet Cong? If not, what would?⁴¹ Second, the target of our signals was seen by all to be the South Vietnamese as much as the North. Conditions in the South were so bad that everyone was looking for ways to improve the morale of our allies. Bombing the North, it was correctly believed, would signal our commitment to our ally and increase their self-confidence.⁴² In that way, signalling did work.

This noted, it is legitimate to attribute to this limited war attitude three practical consequences. Concentrating on the dispatch of signals diverted attention from a search for military measures that could have been successful. It self-consciously led decisionmakers into actions they knew the American people would not like and might reject. And it was consciously used as a way of avoiding or deferring risky decisions. These conclusions are best supported by one of the most important decisions of this period, the decision to begin the ROLLING THUNDER bombing campaign against North Vietnam. A working group chaired by William P. Bundy convened in November of 1964 to review future American policy for Southeast Asia. They came up with three options. Option A was more of the same: United States aid and advisors plus tit for tat strikes against the North if American soldiers were attacked in the South. Option B quickly got the nickname "the full

squeeze:" enemy bridges, lines of communication, and industry were to be bombed and enemy harbors mined. It was to be "a systematic program of progressively heavy pressures against North Vietnamese, to be continued until current objectives were met. Negotiations were to be resisted....," in order to prevent communist peace offensives from halting our action. We would negotiate only to obtain our full objectives, which was an end to all aid to the Viet Cong. Option C was the "progressive squeeze and talk" which was a program to increase our pressure against the North gradually coupled with a stated willingness to stop the pressure and negotiate.⁴³ This was the policy which Lyndon Johnson's conduct of the war -- the slow expansion of the target list plus the San Antonio formula for unconditional negotiations plus the repeated bombing pauses -- most closely resembled. It was a limited war strategy policy of signalling by military means our commitment and then proceeding diplomatically. As Bundy wrote to the Cabinet Secretaries, "We all accept the will of the DRV as the real target."⁴⁴ Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs John McNaughton, the drafter of the options, made this clear. "To change DRV [North Vietnam] behavior (change can be tacit) U.S. should 'negotiate' by an optimum combination of words and deeds. "At the same time, "It is imporant that USSR and China understand the limited nature of our deeds -- i.e., not for a colony or base and not to destroy NVN...."⁴⁵ From the documents, it seems clear that McNaughton himself supported Option C. William Bundy was ready to contemplate greater efforts if Option C failed, but felt that it would "convey a firm signal to Hanoi and Peiping."⁴⁶

What were the consequences of this attitude? First, it caused the military problem of how to win the war on the ground in the South to be neglected. The anonymous author of the section of the Pentagon Papers that discusses the beginning of the American combat troop commitment comments on the absence of any documents discussing the proper role or rationale for an American ground forces in South Vietnam until they were actually sent in March. "In other words, it appears that the key decisionmakers in Washington are not focussing on the importance of deployment. The attention getter as the [2/7/65] Bundy memo [to LBJ] indicates was the impending air war against North Vietnam."⁴⁷ The author is not quite correct. There was some discussion of the role of ground troop during this period. They were considered as part of a limited war bargaining strategy. Within Bundy's working group, the Pentagon Papers notes, "It was the recognized lack of strong bargaining points that led the working group to consider the introduction of ground forces into the northern provinces of South Vietnam." Troop deployment signalled commitment, and, as the representative from the State Department Policy Planning Staff pointed out, Hanoi's price for negotiations was likely to be an end to the bombing. In that event, troops on the ground would be "a valuable bargaining piece."⁴⁸ William Bundy wrote in January 1965 that he liked the idea of sending troops to the northern provinces of South Vietnam. "It would have a real stiffening effect in Saigon, and a strong signal effect to Hanoi."⁴⁹

Because troops were there to signal and not to fight, it did not matter what their combat qualities were. The first troops not to be sent as advisors were the Marines who guarded the air base at Da Nang. They were chosen because, as Marines, they had the ability to keep themselves supplied "over the beach" in an area in which the logistics network was not yet developed.

They also had some heavy equipment to help defend themselves and the base. At the last moment, John McNaughton tried to halt their dispatch. They were too heavy. They would signal the North that we were coming with heavy offensive units that were there to stay. We could send instead the 173rd Airborne Brigade. It could not keep itself supplied, it did not have useful but "high profile" items like tanks, but was light, and would signal our willingness to move them out if necessary. McNaughton ultimately was unsuccessful in this instance but his way of thought did prevail, Westmoreland claims, in another case. In 1965, we observed the construction of the first surface-to-air missile sites in North Vietnam, and the military sought permission to attack them before they were completed, to save American casualties. "McNaughton ridiculed the idea. 'You don't think the North Vietnamese are going to use them!' he scoffed to General Moore. 'Putting them in is just a political ploy by the Russians to appease Hanoi.'

"It was all a matter of signals, said the clever civilian theorists in Washington. We won't bomb the SAM sites, which signals the North Vietnamese not to use them."⁵¹

There is a good deal of bitterness in the story, and Westmoreland seems to be reporting it second hand. McNaughton's earlier action is, however, well established. There is also the matter of the one effort made to figure out what military role our troops would be able to perform, before we sent large numbers of them to fight. Late in March 1965 Maxwell Taylor, then Ambassador to South Vietnam, cabled Washington with a natural request. What was to be the strategy for the use of the troops that were coming? They could be used either offensively or defensively to establish enclaves, they could conduct clear and hold operations, or they could be used as a general reserve to

backstop the South Vietnamese. Taylor preferred a combination of the first and the last, but more than anything he wanted some kind of decision. He proposed that the first Marine units ever be used for 60 days in an experiment to see whether conventional American ground troops could successfully adapt to the requirements of a counter-insurgency war, before more troops were sent to try and fight that war. His questions were not answered, and at the urging of Lyndon Johnson the United States authorized the deployment of 82,000 troops with more to follow, less than a month after Taylor sent his cable.⁵³

It is not correct to say that the Washington leadership was insensitive to public opinion. There is the famous example of Johnson explicitly approving a change in mission for the Marines sent to Vietnam "to permit their more active use" and, in the same document, calling on officials to avoid any publicity and to "minimize any appearance of sudden changes in policy...."⁵⁴ The men who formulated Options A, B, and C, however, were aware that what they were suggesting was not going to receive the blessing of the American people. William Bundy wrote a report, based on drafts by McNaughton, summing up the problems with Option C. "This course of action is inherently likely to stretch out and to be subject to major pressures both within the United States and internationally. As we saw in Korea, an 'in-between' course of action will always arouse a school of thought that believes things should be tackled quickly and conclusively. On the other side, the continuation of military action and a reasonably firm posture will arouse sharp criticism in other political quarters."⁵⁵ Looking back on this aspect of the war, Dean Rusk said "...we never made any effort to create a war psychology in the United States during the Vietnam affair. We didn't have military parades through cities.... We tried to do in cold blood

perhaps
~~steps~~ what can only be done in hot blood, when sacrifices of this order are
 involved.
~~involved~~ At least that's a problem that people have to think of if any such
~~thing~~ thing, God forbid, should happen again."⁵⁶

Rusk's actions, if not his second thoughts, were in strict accord with the analyses of Osgood and Kissinger that the more popular opinion is aroused and involved in a war, the harder it is to keep it limited. The actual disregard for public opinion in the formulation of Vietnam war policy was deliberate, and mirrors the academic theory. The reason why this is so is obvious. The national leaders wanted to keep public opinion quiet in order to control the war and avoid escalation that might lead to a nuclear war. This leads us to the third consequence of the limited war mind set, a conscious preference for avoiding or deferring risky action. Rusk said "We felt that in a nuclear world it is just too dangerous for an entire people to get too angry and we played this down."⁵⁷ The need to avoid nuclear war was unquestionable. It quickly produced, however, a tendency to avoid any sudden moves. A desire as Rostow later described it, "to avoid a sharp political and psychological change in course. His [Johnson's] diplomatic advisers urged strongly that this was the route best calculated to minimize the likelihood of Soviet or Chinese Communist military intervention.... the memory of Chinese intervention in Korea also played a part...."⁵⁸ This fear of escalation was shown to be unwarranted, in retrospect, by the military actions authorized by Richard Nixon in 1970 and 1972. The Johnson administration misjudged, therefore, the stability of the Soviet/American or Chinese/American balance. More to the point, the desire for a plan that was controllable was stronger in 1964 than was the desire for a plan that would be militarily successful. Option C was

preferred because as McNaughton put it, it was "designed to give the U.S. . . the option at any time to proceed or not, to escalate or not, and to quicken the pace or not."⁵⁹ Bundy wrote that, in consequence, Option C is "more controllable and less risky of military action than Option B."⁶⁰ In any event, anything called for in Option B could be tried later if Option C did not work.

The desire to keep the limited war limited increased the pressure to centralize control of the war in the hands of the President. Johnson proudly told Doris Kearns that "by keeping a lid on all the designated targets, I knew I could keep control of the war in my own hands. If China reacted to our slow escalation by threatening to retaliate, we'd have plenty of time to ease off the bombing."⁶¹ The result was that by 1968, General Westmoreland needed special authorization to use anti-personnel rounds in the artillery pieces defending Khe Sanh. Johnson and his senior advisors would insistently interrogate Westmoreland about the details of his defense plans. What would he do if there was bad weather around Khe Sanh? Is his long-range artillery effective?⁶² The desire for control became manic as the war dragged on.

Even more seriously, the strategy of incremental decisionmaking directed from Washington, with its emphasis on signalling, had a deadly effect on the clear formulation and consistent application of a national military strategy. The Washington leadership failed to do the one thing that the central leadership must do. It did not define a clear military mission for the military and it did not establish a clear limit to the resources to be allocated for that mission. Because the Johnson Administration could not bring itself to make two big decisions, it intruded itself into the making of innumerable little decisions. This hindered the military from carrying out the mission it had, of necessity, defined for itself. There

were several reasons for this, as we shall see. But the limited war attitude, with its emphasis on signals, central direction, and war limitation by means of flexible policies had a large role in creating this situation.

This combination of high level indecision and micromanagement first arose when combat troops were sent to Westmoreland. Taylor had tried unsuccessfully to get a strategy defined, but now the practical question was --how many troops to Vietnam? In the case of the Korean War, the decision was made in a clear cut military manner. MacArthur was initially given all the troops in the Pacific Command plus just about all the reserves in the continental United States, Puerto Rico and the Canal Zone. The troops in Europe were not touched, and, in December 1950, as mobilization made more troops available, the Joint Chiefs of Staff made a difficult decision: no more reinforcements for Korea. The United States had the responsibility to defend Europe in a general war. If Korea became part of a bigger war, the defense of Europe would have to come first. Korea would be defended with the existing commitment or it would be evacuated.⁶³

No such decision as to where the Vietnam War lay on our list of national security priorities was ever made. McNamara tried in 1961, when he said 205,000 was the maximum that could be spared, as we have seen. But that level was passed by 1967. Instead of making that decision, the buck was passed downward. Johnson did not want a big war, but neither did he wish to be accused of losing the war by denying his field command what he needed. So Westmoreland was to be given whatever he asked for, short of force levels that would require mobilizing the reserves. In July 1965, McNaughton

instructed the staff of the Joint Chiefs that the President was willing to keep adding ground troops "as required and as our capabilities permit."⁶⁴ Over 400,000 men were authorized in the spring of 1966, but one can search the Pentagon Papers in vain for a rationale justifying that level. The author of that section himself notes "The question of where the numbers... came from provokes much speculation."⁶⁵ Perhaps the military really wanted 1,000,000 men, but were afraid to ask for it. Or, nobody knew what the Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army strength really was. This misses the point. The figure came from nowhere because the Administration abdicated its responsibility to set priorities. Johnson never formulated a clear policy, either global or regional, so he could never say what was or was not needed in Vietnam. All he could do was memo to McNamara in June 1966, "As you know, we have been moving our men to Vietnam on a schedule determined by General Westmoreland's requirements."⁶⁶ How Westmoreland's requirements should fit in with our other requirements was never resolved. Because McNamara had no policy line, all he could do was memo the generals in August and demand detailed accounting of what they were up to. he will send everything Westmoreland requires. "Nevertheless I desire and expect a detailed, line-by-line analysis of these requirements to determine that each is truly essential to carrying out of our war plan."

This was nonsense. We could either send everything Westmoreland asked for, or better, we could send what was required by the war plan consistent with our other objectives, but this was just harassment. The best McNamara could do to set guidelines for the generals was to warn them that sending too many troops to Vietnam would "weaken our ability to win by...raising doubts concerning the soundness of our planning."⁶⁷ McNamara once did try to define the idea of victory in the context of Vietnam. "If we do everything we can,

can we have assurance of winning in Vietnam?" What was "winning?" "[T]his, I think means that we succeed in demonstrating to the VC that they cannot win; this, of course, is victory for us only if it is, with a high degree of probability, a way station toward a favorable settlement in South Vietnam." What was "high probability?" "[B]etter than 75% (whatever that means)." What was a favorable settlement? The Viet Cong should stop fighting and negotiate."⁶⁸ This is a far cry from the detailed military discussions of counter-insurgency of 1961, which set concrete goals and courses of actions (control of rural population through a combination of police work, small unit patrols and administrative reform) against which the military could be measured but within which the military would be left alone to deal with local conditions as they saw fit. This failure of strategic thinking grew worse until the Tet crisis brought matters to a head, and Clark Clifford to the Pentagon, where he exclaimed in despair "I couldn't get hold of a plan to win the war...when I attempted to find out how long it would take to achieve our goal, there was no answer. When I asked how many more men it would take...no one could be certain."⁶⁹

III

What had happened to American military strategy? Its absence became painfully obvious in 1968, but it was missing from 1964 on. The answer, in part, is that we had adopted a limited war signalling strategy. The military measure adequate for that strategy were not adequate for successfully prosecuting the war in South Vietnam. As the Bundy working group admitted, the measures it proposed "would almost certainly not destroy DRV capability to continue supporting the insurrection...should Hanoi so wish."⁷⁰ Hanoi did so wish, the signalling strategy collapsed, and we were left

without a policy. The importance of a clear policy and a clear allocation of resources is made apparent by looking at what happened when, pressed to the wall, the Johnson administration did set a troop ceiling. 525,000 men had gradually come to be authorized for Vietnam by late 1967. Many had been taken away from units defending Europe. No more would be available without calling up the reserves and this Johnson would not do. Westmoreland did not like this situation, but finally he knew where he stood. He could no longer hope to get the number of troops he wanted to wage his kind of war, but he could and did formulate a strategy to make the best use of the of the resources he had. He began a serious program of Vietnamization, "It was the only strategy that I could come up with that was viable if there was no change in policy... It was my strategy, and I portrayed it as such. The administration was totally non-committal on it. They kind of nodded their heads and did not disagree."⁷¹ But this was better than nothing, and it began the program that, by 1972, would allow the South Vietnamese to defeat an armored invasion with the help of American logistics and air power, but without American combat troops.

Other factors contributed to the American strategic confusion. The South Vietnamese government did not stabilize until 1965. The character of the war itself changed, as division size Viet Cong and North Vietnamese military units supplemented the guerilla effort. The point I wish to make here is that the United States was hindered in the process of adapting to these changing factors by the fact that our attention was focussed elsewhere by the limited war strategy.

Since most Washington leaders probably had not read Schelling and Osgood, how did they come to behave as if they did? Or to put the question

slightly differently, why was the warfighting, counterinsurgency attitude of 1961 replaced by the bargaining, limited war attitude by 1964? While it was natural for Washington leaders to try and increase their political control over the military as our commitment grew, it would have been equally natural for them also to increase their concern with problems of military strategy, as opposed to signalling, once our forces were actually involved in combat. As Schelling admitted, his theories explain nothing about the use of force, as opposed to threats. Yet this did not happen. Why?

The nature of the people handling the war in Washington changed. As the war grew bigger, it drew in more senior people. William Bundy points out that there was no "residue of experience" with Southeast Asia among most of the government officials.⁷² Still less was there any residue of experience with the use of force, after Hilsman left the government, but particularly as more high level officials became involved in the direction of the war. These men simply had had little experience in the direction of a war, and had not studied military problems. What did they know? Walt Rostow described himself and his colleagues who came to work in Washington for John Kennedy. "Some had been trained in modern economic theory.... In the 1950s they had focussed their minds sharply on problems of nuclear deterrence and arms control; on the need for highly mobile conventional forces in a nuclear world; on how to organize the Pentagon and military budget to produce a rational force structure. And when they took posts of responsibility, they felt comfortable with this array of problems, even in such acute forms as the Berlin and Cuba missile crisis of 1961-1962.

"But they found themselves caught up in a problem for which they were ill-prepared -- guerrilla warfare...."⁷³ In short, these men knew limited war theory and defense economics, but not military strategy. Their reaction to actual war could have been predicted. Rostow argues that "Instead of constructing an alternative, systematic analysis of the cause of the battle, they tended to do something more limited but wholly legitimate; that is, to debate critically the views (or believed views) of the military."⁷⁴ Men found limited war theory a quick and easy way to become fluent participants in a crucial debate. Schelling developed his theories by observing his children and his friends. Even civilians have that kind of experience, whereas soldiers know more about war. Other officials had had direct experience with the skillful non-use of force in the missile crisis. From the documents, it seems that some of them carried this way of thinking into an area where it was less helpful, into the realm of the actual conduct of war.

If the civilian leadership did not have such knowledge, where could they get it? They could go to school, and at the instigation of President Kennedy, the Foreign Service Institute set up a course for senior and middle level officials to teach them about counter-insurgency warfare. Henry Cabot Lodge delayed his departure to South Vietnam as Ambassador so that he could take the course. Hundreds of other officials eventually joined him. Lectures were given by Walt Rostow, Edward Lansdale and MIT professor Lucien Pye. It was a failure. The course lasted six weeks and dealt with the whole range of counter-insurgency problems in underdeveloped countries all over the world. This simply could not be done, or done well. Douglas Blaufarb, a CIA official who attended the first six week session, described the predictable character of the course. "It was highly generalized and often left the officers at a loss

as to how to translate the generalities into policies, and, even more difficult, into practical actions."⁷⁵ It could not have been otherwise.

If the civilian leadership could not acquire the necessary expertise in a hurry, to whom could they turn for help? The obvious answer is "to the military." This was not done because the military was not trusted. Civil-military relations in the United States are, on the surface, satisfactory. Civilian control is a universally accepted principle. Below the surface, relations were bad. In the back of everyone's mind in the 1960s was the memory of General Douglas MacArthur's insubordination in Korea. Lyndon Johnson, never a man to leave something in the back of his mind, asked Westmoreland flat out in February 1966: "General, I have a lot riding on you.... I hope you don't pull a MacArthur on me."⁷⁶ Johnson and Westmoreland got along reasonably well, but the suspicion was there. In private, Johnson was vivid. "And the generals. Oh, they'd love the war, too. It's hard to be a military hero without a war.... That's why I am so suspicious of the military. They're always so narrow in their appraisal of everything."⁷⁷

This general suspicion had been increased for the men who worked for John Kennedy by the experience of the Cuban missile crisis. According to his brother Robert, John Kennedy was "distressed" with his military advisers. "They seemed always to assume that if the Russians and Cubans would not respond, or [even] if they did, that a war was in our national interest." This remark was prompted by the recommendation that Air Force General Curtis Lemay had made to bomb the missiles in Cuba after the Soviets had begun to withdraw them. "[T]his experience pointed out for all of us the importance of civilian direction and control...."⁷⁸ A somewhat less tactful remark by John Kennedy has been recorded. "The first advice I'm going to give my successor is to watch the generals and

to avoid the feeling that just because they are military men their opinion on military matters is worth a damn."⁷⁹ There was the famous encounter between McNamara and the Chief of Naval Operations during the blockade of Cuba that ended with McNamara shouting that the object of the operation was not to shoot Russians but to communicate a political message: "I don't give a damn what John Paul Jones would have done."⁸⁰

Relations had not improved with time. McNamara's obsession with getting control of the defense budget made things worse. In Lyndon Johnson's words, "Why, no military men could spend a dime without McNamara's approval. He fought and bled for the principle that the Joint Chiefs of Staff could not get a mandate without a specific request. Otherwise, we would be giving them money based on pie-in-the-sky figures...."⁸¹ All in all, the civilians were not men who would turn easily to the generals and say "Teach us about strategy."

Immediate caveats are again necessary. The generals were and are often wrong. Their advice in the Vietnam war was often bad. The military, however, was fighting the war and had the data and personal experience that was crucial to the formulation of good strategy. Bad relations meant that the civilians and the soldiers were less likely to work together to develop good strategy. The civilians were rather inclined to turn to limited war theory. It enabled them to make strategy of a sort without help from the generals. It gave them power over the generals, which is what they wanted.

This state of affairs came to a head in the last period I shall examine, that of the Tet offensive. To sum up the state of affairs before the communists launched their attack we can say that: (1) there was no generally agreed, comprehensible military strategy for winning the war, and no clear definition

of the amount of resources to be devoted to the war; (2) there was a limited war theory of signalling, but it had been a complete failure; and, (3) as a result of the limited war altitude and other factor, decisionmaking had become centralized in Washington. These factors had brought the civilian leadership in Washington close to collapse and the Tet offensive pushed them over the edge. Consider. The kind of "war" they understood had not produced results. They had no theory to help them understand the macro-course of the war. They had a mass of a detailed data, but no way to understand the micro-course of the war. They were in Washington and not in the field so they had no way to see through the statistics to the reality the numbers tried to represent. And they did not trust the judgment of their military men in the field. An enemy "spectacular," no matter how catastrophic for the enemy, was likely to be seen in the worst possible light. Henry McPherson, a speechwriter for Johnson was disturbed by Tet and talked to Rostow. "Well, I must say that I mistrusted what he said, although I don't say with any confidence that I was right to mistrust him, because...I had the feeling that the country had just about had it, that they would simply not take any more.... I suppose, from a social scientist point of view, it is particularly interesting that people like me, ...could be so affected by the media as everyone else was, while downstairs, within fifty yards of my desk, was that enormous panoply of intelligence-gathering devices-tickers, radios, messages coming in from the field. I assume the reason this is so...[was] I was fed up with the optimism that seemed to flow without stopping from Saigon."⁸² William Bundy remembers a memo about the effect of Tet on pacification. "It was a

poignant memo which said in effect, 'They've had it.' That memo reflected my view for a period." Daniel Ellsberg, then on loan to the Defense Department from the Rand Corporation, was more precise. In a February 28, 1968 memo he wrote, "I think that the war is over; [our] aims are lost.... The Tet offensive and what is shortly to come do not mark a 'setback' to pacification, it is the death of pacification.... I am forced to predict not only that the 'blue' areas will contract in the next few months and the 'red' zone expand, but that the new red on the maps will never go back."⁸⁴

This was proven to be wrong. The optimism flowing from Saigon was, for once, justified. The data on pacification that was available to the men at the center looked bad. There was a severe point drop in the number of secure or relatively secure hamlets in South Vietnam after Tet. The men in the field were frantically reporting that this was true, but that they were rapidly wiping out the Viet Cong forces that had made the countryside insecure. The VC had come into the open to attack the cities, and they were being killed. Pacification figure looked bad temporarily because allied forces were being drawn away from the countryside to kill the Communists in the cities. Pacification would be in great shape in a while. They were absolutely correct -- by 1970 over 90% of the hamlets were at least relatively secure. These figures were verified by students of the peasantry hostile to U.S. policy such as Samuel Papkin.⁸⁵ But in Washington, men were neither ready to believe their men in the field, nor to properly understand the war themselves.

IV

Our failure in Vietnam had many causes. We dominated the South Vietnamese government, but did not control it, and so crucial reforms went undone. Our Army made a key mistake in its conduct of the war by emphasizing large unit

operations. I wish to argue in this section that a different approach to limited war, an approach that focused on the military problem of fighting and winning unconventional wars, would have had a better chance of giving us satisfactory results, and could do so in the future. This approach is in some ways quite different from the theories in the 1950s. It emphasizes the construction of clear military objectives and military limits by the government, as well as the political objectives and limits that were the concern of the old theory. And it emphasizes the decentralized, rather than the centralized control of the war, to the extent possible, once fighting actually begins. The old theory failed when it tried to communicate resolve because it did not recognize that only military success can generate and sustain resolve. War is uncertain, and so there is no certain road to success. There are, however, better and worse ways to begin.

Stanley Hoffmann has noted an important fact, "When one is talking about limited war, ...each one is sui generis. Forces designed to fight a major technological war against the main opponent are fairly fungible; forces supposed to fight low intensity wars are not. A force that would have been perfectly equipped to fight in Vietnam is not usable as such in the Persian Gulf.... Those who talk about the primary role of military force have never really faced that problem."⁸⁶

There is some truth to this but only some. Small wars are sui generis, but so are big wars. The difference is we generally have only one big enemy. A nation will face that enemy over a period of many years, sometimes centuries, and will have ample time to study him and to review their past wars with him. Countries are familiar with the terrain because they have fought there before, and indeed, often live on it. They will usually design and build their armed forces to beat this one, specific enemy. And even then,

there can be surprises, as the French found out in 1940. If big wars are hard to understand in advance, how much more difficult is the task of fighting little wars for those countries who must do so? Little enemies are legion. They are located all around the world, and have different climates, terrains and armies. The special military problems of small wars, Hoffmann to the contrary notwithstanding, have long been studied by military thinkers. G.F.R. Henderson, the foremost British military historian of the nineteenth century, listed the maxims that guided military strategy for wars in Europe. Always mislead the enemy, strike where the moral effect is greatest, never fight except on your own ground, at your own time, unless you have superior numbers. "Such maxims seem truisms" he then went on to say, "and to put them forward mere idle repetition. I cannot agree, and I will give you a reason. In our Indian Empire different conditions have imposed a different set of rules upon every second lieutenant: -- "Never refuse battle," "never show a sign of hesitation," and "when you get the enemy on the run, keep him there."⁸⁷ These are the principles that still hold when a modern army faces an enemy with grossly inferior firepower and staying power, in conditions where the attitude of the local population is an important factor.

Another British officer, Charles Callwell, wrote a book entitled Small Wars at the beginning of the century, in which he addresses exactly our problem. "In great campaigns, the opponent's system is understood; ...it is only when some great reformer of the art of war springs up that it is otherwise. But each small war presents new features...." "Small wars break out unexpectedly and in unexpected places.... The nature of the enemy... can be only very imperfectly gauged."⁸⁸ Closer to our own time, the

commander of our Marine Corps forces in South Vietnam captured the essence of the problem in the title of his book Strange War, Strange Strategy.⁸⁹

There are two conceivable ways of dealing with the problem of small, strange wars. The first is to foresee all possible contingencies and tailor separate forces for each of these wars. This is near to impossible. The United States Army is currently tying itself into knots over the problem of how to structure itself for two different kinds of war, one against the Warsaw Pact and one in the Persian Gulf area. Everything within the Army, everything we know about large organizations, argues against having, in effect, two separate forces within one organization, one with heavy weapons for Europe, one that is light for strategic mobility. It means two completely different sets of weapons, training, and exercises. It means the Army will be in trouble when the troops prepared for Europe have to go to the Persian Gulf in an emergency, or the other way around. Now multiply this problem by the number of the conceivable little wars. To start, remember that there are at least three terribly different kinds of terrain merely in the Persian Gulf region; dry desert in the interior of Saudi Arabia and Iran, heavily forested mountains in Oman and along the Caspian Sea, and humid, malarial swamp around Abadan and along the Iran-Iraq border. Three different kinds of enemy could be encountered; Soviet armor and forces, local armored forces and light infantry/guerrillas. War in each terrain and against each enemy has its own set of requirements. If you have only one enemy, you can afford to tailor your forces in this fashion. After World War I, the United States Marine Corps looked around at the world to identify the land war missions it might have to undertake in support of the United States Navy. This was its job. The only naval great power that could threaten the United States, given the

terms of the Versailles Treaty was Japan. Japan was far away across the Pacific, and our one base area near Japan, in the Philippines, would be isolated. A naval war against Japan meant that the Marine would have to seize Japanese naval and aerial bases and turn them over to the Army and Navy for their use. From this strategic problem came the concept of amphibious assault. The Marines began planning operations, testing new equipment, and eventually, holding exercises for this new kind of war, in the 1920s, and didn't stop until Guadalcanal.⁹⁰ This is the kind of special advance military planning that can be accomplished when your enemy and theater are known, and to the extent that we can prethink operations in Southwest Asia, we should do so. The German and Israeli armies have also taken advantage of the fact that their enemies can easily be identified and, ways of beating them studied.

The other conceivable approach to the problem is to realize that small wars are different, that we cannot always know which war we will have to fight, and that we cannot afford to build one for each problem. The problem is how to increase the speed with which our one army can adapt to local circumstances because specialized advance planning can backfire. The British Army in India was trained for desert warfare in the 1930s as a result of its experience in World War I, but was then suddenly called upon to fight in the jungle to defend Burma against the Japanese. New kinds of warfare can only be successfully conducted when you have good information about the enemy's style of operations, and this, all too often, can only be acquired by fighting him. William Slim, who was eventually the commander of the British 14th Army in India, pointed out the painful truth. "If troops are to be trained, they must be pulled out of the

fight. We could not do that.... Experience taught a good deal, but with the Japanese as instructors it was an expensive way of learning.⁹¹

What do armies need to deal with this problem of unfamiliar combat? The first and most basic necessity is confidence in themselves and confidence in their leaders. This is because, in these difficult circumstances, there will be some, perhaps many, defeats. This will crack some units. Some men will not obey officers, and some officers will fear to undertake offensive operations or to run risks. If this goes too far, it will be fatal. It is impossible to avoid defeat and disastrous to try and do so. This means reacting to the enemy and giving up all hope of conducting the war the way you want to, on terms and in ways that favor yourself. Thus, the soldiers and officers must believe in themselves and each other. A professional army with long service men is more likely to have this confidence simply because everyone will know and trust everybody else. The bad eggs can be weeded out, and trust and cohesion established. The British Army in Burma was such an army. It was repeatedly mauled by the Japanese because it had not learned to conduct operations in the jungle. It was roadbound, and so was outmaneuvered. It had to retreat from Burma into India through hundreds of miles of jungle and mountain. When they emerged, they passed in review before Slim. "All of them, British, Indian, Gurkha, were gaunt and as ragged as scarecrows. Yet, as they trudged behind their surviving officers in groups pitifully small, they still carried their arms and kept their ranks, they were still recognizable as fighting units. They might look like scarecrows, but they looked like soldiers, too."⁹² They gave a cheer for Slim. They were in short, ready to learn from their experiences and to follow their commanders.

The British troops that were sent to fight in South Africa in 1900 faced an entirely new kind of battle. Smokeless ammunition fired by repeating rifles were in wide use by the Boers. As a result, troops were brought under heavy, accurate fire, at long ranges, by an enemy they could not see. The old drill manual formations were now suicidal. Sir Redvers Buller had to assault a Boer position along the Colenso river bank. It took four times before he found the right solution: open formations, advancing under the cover of terrain and artillery fire. It seems obvious to us, but intelligent civilian observers present at the scene, including Winston Churchill, doubted its success. The important point is that Buller's men stuck with him through the three failures. His repeated acts of personal bravery had forged a bond between him and his men. He was often present in the midst of an assault. This courage was a vital element in the process of adapting to unconventional combat because without it, the army would have ceased to exist as an army.⁹³

Courage is necessary to keep the army in being, but it is necessary for another reason. This point requires a short digression to explain. By 1964, the war in Vietnam was not a guerrilla and anti-guerrilla war only. The communists could and did assemble from time to time large units up to the size of a division. William Westmoreland was perfectly correct when he said that you could practice counter-insurgency with all the success in the world, but unless you also dealt with the big enemy units, they could bust up the pacification program at will. At the end of 1964 a Viet Cong division, in what, as Westmoreland put it, was "probably the most portentous ARVN defeat of 1964,"⁹⁴ overran a hamlet and destroyed two elite South Vietnamese battalions. For this reason, Westmoreland consistently rejected the advice of many (and the actual example of the U.S. Marine Corps) to use a large portion of the Army in

small unit patrols, though this was the most effective means of locating and killing guerrilla forces.⁹⁵ Instead he conducted large units (i.e., battalion-size and up) patrols to locate and fight the enemy. Large units could better defend themselves against large enemy units. They could not, however, bring the communists to battle against their will because the large units could be detected and evaded. A good strategist in Washington would have given Westmoreland the mission, "Deny the enemy the ability to operate large units in the South. Then we can get on with the anti-guerrilla war." Large unit actions, the infamous "search and destroy" missions, could not and did not do this. In 1965 and 1966, the communists would often stand and fight against U.S. units when their base areas were invaded. After some very costly defeats, the Communists gave up this strategy, and evaded large U.S. units. By late in 1966, the Pentagon Papers reports "the VC/NVA avoided initiating actions which might result in large and unacceptable casualties from the firepower of Allied forces. During the year, the enemy became increasingly cautious in the face of increased Allied strength... VC tactics were designed to conserve main strength for the most opportune targets."⁹⁶

The Army in its Vietnam Studies series has written that the enemy "normally defended by evading." "The enemy's combat forces were lightly equipped so that they could move more freely and quickly."⁹⁷ The enemy evaded our forces by breaking up into small units out in the wilderness.⁹⁸ This tactic was successful. But even when the enemy came out of hiding and attacked en masse as he did in February, May and August of 1965, his casualty rate did not exceed his ability to replace his men - 291,000 were lost, 298,000 were brought in or locally recruited.⁹⁹ The enemy could husband his resources to be able to launch occasional offensives to keep the pacification off balance. He was

hurt. High casualties, even when replaced, meant the loss of experienced, cadres and battle tested soldiers. But he could protract the war indefinitely.

This was not an unsolvable problem for us. The key was intelligence. Police work and the usual tools of counter-insurgency warfare worked against guerrillas, but the enemy units often operated away from the population. The traditional tools of conventional military intelligence -- interrogation of prisoners, use of captured documents, aerial reconnaissance, communications intercepts -- worked, but were also deficient. The enemy could move fast. Both police work and conventional military intelligence did yield results, but there were slow. A villager might learn of the presence of an enemy unit, but by the time he went to town and reported it, and this information had trickled up and down the chain of command, three days, on average, had gone by.¹⁰⁰ The enemy unit had long gone. The same was true for other techniques. Large unit operations aggravated this problem. Large units moved more slowly on the ground. If they moved by helicopter, they required a long period of advance planning to assemble the necessary aircraft, plan the resupplies, coordinate the artillery fire, and so forth.¹⁰¹ If the South Vietnamese units were involved, it was almost certain that warning would be given to the enemy long in advance. Planning took weeks. General Julian Ewell, who commanded an American division in the MeKong Delta, found that he could stop the enemy from escaping when his reaction time was reduced from 60 to 10 minutes.¹⁰² The big American units could only cover a certain amount of ground. It would kill the enemy soldiers it found but as Westmoreland admits the "enemy often escaped."¹⁰³ The worst problem with big unit operations was that we couldn't have many of them. We couldn't check out all intelligence leads or pursue every contact. There were only about 100 American maneuver battalions in Vietnam at the peak of

our involvement. Base defense, rest, and replenishment cut down on the number available for patrol. As a result, we were concentrating on the big unit war, which was all right, but we were not winning it, which was not. Even so, large unit sweeps were the rule through 1968.¹⁰⁴

The answer is obvious in retrospect, but it was apparent to some at the time as well. If the enemy escaped by breaking into small units, we would break down into small units to keep after him. If he assembled a superior force, we would use our superior firepower and mobility to reinforce our patrol, and do it quickly, before the enemy had time to disperse and escape one more time. It was not always the right tactic. But it kept the pressure on the enemy. General Julian Ewell applied this tactic with an air mobile force against enemy guerrilla forces in the Delta in 1969.¹⁰⁵ Marines applied it against North Vietnamese units in the northern provinces of South Vietnam until 1967.¹⁰⁶ The details of these operations are fascinating, but the principles are always the same. Small unit patrols did not take a lot of men. Many could be sent out, day and night. Unlike big units, they could find enemy concentrations without giving warning. They could then call for support: artillery, air strikes, or helicopter assault. In short, they provided accurate timely intelligence that enabled us to use our superior firepower and mobility effectively, instead of wasting it in random fire or "walks in the sun."

Why was this method not employed? The civilian leadership was focussing on signals and not military effectiveness, but why did Westmoreland not change his tactics when they did not produce results? If the small unit was not rapidly and adequately assisted after it made contact, it would be wiped out. Let us backtrack to the beginning of Westmoreland's tour of duty.

When he first arrived in South Vietnam, he did advocate these tactics, as did other American military men, as I have shown. Then something happened. Late in 1964 "the ARVN incurred a serious defeat for which I bear a measure of responsibility. At my urging, ARVN leaders broke down their forces into small units, parcelling them out to district chiefs to provide protection throughout the province and to patrol extensively in hope of inhibiting VC movement. The tactics worked fine for awhile, but in November 1964 two main-force VC regiments came out of the hills and opened a general offensive.

"One by one the big VC units defeated the small ARVN and militia units. Lacking an adequate reserve, ARVN leaders were powerless to strike back."¹⁰⁷ Westmoreland never again advocated small unit operations on a large scale. It did not matter that by 1967 we did have the ability to reinforce patrols. Westmoreland himself gives examples of how air power or air reinforcement saved ARVN and American forces in the same places and circumstances where French units, without air support, had been wiped out.¹⁰⁸ A strategy of small unit patrols ran too many risks. American generals, Westmoreland included, are aggressive and proud of it. "Nobody ever won a war sitting on his ass" is the remark that sums up the attitude of the American army. But Westmoreland was not happy running risks. He was interested in avoiding disaster. He is proud of this too. In Vietnam, he writes no sizeable American unit "ever incurred what could fairly be called a setback. That is a remarkable record" He later repeats himself. "I could take comfort in the fact that in the Highlands [scene of the sweep and destroy missions]...the American fighting men and his commander had performed without the setbacks that have sometimes marked first performances in other wars." He repeats himself again -- we had none of the catastrophes experienced by the French in

Vietnam.¹⁰⁹ We cannot help but remember the old saw "you can't learn unless you make mistakes" and you cannot win wars by avoiding risks.

Westmoreland's predicament was a painful one, and it points out why learning in war is different from other kinds of organizational learning. Mistakes in war mean the wasteful death of men who trusted you to make the right decision. No one would want our officers ever to forget that. Small units were occasionally badly hurt in the Delta.¹¹⁰ This does make operational military innovation difficult. Westmoreland was not the first officer to hesitate before trying a new tactic that would be disastrous if incorrect. One of the longest lived failures of military adaptation occurred in the battle of the Atlantic in World War I. The German submarine force had interfered with British shipping, but had not created an intolerable situation until the start of the unrestricted U-boat campaign in February 1917. Merchant ship losses quickly mounted to the point where shipping capacity was predicted to be only 60-70% of what would be needed in the period April to August 1917.¹¹¹ The problem was in one way analogous to that facing Westmoreland. Here was a new military problem. Existing methods could not tell you where the enemy was. Like Westmoreland, the British Navy responded by increasing its normal activity, in this case, active patrols by surface combatants. A staff paper on the problem revealed the same aggressive spirit as the American army: "too much stress cannot be laid on the necessity of enemy submarines being constantly harried and hunted and never allowed to rest."¹¹² But the obstacle was also the same. Enemy subs could see destroyers before the destroyers could see them. If one area was patrolled, the U-boats would operate elsewhere. There were not nearly enough destroyers to blanket the zones in which the U-boats could operate. The answer was the convoy. If you put

the destroyers with the merchant ships, they would be able to respond to the appearance of a submarine in good time. The Navy raised numerous objections. There were not enough destroyers to do the job. Merchant ships would not be able to "keep station," keep their position in the convoy, at night or in bad weather. Arthur Marder, the naval historian, says "Naval thought was focussed too exclusively on battle and too little on the protection of shipping, hence there was a tendency to reserve destroyers and skilled personnel for the main fleet...",¹¹³ which was not doing much. Many people at the time, up to and including the Prime Minister Hugh Lloyd-George saw the merits of the convoy, and still it was resisted by the Navy. The reason is no secret. The risk was too great until all else had failed, and national defeat was the only visible alternative. Admiral John Jellicoe was quite frank after the war. "Until unrestricted submarine warfare was instituted, the losses in the Mercantile Marine from submarine attack were not sufficiently heavy to cause the Admiralty to take upon themselves the very grave responsibility of attempting to introduce the Convoy System, because of its many disadvantages combined with the fear that an insufficiently protected convoy, if seriously tacked by submarines, might involve such heavy losses as to be a real calamity."¹¹⁴ The Admiralty finally did adopt the convoy system before there was an actual confrontation with Lloyd-George, but they waited until they calculated they could lose three ships out of every convoy to submarines and still be no worse off than they already were.¹¹⁵ They waited in other words, until the relative cost of making a mistake by adopting the new tactic was low. These men were anything but cowards, but the unique demands of this kind of innovation required a kind of courage they did not have.

The need for this courage is the reason why learning in war is so difficult: When the need for this courage is removed, the task is easier. An outstanding success story in the history of military learning and adaptation was in the "war of the beams," the war between the Germans who built the radio navigation aids that guided German night bombers, and the Britons who tried to thwart them. R. V. Jones gives a splendid account of his personal victories in this battle. What his account makes clear is that his counter-measures were rapidly invented and implemented, because nobody would be worse off if he were wrong. His work did not require the diversion of large amounts of resources. If his interference with the German system failed, well, the bombers were coming anyway, and it did no harm to try. In the one case where matters would have been worse if he were wrong, things were quite different. He was an advocate of the use of chaff, called Window by the British, to help British bombers penetrate German radar. He saw no reason to "be squeamish" as he put it, that the Germans might learn about chaff/Window from the British and turn around and use it to increase their bombing of England. If Jones were wrong, hundreds more people would die. The final decision was made by Churchill in consultation with Leigh-Mallory, head of Fighter Command who, in Churchill's words "would have to 'carry the can'" if British defenses broke down because of German chaff. In the decisive meeting, Churchill turned to Leigh-Mallory who "very decently gave the opinion that even though his defenses might be neutralized he was now convinced that the advantage lay with saving the casualties in Bomber Command, and that he would take the responsibility."¹¹⁶ Leigh-Mallory, not the scientists, should get the credit for having the courage to take risks.

Technical innovation is easier than tactical innovation because new equipment can be tried out before it gets to the battlefield. The German tank commander Heinz Guderian put his finger on the problem. He was discussing the merits of tanks with another German commander who finally cast some doubt on this technical marvel. "All technicians are liars," he warned. Guderian replied "I admit they do tell lies, but their lies are generally found out after a year or two when their technical ideas can't be put into concrete shape. Tacticians tell lies, to, but in their case the lies only become evident after the next has been lost...."¹¹⁷

The process of military adaptation and innovation requires courage in one other way. In a strange war, the new data is first encountered by the men in the field, but the process of adaptation can proceed from the top down or the bottom up. Information can be transferred up the line to the central command where it is evaluated, and where new solutions are formulated. Then the new orders are sent back down the line, where they are finally implemented. This process is sometimes necessary. It may be necessary to put together pieces of the puzzle coming from widely separated men in the field before it is clear what to do. If the men in the field have neither the competence nor a self-interest in making the necessary changes, central direction is in order. But it is slow. It has to be. Guderian led the armored breakthrough into France. At one point, it seemed as if the French generals could attack his vulnerable flank. He was not worried. He had studied French military exercises, and had seen that the French high command always "wanted a complete picture of the enemy's order of battle and intentions before deciding on any undertaking. Once the decision was taken, it would be carried out according to plan...." Now that he was at war, he was confident

that the French general "would wait until he had exact information...before doing anything."¹¹⁸ The French were too slow to be a danger to him, because of the centralization of intelligence and decision making.

If we are brave enough to trust our local commanders and, if we have given them a well defined mission, we can delegate responsibility to them. This speeds up the process of innovation enormously. In both the Philippines in 1901 and in the Mekong Delta in 1968, the decisive tactical innovations were developed by low level commanders, by Captains, and were only then picked up by the higher ranking officers.¹¹⁹ For the last 100 years, the German Army has been good at fighting precisely because it selects officers who can make decisions under pressure, and then trains them to take the initiative within the framework of their mission. This principle and the success it brings has long been apparent to observers.¹²⁰ But before this can be done you must trust them, and not have to worry about whether they will pull a Douglas MacArthur on you.

V

The implications for policy are simple. Limited war is strange war, and we will have to adapt to new circumstances. We will better be able to do so if the civilian leadership has the courage to make clear decisions as to resources and missions. The military should not be given a free hand, but it must be allowed the freedom to solve the military problem within the limits set for them. The military will be able to begin solving the problem only after it receives meaningful instructions and parameters. The military itself should be staffed at the highest levels with men who have demonstrated the ability to command and adapt to difficult circumstances in combat and who are respected for that ability within the Army. These measures cannot

be taken until the civilian leadership learns enough about military problems to set meaningful missions for the military. It is not enough to say "Our goal is a free South Vietnam," or "the free flow of oil from the Persian Gulf." A mission must guide operations. "Establish the local air bases sufficient to maintain air superiority over Kuwait and the Persian Gulf coast of Iran against a Soviet air attack of X size and local ground forces. Do it with Y American and allied forces in Z weeks." This could be one mission for the Rapid Development Force. It is sufficiently precise that a military commander knows what to do and well defined enough for him to go back to the President and say "I can't do it with these forces." The President can then decide if the cake is worth the extra necessary candles. Neither he nor his generals can make useful choices if the mission is "deter the Russians" or "defend the oil fields."

Civil/military relations must be improved. The civilian leadership in the Pentagon for the most part does not trust the military to wage war properly and the military has vivid and painful memories of the Vietnam War. It hates the sound of the term "limited war." It will tend to recommend against any war in which it is not given a free hand. The education of the civilians and the cultivation of mutual trust will be helped by intensive peacetime exercises that involve both civilians and soldiers, by war games involving civilians, and by the revision of the theory of limited war. The military must respond by placing men in command who have demonstrated the ability to command and innovate under fire.

In domestic politics, no one would today dare to expect the bureaucracy to be the neutral executor of, for example, a guaranteed annual

income. We have had too much experience, and we have paid attention to that experience. We know better. We ought to know better than to expect our military to be the neutral executor of diplomatic policy. The military, particularly when engaged in combat, has its own special needs and ideals. We must know what they are if we wish to make effective military policy. Trust and courage are what is needed to win strange wars. The old theory of limited war rejected the traditional wisdom about war, one maxim of which held that in war, the moral virtues are at least as important, and probably more important than the intellectual virtues. It is past time that we recalled this obvious truth.

FOOTNOTES

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