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Limited War in a Revolutionary Setting: Application of Clausewitz's Principles in the Vietnam Conflict.

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The United States failed to consider Clausewitz's principles for the relationship between the political and military objectives in a war while North Vietnam gave primacy to the political objective, ensuring all other efforts supported it. The strategy adopted by the Johnson administration to wage the Vietnam War failed to provide clear objectives to govern the military action. Gradual response allowed the North Vietnamese time to adapt to changes enacted by the American forces. By the Tet Offensive in 1968, American public opinion and portions of the government would no longer support the war and sought an end of United States involvement in South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese realized the faced a superior enemy and utilized tactics that countered the American way of war. The primary goal and focus of the North Vietnamese effort remained the political objective throughout the war and all other action (military, psychological, economic, and diplomatic) supported the accomplishment of this goal.

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Limited War in a Revolutionary Setting

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I

How Could They Fail?

The Vietnam conflict has often been studied, and people continue to wonder what happened and how the greatest power on the planet could win the battles yet lose the war. In World War II and again in Korea, the United States demonstrated the validity of conventional warfare as prescribed in the Army Concept. As the United States became more involved in South Vietnam, the Army again sought to apply the Concept to this war. This raises a question that has been studied since 1965: Was the Army Concept applicable to the type of war and environment present in Vietnam? Two trains of thought emerged from this debate: (1) the Army believed the conflict was progressing from an insurgent or guerrilla type of warfare toward the conventional warfare embraced by their Concept, or (2) other members of the military and government believed this conflict was to remain an insurgent type of war that would require new techniques and strategies to effectively counter the communists. The debate between these two philosophies continued at the highest levels of government throughout the war. The government failed to clearly define the objective of the military. This void left the Army free to conduct operations as prescribed by the Concept, limited only by the rules of engagement imposed on military operations. After the Tet Offensive in 1968, the government and the people became disillusioned with the Army Concept, which prompted a complete re-evaluation of the United States strategy for Vietnam. Though changes were enacted from this review, the Army units in the field continued to conduct conventional-type operations until the United States began to withdraw from Vietnam.

These operations appear to have been conducted in the absence of a sound political objective. Does leadership matter? North Vietnam was under the complete control of Ho Chi Minh, who worked with General Vo Nguyen Giap. The United States leadership was fragmented by our system. Presidents and the policies they promoted changed from John F. Kennedy through Lyndon B. Johnson to Richard M. Nixon over the period of our involvement. The effort remained focused through General Westmoreland for execution on the ground. This paper will examine the political goals of the United States in Vietnam and determine whether or not the national strategy was reflected in and linked with the Army operations.

II

The Path to Vietnam.

Vietnam is situated in the southeastern corner of Asia, bordering the Gulf of Thailand, Gulf of Tonkin, and South China Sea to the south and east while bordering China, Laos and Cambodia to the north and west, as shown in Figure 1. It comprises a land area slightly larger than the state of New Mexico, with a coastline of over 2140 miles and land borders of 2883 miles. Its climate is tropical in the south and monsoonal in the north with a hot, rainy season from mid-May to mid-September followed by a dry season from mid-October to mid-March. The topography of the country ranges from a low, delta region in the south to highlands in the north and central regions increasing to

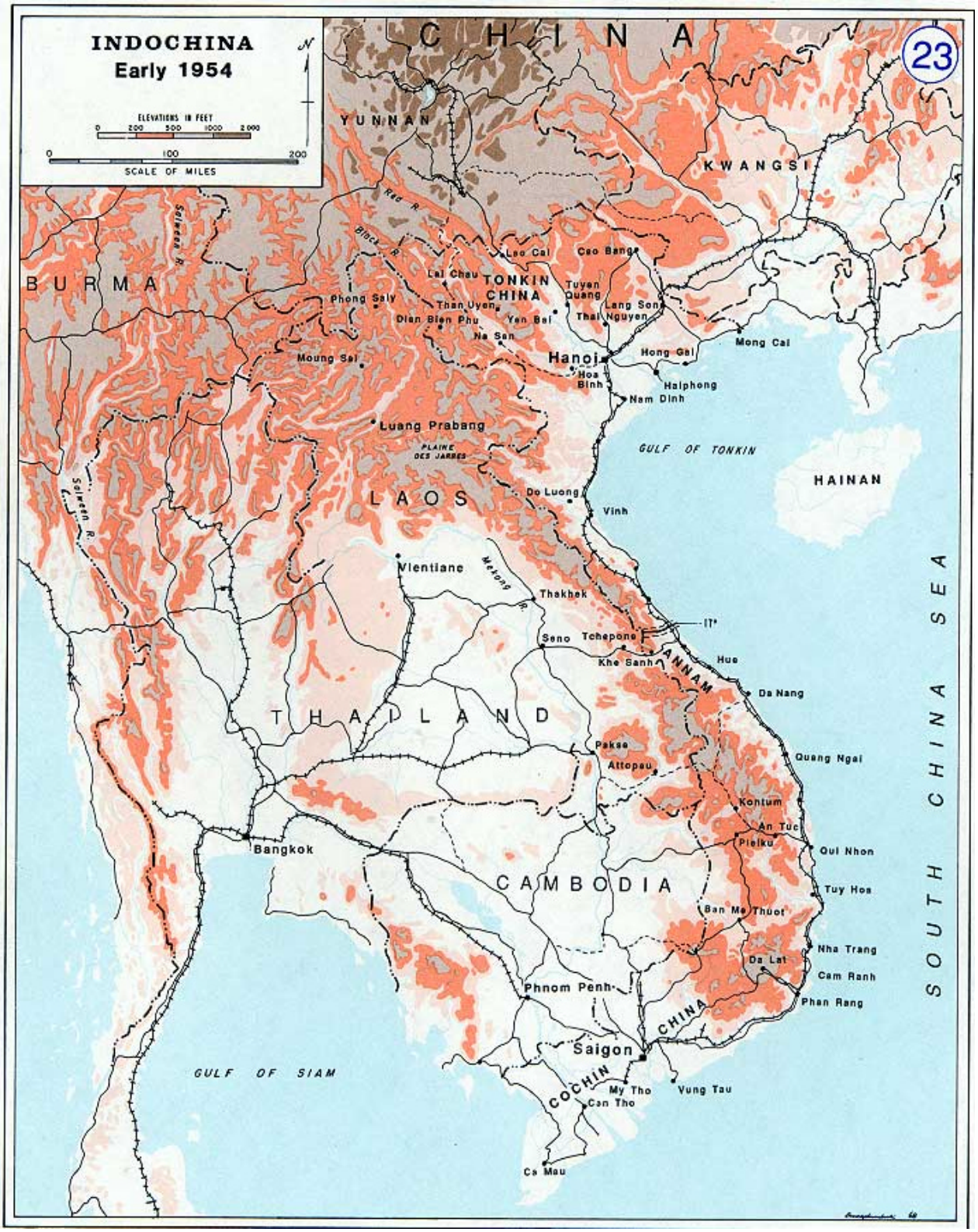

Figure 1. Indochina in 1954.

(www.dean.usma.edu/history/dhistorymaps/vietnam%20pages/vietnamtoc.htm)

mountainous in the far north and northwest, with elevations ranging from sea level to 10, 312 feet.

Vietnam, formerly a part of French Indochina, was accustomed to conflict; a French colony from 1860 until 1954 and was briefly occupied by the Japanese from 1941 until 1945. The Communist insurgency, led by Ho Chi Minh, can be traced to World War II, when the Viet Minh fought against the occupying Japanese forces, receiving assistance from the United States.[1] Once the Japanese were defeated, the Viet Minh continued their fight against the return of French control in the region. The French fought this insurgency from their return in 1946 until 1954, when their forces were surrounded at Dien Bien Phu and they were forced to surrender. This defeat led to negotiations and the Geneva agreements of 1954 that partitioned Indochina. The United States, the Soviet Union, France and Great Britain had convened the Geneva Conference in April 1954 to seek a solution to the Korean War as well as to address the problems in Indochina. The result of this conference was the creation of four countries from the region that had been Indochina: Cambodia, Laos, South Vietnam and North Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh took control of North Vietnam and renamed it the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN).

United States policy toward the region originally began as one of neutrality following World War II, but after the loss of China to the communist regime in 1949 and the start of the conflict in Korea, new significance was placed on France's struggle with the communists in Indochina. Both the Soviet Union and China recognized Ho Chi

[1] Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., The Army and Vietnam. (Baltimore, MD, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988) p. 17.

Minh's movement in January 1950.[2] After the communist attack on South Korea in June 1950, a meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) held that Indochina and the French struggle there were key elements in the ongoing battle against the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. The JCS authorized the formation of a Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in August 1950 to assist the French in Indochina.

Starting initially with only four members, the MAAG rapidly grew to 342 advisors by 1954.[3] Lieutenant General John W. O'Daniel visited the region in August 1953 and reported that the French would accomplish a decisive defeat of the Viet Minh by 1955.[4] This report was countered by a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) report less than a month later that concluded guerrilla action would probably continue indefinitely, even if the Viet Minh field forces were defeated. Less than a year after O'Daniel's visit, the French requested assistance from the United States. The JCS had considered many options to influence the political and military climates in Southeast Asia. The JCS reviewed potential courses of action relative to the French conflict in Indochina and the United States involvement in Korea, including a nuclear strike against China, expecting benefits from such an attack in both of these regions. A notable dissenter to the planning of the JCS was General Matthew B. Ridgeway, Army Chief of Staff. Filing an unsolicited report, he stated neither nuclear weapons, air nor sea power alone could assure victory, but ground forces would be required in Indochina. He also stated in his report that victory could be achieved if the United States was willing to commit

[2] Ibid. p. 18.
[3] Ibid. p. 18.
[4] Lieutenant General O'Daniel initially toured Indochina as an Army representative for the JCS to develop a situational report on the status of the French Efforts. He would return in 1954 to assume command of the MAAG.

seven to twelve divisions equipped and trained to fight a mid-intensity conflict. Ridgeway cautioned that dedicating the required forces to Indochina would severely impact the United States ability to meet its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) commitments. Ridgeway brought the costs of entering the conflict in Indochina to the attention of the political leadership. Marine Corps Commandant, General Lemuel Shepard supported Ridgeway believing entry into the conflict provided little chance for success.[5] Due to lack of support among his NATO Allies and dissention among the JCS, President Dwight D. Eisenhower refused to intervene to prevent the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. The French were engaged by the Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu on 13 March in 19 54. The Viet Minh slowly encircled the French, overwhelming their position on 7 May 1954.[6]

The fate of Indochina was decided at a conference convened in Geneva on 26 April 1954, ending 21 July 1954.[7] The results of the Geneva Conference were seen as a set- back for the Free World by establishing a communist foothold in Southeast Asia. To counter this situation, the United States formed the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in an attempt to create an anti-communist shield that would resist any further spread of communism in the region.[8] French interest in the region diminished after Geneva due to internal political struggles and colonial problems in Algeria.[9] The French had withdrawn most of forces and disestablished the French high

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[5] H. R. McMaster, Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamera, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam. (New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 1997) p. 35.
[6] Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, ADM, USN (Retired), Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect. (Novato, CA, Presidio Press, 1978) p. 8.
[7] Ibid. pp. 8-9.
[8] Ibid. p. 9.
[9] Ibid. p. 10.

command in Saigon by April 1956.[10] The United States filled the void left by France and became more entangled in South Vietnam. The United States believed it necessary to support South Vietnam in an effort to maintain a democratic influence in Southeast Asia. Bao Dai, the former emperor of the region that included Vietnam, returned to rule in South Vietnam with the help of the French in 1949 after four years of exile in Hong Kong. He had abdicated the throne in 1945 in favor of the Viet Minh Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Though he had negotiated independence for Vietnam from the French in 1950, Bao Dai proved to be passive and ineffective as the head of state.[11]

Peace still did not come to Indochina. As premier, Ngo Dinh Diem gradually took power from Bao Dai, garnered support from the United States for his action with the South Vietnamese Army against various armed sects and was overwhelmingly elected as head of state over Bao Dai by popular referendum in South Vietnam in October 1955.[12] This was the official beginning of the South Vietnamese Republic. Diem solidified his government but alienated the people by placing many of his family members in key positions. Armed resistance against Diem's control began when he was still premier with the random dissidence by armed sects in the countryside. After he came to power, several incidents of violence occurred, growing in intensity through 1959 and were attributed to the Viet Cong[13] (a derogatory contraction of Vietnamese Communist). Diem elevated the communist guerrilla activity to full-scale conflict by

[10] Ibid. p. 11.
[11] Ibid. pp. 6-7.
[12] Ibid. pp. 10-11.
[13] The Viet Cong were communist guerrilla groups operating in South Vietnam comprised mainly of South Vietnamese but included some infiltrators from the North.

bringing the army of South Vietnam to fight the dissidents. The Viet Cong were well organized, receiving the necessary support from the North to conduct battalion size operations against the South Vietnamese Army by 1960.[14] South Vietnam also received increasing support from the United States in 1960; filling a vacuum left in the military structure by the French. The United States provided more advisors to the MAAG, and the JCS authorized their integration into the South Vietnamese Army down to the battalion level. The JCS also authorized the transfer of additional United States Army Special Forces to the country to train the South Vietnamese Army in counter-guerrilla tactics. By the summer of 1960, several South Vietnamese Ranger Battalions had been established to conduct counter-guerrilla operations. The major push of the United States Advisors was to reshape the Vietnamese Army along American guidelines to counter a Korea-type invasion from the North. The South Vietnamese General Staff was reluctant to support this plan, believing that small, flexible units would be better to counter the internal, insurgent threat it saw instead of divisions; however, it was no match for the American Army leaders bent on reforming the Vietnamese Army. The South Vietnamese General Staff lacked the strength, power and support of their own government to overrule the American plans for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).

In 1961, John F. Kennedy was inaugurated as the new president of the United States. Also in that year, there was an increase in communist activity, which tested the new President. The first major issue was unrest in neighboring Laos. The United States-backed faction in that country was losing to the Communist-neutralist faction

[14] Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, p. 13.

supported by the Soviet Union and North Vietnam. The JCS considered the use of United States forces on the ground, but there was disagreement among the JCS on the issue. Eventually, the use of troops on the ground was rejected and a cease-fire was declared in May. President Kennedy decided to support the coalition government that was formed. This is pertinent to United States involvement in South Vietnam, since this move shook the confidence of other leaders in Southeast Asia as to the sincerity of the United States commitment to the region. The inaction on the issue was seen by the other neighboring governments as a failure of the United States to provide support to the people in Laos and made them question what support could they rely on from the super power in a time of need. Other problems, such as the Bay of Pigs disaster in April of 1961, motivated President Kennedy to develop a strong program of support to South Vietnam.

The national strategy of the United States in this area was a result of anti-communist reaction. Several different strategies were adopted to counter the spread of communism after the close of World War II. First, NSC-68, with the strategy of containment, was adopted in 1950 by President Harry S. Truman's administration following the loss of China to communism in 1949 and the successful testing of an atomic weapon by the Soviets in the same year. NSC-68 sought to contain the spread of communism through economic, psychological and military means.[15] These are the basic tenets of the containment strategy. The start of the Korean conflict validated much of NSC-68 and made containment one of the administration's top concerns.

[15] John Lewis Gaddis, Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy. (New York, Oxford University Press, 1982) pp. 98-100.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower followed Truman in 1952 with his “New Look.” Eisenhower tasked the National War College with Operation Solarium in 1953 to study the issues associated with our national strategy to determine the best course of action. It considered (1) the continuation of Truman’s containment, (2) a deterrence through establishing a periphery around the communist world and threatening nuclear retaliation if it were crossed, and (3) a liberation of Soviet areas of influence through the use of political, psychological, economic, and covert means.[16] The “New Look” adopted a portion of each of the alternatives studied in Solarium, but the central theme of the strategy was an asymmetrical response to any threat, targeting the weaknesses of an adversary with a calculated application of the strengths of the United States.[17] Eisenhower considered nuclear weapons to be a key component of this strategy, because they allowed him to reduce military costs through force reductions while retaining an instrument capable of massive destruction. Eisenhower, concerned with the transition from a wartime economy, sought a balanced budget to free capital to finance growth in United States business. With the Kennedy administration in 1961 came a strategy of “Flexible Response.” Kennedy wanted to distance himself from the previous administration, believing he represented a new generation and desiring to prove it to the American public through his actions and policies. Kennedy and his advisors believed that the “New Look” failed to provide sufficient means to respond to various challenges. “Flexible Response” relied on a symmetrical response to any given threat to United States interests, any push to expand communism would be met and

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[16] Ibid. pp. 145-146.
[17] Ibid. pp. 146-148.

defeated regardless. Kennedy saw the need to be able to act using all elements of national power from the political to various types of military action – covert, guerrilla, conventional and even nuclear.[18] Based on the policies it established, the administration placed more emphasis on ensuring the response was proper for the situation as well as ensuring all actions were properly integrated. Following Kennedy's assassination in 1963, the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson continued this strategy, and Vietnam became its test.

Ho Chi Minh was North Vietnam. He left his country in 1911 working on a French steamer, to seek education and answers that he could not find in his native land. His travels initially brought him to Paris, where he joined the French Communist Party. Then, he made his way to Moscow. After more education in the communist way, he moved to China in 1925 to unify and organize the Vietnamese refugees. The organizations he established in China were the beginning of the Viet Minh. He established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam after World War II but continued to fight, first the French then the Americans, to unify Vietnam. The strategy of North Vietnam was simple to determine, seeking the unification of Vietnam under single party communist control. In a resolution adopted in 1959, the Communist party of North Vietnam declared the United States an enemy of peace and the main obstacle to the realization of the hopes of all the Vietnamese people.[19] It envisioned the North as a strong base from which it could assist the sympathetic South Vietnamese to organize themselves into efficient cells to conduct guerrilla warfare, overthrow the Diem

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[18] Ibid. p. 214.
[19] Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, pp. 13-14.

government, and eject the United States from their country. This resolution paved the way for increased intervention by the North Vietnamese in the South.

Historians say the Vietnam conflict started in April 1965, when President Johnson authorized the use of United States troops in offensive action against the North Vietnamese, but the Unites States entry into the war cannot be so clearly defined. In 1950, the MAAG was authorized, and four advisors went to Indochina. The MAAG had grown to 342 members by 1954. The first American blood was drawn when two American advisors were killed north of Saigon in 1959.[20] By the end of 1961, approximately 5,000 advisors were in South Vietnam. The MAAG became the Military Assistance Command for Vietnam (MACV) in 1962 and continued to grow. Also in 1962, the first supply troops (4,000 strong) came to support South Vietnam and the first battle deaths were recorded.[21] As 1963 drew to a close, over 16,000 military advisors were in South Vietnam, and American aid for that year totaled 500 million dollars.[22] After two alleged attacks by North Vietnamese torpedo boats on the United States war ships in the Gulf of Tonkin in August 1964, President Johnson ordered retaliatory strikes on North Vietnam. Oil facilities and naval targets in the Hanoi-Haiphong area were attacked on 4 August 1964 by aircraft from the carriers CONSTELLATION and TICONDEROGA, two of these aircraft were shot down and the first American prisoner of war captured. The Gulf of Tonkin resolution, approved by Congress on 7 August 1964, authorized the President to take all necessary measures to protect the United

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[20] R. R. Palmer, Joel Colton, A History of the Modern World Since 1815. (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1978) pp. 920-921.
[21] Ibid. p. 921.
[22] www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/vietnam, Vietnam War 1961-1964.

States and South Vietnam.[23] This proved to be the only official sanction by Congress for American action in Vietnam until it was revoked in 1970, as Congress and the American public become disenchanted with the war. Also in 1964 came the first direct attack by the Viet Cong on American troops at Bien Hoa air base, where five Americans were killed in a pre-dawn mortar attack.[24] By this time there were over 23,000 advisors in South Vietnam. In 1965, the first combat troops were deployed to Vietnam, the United States Navy began river patrols, and a massive air campaign was started against North Vietnam. The employment of combat troops on the ground was seen as an irrevocable commitment by the United States to the war. No longer was it just "advising" the South but was now a part of the conflict. The United States Navy began OPERATIONS MARKET TIME and GAME WARDEN with the South Vietnamese Navy in an effort to disrupt the flow of supplies along the coasts and rivers from North Vietnam to the Viet Cong in the South.[25] The riverine patrols operated in the Mekong Delta. These naval operations forced most of the supplies for the Viet Cong to come via the Ho Chi Minh Trail and not by sea or through Cambodia. The air strikes by the United States against the North were part of OPERATION ROLLING THUNDER, targeting anything from facilities in North Vietnam to movements along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. From 1965 to 1968, the United States would drop more ordnance on Vietnam than against all of the Axis powers in World War II.[26] United States troops in

[23] R. R. Palmer, p. 922.
[24] www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/vietnam, Vietnam War 1961-1964.
[25] Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, p. 140. Note: The timing for the commencement of these operations varies between this source and The History Place.
[26] R. R. Palmer, p. 922.

Vietnam rapidly grew to over 180,000 by the end of 1965. The United Stated had definitely entered the war.

III

Specific Situation – United States.

After World War II, the United States saw the major threat to the Free World as the spread of communism and worked to counter the expansion of the Soviet Union and its satellites through all avenues: diplomatic, economic, psychological, and militarily. With the World War II fresh in all minds, diplomatic and economic means were readily employed. Following World War II, there was a push to reduce American reliance on the military, saving the budgetary dollars and limiting the potential for more conflict. The advent of nuclear weapons was thought by many to make the large force structure unnecessary. The first events in what was known as the Cold War came in Greece and Turkey in 1947.[27] This was the start of the Truman Doctrine, in which the United States promised to supply military equipment and advisors, initially to Greece and Turkey, to assist all countries to prevent the takeover of their government by minority parties.[28] The next major step by the United States was to solidify as much of Europe as possible against possible Soviet incursion. In 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization

[27] The Cold War is a term commonly applied to the period from the close of World War II until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. During this time period, intense competition existed between the United States and The Soviet Union at all levels within the societies: politically, militarily, economically, diplomatically, in sports as well as space.
[28] R. R. Palmer, pp. 844-845.

(NATO) was formed as an alliance of twelve nations, but soon included West Germany, Greece and Turkey, to prevent the invasion of Western Europe. The United States also sponsored the Marshall Plan in an effort to assist those countries damaged by the war. It promoted economic revitalization and freer trade between countries, resulting in an explosion of growth in Western Europe. As the United States solidified Western Europe, the Soviet Union brought Eastern Europe under its control, not through economic aid and military assistance, but by maintaining a military presence after World War II and installing harsh, communist governments. The end of World War II also brought the demise of the British, French, Belgian, Portuguese and Dutch empires in Asia and Africa. This also meant that numerous countries would emerge from the remnants of these empires to become the proxy battlegrounds for the competition between communism and free world.

In Asia, China was lost to communist revolution in 1949, the Soviets controlled North Korea, and a communist-controlled North Vietnam resulted from the Geneva accords in 1954. Everywhere the United States looked, the Soviet Union was expanding. The North Koreans, whether backed by the Soviet Union and China or not, invaded the South in the summer of 1950. President Truman worked through the United Nations to condemn this overt act of aggression and received backing to restore the borders of South Korea. As this Korean War occupied the minds of the American public, the leadership of the government looked to strengthen the non-communist countries in Asia with a pledge of support. The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was formed in an attempt to curb communist expansion in Southeast Asia. This treaty lacked the strength of NATO, but emphasized the importance of Southeast

Asia to the United States. As the Korean conflict drew to a close, the United States strengthened its support of South Vietnam, as it was faced with a growing insurgency of communist-backed forces sponsored by the North. The United States became more involved in South Vietnam partly due to the SEATO treaty and partly due to the belief that South Vietnam was the key to curbing communist advancement in the region. Mainly, the United States government feared a loss of influence in Southeast Asia, if it failed to act in support of South Vietnam. Vietnam and the other countries that had made up Indochina were an important source of raw materials. Vietnam was also strategically located adjacent to major sea-lanes making it of vital importance in the control of shipping in the region. Vietnam was seen as another link in the chain of events that was called the Cold War. It was the continuation of United States efforts to contain communism that had been the foundation of American foreign policy since 1947.

The overarching objective in Vietnam was to curb the expansion of communist influence. However, the Johnson Administration feared intervention on the part of the Soviet Union or China, as had been seen in Korea, if too much effort was placed in supporting South Vietnam. He chose a strategy of gradual escalation to tailor the forces in Vietnam to the perceived threat from the North Vietnamese in an effort to avoid alarming the Soviets and Chinese. With gradual escalation, the intent was to preserve the government in Saigon against the onslaught of the communists and punish the government of North Vietnam. Additionally, President Johnson adopted Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara's concept of graduated pressure, a gradual intensification of military action to demonstrate American resolve and convince the

enemy to alter his behavior or negotiate.[29] The military advocated the use of overwhelming force, if the United States was to enter the conflict, but McNamara stymied attempts of the JCS to relate their views to the President by controlling their access to him.

The United States wanted to solidify the South Vietnamese government, politically, economically, and militarily. The United States reluctantly supported the Diem government despite his ever-growing corrupt bureaucracy and ineffective leadership. In 1963, the United States encouraged the South Vietnamese military to stage a coup and General Duong Van Minh, the most respected of the senior generals, assumed control of the country.[30] This was just the first coup staged by the military in what was to remain an unstable government throughout the war. The government was not the only source of instability. The communists undertook a gradual infiltration into the society of South Vietnam, instead of a massive invasion from the north as seen in Korea. The United States sought to quell this insurgency and firmly establish a democratic government in South Vietnam, but continued to back the existing government system that failed to represent the people of South Vietnam. This uncertainty in the government hindered efforts to develop trust in the Vietnamese people that the government would protect them and ensure their best interests were met.

The media rose to a new level of significance during this war. Vietnam was the first television war, a war in which the American people could tune in every night and see updated information on the progress of the war and the results of every conflict

[29] H. R. McMaster, p. 62.
[30] Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, pp. 23-25.

before their eyes. The media was also used by the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese to their advantage; they would infiltrate a village in order to fire upon American troops or planes, drawing a counter-strike on the village, then bring in the news crew to show the innocent civilians killed by the brutal American forces. After the Tet Offensive in 1968, the Government of North Vietnam also utilized the media in the United States to accentuate the growing disfavor for American involvement in the war.

IV

Specific Situation – North Vietnam.

War was not uncommon to the Vietnamese people, as they had fought various aggressors since the foundation of their society before the birth of Christ. The communists in North Vietnam had fought as guerrillas against the invasion by the Japanese in World War II, and later fought for independence from the French. The armistice in 1954 ended French involvement but created a divided Vietnam with a contested border between the two at the seventeenth parallel. An insurgency soon began, as the communists from the north led by Ho Chi Minh attempted to unify Vietnam under their rule.[31] North Vietnam was faced with a much larger and better-equipped foe than any it had previously faced when the United States entered the war. North Vietnam had to devise other ways of waging war against the United States. Initially, North Vietnam relied on guerilla forces in the South to engage the United States while it raised and trained an army in the North. General Vo Nguyen Giap led this North Vietnamese Army and all of the guerrilla forces against the Americans during Tet in

1968. After a rebuilding period for the North Vietnamese Army, it attacked a reduced American force in 1972.[32] In both instances, the American forces, dealing enormous casualties, crushed the full engagement of the North Vietnamese Army. Regardless of the loss, the determination of the Vietnamese led by Ho Chi Minh would not be broken. When these two mismatched adversaries met in the jungles of Vietnam, the results were quite different than those predicted. The Vietnamese were used to fighting for their existence and the United States was seen by many, not as a savior, but as just another colonial aggressor.

Faced with a superior enemy, North Vietnam had to carefully determine its goals and strategy. Its goal was to unify Vietnam under communist rule through internal aggression. Its strategy was quite similar to the strategy of attrition used by the United States: to wear down the will of the United States until it could no longer continue the conflict. What varied was the means by which the North intended to execute its strategy. Ho Chi Minh and General Giap intended to wage a protracted conflict using sufficient forces to draw the United States away from populated areas into as remote and static a location as possible to limit its effectiveness. The guerrilla warfare would generate casualties among the United States forces to attrite their will to continue the war.[33] It appeared that the North Vietnamese were more aware of the writings of Clausewitz than the United States military. In his writing on the expenditure of effort, Clausewitz noted that the most important method is to wear down the enemy over the duration of the conflict to bring about the gradual exhaustion of its physical and moral

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[31] Ibid. p. 869.
[32] Nixon began withdrawing troops from Vietnam in 1969.
[33] Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., p. 178.

resistance.[34] This was precisely the strategy the North followed against the United States after 1968. The center of gravity was the Vietnamese Army and its vulnerability was the extended logistics trail from the North to support its forces in the South.

A central element in the strategy of North Vietnam was the concept of a people's war and *dau tranh* or "struggle," a war for the people with goals of independence, a unified country, and happiness. The people, all of the people, were seen as the agents of the war and in their efforts would come the victory. There was no such thing as a non-combatant in the North Vietnamese perspective. Ho Chi Minh and General Giap believed much of the war could be fought and won using only cadres of their forces to motivate and train troops from within South Vietnam utilizing this concept of *dau tranh*. They had seen this technique work against the French and expected the same results against the Americans. After their first engagement with American forces on the ground, General Giap saw a need to revise some of his tactics. Faced with the technological superiority of the American forces, the North Vietnamese relied upon mass and movement or diversion to force the Americans to fight on unfamiliar territory. General Giap knew the strength of the communist movement rested within the people and the human factor could make the difference against the sophisticated weapons of the Americans.[35] With a reliance on the people for the war effort, General Giap saw the strategy as a combination of military, political, economic and diplomatic elements at once with the military being the central element.[36] A key factor for this strategy to work

[34] Carl von Clausewitz, p. 93.
[35] www.cnn.com/specials/cold.war/episodes/11/interviews/giap/
[36] www.pbs.org/wgbh/peoplescentury/episodes/guerrillawars/giaptranscript.html

was the continuous flow of supplies and reinforcements from the North via the Ho Chi Minh trail as shown in Figure 2.

V

The Army Concept.

Prior to Vietnam, the United States Army experience rested in conventional wars involving major unit action along fronts. The Army Concept embraced this type of war. It had developed and been refined over the years and had influenced the way the Army was organized, trained and fought. It focused on mid-intensity conflict utilizing high volumes of firepower to minimize casualties.[37] In preparing for Vietnam, the Army believed the addition of air mobility and additional firepower would overcome the difficulties posed by the insurgent forces. The Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army units generally moved in small groups, at night through known terrain. These guerrilla units employed any means to attack the enemy; unconventional tactics were their norm. They utilized all types of weaponry when they attacked and were able to continually draw supplies as they were needed seemingly from the mist in the jungle. The Ho Chi Minh trail was extensive and General Giap was an expert logistician. Their army units did not normally amass along a front to engage the South Vietnamese, but remained hidden in among the population or under the cover of the jungle, massing only for short periods to attack a post then disappearing back into the jungle before United States airpower could be effectively utilized against their units. There were exceptions

[37] Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., pp. 4-5.

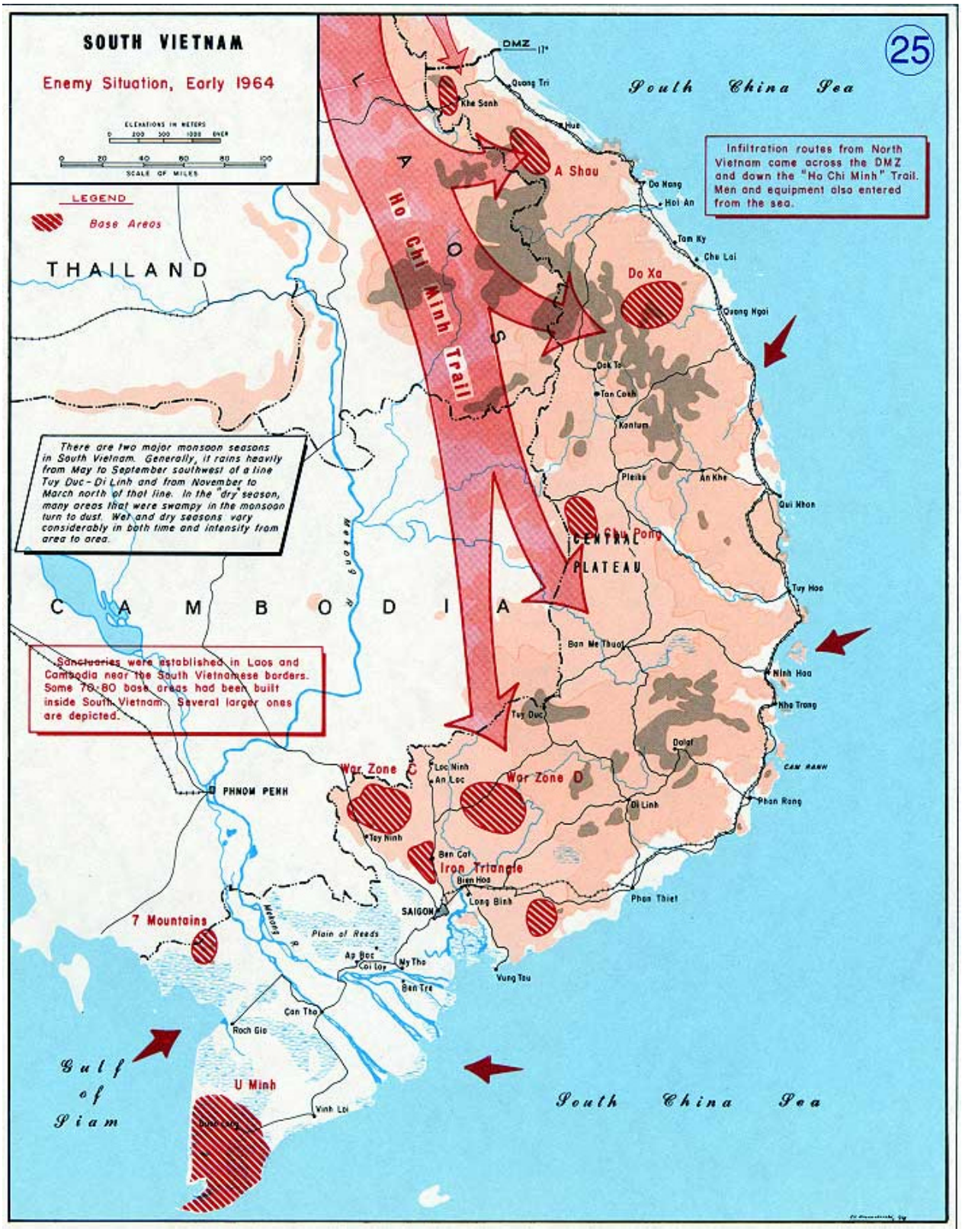

Figure 2. North Vietnam/Viet Cong Situation in South Vietnam, 1963.

(www.dean.usma.edu/history/dhistorymaps/vietnam%20pages/vietnamtoc.htm)

where the North Vietnamese did engage the American and South Vietnamese forces in more conventional warfare along a front such as offensives launched in 1968 and 1972. However, the results were disastrous for the North Vietnamese in both of these instances. The Kennedy administration saw the need to develop a counterinsurgency capability and tasked the Army with developing this capability. The Army was appalled that a group of young civilians (the Kennedy administration) would dictate how they would fight a war. The recommendation was that the Army shift its structure from relying on heavy units in favor of a light infantry force suitable for the expected conflict. The Army was adamant that they could effectively combat any threat with their Concept. General George H. Decker, Army Chief of Staff from 1960 to 1962, stated: "Any good soldier can handle guerrillas."[38] The Army placed little emphasis on this Presidential directive, even though it developed doctrine in the 1962 edition of FM 100-5, *Operations,* Chapter 10, "Unconventional Warfare Operations," it never intended to apply the doctrine in the field.[39] The Army's solution was to force the war to fight their Concept instead of adapting their strategy for an insurgent type of war. Their intent was to shape the conflict to conform to the type of war they were prepared to fight.

Mao Tse-tung captured the phases of a guerrilla type war in his pamphlet *Yu Chi Chan* (Guerrilla Warfare) published in 1937.[40] The first phase of a guerrilla action involves organizing, consolidating and preserving regional base areas to train and indoctrinate "volunteers." The next phase (phase two) utilizes these trained guerrillas to carry out actions, such as, sabotage, ambushes and terrorism in an attempt to procure

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[38] Ibid. pp. 36-37.
[39] Ibid. p. 39.
[40] Mao Tse-tung, Fleet Marine Force Reference Publication 12-18, Mao Tse-tung on Guerrilla Warfare, Brigidier General Samual B. Griffith, USMC (Retired) translator, (Washington, DC, Department of the Navy, 1989) p. 37.

supplies, gain territory, recruit more troops and provoke government reaction. By causing the government to react or overreact, the guerrillas can propagandize any action taken to further alienate the population. The final phase (phase three) is characterized by the organization of the guerrilla units into a conventional force that seeks to decisively engage the enemy.[41] In 1965, the Army, McNamera and some other government officials felt that the intelligence was indicating a shift by the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese from guerrilla (phase two) toward more conventional (phase three) warfare in the insurgency. Additionally, they felt any reversion of the insurgents to guerrilla warfare would be manageable within their projected force levels. Other officials, both government and military, believed that the enemy activity had remained consistent at near the guerrilla level with limited numbers of large unit actions.[42] Thomas L. Hughes, Director of Intelligence and Research at the State Department, strongly contested the belief that the conflict was moving to phase three operations in an analysis he provided to the Secretary of State in July 1965. He recommended operations consist of providing security to the population against Viet Cong activity.[43] Despite the controversy over the type of warfare which was being waged by the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army, President Johnson supported the Army's proposals.

The Army believed it possible to force the enemy into large unit action through the use of search and destroy operations as well as the application of overwhelming firepower. General William C. Westmoreland said it was not enough to contain the "big

[41] Ibid. pp. 20-22.
[42] Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., pp. 158-161.
[43] Ibid. pp. 160-161.

units" of the enemy forces, but they had to be pounded by artillery and bombs before engaging them with ground forces or they would forever remain a threat.[44] The strategy of attrition assumed that the Army could force the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong to shift to phase three type of conflict and operate as large units. The push behind search and destroy operations was to seek-out the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong units and force engagements. The Viet Cong capitalized on the American strategy by drawing the American forces away from the populated areas, a source of strength for the Viet Cong, into the jungles of the Central Highlands. The Army deployed its top division, the 1st Cavalry, into this region. General Westmoreland used the battle in the Ia Drang Valley in November of 1965 as validation of his concept of operations, proving the shift of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong to phase three operations. A regimental-sized formation of North Vietnamese was encountered in the Ia Drang Valley and smashed by elements of the American 1st Cavalry Division through superior firepower and mobility.[45] The mobility provided by air assets became key elements of the war as the Army rapidly grew dependant on the tactical fighters and helicopters to provide necessary support and firepower in their strategy of attrition.

The strategy adopted by the Army was to wage a war of attrition, to continue to engage the enemy and inflict considerable losses upon them until they could no longer wage war. The emphasis in the war was placed on the body count by the Army instead of legitimate advances in securing the people and government of South Vietnam. The Army failed to acknowledge two clear indicators that their plan was flawed: (1) most

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[44] William C. Westmoreland, GEN, USA, A Soldier Reports. (Garden City, New York, Doubleday & Company, Inc.,1976) p. 150.
[45] Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., pp. 168-169.

action was initiated by the enemy units, and (2) regardless of the losses inflicted on the Viet Cong, they were able to regroup and resupply. Instead of accepting these deficiencies in its Concept and adapting its strategy to fit the environment, the Army sought to continually escalate the war, drawing more men and supplies to Vietnam. It believed that eventually a large enough army would be fielded to force its strategy of attrition to work. At the peak of the war in 1968, with over 540, 000 men stationed in Vietnam, less than 16 percent were combat troops.[46] The rest were utilized in supply and service roles. The enormity of the support personnel required was due to the heavy firepower brought for use in this war. This equipment had not been designed for the rugged environment to which it was subjected and required extensive support to maintain it in an operational status. The protests and propaganda against the war in the United States also reached new heights in 1968. The government and people of the United States would no longer support escalation of the war after the Tet Offensive attempted to force the Army to re-examine its strategy for the conduct of the war.

VI

The Dead German Still Speaks.

The Americans entered the conflict in Vietnam with the intent to contain communism and force the North Vietnamese to accept American terms for the continued existence of South Vietnam. In studying the nature of war, Clausewitz states that: "War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will."[47] Clearly, this was the intent of the

[46] Ibid. pp. 197-198.
[47] Carl von Clausewitz, p. 75.

American leadership, to bend the government of North Vietnam to the American will. Much consideration was given by the American leadership as to how to bring American forces into the conflict, whether to fully engage the military or gradually build forces in Vietnam based on the threat encountered. Clausewitz provides insight on this subject as well in his writings: "When conducting war, the maximum use of force, applied with intellect and undeterred by loss of life, will yield the advantage to the aggressor if the other side limits their effort, forcing them to escalate."[48] The United States limited its effort in Vietnam by adopting the strategy of gradual response, while North Vietnam used everything at its disposal to engage the American and South Vietnamese forces. While American losses created a loss of support for the war effort in the United States, the North Vietnamese leadership never faltered in their support the war though often forcing the population to replace and resupply the army after significant losses. After major engagements, such as, Tet in 1968, it took the North several years to replace the incredible losses it incurred during the offensive. Despite these setbacks, the North Vietnamese fought on and, just as predicted by Clausewitz, the Americans were forced to escalate their efforts. In considering the strength of an enemy, Clausewitz cautions that, in addition to evaluating the means at his disposal to conduct war, the strength of the enemy's will must also be evaluated.[49] Though military strength can be easily evaluated by mathematical means, the will of a people is very subjective and their history and motives must be considered. The American leaders failed to consider the will of the North Vietnamese in evaluating their strength. This shortsightedness was

[48] Ibid. pp. 75-76.
[49] Ibid. p. 77.

noted in several war games conducted by the Americans before and during the war, such as, SIGMA I and II, but never given the amount of consideration that it needed.

One point the Army failed to recognize had been made over 150 years earlier by Clausewitz, that the military objective must support the political goal. The Army felt the essence of the war was military and that politics were secondary until they had inflicted sufficient damage on the insurgents to force peace negotiations.[50] However, the basis for this war was purely political. The role of the United States was to stem the expansion of communism to South Vietnam, ensuring their right to self-determination. The JCS was frustrated by the ambiguity of the President Johnson's objective in Vietnam. He had made clear his desire to combat communism and succeed in Vietnam, but failed to provide it the clear objectives it needed to plan and execute the war. Without a clear statement of purpose in Vietnam, the JCS was unsure how and what to advise the President and Secretary of Defense for action in this region.[51] As stated by Clausewitz, "the political object not only determines the military objective but the amount of effort required."[52] The JCS was consequently crippled in its ability to effectively plan for this war without a clear understanding of the political object desired. If war is the continuation of policy, once war has begun, policy must continue to influence the military operations until the conflict is resolved.[53] The military must continually provide feedback to the policy-makers as to whether the military objective is achievable. This forces the re-evaluation of the political objective to determine if it requires modification or if the military objective should be revised. Also the amount of

[50] Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., p. 131.
[51] H. R. McMaster, p. 64.
[52] Carl von Clausewitz, p. 81.
[53] Ibid. p. 87.

effort must be considered and revised as necessary to meet the desired goals. This vital feedback loop had broken down in the American system during Vietnam. Since the Army assumed the military objective had become the primary effort, little feedback was provided to the government relative to the political or military objectives. Additionally, personality conflicts between President Johnson and his staff with the military impeded the normal flow of information. The only feedback came in the form of requests for more troops and materials to escalate the involvement of the United States in the war.

Prior to entering a conflict, a careful examination must be conducted into the political motivation at the center of the conflict from the perspectives of both the friendly and enemy forces. From there, the strength of the enemy and its motivations for the conflict must be considered as those within the friendly nation. Finally, alliances and the political sympathies of nations surrounding the belligerents have to be taken into account.[54] All of these factors can affect the type of conflict and scope of forces required. A careful assessment of any enemy must be performed and compared to the capabilities held within a given country before commencing open conflict. The United States significantly failed in this task by failing to learn about the history, people, language, motivations and strengths of the Vietnamese people before the first advisors left for the MAAG. The Army did stand up a token school to train advisors in 1962, but it failed to properly train them on the expected environment (political, military, and physical) in Southeast Asia. The MAAG tried to directly apply American training methods, techniques and instructions in developing the South Vietnamese Army, failing to consider the differences both culturally and physically. The Military Assistance

[54] Ibid. pp. 585-586.

Training Advisors (MATA) school intent was to provide officers and non-commissioned officers with a working knowledge of their role in Vietnam, as well as training in conversational Vietnamese and study of counterinsurgency operations in Greece and Malaya.[55] Well-intended, the course lacked qualified instructors, pertinent course material to the insurgency in South Vietnam, and time to teach the material (the course was only 4 weeks in length). The course was poorly rated and by the close of 1963, with over 13,000 advisors in South Vietnam, less than 3,000 had attended the MATA course.[56] The failure of the Americans to learn about the Vietnamese culture was as detrimental to the planning and execution of conflict against the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong as it was in the training of the South Vietnamese. By contrast, General Douglas McArthur was an expert in Southeast Asian affairs, having lived and fought there for over 30 years. For example, he was keenly aware of Korean culture, motivations, strengths and expectations in that war and developed plans to effectively engage the North Korean forces. In comparison, Ho Chi Minh and General Giap had a critical insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the American forces and developed a strategy to best exploit those weaknesses.

[55] Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., p. 48.
[56] Ibid. pp. 48-49.

VII

Another Approach: United States Marine Corps.

The power base for the communists was in the people in the villages from which they could obtain and store the necessary supplies, intelligence and recruits, either voluntarily or by threat. Several programs were initiated with little to no success in breaking this link in the support chain for the Viet Cong. Programs such as Agroville, the Strategic Hamlet Program, and Hop Tac were all intended to separate the Viet Cong from the population in the villages by various means.[57] The primary mission of the American forces should have been separating the Viet Cong from their power base and protecting the villages before attempting to force them into a large-scale conflict. The Marines, under Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak and Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt, recognized that the search and destroy tactics approved by General Westmoreland were inadequate to defeat the enemy. They created tactical areas of responsibility (TAOR) in which responsibility for an area and the people in it was shared between the Marine unit and the South Vietnamese Army unit assigned to the region. Success of this program was seen in the numbers of Vietnamese that moved into the regions controlled by the Marine TAORs, growing from an initial 1930 persons in mid-1965 to 1,340,000 by mid-1967.[58] As the Marines improved the program, Combined Action Companies (CACs) were formed in an effort to better integrate with the local population. These companies trained and utilized the Popular Forces within the structure of the Marine units in an effort to transform them into the protective force for

[57] William R. Corson, The Betrayal. (New York, W. W.Norton & Company, Inc., 1968) pp. 47-55.
[58] Ibid. p. 175.

the village as they were originally intended. The CACs evolved into the Combined Action Platoons (CAPs) simply because "cac" can be taken to mean a most disagreeable person in Vietnamese, and the units assigned these missions were not configured normally.[59] In this program, General Walt ordered all Marine combat units to conduct patrols from sundown to sunup when insurgent activity was greatest. The use of CAPs spread through the First Corps because it was effective in blocking Viet Cong incursion into the villages. Marines readily volunteered to join this program and often extended their tours due to their belief in the results obtained. CAPs adopted the same missions as stated for the Popular Forces, local paramilitary units responsible for village security:

> 1) Destroy the Viet Cong infrastructure with the village or hamlet area of responsibility.
> 2) Protect public security and help maintain law and order.
> 3) Protect the friendly infrastructure.
> 4) Protect bases and communication axes within the villages and hamlets.
> 5) Organize people's intelligence nets.
> 6) Participate in civic action and conduct propaganda against the Viet Cong.[60]

Each of these missions directly affected the ability of the Viet Cong to exploit the population in supporting its war effort through supplies, recruits and information. The main drawback of this approach was that it took time to integrate the Marine and Vietnamese forces and earn the trust of the village that they were assigned to protect.

By mid-1967, the CAP program was obtaining solid results without the support and assistance of the Army. Once the CAP was accepted by the people of the village, they undertook various civic projects such as: school construction, irrigation works,

[59] Ibid. p. 180.
[60] Ibid. p. 184.

bridge and road repairs, animal husbandry, introduction of new crops and agricultural methods, etc.[61] The exception to having the CAP accepted by the village before beginning civic projects was the MEDCAP program, which provided medical treatment to the village while the people became accustomed to the Marine presence.[62] Many of the civic programs undertaken by the CAPs were accomplished only by obtaining the necessary materials and supplies by any means; trading, coercion of other services support, "midnight requisitions," and money collected by the Marine Corps Reserve in the United States. The results were real: the villages protected by CAPs were considered more secure, the Marine units had a lower casualty rate than units engaged in search and destroy missions, and the protection of the Marines emboldened the farmers to stand up against the Viet Cong. A study performed in mid-1967 by the Department of Defense noted that the hamlet evaluation system security score showed villages protected by CAPs scored 2.95 out of 5.0 while other villages in the region only scored 1.6.[63]

The success of the Marines did not sway the Army. They were disgusted with the Marines, feeling that they would not execute the battle plan in accordance with Army guidelines and claiming the Marines didn't know how to fight particularly against guerrillas. General Westmoreland saw the Marine use of CAPs as an attack on his concept of operations. Army leadership failed to recognize the merit of securing the densely populated coastal region prior to moving inland to pursue the Viet Cong. The Army saw the Marine approach as leaving vast amounts of land open to the Viet Cong

[61] Ibid. p. 188.
[62] Ibid. p. 188.
[63] Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., p. 174.

to exploit; however, this land was remote and largely uninhabited. This was precisely where the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese wanted to draw the American forces and engage them, away from the villages. The Marines were effectively separating the Viet Cong from their power base in the people. Though General Westmoreland later conceded that the Marine approach had merit, he defended the Concept stating that the Army did not have the personnel to put a squad in every village. However, if the Army had shifted to a light infantry force, the number of support personnel could have been reduced to free the necessary combat troops to support such a plan. A 1967 Department of Defense report noted that the encadrement of every village could be accomplished with 167,000 United States troops.[64] This number could be further reduced if allowance was made for securing selected areas first and spreading out to encapsulate additional villages under the protection of the Combined Action Platoons.

VIII

Effort Defined.

Many studies and war games were conducted prior to and during the war concerning action in this region. In April 1964, the JCS were dissatisfied with a report by McNamara advocating a strategy of gradual response, so it prepared a war game to test the assumptions of this strategy. It examined the results of the application of this strategy by the United States and South Vietnam, as pressure was increased on North Vietnam. They were also concerned and studied the political and military interaction of the involved countries as well as the Soviet Union and China. SIGMA I showed

[64] Ibid. pp. 175-176.

disturbing results that were replayed in the war. In this game, the bombing of North Vietnam produced few results and, despite a buildup of 600,000 troops by the United States, land was lost to the Viet Cong. [65] Fundamental flaws in the strategy of gradual response were exposed by the war game:

> 1) North Vietnam was able to respond to United States escalation by intensifying the ground war, and
> 2) It suggested that the United States had underestimated the resolve of the North Vietnamese.[66]

McNamara moved to solidify his position with the President by severing all channels of communication between the JCS and the President and requiring all correspondence to cross his desk on the way to the President. McNamara discounted the results of SIMGA I; therefore, President Johnson never saw the results of this war game. McNamara preferred statistics and graphs using hard data to determine how the war was shaping over the subjective results of a war game fashioned and executed by the military. Both President Johnson and McNamara held the military in low esteem. Utilizing a group of civilian analysts assigned to his office, McNamara studied data such as the number of personnel killed in action, Viet Cong activity, weapons captured, aircraft sorties, North Vietnamese naval activity, South Vietnamese river boat patrols, patrol days by South Vietnamese units, etc.[67] The data crunched by civilian analysts was preferred by the Secretary of Defense in shaping American involvement in Vietnam over the seasoned military advice of the JCS. SIGMA I had predicted that air power would be ineffective in destroying North Vietnam's ability to support insurgent operation in the south. Walt Rostow from the State Departments Policy Planning Committee

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[65] Ibid. p. 133.
[66] H. R. McMaster, pp. 89-90.
[67] Ibid. pp. 90-91.

argued that air power need only deter the North Vietnamese from supporting insurgency in the South. This "Rostow Thesis" was tested in SIGMA II, a war game conducted in September of 1964 by the JCS in an attempt to answer the major political and military questions before American troops were committed for combat in Vietnam.[68] The game raised serious issues with this thesis, showing that bombing had a minimal effect on North Vietnamese resolve while stiffening its determination in the conflict. It was determined that the Viet Cong could use existing stockpiles of weapons and civilian support to maintain the insurgency in South Vietnam. As in the first war game, SIGMA II pointed out that escalation of American military involvement would erode public support for the war in the United States. This game predicted that graduated response would lead to disaster in Vietnam. The American leadership discounted the results of these war games and held fast to their strategy of gradual response, only to see the games played out in real life.

Studies were performed by the Central Intelligence Agency and the State Department that indicated little could be gained from the deployment of troops to Vietnam. Intelligence gathered from 1961 throughout the war by the Central Intelligence Agency contained discouraging estimates for every stage of the escalation process that accurately predicted the outcome. Many of the studies and war games indicated that Vietnam would prove to be a quagmire that would be difficult to escape. Predictions in 1961 showed more and more of the American troops would be required to overcome the predicted infiltration of troops from North Vietnam and that bombing of North Vietnam would not impact this rate of infiltration.[69] By 1965, Maxwell Taylor,

[68] Ibid. pp. 155-156.
[69] John Lewis Gaddis, pp. 258-259.

Ambassador to Vietnam and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, strongly opposed the introduction of American grounds forces in the conflict because a: "White-faced soldier armed, equipped and trained as he is [is] not [a] suitable guerrilla fighter for Asian forests and jungles."[70] Another study conducted by the Central Intelligence Agency in March 1966 determined that bombing of North Vietnam had been ineffective to date; however, it recommended continuation of the bombing with fewer restrictions on targets and locations.[71] The Army followed the path of escalation until 1968, when portions of the government and the people of the United States would no longer support it. The value of the political objective had finally exceeded the amount of effort the people of the United States would allow.[72] The strategy of attrition held onto by the Army was the same strategy that brought the American withdrawal from Vietnam; the war had become too costly in men and material for the continued support of the United States.

IX

What It All Means.

Limitations on military activities were crafted to avoid arousing American popular interest for the Vietnam War effort due to the Johnson administration's fear that the massive offensive action advocated by the military would divert attention and funding from Johnson's "Great Society" legislation, hindering its passage. Gradual response failed in part because it allowed the North Vietnamese the time to adapt to incremental

[70] Ibid. p. 258.
[71] Ibid. p. 259.
[72] Carl von Clausewitz, pp. 92-93.

escalations of American military power. The breathing space provided the time needed to improve air defense capabilities, disperse industrial facilities, develop additional transportation routes to the south and replenish necessary war supplies from China and the Soviet Union. By 1968, support for the war began to crumble on the American domestic front. American culture and the concept of war demanded the total victory achieved in World War II, but the strategy of a gradual escalation embarked upon by the Johnson administration would never produce the results sought by Johnson. Two additional factors affected support for the war in the United States: 1) Disaffection with the draft by America's youth and 2) Increased publicity against the war in the United States, partially sponsored by the North Vietnamese. While the youth of American protested against the draft, the North Vietnamese fanned the fire of the protest by using the press to sway American public opinion against the war. The application of a gradualist strategy against an inferior, but steadfastly determined, enemy provoked American public resentment as the struggle dragged on, with an ever increasing human and economic toll. To have fought this limited war successfully, American statesmen should have defined specific political objectives for the conflict. Then, the President could have unleashed all of the resources available (political, economic, military, psychological, and diplomatic) to pursue these goals. Limited aims do not require limited means; victory demands maximum effort.

X

Why They Failed.

The strategies adopted by the United States and North Vietnam during the war have been the subject of many studies since the war ended. Like the Japanese in the Pacific in World War II, the inflexibility of the United States to adapt their strategy to the environment in which the war was waged led to their defeat. The Army believed that they could force the North Vietnamese to fight the type of conflict that conformed to their style of warfare instead of adapting to meet the challenge of an insurgent war. When their plans failed to produce the desired results, the Army's solution was to deploy more troops until the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese could no longer resist. The United States failed to clearly identify their political purpose in Vietnam and establish military objectives to accomplish this purpose. Americans failed to place adequate effort on providing security to the population against attacks by the Viet Cong. Additionally, the government of South Vietnam was fractured, ineffective and vulnerable to attack by the insurgency. South Vietnam was created by the Geneva accords of 1954 and lacked a sense of nationality among the population. The bulk of the population was peasants that were far removed from the ruling elite and military, yet vulnerable to the ideals espoused by the communist forces. The Army believed that the war was primarily a military conflict and the political struggle was secondary. The Army continued to escalate the war until the people of the United States would no longer bear the burden of continued conflict and demanded withdrawal.

The North Vietnamese understood that they were faced with a powerful adversary. Therefore, to support their goal of a communist Vietnam, they planned a protracted war of attrition. Using guerrilla warfare in familiar terrain, the North Vietnamese were able to control when conflict occurred and draw the American forces away from the populated regions. This reduced the effectiveness of the United States troops by keeping them isolated from the population while allowing the Viet Cong access to their logistical base among the people. The North Vietnamese adopted the best strategy available to them, considering the means at their disposal to engage a superior force. While the leaders for United States failed to follow Clausewitz's admonition, the North Vietnamese leadership understood the type of war in which they were engaged and adapted its strategy to support its political goals. The final result of the conflict was that the North Vietnamese lost every major battle but still emerged as the victor in 1975.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title: Limited War in a Revolutionary Setting: Application of Clausewitz's principles in the Vietnam Conflict

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Thesis: The United States failed to consider Clausewitz's principles for the relationship between the political and military objectives in a war while North Vietnam gave primacy to the political objective, ensuring all other efforts supported it.

Discussion: The strategy adopted by the Johnson administration to wage the Vietnam War failed to provide clear objectives to govern the military action. Gradual response allowed the North Vietnamese time to adapt to changes enacted by the American forces. By the Tet Offensive in 1968, American public opinion and portions of the government would no longer support the war and sought an end of United States involvement in South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese realized the faced a superior enemy and utilized tactics that countered the American way of war. The primary goal and focus of the North Vietnamese effort remained the political objective throughout the war and all other action (military, psychological, economic, and diplomatic) supported the accomplishment of this goal.

Conclusions: The inflexibility of the Americans to adapt their strategy to the environment in which it fought led to their defeat in Vietnam. Unable to shape the conflict to the desired type of war and unwilling to stray from their concept of operations, the American Army became bogged down in an ever deepening quagmire from which they couldn't escape. The Americans failed to stop the communist infiltration into South Vietnam and failed to find a legitimate government worthy of the support of the South Vietnamese people. The Americans failed because they lacked the overarching guidance of a clear political objective to focus their actions. The North Vietnamese understood the war they were waging as well as the enemy they faced. They were prepared to continue the fight until their goal was accomplished and adapted their strategy to support the accomplishment of this goal.