

VIETNAM, MAO, AND CLAUSEWITZ

by

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In March 1965, when the first American ground combat troops landed in South Vietnam, the stage was set for the test of the differing American and Maoist interpretations of Clausewitzian doctrine. Starting from basically the same point as Mao Tse-tung in accepting the Clausewitzian idea that war is the continuance of political conflict, Americans came to a much different conclusion. While Clausewitz and Mao constantly stress the interaction of the political and military struggle, the United States has historically separated the two. Clausewitz' (and Mao's) philosophy might be stated as "War is politics and politics is war," while the American view held that "There is war and there is also politics." Consequently, the United States concentrated on the destruction of the enemy army as the means to achieve the political aim of war.

The Communist guerrilla army in Vietnam followed the precepts outlined by Mao for fighting a "People's War," modified slightly by the influence of General Vo Nguyen Giap, while the United States implemented the *military* theories of Clausewitz as it had for most of the twentieth century. The leaders of the insurgency in Vietnam were scrupulous in executing Mao's strategy. Like Mao (and Clausewitz before him), Giap understood the primacy of the political aim:

If insurrection is said to be an art, the main content of this art is to know how to give to the struggle forms appropriate to the political situation at each stage, how to maintain the correct relation between the forms of the political struggle and those of the armed struggle in each period.¹

Mao's philosophy concerning the relationship between the political and the military—between the people and the army—is embodied in his most famous quotation regarding guerrilla warfare:

... Such a belief reveals lack of comprehension of the relationship that should exist between the people and the troops. The former may be likened to water and the latter to the fish who inhabit it. How may it be said that these two cannot exist together?²

What this amounts to is that Mao believed that the support of the peasant was indispensable if the guerrilla army were to survive, let alone prevail.

Mao envisioned a protracted war that would be fought in three phases. The first—Organization—is devoted to the gathering of peasant support (without which the guerrilla cannot win), the development of the base area, and small guerrilla actions against the enemy's weak points. Phase two—Expansion—is characterized by sabotage, terrorism, and bold action by the guerrilla army to reduce the effectiveness of the enemy army, bring in new guerrilla recruits, capture supplies from the enemy, and expand guerrilla control into contested areas. The decisive third phase is one of Mobile Warfare, during which the war takes on the semblance of conventional warfare, and the guerrilla plays but an auxiliary role.

These three ideas—the primacy of the political aim, the decisiveness of the peasants' support, and the three phase protracted war—contain the essentials of Mao's conception of revolutionary warfare.

Paradoxically, Mao took the major thesis of Clausewitz which states that "War is a mere continuation of policy by other means" and created a strategy that perplexed an American Army, whose leaders had embraced the more conventional military elements of Clausewitzian strategy and had virtually ignored its political aspects.

American strategists historically had no policy for the use of force to achieve political goals. Generally speaking, American political aims were unlimited, and war strategy was directed at the destruction of the enemy army. This was especially true after the United States had amassed enough national power to properly effect this type of strategy. As Professor Russell F. Weigley writes:

But the tendency of war is to require that in order to impose one's will upon an opponent, the opponent must be disarmed.... That is, he must be overthrown. Given this tendency of later American wars to be aimed candidly and from the outset at the overthrow of the enemy, the main problem of American strategists was usually that of encompassing the destruction of the enemy's armed forces.³

This is the American version of Clausewitzian strategy that clashed with Mao's revolutionary war doctrine in Vietnam.

VIETNAM: CLAUSEWITZ AND MAO

Prior to 1965, the war in Vietnam was fought basically along classical revolutionary warfare lines. The National Liberation Front (NLF) was established in South Vietnam in 1960, and in 1962 the People's Revolutionary Party (PRP) was created by Communist militants within the NLF to control the insurgency in South Vietnam. Although the NLF was an organization indigenous to South Vietnam (albeit with many of its leaders trained and infiltrated from North Vietnam), the PRP had direct ties with the Lao Dong (Communist) Party in Hanoi. The Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), an arm of the Lao Dong Party, exercised a large

degree of political and military control over the insurgency in the South.

It is true that the insurgency received moral and doctrinal support from the North. However, it was still largely a Southern effort. It must be recognized that the Southern insurgency would not have progressed so rapidly without the participation of the approximately 100,000 Communists who were either underground in the South or who had infiltrated from the North. The objective of North Vietnam and of the Vietcong was to forcefully reunify Vietnam under Communist leadership, using a revolutionary warfare strategy. It focused on the political objectives of the war and used diplomatic, psychological, and military initiatives to enable, in John Collins' words:

... A ninth rate nation, in concert with a collection of motivated peasants, [to] consistently [outsmart] the world's preeminent superpower for at least fourteen years, and thereby produced a strategic classic.⁴

US INVOLVEMENT

America's direct involvement in Vietnam began in 1954, when President Eisenhower sent aid directly to South Vietnam. The following year, South Vietnamese Premier—later President—Ngo Dinh Diem formally requested the United States to train the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). The American military approached this task along conventional lines; that is, they organized and trained an army that would be capable of defeating an overt invasion from the North, similar to the Korean model. General William C. Westmoreland states that the objective of the United States military involvement in Vietnam was, from beginning to end:

To assist the Government of Vietnam and its armed forces to defeat externally directed and supported Communist subversion and aggression and to attain an independent South Vietnam functioning in a secure environment.⁵

The political goals that this military mission was to support were stated in a 1961 letter to President Diem, in which President John F. Kennedy emphasized that the American commitment to South Vietnam was designed to bring peace to the country, to insure that South Vietnam retained its independence, and to contain Communism. Later, another goal was added: to defeat the Communist concept of revolutionary warfare.

To achieve these goals, Kennedy and his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, followed a policy—up until the commitment of US ground combat units—of providing money and material aid and an ever increasing number of advisors to raise the quality of Vietnamese performance. Unfortunately, the advice that was given was frequently irrelevant to the situation in South Vietnam and usually was more appropriate to the Korean War model. Indeed, after a 1961 trip to Vietnam, General Lyman L. Lemnitzer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was reported to feel that:

The new administration was 'oversold' on the importance of guerrilla warfare and that too much emphasis on counter-guerrilla measures would impair the ability of the South Vietnamese Army to meet a conventional assault like the attack on South Korea by the ten or more regular North Vietnamese Divisions.⁶

Certainly, the potential threat of a massive invasion of South Vietnam could not be ignored, but in a strictly military sense, the immediate need in the early 1960's was for an effective police force, a counterinsurgent army, and an integrated intelligence network.

On the political side of the house, the need was for programs that would counter the NLF's political propaganda that was becoming increasingly successful. After Diem's overthrow and death in 1963, the need was, of course, for political stability. Because these needs were never satisfied, the Vietcong heaped success upon success. By early 1965, it became obvious that the Vietcong were on the verge of splitting the

country in two and of winning the war if something were not done. In March 1965, General Westmoreland estimated that:

If present trends continued six months from now the configuration of the... [South Vietnamese forces] will essentially be a series of islands of strength clustered around district and province capitals clogged with large numbers of refugees in a generally subverted countryside... that we are headed toward a VC takeover of the country, probably within a year.⁷

The American reaction to this dire circumstance was to commit US ground combat troops to the battle and for the next four years to turn the conflict into an "American War."

THE AMERICAN WAR

With the introduction of American ground combat forces on a large scale, the operative question became: "How can these forces be strategically employed?"

One way was to follow the counterinsurgent theories of Sir Robert Thompson, who occupied an advisory position in Vietnam as early as 1961. He advocated a strategy that took the people as the center of gravity—that is, as the decisive element in the guerrilla war. Sir Robert wrote:

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An insurgent movement is a war for the people. It stands to reason that government measures must be directed to restoring government authority and law and order throughout the country, so that control over the population can be regained and its support won. . . .

.....
The mere killing of insurgents, without the simultaneous destruction of their infrastructure, is a waste of effort because their subversive organization will continue to spread and all casualties will be made good by new recruits.⁸

Another option available to the United States was called the "enclave strategy." First enunciated by General Maxwell D. Taylor in 1965, it gained currency a year later when it was advocated by General James M. Gavin. Essentially, the idea involved:

[holding] several enclaves on the coast, where sea and air power can be made fully effective [Otherwise] we are stretching these [American] resources beyond reason in our endeavors to secure the entire country of South Vietnam from the Vietcong penetration. . . .⁹

Westmoreland approved a staff study that rejected this approach as "an inglorious, static use of US forces in overpopulated areas with little chance of direct or immediate impact on the outcome of events."¹⁰

A third method of fighting the war would be to gradually escalate the bombing of North Vietnam and of the Ho Chi Minh Trail until the leaders of the North saw that the cost of the war was more than they were willing to pay. Westmoreland put it this way:

. . . the bombing campaign might convince the North Vietnamese to desist and . . . to make enough progress in the South to give the South Vietnamese the confidence and the vitality to go it alone.¹¹

This bombing campaign would be both gradual and restrictive, so as not to make Communist China and Russia edgy. The

concern that China or the USSR might actively intervene in the war also precluded the invasion of North Vietnam as a viable option.

A final strategic option was Westmoreland's own:

The enemy's shift to big-unit war was drawing ARVN troops away from the heavily populated regions, leaving the people vulnerable to subjugation by local Communist forces and political cadres. American and allied troops, along with the South Vietnamese airborne and marine battalions of the general reserve, would have to assume the role of fighting the big units, leaving the bulk of ARVN free to protect the people. No more niceties about defensive posture and reaction. I intimated; we had to forget about enclaves and take the war to the enemy.¹²

These were some of the strategies developed to counter the revolutionary warfare threat in Vietnam. In actual practice, a curious amalgam of these strategies developed, with first one emphasized and then another. But the selection of which strategy to employ was not entirely an American choice to make. To get the full picture will require our looking on the "other side of the hill."

GIAP VS. WESTMORELAND

On the North Vietnamese side, two factions had emerged, each advocating a particular strategy for the war in South Vietnam.¹³ The "protracted war" faction was led by Vo Nguyen Giap, while the "quick victory" party was led by Truong Chinh—both old-time party comrades. The differences between these two strategic schools were brought to a head by the American ground intervention. General Giap apparently sought to have the Vietcong shift to a more defensive strategy, putting his money on a protracted war. The "quick victory" school, however, pushed for continued offensive operations against both ARVN and US troops, with the ultimate aim

being a “General Offensive” which would culminate in a “General Uprising.”

The concepts of the General Offensive and General Uprising as they relate to North Vietnam and to the Vietcong are central to an understanding of the events of the Second Vietnam War. The General Offensive was simply the North Vietnamese version of Mao’s Phase III, which envisioned mobile warfare. The General Uprising, on the other hand, was strictly a North Vietnamese concept which postulated a General Offensive resulting in a General Uprising of the population that would then be decisive in defeating the target government. Thus, Phase III would be relatively short, similar in nature to a blitzkrieg. The issue was resolved in favor of the “quick victory” offensive school which was advocated by the commander of Vietcong forces in the South, General Nguyen Chi Thanh, a North Vietnamese officer. So the opposing sides in Vietnam in 1965 were both intent on offensive action.

General Westmoreland’s concept of implementing his offensive strategy included three phases:

Phase one: Conunit those American and Allied forces necessary ‘to halt the losing trend’ by the end of 1965.

Phase two: ‘During the first half of 1966’ take the offensive with American and Allied forces in ‘high priority areas’ to destroy enemy forces and reinstitute pacification programs.

Phase three: If the enemy persisted, he might be defeated and his forces and base areas destroyed during a period of one year to a year and a half following Phase II.¹⁴

While General Westmoreland did not follow the classic “oil spot” counterinsurgent doctrine, he did approach it by establishing a priority area in each corps tactical zone, with the idea of eventually effectuating a linkup of these zones. General Westmoreland, however, never accorded these pacification efforts more than secondary importance, since he was after the “bully boys”—the main forces or big units—which he felt were the main threat to

winning the war. He also saw the danger to his strategy:

... the very existence of large enemy units made it essential that American troops be prepared on short notice to drop what they were doing and move against a developing big-unit threat. When the troops moved away from the population, the guerrillas obviously gained a chance to recoup their losses, but I never had the luxury of enough troops to maintain [a] ... presence everywhere all the time.¹⁵

Criticism of Westmoreland’s strategy centered around this big-unit concept and around his “search and destroy” tactics. John Collins asserts that American counterinsurgency efforts went “bankrupt” in 1965 with the appearance of American troops. He goes on to state:

‘Americanization’ would have been acceptable as a stop gap, but in the long run, it was a strategic disaster. The ‘military war’ assumed and retained top priority; our ally’s armed forces were cavalierly shunted aside; corollary political and economic programs received little encouragement, and predictably, the populace suffered. Probably no other policy could have prevented our success as surely as did Americanization.¹⁶

Other critics attack Westmoreland’s “search and destroy” techniques. These critics hold that in revolutionary warfare, pacification is the key to success and pacification demands “clear and *hold*” tactics. That is, after an area is cleared of Vietcong military units, the next task is to provide the population security, while at the same time rooting out the Vietcong infrastructure. They point out that the real target is the peasant, not the big units. Sir Robert Thompson feels that “search and destroy” tactics resulted in the ineffective dispersal of US forces all over the unpopulated areas of South Vietnam. But despite this criticism, Westmoreland’s strategy had prevented the collapse of South Vietnam in 1965; throughout 1966, the enemy main

force units had been dealt bloody losses; and the beginning of 1967 saw corps-size attacks on the Communist war zones northwest of Saigon. But now it was Giap's turn.

Prior to the 1966-67 dry season, a debate of Vietcong strategy again occurred. Again General Thanh and General Giap were on opposite sides of the issue, but this time General Giap's views prevailed. General Thanh sought the deployment of North Vietnamese main force divisions throughout South Vietnam, while General Giap advocated the massing of divisions in a single strategic area just south of the 17th parallel. Giap's plan would "spoil" the American strategy by forcing Westmoreland to shift troops from other parts of South Vietnam, to defer pacification in the northernmost I Corps area, and to delay deployment of large US units in the area south of Saigon.

This, of course, is just what happened. US Marine General Walt writes that he was required to slow his pacification effort (which many experts believe was the best in Vietnam) and "forced to commit men into the largely barren north."¹⁷ Four US brigades were also shuttled into I Corps and were later designated as the Americal Division. With this diversion, Giap forced Westmoreland to take troops from his priority areas and to place them in a largely static role at a place of Giap's choosing. Giap chose the Northern provinces and the Central Highlands as battlefields because American troops would be taken off pacification duties, the one program that threatened to destroy the critical factor in the southern insurgency—the VC infrastructure. So while 1967 saw many North Vietnamese and Vietcong soldiers killed, it was also the year in which the initiative again passed to the guerrilla. Just over the horizon was the decisive Tet offensive of 1968, an event that was destined to change the course of the war in ways that neither Giap nor Westmoreland could foresee.

TET

The 1968 Tet offensive has correctly been called one of the decisive battles of the

twentieth century. It was a military victory for the United States; it was the "Pearl Harbor" of South Vietnam that finally united its people; it was a political victory for the allies because it decimated the Vietcong infrastructure—it was all of this and more. But above all, it was, in fact, the greatest psychological defeat in the history of the United States.

The attack was not entirely unexpected; General Westmoreland had been receiving reports of a Communist buildup for several months. What was unexpected was the timing of the offensive, which began during the traditional Tet holiday period, only the second time in history that a Vietnamese general had violated the holiday. Equally surprising were the scope and the ferocity of the attack. The Vietcong struck against Saigon, against 36 provincial capitals, against 5 of the 6 free cities, against 64 district towns and over 50 hamlets. Most of these attacks were repulsed in just a few days at heavy cost to the Vietcong, the exceptions being Saigon and Hue.

General Westmoreland estimates that the Communists lost 40,000 either killed or captured, compared to allied losses of about 3,100 killed. Even COSVN, after enumerating the successes of the enemy offensive, admitted to the following shortcomings:

... we failed to seize a number of primary objectives and to completely destroy mobile and defensive units of the enemy. We also failed to hold the occupied areas. In the political field we failed to motivate the people to stage uprisings and break the enemy's oppressive control.¹⁸

So in the Communists' own words, the attack did not achieve all of the intended objectives. But just what were Giap's intentions?

To answer this question, one must turn to the summer of 1967 and Hanoi. The first event that impacted on the planning of the offensive was the death of Nguyen Chi Thanh from wounds that he is believed to have received from a B-52 raid in the border jungles of South Vietnam. He had been, as

noted earlier, Hanoi's senior general in the South—the Red military counterpart of General Westmoreland. General Thanh had been the leading North Vietnamese advocate of the big-unit war. Recall that earlier he was opposed to Giap's concentration of regular divisions south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and, in fact, had proposed that the regular units be dispersed throughout all of South Vietnam. But by early 1967, Thanh seemed to have changed his mind, possibly as a result of the success of the US forces in attacking War Zones C and D in the fall of 1966, and he now favored orchestrating large unit activities with those of the local guerrilla units. He had openly chided General Giap a year earlier for his insistence on the strategy of protracted guerrilla warfare, but now had apparently drifted closer to Giap's ideas. It is one of the more interesting "what ifs" of the war to speculate what effect General Thanh would have had on the nature of the Tet offensive had he lived.

But he did not live and, as the North Vietnamese diplomats from around the world arrived in Hanoi in the early summer of 1967 to decide the strategy for the coming year, General Thanh was silent. General Giap had made his views on waging a protracted war public in September 1967, presumably after the decision to launch the Tet offensive had been made. He thought that a stalemate could win the war for the North, because the United States could not afford to be bogged down in Vietnam indefinitely. In his treatise, *Big Victory, Great Task*, Giap reemphasized the importance of the guerrilla units and was contemptuous of Westmoreland's "search and destroy" tactics. He outlined his top two military priorities: inflicting heavy casualties on American and allied units and attacking their base areas. He saw the importance of both the coordinated and independent concepts of operation. The coordinated method, which used main force infantry, artillery, and sabotage units, would be used to attack the enemy when the opportunity for causing heavy casualties presented itself. Guerrilla units would be used as auxiliaries to the main force. The independent method would be used to strike allied base areas and

strong points with crack commando units that would use rockets and mortars to inflict heavy enemy casualties, while risking few guerrilla losses.¹⁹

At first glance, the concepts just described would not seem to be in harmony with the General Offensive and General Uprising doctrine that was the rationale for Tet. Indeed, there is evidence to support the notion that Giap implemented the Tet offensive reluctantly.²⁰ Yet Giap appears to have been responsible for planning and executing Hanoi's decision to launch the Tet offensive. Giap sought a way to achieve his two top military objectives at the same time that he achieved the twin political goals of toppling the Saigon government and dealing a fatal blow to the pacification program, which by May 1967 had been placed under the authority of General Westmoreland. For the first time in the war, the big-unit war and the "other" war were integrated. Since General Giap had always been concerned about the pacification effort, this US organizational change must have jolted him.

In early 1967, Giap noted the US reaction to his divisional probe around Con Thien in Northern I Corps. He saw the pullout of the US Marines in force, their switch northward, and the consequent detrimental effect that this had on pacification. In October 1967, similar operations at Dak To and Loc Ninh in the II Corps Central Highlands area achieved similar results. As Tet drew near, Giap shifted his operations to the DMZ at Khe Sanh and possibly provided fuel to the rumor that this was to be another Dien Bien Phu by allowing himself to be seen in the area. Westmoreland reacted predictably, and the Tet offensive was launched, with the results previously stated.

Khe Sanh and the operations in the Central Highlands furthered the attainment of Giap's two military objectives through coordinated unit tactics, while the independent guerrilla attacks on the cities and towns furthered his political objectives. The timing of the peace talks in May 1968 supports the idea that Tet may have been a *political* move to put North Vietnam in a favorable negotiating position. Whatever the intentions—and the evidence is

inconclusive—the results were astounding. From the North Vietnamese perspective, the attack was costly to the Vietcong, especially since their infrastructure was virtually destroyed. The VC infrastructure and guerrilla tactics never again played a key role in the south. General Walt characterized the battle as the “Pearl Harbor of South Vietnam: it solidified and strengthened the people and brought them closer to their own government and armed forces than ever before.”²¹ ARVN morale soared. In effect, it was a VC military defeat of gigantic proportions.

But what was lost on the battlefield in Vietnam was recouped tenfold half a world away in the United States. And here the media must accept part—but not all—of the responsibility for turning victory into defeat. David Halberstam characterized the effect of Tet this way:

For the first time they [VC] fought in the cities, which meant that day after day American newspapermen, and more importantly, television cameramen, could reflect their ability, above all their failure to collapse²²

Certainly, Tet destroyed the credibility of President Johnson’s administration. In retrospect, the reasons for this are clear. For one thing, the press and TV were advocating a point of view in opposition to the Vietnam War which the American public was ready to accept (1) because it never really understood the war and (2) because the media found a dissident intellectual element that was fully prepared to exploit any unfavorable news about the war. Nevertheless, in the final analysis, the government must take the blame for never really leveling with the American people.

Of equal importance to the perception of the American people of a battlefield disaster was the March 31, 1968, speech of President Johnson, wherein he declared himself a “noncandidate” for reelection. This could only magnify the public feeling that something was seriously wrong. But the most critical blunder was the request by

Westmoreland for an additional 205,000 American soldiers. Whether this request was motivated by Westmoreland’s desire to exploit a battlefield victory or by that of General Earle G. Wheeler—then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—to force mobilization of the Reserve Components is unclear and, perhaps, irrelevant, because the American public viewed the request as validating the media’s characterization of Tet as an American defeat and considered pouring more troops into Vietnam as “throwing in good money after bad.” The public’s support for the war and for the administration was severely eroded as a result of Tet and its aftermath.

DISENGAGEMENT

Events after the Tet offensive moved rapidly. “Negotiations” were begun, and General Abrams was put in command in Vietnam. Richard Nixon was elected President of the United States by a slim margin and was politically committed to the withdrawal of US troops from South Vietnam. During 1969, the VC switched to a strategy of small-unit actions, generally in accordance with General Giap’s independent tactics; likewise, General Abrams also turned to small-unit tactics. There were exceptions, however. The VC launched three offensives during the year, generally in the areas near Saigon, in the DMZ, and in the Central Highlands. The major actions in 1970 and 1971 were the “incursions” into Laos and Cambodia. By 1971, there was a sharp reduction in US casualties, and by the end of 1973, a cease-fire had been established.

But by now both pacification and Vietnamization had taken root. General Westmoreland gave these policies a push in 1967 when he named Ambassador Robert W. Komer as his Deputy for Pacification and gave his military deputy, General Abrams, responsibility for what later came to be called Vietnamization. The improvement was dramatic. By 1969, Sir Robert Thompson reported that he “was able to visit areas and to walk through villages which had been under Vietcong control for years.”²³ The upgrading of ARVN was also moving apace,

paving the way for US disengagement. So finally, after a decade of trying, the United States rediscovered the key to victory in Vietnam. Sir Robert Thompson's thoughts are significant in this regard:

It was never understood [before 1969] that nation building was the offensive constructive programme designed to strengthen the government's assets and eliminate its weakness, while the military operations were defensive and destructive designed to hold the ring... and, in so doing, to weaken the enemy's military assets. The programme which linked these two together was pacification... the three programmes were tackled and regarded in precisely the reverse order of importance in relation to the objective and, in turn, the strategy.²⁴

So, by 1969, the US was at last on the right track, and by 1971, it looked as if the North Vietnamese could not win by using guerrilla tactics.

However, the North Vietnamese were not to give in so easily. Hanoi reversed its war strategy and decided to launch a conventional invasion of South Vietnam across the DMZ. The attack met with initial success but was eventually halted. ARVN, in conjunction with US air power, counterattacked and, by the fall of 1972, with Haiphong harbor mined, the VC were stopped on the battlefield. Vietnamization had proved to be effective. This was Hanoi's darkest hour. Once again, however, a battlefield loss was turned into a diplomatic success—the cease-fire was signed in January 1973.

In true Communist style, the North Vietnamese then began a logistic buildup under cover of the cease-fire. During the summer of 1974, the VC attacked, enjoying some limited success, although by January 1975, the ARVN had regained all of the territory that it had lost. Even while US aid was being curtailed in 1974, ARVN repulsed divisional and corps level attacks. By 1975, Hanoi was ready to mount another large-scale

conventional invasion of the South. The capture of Song Be in January 1975 was a test of US resolve, and when the US did not firmly respond, the stage was set for the collapse of the Saigon government. Without firm US support, the ARVN lost its will to fight and the shameful result, more than adequately covered by the US media, is familiar to us all.

CONCLUSIONS

The conflict between the two interpretations of Clausewitz had ended. Mao's version certainly emerged the victor, largely because the American planners ignored the teachings of Clausewitz on the political level, while those on the military level were energetically applied. A closer examination of this claim seems in order.

In the first place, the American strategists ignored Clausewitz in not determining the kind of war they were prepared to fight:

Now the first, the greatest and the most decisive act of judgment which a statesman and commander performs is that of correctly recognizing in this respect the kind of war he is undertaking, of not taking it for, or wishing to make it, something which by the nature of the circumstances it cannot be. This is, therefore, the first and most comprehensive of all strategic questions.²⁵

In effect, the military, failing to understand the type of war it faced, did what it knew how to do best—fight a conventional war. However, Vietnam was anything but a conventional war. It was first, last, and always a political war.

And so our second major lesson must be that, on the political level, the American military strategy never supported the political objective. In fact, it was difficult to determine what the political objective was at any given moment. The initial political objective was to attain an independent and secure South Vietnam. After the introduction of large American ground combat units, this relatively simple and straightforward political objective

became obscured. Soon, the defeat or containment of Communism became a driving goal (perhaps it was the real goal in the first place, and self-determination for South Vietnam was simply the rationale). Later, American prestige and resolve became major goals, often overshadowing or even replacing the other goals. Finally, the defeat of the revolutionary warfare concept also became important. These may all have been valid goals, but the point is that many of these goals were developed *after* the decision to intervene was made. While the politicians must accept a major share of the blame for defeat because they failed to set proper and unambiguous policy, the military is equally to blame for not demanding clear, coordinated policy from their civilian superiors.

Thirdly, considering command and control in its broadest sense, the American policymakers and strategists turned their backs on both common sense and Clausewitz:

... war is to be regarded as an organic whole, from which the single members cannot be separated, in which therefore every individual activity flows into the whole...²⁶

During the Vietnam conflict, General Westmoreland controlled the ground war in South Vietnam; pacification, until 1967, was the responsibility of the American ambassador; the naval war was fought by the Commander, Seventh Fleet; and the air war over Hanoi was planned by the Commanding General, 7th Air Force (however, targeting priority was established in Washington, D.C.). There never was any combined command of US, allied, and Republic of South Vietnam forces. Instead there was "cooperation," which is a difficult way to run any war and a particularly bad way to run a counterinsurgency.

Then there is the Clausewitzian notion of the center of gravity. The concept is to identify the enemy's decisive point—his center of gravity—and to attack that point as a first priority and to relegate other matters to secondary roles. As Sir Robert Thompson pointed out, the center of gravity of the

Vietnam War was the commitment of the people of South Vietnam to their government. A precondition for that commitment was the security of the people, and the pacification program was the means to accomplish both. However, General Westmoreland's strategy was designed primarily to defeat the North Vietnamese Army. This is not to say that operations against main force units and infiltration routes were not important or necessary. They were, but not as a matter of first priority.

After reviewing both the American and the Maoist strategies that evolved on the battlefield in Vietnam, one must conclude that Clausewitz is indeed relevant to fighting revolutionary wars. In essence, the American and Maoist interpretations were different sides of the same Clausewitzian coin. But Clausewitz is elusive—his philosophy can be (and has been) invoked to argue almost any strategic point of view. The trick is to apply the appropriate parts of Clausewitz to the strategic situation at hand. Those enumerated above—deciding what kind of war must be fought, deciding what the political aim is *before* going to war, linking the military strategy to the political aim, recognizing and attacking the proper center of gravity, and insuring that the war is conducted as a unified effort—appear to be especially relevant to American counterinsurgency strategy in Vietnam.

Finally, the war in Vietnam was not lost because the American military were restricted from fighting the war their way. Certainly, some of the limitations placed on the military by their civilian superiors were wrong. There can be no political justification for the tactical restraints—both in the air and on the ground—on the interdiction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Nor is there any excuse for the fragmentation of command and control of the war or for the confusion surrounding the political objectives. But, had any of these shortcomings been redeemed, the result would surely have been the more efficient pursuit of the *wrong* strategy. Good management is no cure for poor strategy.

Had all the shackles been removed, one can

only expect that General Westmoreland would have pursued his big-unit war more assiduously, the air war might have tried to "bomb Hanoi back into the stone age," and perhaps even tactical nuclear weapons would have been used. But all of this was aimed at the wrong center of gravity, using the wrong strategy. The key to victory was in the hands of the military strategist from 1954 onward; he had but to use it. If the pacification and Vietnamization policy had been followed as a matter of first priority throughout the conflict, the nature and the result of the war might have been completely different, and the restraints would have had little effect. The war would have entailed less blood and treasure and would not have divided our country as it finally did. The irony of the situation is that it took fourteen years of effort and a colossal military blunder by General Giap to discover a strategy that had been present from the start. Had the military strategists chosen this less glorious pacification strategy at the outset, there would not be any talk today of a military victory and a political defeat in Vietnam. To talk of a military victory and political defeat is not only a contradiction in Clausewitzian terms, but it is also a failure to grasp the whole point of the painful experience.

NOTES

1. Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War, People's Army* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1962), p. 76.
2. Mao Tse-tung, *Yu Chi Chan*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Newport: Naval War College, 1950), pp. 92-93.
3. Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), pp. xiii-xiv.
4. John M. Collins, *Grand Strategy* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1972), p. 255.
5. William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), p. 69.
6. Robert B. Asprey, *War in the Shadows* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), p. 986.
7. Westmoreland, p. 147.
8. Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1966), pp. 51, 116.
9. Asprey, pp. 1166-67.
10. Westmoreland, p. 156.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
13. For an excellent discussion of these strategic debates see Patrick J. McGarvey, *Visions of Victory* (Stanford: Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, 1969), pp. 3-56.
14. Westmoreland, p. 151.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
16. Collins, p. 245.
17. Lewis W. Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1970), p. 141.
18. McGarvey, p. 253.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 40-46, 199-251.
20. H. Lunde, personal interview, 8 April 1976. During a September 1973 discussion with his North Vietnamese counterpart on the Four Party Joint Negotiating Team (concerned with MIA's), LTC Lunde was told that Giap was not enthusiastic over either the 1968 or 1972 North Vietnamese offensives.
21. Walt, p. 170.
22. David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 787.
23. Robert Thompson, *No Exit From Vietnam* (New York: McKay, 1970), p. 209.
24. Quoted in Collins, p. 249.
25. Karl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. O. J. Matthijs Jolles (Washington: Infantry Journal Press, 1950), p. 18.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 598.

