

Could the United States Have Won in Vietnam?

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BRADLEY WILLIS, MAY 23 2013

The Vietnam War was a civil war waged between the countries of North and South Vietnam; the conflict soon escalated in to one of the major proxy conflicts of the Cold War, with the South receiving heavy support from the United States, whilst the North from various communist states, most notably the Soviet Union and China. In addition to this, the South Vietnamese and United States forces had to contend with a major pro Communist insurgency campaign in South Vietnam. The core objective of the United States was the preservation of a non-communist South Vietnam[1], and aimed to achieve this by pursuing a Limited War with the primary aim of coercing North Vietnam into a negotiated settlement[2]. Ultimately, however, after nearly 20 years of American intervention, they failed to achieve this objective.

In the ensuing years from the American defeat in Vietnam, there has been deep debate as to whether the United States could or could not have won the Vietnam War by achieving their core objective of the preservation of a non-Communist South Vietnam[3]. This paper, however, will argue the converse and put forward the argument that the United States could have not won in Vietnam, at least under conditions that were proportional and truly in the United States' interest. The global and strategic context of the day gave the United States no option but to deploy a strategy of Limited War in Vietnam, a theory which completely failed to recognise the true Clausewitzian nature of the conflict and limited the number of military options open to them: this, combined with the intrinsically weak, illegitimate and unsupported government of South Vietnam, made victory in Vietnam an almost certain impossibility.

First, one must understand that the Vietnam War was at its heart a civil war, and as such, garnering the support of the public is paramount if one wishes to win; to quote Fredrik Logevall, "*the war had to be won politically or not at all*"[4]. However, the nature of the South Vietnamese government, as this paper will now show, would always serve to prohibit a successful American intervention in Vietnam.

Throughout the course of the war, reports that South Vietnamese officials would struggle to collect taxes beyond small urban areas were numerous and wide spread[5]; when one compares this to American reports of North Vietnamese officials having little difficulty collecting taxes from their populace, or recruiting from the population into the ranks of the NVA[6], it does not take much to understand where the true mantle of Vietnamese governmental legitimacy lay[7]. Essentially the South Vietnamese government was crippled by several key factors that no amount of American assistance could have overcome.

Firstly, the South Vietnamese government was exceedingly corrupt[8], and as such it was unlikely that any attempt to win the South Vietnamese will could have succeeded. The inherent corruption only served to perpetuate the lack of popular support among the South Vietnamese people, with whom the state of corruption was common knowledge[9]. In the strategic hamlets, for example, many South Vietnamese officials siphoned off funds that were intended to reimburse the relocated South Vietnamese population[10]. As a result of this, the strategic hamlets program was often undermined with many conspiring with NLF cadres who sought to alleviate hardships created by South Vietnamese corruption[11].

In addition, the professional military was greatly inferior to North Vietnamese forces[12]. South Vietnamese forces were ill prepared to fight a political war and the majority of their forces had little to no strategic training; in addition to this, during the era, Diem promoted soldiers within the military based on loyalty to him rather than genuine combat or

Could the United States Have Won in Vietnam?

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strategic merit[13]. When the ability to provide security for your own populace is critical to winning the hearts and minds and thus political legitimacy, this was a major problem.

However, the most crippling factor was American intervention itself: South Vietnam was essentially a synthetic state that relied purely on the contribution of the United States for its very existence[14]. This ultimately undermined the South Vietnamese claim of nationalist legitimacy with the people. This is well shown in the way that Vietnamese referred to the Diem government as “My Diem” or “American Diem”[15] perceiving it as (quite rightly) a puppet of the US government with no independent viability of its own[16].

What this evidence goes to show us is that the United States could have never won the Vietnam war; the South Vietnamese government completely lacked the leadership or legitimacy among the people to even build sufficient popular support; and the fact that the South Vietnamese were purely reliant upon the support of the Americans invalidated South Vietnam as a legitimate nationalist front in the eyes of the Vietnamese people. Whilst the corruption present throughout the government only served to alienate the people further when compared to the North Vietnamese and NLF, who sympathised and sought to alleviate the hardships of the Vietnamese. In a civil war where the securing of hearts and minds were imperative to strategic success, these flaws were nothing less than terminal for the South Vietnamese government. With this in mind, it comes as no surprise that when American support of the South Vietnamese government was withdrawn the South regime quickly fell to the North with very few willing to fight on the behalf of the south[17].

We must now consider the options that were available to the United States at the start of the war. Simply leaving South Vietnam to its fate was not politically acceptable to the Johnson presidency[18], and as such should be disregarded. This left the option of either a limited war, a comprehensive counter insurgency campaign or a major invasion of North Vietnam to dismantle the communist regime: as this paper will now go on to explain, all strategies would have been compromised either by the strategic context of the time or the South Vietnamese government.

The United States ultimately chose to pursue the Vietnam War in accordance with Limited War Theory; however, as Clausewitz himself warns us, “theories tend to ignore or assume away chance, technocratic language often leads to fuzzy thinking that obscures reality”[19]. In the case of the American intervention in Vietnam, the over-simplification of objectives led to a major misinterpretation of where the true Clausewitzian centre of gravity lay[20]. The United States failed to understand that the Vietnam War was political and that victory relied on securing the will of the people; this was something that could not be created or substituted by military action[21]. However, the United States, failing to recognise the role of passion in a people’s war, chose a military objective: the defeat of the NVA[22]. As such they pursued dubious strategies of strategic bombing and war of attrition, neither of which could make a significant impact to the communist war effort due to the agricultural nature of Vietnam in conjunction with the fact that search and destroy tactics simply could not inflict the losses necessary on the North Vietnamese[23].

However, despite the strategic failings of Limited War theory, the Americans did not really have any other viable alternatives. Firstly one must understand why unlimited means would have been unfeasible in what was for the United States a war of limited objectives. Take in to consideration of the strategic context of the time, as well as the Clausewitzian understanding on the pursuit of limited objectives[24]. In the aftermath of the war, General Westmoreland, the primary leader of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) for the majority of the war, put forward the argument that the United States could have easily won had the United States not restrained their means from the offset[25]: this would have been achieved with a combination of intensive ground and air operations, which would have manifested themselves in the form of an invasion of North Vietnam[26]. This, however, is a questionable interpretation for two reasons. Firstly, when one applies this to Clausewitz, one understands that belligerents in war do not seek to apply maximum force in the pursuit of a limited objective; instead, the political and technical conditions of the movement are the key determining factor[27], and thus Clausewitz himself by no means suggests that the use of unrestricted means would have secured victory. In addition, in doing so, the United States would have risked the serious escalation of what they merely perceived to be a proxy conflict[28] to a direct clash between super powers, and potentially nuclear war. This was not an unreasonable analysis; only years earlier during the Korean War, China and the Soviet Union escalated what was initially a proxy war in to a major international conflict. To this end, there was little political appetite to risk a major escalation of the conflict[29]. With this in mind, President Lyndon Johnson

Could the United States Have Won in Vietnam?

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instead sought a limited range of objectives that were intended to coerce Hanoi as opposed to destroy them[30]. What this shows us was that despite many arguments for the contrary, the forceful dismantling of the North Vietnamese regime was never a realistic option to the United States if they wanted to keep the war within means in which they were willing to accept; in other words, without risking a major escalation in the nature of the conflict as had been the case in Korea. Furthermore, this evidence also suggests, as Clausewitz himself argues, that unrestricted means to limited goals is not a guaranteed determinate of success.

Furthermore, the United States could not have pursued the Vietnam War via a means of a comprehensive and thorough counter insurgency (COIN) strategy. This is due to a variety of factors that were unique to the Vietnam case, predominantly the weakness of the South Vietnamese government and similar constraints that were experienced with the Strategic Hamlets program. For example Anthony James Joes puts forward the argument that the execution of a demographic frontier strategy would have been much more effective at winning the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese that were vital to secure a non-communist South Vietnam[31]. Such a strategy would have been executed in conjunction with South Vietnamese forces and would have protected the population via electronic barriers and minefields, thus in theory preventing the NLF from seeking, food, supplies and shelter from the South Vietnamese[32]. However, the argument that this or other counter insurgency strategies would have worked in Vietnam is poorly founded.

Firstly, the NLF insurgents would have still had easy access to the Mekong Deltas in South Vietnam[33]; these rich fertile plains consisted of an abundance of natural and farmed food and would have allowed the NLF to be more than self-sufficient[34]. Secondly, previously successful Counter Insurgency campaigns such as Malaya relied on an ability to identify insurgents who had a different ethnic makeup to the primary population[35]; in Vietnam no such luxury was available and thus would have made insurgent identification exceedingly difficult. Lastly, the success of all COIN programs rest on the ability for the force conducting the COIN campaign to be able to win over the hearts and minds of the population: a successful COIN campaign in Vietnam would have required the active presence of South Vietnamese officials to interact and engage with the South Vietnamese population. However, as discussed earlier in this essay, the inherent corruption within the South Vietnamese government would have been just as present in any other COIN campaign as it was with the Strategic Hamlets[36], thus, like with the Strategic Hamlets program, an American-led COIN campaign would only have served to alienate the South Vietnamese population further with corruption and overwhelming reliance on the Americans, thus again pushing them in the favour of the NLF cadres.[37]

What this shows us is that even if the United States had pursued a successful COIN strategy, the weaknesses of the South Vietnamese and the fact that it would have relied predominantly on the Americans would have only undermined the program, as was the case with the Strategic Hamlets.

Lastly, it is important to note that many scholars such as the infamous Colonel Harry Summers cite that the failure of the American government to rouse the American population to a war wary state was critical to the American failure to win the war[38], and if they had, victory would have been a greater possibility. Summers, in his infamous work *On Strategy*, in which he applies the teachings of Clausewitz to the American failure in Vietnam, argues that the Johnson administration played down the war's importance for the primary reason that he feared an unpopular war would have also jeopardised his social reform programs[39]. In doing so, one of the three key elements to the Clausewitzian concept of the trinity was ignored, the people[40]. This, for Summers and other scholars, was one of the most major reasons for the United States' failure in the war, to quote Summers himself, "the failure to invoke the national will was one of the most tragic failures...it produced a strategic vulnerability that our enemy could exploit"[41].

Summers' argument rests on interpretation that had the United States roused public support like they did in the run up to the 2003 Iraq War then the legislature of the United States could have voted in favour of a constitutional declaration of war. As Summers explains, declarations not only serve as a declaration of initial public support, but also focuses the nation's attention on the enemy; this in turn would have garnered a greater focus on the enemy and the political objectives that had to be achieved in order to be successful, a lack of which was key to the United States' failure[42]. This in turn would garner one of the 'the people' of the Clausewitzian trinity.

Could the United States Have Won in Vietnam?

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Although Colonel Summers raises an interesting point to argue this could have changed the war in the United States' favour, it is a dubious analysis which completely disregards the larger strategic problem that faced the United States. Even had the United States had the full backing of her people and a focused objective as a result, this would have not changed the strategic situation faced by the United States. The people themselves, like the government, would not have had the stomach for a major conflict between the super powers; however, even if they had placed support behind a campaign of counter insurgency or a more focused, limited war, both of these approaches simply could not have succeeded in Vietnam, due to the unique nature of Vietnam herself. The inadequacies of the South Vietnamese government and the lack of popular support among the people made the possibility of winning the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese, which were key to maintain a non-communist South Vietnam, an almost impossible certainty.

In conclusion, the evidence clearly suggests that the United States could have never have won the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War was, at its very core, a war on which the outcome solely relied on the support of the indigenous population: this the United States failed to understand, and instead separated its military strategy from the political reality[43]. In addition, the adoption of any other military strategy would have failed to achieve the desired results purely based on the fact the mantle of Vietnamese political legitimacy lay firmly with the North. The US simply placed their faith in an illegitimate political power. As this essay has shown, even a comprehensive understanding of the Clausewitzian centre of gravity would not have turned events in the United States' favour. The South Vietnamese governments, on whom the success of the war was determinant, suffered from a series of comprehensive shortcomings that, as several scholars themselves deduced, could not be overcome by any levels of American intervention. Lastly, it should be noted that the common conceptions that the US could have won through superior firepower or mobilising its population are also founded in false logic: the risk of escalation to a larger conflict was never in the United States' interest, whilst the involvement of the people would have done little to assist the US in overcoming the political problems of South Vietnam.

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Could the United States Have Won in Vietnam?

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[3] Ibid -Page 318

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[5] Ibid page 132

[6] Ibid - page 132

[7] Ibid - Page 130

[8] Logevall - page 136

[9] McNamara, Blight & Brigham - Page 324

[10] Mcanamra, Blight & Brigham - page 324

[11] Ibid - Page 324

[12] Logevall - Page 136

[13] McNamara, Blight & Brigham - Page 321

[14] Rosenau - page 138

[15] Ibid

[16] Ibid

[17] ibid

[18] Stone - Page 129

[19] Paraphrasing of Clausewitz in Fleck, Janice. Limited War Theory in Vietnam: A Critique According to Clausewitz. National War College. 1994. Journal. Page 3

Could the United States Have Won in Vietnam?

Written by Bradley Willis

[20] Fleck – Page 1

[21] Ibid – Page 4

[22] Ibid – Page 3

[23] McNamara, Bright & Bringham – Page 368

[24] Stone – Page 132

[25] Ibid

[26] Ibid

[27] Ibid

[28] McNamara, Blight & Brigham – Page 313

[29] Stone – Page 132

[30] Ibid

[31] Joes, Anthony James. *The War for South Vietnam*. New York: Praeger, 2001. Print. – Page 111

[32] Ibid – Page 112

[33] McNamara, Blight & Brigham – Page 324

[34] Ibid

[35] Ibid

[36] Ibid

[37] Ibid

[38] Summers, Harry G. *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*. Novato, CA: Presidio, 1982. Print. – Page 19

[39] Ibid – Page 18

[40] Ibid – Page 5

[41] Ibid – Page 19

[42] Ibid – Page 21 & 22

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Date written: December 2012