

Limits of Power: The US Military in Vietnam

PHILLIP A. ATTENBOROUGH

In this work we will not merely examine the military aspects of the war, dealing with troop deployments and overall strategy, but rather we will examine the entire picture so to speak. We will look at the political contributions to the war and how they shaped the military's role. We will also examine areas such as the American public opinion, the media and the role that they both played in America's defeat in Vietnam. As a conclusion we will examine the military strategy employed, its motives, the blunders, the misfortunes and the entire structure of the United States military during the Vietnam crises. In essence, we will be examining the downfalls which led to the limits of United States military power in Vietnam and touch on all of the major factors that led to the ultimate defeat and withdrawal of the United States military forces from Vietnam in 1973.

To begin let us discuss a little about the disadvantages that the United States were up against from the very start. The problems faced by the United States at first, were primarily political in their origins. The United States Government began sending direct aid to Diem's government as early as 1955. Over 900 US military personnel were stationed in the Republic of Vietnam by December of 1960. The American backing of a weak and corrupt South Vietnamese Government was already in process. However, did the United States have any choice in the matter? It seems that they did not, for it was either Diem or the Communists. It was merely a support towards the lesser of the evils! This is not to discredit the United State's decision to back Diem or any of the other corrupt puppet regimes that would come into being in South Vietnam - for she really had little choice in the matter. It serves rather as a starting point for this article, for Diem and his successors were the United State's closest enemy next to the communists themselves. These regimes had seemed to hinder the US military's power more than it had helped. Diem's government was in fact responsible for the initiation of the Strategic-Hamlet program in the spring of 1962, one that would create tremendous friction between the people of South Vietnam and both Diem's forces and the United States military in the years to follow.

The Strategic-Hamlet was a program used by the South in order to keep the southern countryside and its peasant populace under easier control. Fortifications were set up surrounding approximately 7,600 hamlets in South Vietnam and the South Vietnamese people were concentrated within the hamlets jurisdiction. Some 4,000,000 South Vietnamese were driven into these hamlets,

which has been estimated at 25% of the populace. The problem arose when the people refused to move into the strategic hamlets. On such occasions the Army of the Republic of Vietnam then turned to the use of artillery and aircraft to compel them to seek such refuge. This may hardly be seen as a successful strategy in winning the allegiance of the South Vietnamese people. In fact, many military-aged men of the South Vietnamese peasant populace joined the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam in response to Diem's military rule. There was an immense upsurge in the popular grievances of the peasant populace who were now refugees due to their own government's inability to handle a crisis. They had been robbed of their rights to their own possessions, but that was not all. The camps into which they were forced, have been described as "a concentration camp of sorts", and in 1969 a senior ARVN strategist admitted to the sheer brutality of the program. So we may recognize that from the beginning, the United States was at odds with the incompetence of the Republic of South Vietnam. It should be mentioned however, that after the Diem regime had fallen in November of 1963, the United State's interest in controlling the southern rural population by such means, had been withdrawn to a great degree. By 1966, the United States military had reduced fortified hamlets to the maintaining of some 3,800 remaining hamlets. Although in refraining from examination in detail of the RSVN and its armed forces under the corrupt leadership of the military regimes, it should be well noted that the Republic was on numerous occasions a hindrance to the US military. One might well recognize that the RSVN was in fact one of the many obstacles that was to limit the power of the US military in Vietnam.

Before examining the US military itself, it is necessary to examine the governmental policies of the United States and the American media and its effects on the US military. In essence, the themes of America, its policies and its general public opinion should be examined so that one might recognize the tenuous position held by the US military at that point in time. Colonel Summers, an active officer in the US Army, has of late written a few excellent works from the military perspective, which have revealed many important areas of debate. His examinations are based on the military perspective of how a nation at war should conduct itself in order to successfully sustain a victory. His work entitled *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context*, is based primarily on General Clausewitz's work entitled *On War*. Clausewitz was a military and political strategist of the early 19th century, who wrote on the art of warfare. Summers also uses his past experiences in Korea, in trying to examine the Vietnam problem.

On examining the American Home Front during the Vietnam War, Colonel Summers divides his work into several categories. Those being the "National Will" of the American People, the Congress and the "Friction" posed

by both of these groups. It appears that the loss of Vietnam in part, was due to the collapse of such national will. The American public's support for the war was never enthusiastic to begin with and as the war raged on, the public's support for the war began to further deteriorate. Summers adds that President Johnson was largely to blame, for he made the decision not to mobilize or invoke a national will. Johnson feared that such a policy might jeopardize his "Great Society" programs, inevitably jeopardizing his own political career. From this, Colonel Summers draws his first conclusion, stating that Johnson could not commit the army without first committing the American people - after all, it is those people that would fill the ranks, support and maintain that army. Colonel Summers further states that "when the army is committed the American people are committed, when the American people lose their commitment it is futile to try to keep the army committed".¹

It was not however, President Johnson alone, who had failed in his duties. It was merely an unfortunate event, that this crisis was to coincide with a social upheaval in America. The "Age of Aquarius", with its flower children, civil rights activists and New Leftists, created an atmosphere which was most non-conducive to waging a war - a war that the ruling class was exploiting to sustain "the decadent capitalist system", or so they spouted.

One of Johnson's greatest blunders however, was that he had refrained from creating a formal declaration of war, believing perhaps that by that point in time it would be seen merely as an antiquated formulation and would therefore be uncalled for. Colonel Summers however, feels otherwise. He states that by not declaring a formal state of war against North Vietnam, Johnson had not legitimized the relationship in the eyes of the American society and this he feels was an immense value to society. For the declaration of war in its substance, was the mobilization of the American people. "The failure to invoke this national will was one of the major strategic failures of the Vietnam War. It produced a strategic vulnerability that our enemy was able to exploit".²

The lack of the national will among the American people was a tragic enough disadvantage for the United States military to function with, but the friction created, had become absolutely intolerable. This was a friction that would inevitably find its way to the fighting front. American anti-militarism, has since the beginning been part of the American makeup, a trait that numerous other democratic free societies share. Americans, generally speaking, have never loved the military, but have rather trusted and respected it in the past, calling upon it during times of crisis when America's liberties and freedoms were being jeopardized by other militaristic authoritarian nations. Colonel Summers asserts however, that during the Vietnam war, trust and respect were also denied

by many Americans. He states further, that Government policies tended to aggravate this friction rather than smoothing it over. This was accomplished by granting draft deferments for students, which only led to class upheaval and antiwar militancy. The students only tried to appease their own consciences by swearing that the war was immoral. And so it was, after all what war is not! However, it went a little further than that. Vietnam was found "morally intolerable", other wars in the past however, were just as gruesome and cruel, but the American populace felt that was different. The war was also found morally repugnant. "By supporting a corrupt, authoritarian government the United States was betraying its own principles".³ The United States however, had no choice but to support the Republic of South Vietnam for several reasons. Her only other option would have been to militarily occupy the entire nation and I am sure that such a policy would not have been acceptable neither at home nor abroad!

Who was responsible for creating the strong antiwar feeling at home? A great majority of that responsibility fell upon the shoulders of the American media. Television coverage of the war's brutal reality was brought into the living rooms of all the American television viewers. The destruction of the country side and its inhabitants through napalm bombings and artillery barrages were televised nightly. The plight of the refugees, the torturing of prisoners (that of which was permissably shown), and the political assassinations, were subjects that motivated many Americans to act in the radical manner that they did. As far as Americans were concerned, it was different. Vietnam was fought in "cold blood", not in the "heat of passion", as other wars had been portrayed.

The media played a most vital role at that point in America's history and at times played her role rather irresponsibly. The American media had not in fact brought the "reality" into America's living room, but rather had distorted and in certain instances had misinformed the American public entirely! In reviewing a video tape entitled "Television's Vietnam: The Impact of Media", which was produced and distributed by: "Accuracy in Media", revealed the failure of the American media machine all with valid evidence, just as its public, was anti-American militarism and indeed had shown this strong feeling throughout much of its ultra-critical representation of what was supposedly happening in Vietnam. The media's treatment of the Christmas bombings, the struggle for the American embassy in Saigon, the defence of Khe Sanh by the US forces and the Tet Offensive in general, was handled with an extremely anti-American shadowed outlook. The under exposure of the Hue massacre as compared to the over exposure of the My Lai massacre, forces one to wonder just who's side the media was really on. As Colonel Summers indicates, "instead of the passions of the American people strengthening and supporting us, more vocal and in passionate

voices were too often raised in support of our enemies".⁴ It also makes one question the relationship between an inaccurate and distorted media and its effects upon the American populace. Would the American people have turned on their fellow countrymen if they had been more correctly informed? At any rate, this does not discredit the important role and the impact that the media had instilled in the American populace during the War, but rather holds them ever responsible and most certainly one of the many factors that attributed to the limitation of the United State's military power in Vietnam.

The lack of a national will and the friction imposed by the American Congress and Bureaucracy was also to hamper the US military position in Vietnam. As already indicated, Johnson's refusal to declare a formal declaration of war upon the enemy had caused a grave consequence between the American people and the war effort itself. It appears that the Army had become the center of antiwar sentiment rather than the Congress. Colonel Summers believes that Johnson had recognized the strong antiwar sentiment and had shifted the blame onto the military, so that he and his government might be able to avoid any radical repercussions. He further blames the President for listening only to advisors whose views he thought were correct. He states that the Congress evidently believed that the military professionals had no worthwhile advice to give and that the military by default had allowed the strategy to be dominated by civilian analysts and political scientists. Whether or not Colonel Summer's analysis is completely correct, it is most likely that the Congress and the politicians including the Presidency, had turned to fighting the war in such a manner. The economical concerns of the military strategy took priority. Economics is an element which is impossible to evade in any war, but Vietnam seemed to stretch that point. McNamara's Planning, Programming and Budgeting System (PPBS) approach to the United States military strategy seemed to dominate the Pentagon's approach. It became the center of the focus for questions posed towards the military.

In examination of the US military and its limits of power, four seemingly important areas should be reviewed. These categories are divided into the following: the political factors including the concept of pacification, the use of firepower and its consequences, an examination of the United States military and its functional operations, and finally, the concept of strategic and political objectives.

Firstly, in examining the political problems that limited the United States military power in Vietnam, Townsend Hoopes, a high ranking officer in the United States Air Force during the Vietnam War, believed that Westmoreland was greatly responsible for the lack of recognition placed upon the theory of

political pacification. As discussed earlier, the Diem regime and the use of the Strategic-Hamlets had also lacked in pacification of the South Vietnamese population. Hoopes further states that Westmoreland's search and destroy operations that forced millions of refugees from their land, was indeed a "strategy of attrition". The rural South Vietnamese became in most cases, sullenly anti-American. He believes that Westmoreland's strategy was never "subjected to critical analysis by the authorities in Washington".⁵ The United States Army was not merely anti-Vietnamese but it was also antagonistic towards the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, and on several occasions simply asked them to be removed from the operational theatre. The US military recognized the Government of Vietnam's lack of organizational drive and reforming zeal and they were entirely correct in recognizing such. However, they were not playing the game so to speak. The US Army refused the theory of pacification and in the long run paid the price.

The Government of Vietnam was indeed systematically corrupt. It was inefficient, could not protect or govern large areas of South Vietnam, and therefore lacked popular support. It has been estimated that by 1968, the Government of Vietnam had the support of only 30% of its populace, most of whom were living in the larger urban areas. On the other hand however, Ho Chi Minh and Hanoi, had harnessed nationalism, determination, organization and fighting qualities that were far superior to their southern counterpart. It is felt that the North Vietnamese leadership had mobilized the northern civilian populace, which made a great psychological impact upon its people and their war effort. The US military and the Army of South Vietnam however, was creating public opposition and dividing the war effort. Ironically enough, Townsend Hoopes sums it up quite well by stating, "We are progressively tearing the country apart in order to win the hearts and minds of its people".⁶ How could a victory possibly be sustained in such a situation?

The US military in Vietnam, it has been said, had never developed an appropriate strategy for war, but rather assumed the mere application of vast military power and felt with over confidence that the application of such firepower would be sufficient. "The solution in Vietnam is more bombs, more shells, more napalm ... till the other sides cracks and gives up".⁷ (General Depuy, one of the principal architects of the search and destroy strategy). The heavy application of firepower in Vietnam by the United States military, had in effect created many hardships for the military. Militarily speaking, it had on the whole, served its purpose. The economical and social consequences were most prolific however!

Gabriel Kolko an American historian who now teaches at York University in Toronto Canada, argues that the US military had turned to the increase in

military spending and firepower as a result of the loss of political support from the people of South Vietnam itself. Ultimately, he believes that the United States had become too dependant upon their military technology. "It was our policy that after contact with the enemy was established, our ground forces would pull back a sufficient distance to allow artillery and fire power to be used without restraint. Then the Army would follow up these attacks".⁸ The immoral repercussions of such a strategy were exploited by the media to its fullest, as previously discussed and were brought into the living rooms of the American populace. Such a strategy was not only seen as immorally repugnant, but rather, it was not conducive to the average American's pocket book. It has been estimated that over one-third of the war's cost was due to the maintenance and production of such technological war machinery.

The use of the helicopter, although it had proven itself invaluable, had at the same time revealed true numbers and approximate locations while in the field. The element of surprise was therefore broken. Westmoreland had himself stated that by the time the war had progressed, the helicopter and numerous other military advancements had become extremely vulnerable to enemy ambush. North Vietnam's anti-aircraft missiles and MIG fighters (Russian aid), had played havoc with the United States Air Force over North Vietnam. Townsend Hoopes at that time had even questioned the effectiveness that his bombers were achieving. Late in 1966, a Pentagon journalist had concluded that "the huge array of new American gadgets and weapons was not adequate: US brain power had been baffled by the wily and resourceful Viet Cong who is fighting his war on the cheap".⁹ Yet without the helicopter, some 1,000,000 more United States troops would have been needed to patrol South Vietnam. What was the answer? In 1966 the war had only cost \$5.8 billion, and yet by 1968 it had climbed to an astonishing \$26.5 billion. The American public would not accept a larger military budget and they would surely oppose the conscription of 1,000,000 more American boys! It appears that there was no correct answer under the given set of circumstances.

The US military itself was also effected greatly during this war period. Summers believes that "neither our civilian nor our military leaders dreamed that a tenth-rate undeveloped country like North Vietnam could possibly defeat the US, the world's dominant military and industrial power. Our military leaders evidently assumed ... the US would prevail regardless of what strategy was adopted".¹⁰ The military had made the cardinal military error, in that it had underestimated the enemy. The military had failed in its role as the primary military advisors to the President. Therefore the military failure was not completely due to Johnson's actions, but more correctly his military advisors. There furthermore seemed to have been a disunity of Command in the United

States forces at that time, commands of which were formulated in Honolulu, others in Washington and yet others in Vietnam. This lack of "Command Unity" ultimately led to an uncoordinated action on the field, in the air and on the sea. A common goal was therefore never achieved due to this lack of unity.

Numerous grievances had arisen within the US military itself, in particular, those dealing with the division of military expenditures. The Commander-in-chief of the Pacific was of the Navy and therefore demanded a larger portion than was deemed necessary. The role of the helicopter in air mobility was placed under that of the Army, needless to say the Air Force was not pleased. Such jurisdictional issues escalated as time went on.

During that period the US military hierarchy had greatly deteriorated. The problem of "careerism" had reached a high. Vietnam was used as a means of rapid promotion within the ranks, after which one would leave behind the problems in Vietnam without future concern. The problem would simply be left up to the next soldier and the next soldier would follow the same pattern. There appeared to be a lack of pride in the war effort, no sense of concern to win the war - simply wanting to get out of it in one piece.

Attendance in the United States ROTC dropped off. No one wanted to go to "Nam". Kolko also mentions that the American GI lacked the political commitment to South Vietnam. Destruction of crops, villages, and perhaps even the My Lai massacre can be seen as a direct reaction of such docility towards that commitment. The wide spread use of drugs in the military became a major problem by 1970. Oddly enough the Republic of Vietnam was the supplier! The US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) in Saigon was passive towards the problem fearing that a conflict would only arise creating a distasteful political atmosphere. In 1972 the drug problem became so bad, that some key US bases allowed prostitutes into the barracks, in hopes of reducing the drug usage!

Tensions between officers and enlisted men heightened as the war progressed. By 1970, Kolko feels that the "human collapse" of the GI had become evident. The discipline and the very capacity of the US armed forces had become questionable. Racial problems between Blacks and Whites intensified. Mutinies and insubordination became rampant. Fraggings of officers became an outright sentence to those officers who pushed their men to the brink. Antiwar feelings were not merely at home but they had strongly permeated within the ranks of the United States armed forces in Vietnam.

The most vital of all concepts during this war, was that of "Limited War" and the objectives portrayed through such a policy. US strategic policy called for the

containment, rather than the destruction of the Communist power. The doctrine of Limited War was conducted by Johnson and the Pentagon, and based on the fears of nuclear war, and possible intervention from both China and Russia. Colonel Summers asserts that instead of attacking the source of the war, that being North Vietnam, the US Army turned to the defensive role, eliminating the Viet Cong threat in the South. There was a definite confusion over objectives of a political and military nature, and due to such confusion, the US Government found the Vietnam crisis difficult to deal with. The political objective was to attain an independent South Vietnam functioning in a secure environment, through a policy of counterinsurgency. The military's objective however, was "to assist the Government and its armed forces to defeat externally directed and supported Communist subversion and aggression".¹¹ In essence, the US policy of limited war was calling for the defeat of North Vietnam by forcing a negotiated peace similar to that of the Korean experience in 1953. Colonel Summers believed however, that North Vietnam fought by the old rules - "victory being their ultimate objective". It seems that he was correct!

Due to America's lack of an offensive strategy towards North Vietnam itself, American land forces were ultimately placed on the defensive. The enemy was therefore allowed to build up its land based forces with only minimal interference, that coming from American Strategic Bomber Command. The main North Vietnamese forces henceforth prepared and deployed their forces as they pleased. When the time was right for their offensive, they would attack. If a retreat was called for, they would simply withdraw north of the Demilitarized Zone and redeploy. The United States however, would have to repulse the offensive, and suppress the Viet Cong simultaneously, and there would be little time for the US forces to lick its wounds. The US military was always on the defensive - even when it was on the offensive! How could a military force of any caliber, be victorious under such a predicament?

It is understood that the US military was quite capable of winning a decisive victory in Vietnam, given suitable conditions under proper guidance. As shown in the Tet Offensive and the Easter Offensive, American Armed Forces proved themselves beyond the shadow of a doubt. On both occasions the North Vietnamese standing army had proven itself inferior to the overwhelmingly superior United States forces. Under the discussed conditions that were imposed during this conflict however, it seems that a victory would have been impossible. Johnson's policy of Limited War was the greatest of these disadvantages. His justification of this policy however, is debatable. For the negotiated peace in Korea had been proven successful. How could Johnson have known that North Vietnam would not choose a similar condition? From the field of honor to the war effort at home, America did not seem prepared during this period in

her history to deal with such a conflict. Continuous misfortunes, one after another hampered all prospects of a feasible victory. This article was not merely an examination of the limits of power of the United States military in Vietnam, but rather an examination of the American people and America herself.

FOOT NOTES

1. Summers, *On Strategy: the Vietnam War in Context* (USA, 1981), 7.
2. *Ibid.*, 12
3. Herring, *America's Longest War* (USA, 1979), 171.
4. Summers, *Ibid.*, 17.
5. Hoopes, *The Limits of Intervention* (USA, 1969), 63.
6. *Ibid.*, 189.
7. Herring, *Ibid.*, 152
8. Kolko, *Anatomy of a War* (USA, 1985), 189.
9. *Ibid.*, 193.
10. Summers, *Ibid.*, 74.
11. *Ibid.*, 64.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Herring, G. *America's Longest War: the US & Vietnam*. USA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1979
2. Hoopes, T. *The Limits of Intervention: an inside account of how the Johnson policy of escalation in Vietnam was revealed*. USA: David McKay Company, Inc., 1969.
3. Kolko, G. *Anatomy of a War*. USA: Pantheon Books, 1985.
4. Palmer, B. *The 25 Year War: America's military role in Vietnam* USA: University Press of Kentucky, 1984.
5. Summers, H. *On Strategy: the Vietnam War in Context*. USA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 1981.
- * "Television's Vietnam: The Impact of Media" (Video Tape) Distributed & Produced by: Accuracy in Media (1275 K Street, N.W., Suite 1150, Washington, D.C. 20005)