

## LESSONS: A SOLDIER'S VIEW

*by Harry G. Summers, Jr.*

A story made the rounds of the Army during the closing days of the Vietnam War. When the Nixon administration took over in 1969, so the story goes, Pentagon officials fed all the data on North Vietnam and the United States into a computer: population, gross national product, manufacturing capacity, size of the armed forces, and the like. The computer was then asked: "When will we win?" It took only a moment to answer: "You won in 1964!"

From the American professional soldier's perspective, the most frustrating aspect of the Vietnam conflict is that the U.S. armed forces did everything they were supposed to do, winning every major battle of the war, yet North Vietnam, rather than the United States, triumphed in the end. How could U.S. troops have succeeded so well, but the war effort have failed so miserably?

Some historians, notably Herbert Y. Schandler, have blamed President Lyndon Baines Johnson's refusal to curtail his Great Society programs to meet the needs of wartime. That is only part of the answer. Even if Johnson had chosen between "guns and butter," Schandler himself observes, no amount of men and firepower could have won the war without a coherent White House war strategy.

Others, such as historian Russell F. Weigley, argue that America's failure was tactical, an attempt to apply conventional military doctrines to a "revolutionary" war. But the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces decimated the Viet Cong guerrillas after Hanoi's 1968 Tet Offensive, and the Communists emerged victorious only in the spring of 1975, after the Americans went home, when Hanoi launched a conventional armored assault upon the South.

Few Army officers who served in Vietnam accept the simplistic explanation that a collapse of national will, or a home-front "stab in the back" fostered by the New Left and the news media, made this country lose the war. Older officers tend to blame civilian leaders, notably Defense Secretary Robert S.

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McNamara, while younger men criticize senior generals, notably General William C. Westmoreland, the U.S. field commander.

The causes of U.S. failure, in my view, are more complicated. And they start at the top.

First of all, President Johnson made a conscious political decision not to mobilize the American people for war. This was a fundamental mistake. (Among other things, Johnson had forgotten that the attempt to fight a war in Korea in 1950–53 without a congressional declaration of war had helped to cripple the Truman Presidency.) This misjudgment of the nature of limited war was highlighted by McNamara, who was quoted as saying that Vietnam was “developing an ability in the United States to fight a limited war, to go to war without the necessity of arousing the public ire.”

Why was this approach adopted?

### Carrots and Sticks

Civilian limited-war theorists such as Robert Osgood and Thomas Schelling had (falsely) postulated that the existence of nuclear weapons had entirely changed the nature and conduct of warfare and that all past battlefield experiences were thus irrelevant. Political leaders, the academic theorists seemed to contend, should tightly control the conduct of a limited war, “fine-tuning” while ignoring public opinion and the demands of the fighting men if necessary. As defense analyst Stephen Peter Rosen observes, such arguments, widely echoed, helped to persuade the Vietnam-era generation of policy-makers—particularly McNamara, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, and President Johnson himself—to think of limited war as an *instrument* of diplomacy, of bargaining with the enemy, rather than as a bitter struggle in which the nation invested blood and treasure to secure important goals.\*

Largely accepting this approach during the 1964–66 build-up in Vietnam, LBJ and his civilian advisers stressed the dispatch of “signals” to the enemy rather than military meas-

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\*“Vietnam and the American Theory of Limited War,” *International Security* 7, Fall 1982.

*Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., 51, was born in Covington, Ky., and received his B.A. from the University of Maryland. He graduated from the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth. After enlisting in 1947, he saw combat in the Korean and Vietnam wars. Now on the faculty of the Army War College, he is the author of On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War (1982).*



*The Vietnam GI averaged 19 years of age compared with 26 in World War II. Two-thirds of the men killed in Indochina were 21 or younger.*

ures to win the war. They avoided seemingly risky strategic decisions that could have ended the war.

"I saw our bombs as my political resources for negotiating a peace," Johnson later explained to political scientist Doris Kearns. "On the one hand, our planes and our bombs could be used as carrots for the South, strengthening the morale of the South Vietnamese and pushing them to clean up their corrupt house, by demonstrating the depth of our commitment to the war. On the other hand, our bombs could be used as sticks against the North, pressuring North Vietnam to stop its aggression against the South."

Washington's overall defensive stance in Indochina surrendered the long-range initiative to the enemy and, inevitably, alienated the American public. In effect, Lyndon Johnson limited not only his objectives in the war, but the military and political means employed to attain them. Fearing Communist Chinese intervention,\* the President variously declared that he

\*But CIA estimates in 1965-67 belittled this possibility: Little love was lost between Hanoi and Beijing, and the Chinese would only enter the war if the U.S. invaded North Vietnam.

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would restrict the bombing to the southern portions of North Vietnam, that U.S. troops would never invade the North, and that the United States would under no circumstances use nuclear weapons. He forbade U.S. ground commanders to interfere with crucial Communist base areas and reinforcement routes in neighboring Laos and Cambodia; in short, he chose to treat South Vietnam as an "island."

Johnson did not apply political pressure upon the Soviet Union to stop its materiel support of North Vietnam, without which the war would have soon ended. His successor, Richard Nixon, took firm action during Hanoi's 1972 Easter Offensive, sharply increasing the bombing against the North and mining Haiphong harbor. But he refused to take such decisive steps in 1969 to end the war, partly because he feared such bold action would endanger the budding U.S. rapprochement with China and détente with the Soviet Union. (He secretly bombed Hanoi's bases in Cambodia instead.)

#### **Don't Alarm the Home Folks**

In sum, the civilian policy-makers failed to understand what most ordinary Americans know in their bones: *War*, whether limited or not, imposes a unique national effort. It has its own imperatives, its own dynamic. It requires the undivided attention and dedication of the President, the Congress, and the citizenry. The President, in particular, has the duty to define the aims of the war, to fix a military strategy for success, and to clarify for the American people why they and their sons should be willing to make major sacrifices.

As Dean Rusk stated in 1976, "We never made any effort to create a war psychology in the United States during the Vietnam affair. We didn't have military parades through cities. . . . We tried to do in cold blood perhaps what can only be done in hot blood, when sacrifices of this order are involved."

Unlike North Vietnam, the United States never focused its full attention on the war. President Johnson believed that destiny had chosen him to transform America through his Great Society programs, and that the country could simultaneously afford guns and butter. "I knew from the start," Johnson confided to Kearns in 1970 about the early weeks of 1965, "that I was bound to be crucified either way I moved. If I left the woman I really loved—the Great Society—in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home. All my programs. All my hopes to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. . . . I was de-

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terminated to be a leader of war *and* a leader of peace.”

In addition to refusing to cut back his domestic programs as the war began, the President failed to seek a congressional declaration of war against North Vietnam, to call up the reserves, or to ask for a tax increase until 1967.\*

The Johnson administration also sought to disguise the cost and impact of the Vietnam effort by engaging in a slow and incremental build-up of the air war and U.S. combat forces. Demonstrating strength and determination to the enemy—without alarming the home folks—became the primary aim of Washington’s early policy in Vietnam.

By increasing air sorties over the North from 55,000 in 1965 to 148,000 in 1966, for instance, U.S. policy-makers entertained few illusions about turning the tide: In 1966, the bombing cost the United States \$9.60 for every \$1 of damage inflicted upon the enemy, to say nothing of American pilots lost in action. Rather, they thought the growing air effort would convey the strength of the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam.

Similarly, William Bundy, then Assistant Secretary of State, favored sending U.S. troops to the northern provinces of South Vietnam in January 1965 because “it would have a real stiffening effect in Saigon, and a strong signal effect to Hanoi.” But gradualism in the air and on the ground proved poor psycho-strategy. It was also poor politics: Congress and the public never mobilized for war.

### Johnson’s War

The Vietnam War made clear that Congress should declare war whenever large numbers of U.S. troops engage in sustained combat abroad. As General Westmoreland later wrote, “President Johnson . . . should have forced the Congress to face its constitutional responsibility for waging war.” Following Communist attacks against U.S. bases (at Pleiku, in February 1965), Johnson probably could have obtained a congressional declaration of war against North Vietnam, thereby slowing the rise of later opposition from Congress. And if Johnson had failed to win a congressional mandate, he at least would not have felt compelled by fears of right-wing criticism to commit U.S. combat troops to South Vietnam’s defense. In both cases, the country would have shared in the debate and in the decision.

By failing to bring the public and the Congress into the war effort, Johnson drove a wedge between the Army and large seg-

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\*Truman did not ask for a declaration of war against North Korea in 1950, but he did mobilize reserves, seek price controls, ask for tax increases, and curb domestic programs.

### THE VIETNAM VETERAN

"There is something special about Vietnam veterans," antiwar psychologist Robert Jay Lifton wrote in *Home from the War* (1973). "Everyone who has contact with them seems to agree that they are different from veterans of other wars." U.S. intervention in South Vietnam, Lifton suggested, had produced a deeply troubled Lost Generation. On television and in the movies (*Coming Home*, *The Deer Hunter*) of the 1970s, the Vietnam GI was regularly portrayed as either victim or psychopath—at war with himself and society. In effect, such stereotypes helped to make the veteran a scapegoat for an unpopular war.

The available facts, drawn from Veterans Administration data and other surveys, supply a different portrait.

Of the 8,744,000 personnel on active duty during the "Vietnam era" (August 5, 1964, to January 27, 1973), 3,403,000 served in the Southeast Asia theater. Roughly 2,594,000 of that number served in South Vietnam; perhaps 40 to 60 percent of them fought in combat, provided close combat support, or were frequently exposed to hostile action.

How well did the U.S. combat soldier and Marine perform during their one-year tours? Most analyses support the conclusion that American officers and men learned fast and fought well against a tenacious, often elusive foe during the 1965–68 period preceding President Nixon's 1969 decision to begin to withdraw. Thereafter, discipline eroded. Recorded "fraggings"—assaults by troops upon officers with intent to kill, to injure, or to intimidate—rose from 96 in 1969 to 222 in 1971. Drug abuse reached epidemic proportions; in 1971, 28.5 percent of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam admitted to using narcotics such as heroin and opium. Worldwide Army desertion rates rose from 14.7 per thousand in Fiscal Year (FY) 1966 to 73.5 per thousand in FY 1971.

But U.S. Army desertion rates during World War II were not dissimilar (63 per thousand in 1944). Indeed, most desertions by those who served in Indochina took place *after* they came home and were seldom related to opposition to the war; drugs and insubordination were a worldwide Army phenomenon. Ninety-seven percent of Vietnam-era veterans earned honorable discharges.

The "psychopath" image was equally far-fetched. Despite the war's peculiar strains, the rate of psychological breakdowns ("combat fatigue") among servicemen in Vietnam was below those of Korea and World War II. Yet American servicemen suffered permanently disabling wounds at a far greater rate in Vietnam than in earlier wars—300 percent higher than in World War II, 70 percent higher than in Korea—partly because of the Viet Cong's use of mines and booby traps. Improved medical care enabled more badly wounded men to survive.

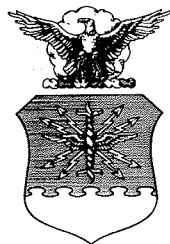
Despite the much-publicized March 1968 massacre of civilians at the hamlet of My Lai by an Army platoon led by Second Lieutenant William L. Calley, few U.S. infantrymen committed atrocities during the Vietnam War; prosecution of offenders tended to be vigorous and punishment harsh.

U.S. troops in Vietnam represented a much broader cross-section of America than is commonly supposed. For example, blacks accounted for no more than 12.5 percent of U.S. troops in Vietnam, and for 12.3 percent of the total number of Americans killed in the war at a time when blacks constituted 13.5 percent of the total U.S. male population of military age. Only 25 percent of U.S. personnel deployed in Vietnam consisted of *draftees*, versus 66 percent of military personnel during World War II.

The chief inequities were economic. Three-fourths of the troops in Vietnam came from lower-middle- or working-class families (and one-fourth came from families below the poverty level). Compared with their more affluent peers, individuals with lower-income backgrounds faced twice as great a likelihood of serving in the military. (Ivy League college graduates were conspicuously rare in Vietnam.)

Most Vietnam veterans have adapted successfully to civilian life; and 14 are now in Congress (two Senators, 12 Representatives). "Post-traumatic stress disorder," which has afflicted perhaps one-fourth of Vietnam veterans, appears to derive from the common perception among these men that they received a far less friendly reception upon their return than did veterans of other American wars. This perception is not inaccurate. For one thing, neither Lyndon Johnson nor Richard Nixon (nor the nation's college presidents) proposed a "GI Bill" for Vietnam veterans that matched the federal education benefits awarded to earlier generations of ex-servicemen.

Even so, statistics on suicide, divorce, crime, and drug use show that the Vietnam veteran compares favorably on these counts with his nonveteran peer. And in March 1982, despite the economic recession, more than 90 percent of Vietnam veterans held jobs.



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ments of the populace, notably intellectuals and college students. Even in the eyes of many moderate critics, the armed forces and the GIs in combat soon became the executors of "Johnson's war," rather than the instruments of the national will. For future Presidents, the War Powers Act of 1973, which bars presidential commitment of U.S. troops in combat beyond 90 days without congressional approval, partially solves this problem. But only partially. It does not necessarily force the President to mobilize the entire nation.

### Back to Basics

Thus, as the Constitution envisions, the civilian leadership—the President and the Congress—must make the basic decisions about going to war and define the war's objectives. For their part, the nation's senior military leaders have the obligation to devise the strategy necessary for success—as they did in World War II and Korea. During the Indochina conflict, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) did not play this role. Unlike all his wartime predecessors, the President allowed civilian strategists with little or no combat experience to take charge, as if their "cost-benefit" or "psychological" approaches were superior to the insights of the military commanders. One result: From June 1965 to June 1966, as U.S. troop strength in Vietnam grew from 60,000 to 268,000, the President met privately with his Army Chief of Staff, General Harold K. Johnson, only twice.

Seeking always to "keep their options open," the civilian leaders never determined the maximum number of troops that the United States *should* commit to Vietnam, let alone a plan to win the war. For example, despite strong reservations expressed by Under Secretary of State George W. Ball and National Security Adviser Bundy, McNamara persuaded Johnson in July 1965 to approve a build-up of U.S. troops in South Vietnam to more than 200,000 men without any assurance that that number would suffice to shore up the beleaguered Saigon regime, let alone to defeat the Communist forces decisively on the battlefield. At the Pentagon, during the Tet 1968 crisis, Defense Secretary Clark M. Clifford discovered that he "couldn't get hold of a plan to win the war. [When] I attempted to find out how long it would take to achieve our goal, there was no answer. When I asked how many more men it would take . . . no one could be certain."

Westmoreland, despairing of winning White House approval of the higher troop levels that he believed necessary to win the war, had received much the same impression in Wash-



ington in late 1967 when he proposed—and proclaimed—a strategy for Vietnamization. “The [Johnson] administration was totally noncommittal on it,” he later wrote. “They kind of nodded their heads and did not disagree.”

The Joint Chiefs, led by General Earle Wheeler, strongly questioned the White House’s approach in private, but Johnson (and Nixon) rarely consulted them directly. The Chiefs acquiesced in presidential mismanagement of the war, even allowing Johnson to set weekly bombing targets in North Vietnam; they hoped for better days. But the military leaders could have best served their country in early 1965 by dramatically protesting against the President’s policies. By quietly threatening to resign, for instance, the Chiefs might have forced the Commander-in-Chief to adopt a winning strategy in Indochina—notably, by cutting the Ho Chi Minh Trail and isolating the southern battlefield. Or, failing that, the JCS could have brought the dispute before the American people and spurred a national debate on the war *before* a major commitment put a half-million U.S. troops into battle *without* a strategy.\*

In any event, the military leaders should not have echoed Washington’s euphemisms—“kill ratio,” “neutralize,” “incur-sion”—to disguise the bloody realities of combat. General Fred Weyand argued in 1976 that as

military professionals we must speak out, we must counsel our political leaders and alert the American public that there is no such thing as a “splendid little war.” There is no such thing as a war fought on the cheap. War is death and destruction. The American way of war is particularly violent, deadly and dreadful. We believe in using “things”—artillery, bombs, massive firepower—in order to conserve our soldiers’ lives. The enemy, on the other hand, made up for his lack of “things” by expending men instead of machines, and he suffered enormous casualties. . . . The Army must make the price of involvement clear *before* we get involved, so that America can weigh the probable costs of involvement against the dangers of uninvolved . . . for there are worse things than war.

In the field, the military’s role is to destroy the enemy’s forces and its will to fight, even in an allegedly “revolutionary” conflict, as the North Vietnamese proved conclusively in their

\*LBJ worried about keeping the generals in line. Indeed, he once told Westmoreland, “General, I have a lot riding on you. . . . I hope you don’t pull a MacArthur on me.” Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, Doubleday, 1976, p. 159.



*In this 1969 cartoon for the New York Review of Books, David Levine savaged Richard Nixon—and his predecessors—for explaining U.S. policy in South Vietnam in terms of prior commitments.*

spring 1975 blitzkrieg. In my view, the U.S. Army should never have become so heavily engaged in “nation-building,” pacification, and, thus, local politics as it did in South Vietnam. The South Vietnamese Army and the Saigon government, perhaps with the aid of the U.S. embassy, could have conducted the struggle for the “hearts and minds” of the South Vietnamese people. In any case, this struggle, so heavily publicized by Washington, was *secondary*. As events made abundantly clear, the troops of the North Vietnamese Army, not the southerners of the Viet Cong, posed the primary threat to South Vietnam’s independence, and eliminating that danger should have been the chief concern of both the U.S. Army and the White House from the start.

Even as it alienated or confused Americans at home, the gradualist and almost timid manner in which the United States had waged the war surely eroded its diplomats’ credibility when talks began in Paris in 1968. The Americans and their allies could not conduct successful negotiations—successful in the sense of securing a withdrawal of Hanoi’s troops from the South with residual U.S. air power serving as a deterrent against fu-

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ture invasion from the North—from a position of weakness. No one could. President Johnson's nine unilateral U.S. cease-fires and 10 bombing halts during 1965–68 had only earned the enemy's contempt, as Hanoi's repeated cease-fire violations and accelerated transport of supplies over the Ho Chi Minh Trail during these episodes demonstrated.

And by announcing in June 1969 that the United States would begin withdrawing its troops without any quid pro quo from the enemy, President Nixon similarly signaled a lack of resolve to Hanoi that probably encouraged the enemy to stall the negotiating process, in the expectation of an eventual total American pullout. Predictably, "Vietnamization" proved an empty threat since no President could guarantee perpetual U.S. aid to the vulnerable South Vietnamese, let alone the re-entry of American naval and air power into the region in the event of renewed North Vietnamese aggression from Laos and Cambodia.

In war, negotiations with the adversary cannot be a *substitute* for a coherent military strategy. To Americans, weary of bloodshed, negotiations with North Vietnam seemed to promise an end to the war. But Hanoi's unwillingness in 1968–72 to reach a compromise with Saigon, rather than the presence of U.S. ground troops or Saigon's intransigence, posed the key obstacle to a peaceful settlement in South Vietnam. Always hoping that a "reasonable" (i.e., painless) settlement was possible, the Johnson and Nixon administrations sought "honorable" conditions for American extrication, which, in the end, amounted only to the release of Americans held prisoner by Hanoi and a "decent interval" for the South Vietnamese ally we left behind.

War may be too serious a matter to leave solely to military professionals, but it is also too serious a matter to leave only to civilian amateurs. Never again must the President commit American men to combat without first fully defining the nation's aims and then rallying Congress and the nation for war. Otherwise, the courageous Americans who fought and died in the defense of South Vietnam will truly have done so in vain.

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