ON STRATEGY
A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War

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CHAPTER 8

TACTICS,
GRAND TACTICS,
AND STRATEGY

The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish . . . the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.

Clausewitz, *On War*

As military professionals, it was our job to judge the true nature of the Vietnam war, communicate those facts to our civilian decision-makers, and to recommend appropriate strategies. As Clausewitz said, that was the first strategic question and the most comprehensive. It is indicative of our strategic failure in Vietnam that almost a decade after our involvement the true nature of the Vietnam war is still in question. There are still those who would attempt to fit it into the revolutionary war mold and who blame our defeat on our failure to implement counterinsurgency doctrine.² This point of view requires an acceptance of the North
Vietnamese contention that the war was a civil war, and that the North Vietnamese regular forces were an extension of the guerrilla effort, a point of view not borne out by the facts.

As Professor Raymond Aron recently pointed out, it is essential to distinguish the First Indo-China war between France and the Viet Minh from the Second Indo-China war between North Vietnam and South Vietnam. The first was a revolutionary war. The second was not. The forces that besieged Dien Bien Phu grew out of the guerrilla movement; the forces that captured Saigon did not grow out of the Viet Cong but were the regular armed forces of North Vietnam. This critical difference validates the official U.S. government position that the Vietnam war was caused by aggression from the North.

To have understood the true nature of the Vietnam war required not only a strict definition of the enemy, it also required a knowledge of the nature of war itself. As we saw in Part I, our understanding was clouded by confusion over preparation for war and the conduct of war, by fears of nuclear war, by fears of Chinese intervention, and by the misconception that we were being challenged by a whole new kind of "revolutionary" war that could only be countered by the "strategy" of counterinsurgency. Reviewing the literature on Vietnam in search of "lessons," Professor of History Joe Dunn concluded that while "George Santayana reminded us that 'those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,' some would argue that Gaddis Smith's rejoinder is more applicable: 'One of the most somber aspects of the study of history is that it suggests no obvious ways by which mankind could have avoided folly.'"

There are many ways to look at the war in Vietnam. One way (Santayana's) suggests that by a proper understanding and application of military art we could have influenced the outcome. Another (Gaddis Smith's) would have it that we were caught up in a kind of Greek tragedy where the end was perordained and where there were "no obvious ways by which [we] could have avoided folly." There is an attraction—some would say a fatal attraction—in the Gaddis Smith approach. In the face of failure it is easy to salve your conscience with the notion that nothing you could have done would have made any difference, that fate rather than your action or inaction had predetermined the end. For example, there are those who would blame our failure in Vietnam on the forces of history or on the tide of human events. But, as we will see, it was four North Vietnamese Army corps, not "dialectical materialism," that ultimately conquered South Vietnam.

As Alexander Solzhenitsyn said, "We must not hide behind fate's petticoats." We must reject Gaddis Smith in favor of Santayana and believe that a thorough knowledge of the art of war through what Clausewitz called "critical analysis"—can influence the course of events. Critical analysis, according to Clausewitz, consists of three different intellectual activities—the discovery and interpretation of facts, the tracing of effects back to their cause, and the investigation and evaluation of the means employed. "Critical analysis is not just an evaluation of the means actually employed, but of all possible means," said Clausewitz. "One can, after all, not con-
demn a method without being able to suggest a better alternative."

Clausewitz further observed that "[we see] things in the light of their result, and to some extent come to know and appreciate them fully only because of it." In retrospect, our entire approach to the war would have been different if at the beginning we could have foreseen the North Vietnamese tanks rumbling through the streets of Saigon on 1 May 1975. The North Korean conventional attack in June 1950—and the North Korean tanks rumbling through Seoul—left no doubt as to the nature of that war and the nature of the proper U.S. response. But the North Vietnamese, evidently learning from the Korean war that an overt attack could precipitate a massive U.S. military response, began the war on a different key. Unlike the North Koreans who had pulled their communist cadres out of South Korea in April 1948 and opted for a conventional attack, the North Vietnamese opened their campaign with a guerrilla attack. One reason undoubtedly was fear of the U.S. response to an open attack, but there were other reasons as well. Unlike Korea, where the South Korean leader Syngman Rhee personified Korean nationalism and the North Korean leader Kim Il-sung was seen as a Soviet puppet, in Vietnam the situation was reversed. Ho Chi Minh had captured the cloak of Vietnamese nationalism during the struggles with the French, while the South Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem (and his successors) were tainted with a civil service and army structure inherited from French colonialism. Another factor was that in Korea the Americans were seen as the liberators from Japanese colonialism, in Vietnam they were identified with the former French regime."

All of these things combined tended to cloud our perception of how to counter North Vietnamese aggression. Judged by the results of the war, the basic mistake (as we will see) was that we saw their guerrilla operations as a strategy in itself. Because we saw it as a strategy, we attempted to understand it in terms of "people's war" theories of Mao Tsetung, and devised elaborate theories of counterinsurgency. We attempted to counter it by using such models as the British model in Malaysia. These theories and models had some relevance for the government of South Vietnam which ultimately had to neutralize the internal threat to its existence, but they had only secondary relevance to the United States. Ironically, we had seen this clearly in Korea. While we could protect them from external attack, internal security was a problem only they could solve. We could aid them with political advice and economic and military assistance, but the task was primarily theirs. As we will see in a later chapter, it was not until the end that we rediscovered this fact in Vietnam.

Where did we go wrong? It can be argued that from the French withdrawal in 1954 until President Diem's assassination in 1963, the American response was essentially correct. The task at hand was one of assisting South Vietnam to become a viable nation state, and the U.S. military advisors contributed to that end. In December 1963, the nature of the war began to change. The North Vietnamese made a decision to intervene directly both with military assistance and guerrilla cadres.
In the late summer of 1964, the North Vietnamese again escalated the war by sending regular North Vietnamese Army forces south. In his analysis of the Vietnam war, Brigadier General Dave Palmer identifies this crucial turning point:

By committing its regular forces to a cause which had previously been cloaked in the guise of an internal war, Hanoi dramatically altered the entire thrust and scope of the conflict. It was a key command decision. Indeed, it may well have been the key command decision of the war.8

Although it was not so dramatic, nor so obvious, as the North Korean invasion of South Korea in June 1950, the North Vietnamese had launched a strategic offensive to conquer South Vietnam. As in Korea, our initial response was defensive, relying primarily on South Vietnamese ground forces and limited U.S. air support. By mid-1965 it had become clear that this was not enough. U.S. combat troops were needed to stabilize the situation. In November 1965, the 32nd, 33rd and 66th regiments of the North Vietnamese Army clashed head-on with the U.S. 1st Cavalry Division in the Ia Drang Valley in central Vietnam. After ten days of heavy fighting the North Vietnamese were in full retreat. As General Palmer reports:

On a strategic scale, a brilliant spoiling attack had completely derailed Hanoi’s hopes of earning a decisive victory before full American might could be deployed to South Vietnam. Moreover, in a head-on clash between an American and a North Vietnamese division,

on the enemy’s chosen ground, the NVA unit had been sent reeling in retreat. For the moment, at least, an adverse tide had been reversed.9

Now was the time for the United States to take the offensive. Although in theory the best route to victory would have been a strategic offensive against North Vietnam, such action was not in line with U.S. strategic policy which called for the containment rather than the destruction of communist power. As we saw earlier this policy was based at least in part on our fears of sparking a nuclear war and our fears of Chinese intervention. As General Palmer reports:

The Johnson administration had already barricaded the one sure route to victory—to take the strategic offensive against the source of the war. Memories of Mao Tse-tung’s reaction when North Korea was overrun by United Nations troops in 1950 haunted the White House. America’s fear of war with Red China protected North Vietnam from invasion more surely than any instrument of war Hanoi could have fielded.10

While a strategic offensive against North Vietnam may not have been politically feasible, we could have taken the tactical offensive to isolate the battlefield. But instead of orientating on North Vietnam—the source of war—we turned our attention to the symptom—the guerrilla war in the south. Our new “strategy” of counterinsurgency blinded us to the fact that the guerrilla war was tactical and not strategic. It was a kind of economy of force operation on the part of North Vietnam to buy time and to wear down superior U.S. military forces. As Norman Hannah, a career State De-
partment Foreign Service Officer (FSO) with long experience in Southeast Asia wrote in 1975, "In South Vietnam we responded mainly to Hanoi's simulated insurgency rather than to its real but controlled aggression, as a bull charges the toreador's cape, not the toreador."\textsuperscript{11}

We thought we were pursuing a new strategy called counterinsurgency, but actually we were pursuing a defensive strategy in pursuit of a negative aim—a strategy familiar to Clausewitz in the early nineteenth century. In his chapter on purpose and means in war Clausewitz discusses various methods of obtaining the object of war. One way is what Clausewitz calls "the negative aim." It is, he said, "the natural formula for outlasting the enemy, for wearing him down."\textsuperscript{12} In a later chapter, Clausewitz discusses the relationship between the negative aim and the strategic offensive. "The aim of the defense must embody the idea of waiting," he said. "The idea implies ... that the situation ... may improve ... Gaining time is the only way [the defender] can achieve his aim."\textsuperscript{13} Basic to the success of a strategic defensive in pursuit of the negative aim, therefore, is the assumption that time is on your side. But the longer the war progressed the more obvious it became that time was not on our side. It was American rather than North Vietnamese will that was being eroded. In his review of General Westmoreland's biography, Hannah writes:

\ldots [General] Westmoreland mentions several factors that prolonged the war, but \ldots we are entitled to conclude that he did not regard these factors likely to be decisive. Indeed, he tells us he suffered these impediments because he believed that "success would eventually be ours." But it was not. Why not?

General Westmoreland does not directly answer the question but the answer emerges without being stated. We ran out of time. This is the tragedy of Vietnam—we were fighting for time rather than space. And time ran out.\textsuperscript{14}

In the introductory chapter to this book we posed the question—how could we have done so well in tactics but failed so miserably in strategy? The answer we postulated then—a failure in strategic military doctrine—manifested itself on the battlefield. Because it did not focus on the political aim to be achieved—containment of North Vietnamese expansion—our so-called strategy was never a strategy at all. At best it could be called a kind of grand tactics.

As a tactic it was extremely effective. As Professor Chalmers Johnson wrote in 1973, two years before the fall of Saigon:

Both Lin Piao and Vo Nguyen Giap identified the Vietnam war as a test case for the efficacy of people's war. The United States too saw the war as a test of methods for resisting people's war. Therefore, any study of people's war is obliged to consider Vietnam and try to find out how the test came out. \ldots

None of the people's wars of the sixties did very well, including the one in Vietnam. Vo Nguyen Giap himself has admitted a loss of 600,000 men in fighting between 1965 and 1968. \ldots Moreover, by about 1970 at least 80 percent of the day-to-day combat in South Vietnam was
being carried on by regular People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) troops... Genuine black-pyjama southern guerrillas... had been decimated and amounted to no more than 20 percent of the communist fighting force.¹⁵

But tactical success is not necessarily strategic success, and tactical failure is not necessarily strategic failure. As we saw earlier, Clausewitz had said 150 years ago that military victory is only an end when it leads directly to peace—i.e., the political object of the war. Ironically, our tactical successes did not prevent our strategic failure and North Vietnam’s tactical failures did not prevent their strategic success, and in strategic terms, people’s war was a success. It caused the United States to deploy against a secondary force and exhaust itself in the effort. It also caused the Army of South Vietnam to deploy in such a manner that it could not be massed to meet a conventional North Vietnamese cross-border conventional attack.

As was noted earlier, there are those who still question the true nature of the war, including many who actually fought there. Clausewitz warned of the “vividness of transient impressions,”¹⁶ and most American military experience was during 1965–1970 when we were supposedly pursuing “counterinsurgency.” Few experienced the North Vietnamese conventional attacks in 1972 and 1975. Most of the writings on the war also miss its true nature. Analysis after analysis condemns the United States for its overreliance on conventional methods. Yet these conventional tactics were militarily successful in destroying guerrilla forces. They were so successful that, according to press reports, the North Vietnamese im-

tated these same tactics to suppress the insurgent movement in Cambodia. From bitter experience they knew that such tactics worked. The reason for the confusion is that our announced strategy was counterinsurgency. The analysts, seeking the cause of our strategic failure, naturally focused on counterinsurgency. But since the insurgency itself was a tactical screen masking North Vietnam’s real objectives (the conquest of South Vietnam), our counterinsurgency operations could only be tactical, no matter what we called them.

Our failure as military professionals to judge the true nature of the Vietnam war had a profound effect. It resulted in confusion throughout the national security establishment over tactics, grand tactics and strategy, a confusion that continues to this day. As author and strategist Herbert Y. Schandler commented, “The President had one view, the JCS another, and the field commander had another.”¹⁷

In order to sort out this confusion the remaining chapters of this book will analyze our strategic defeat in terms of the classic principles of war. These principles can provide what Colonel Charles A. Hines describes as “military planning interrogatories”—i.e., an analytical framework to reduce general principles and theoretical postulations to pragmatic and operational situations.¹⁸ Such an approach will present the Vietnam war in its true light—not as something new and unique with no lessons for the future, but as a war best understood in terms of war itself. In so doing it should illuminate the tasks that America may have to face on future battlefields. As Army Chief of Staff General Edward C. Meyer emphasized on 4 June 1980:
THE ENGAGEMENT

The keystone of our contribution toward peace is total competence in waging war. That expertise can only come from an ardent study of tactics and strategy. It demands that we develop a full appreciation for applying the principles of war in our decision process.  

NOTES

2. Not only was it not the cause of our defeat, it had little to do with the North Vietnamese victory. As Lieutenant Colonel Stuart A. Herrington put it in a recent book (*Silence Was a Weapon*, Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1982): "Like us, Hanoi had failed to win the 'hearts and minds' of the South Vietnamese peasantry. Unlike us, Hanoi's leaders were able to compensate for this failure by playing their trump card—they overwhelmed South Vietnam with a twenty-two division force."
9. Ibid., p. 103.
10. Ibid., p. 110.
13. Ibid., VIII:8, pp. 613, 614.
17. Interview with Colonel (USA, Retired) Herbert Y. Schandler, 13 November 1980.

CHAPTER 9

THE OBJECTIVE

Every military operation must be directed toward a clearly defined, decisive and attainable objective. The ultimate military objective of war is the destruction of the enemy's armed forces and his will to fight. The objective of each operation must contribute to this ultimate objective. Each intermediate objective must be such that its attainment will most directly, quickly, and economically contribute to the purpose of the operation. The selection of an objective is based upon consideration of the means available, the enemy, and the area of operations. Every commander must understand and clearly define his objective and consider each contemplated action in light thereof.

FM 100-5, 19 February 1962

The original intent was to begin each of the chapters in Part II with a discussion of the relevant principle of war extracted from our Vietnam-era *Field Service Regulations*, the 19 February 1962 edition of Field Manual 100-5. Theoretically, these principles form the basis for Army strategic and tactical doctrine and should therefore provide a framework for analysis of our Vietnam strategy. Since the principles of war are by definition of universal application, they should also pro-
provide a basis for the evaluation of North Vietnamese strategy. As the analysis began, however, it was found that the Vietnam-era manual discussed the principles of war only in terms of their tactical application. Significantly, their strategic application was missing. In order to discover this missing dimension, it was necessary to go back to the beginning.  

The first official American codification of the principles of war was in *War Department Training Regulations* 10–5, 23 December 1921. In its discussion of the principles of war this manual stated that “their application to the preparation for war and the direction of war is called strategy. Their application to specific battles and operations is called tactics.” This distinction was especially evident in its discussion of *The Objective*, where both its strategic and tactical dimensions were emphasized. Strategically, “the selection of objectives depends on political, military, and economic conditions, which vary in force and effect. . . . The objective assigned military forces must be in consonance with the national objective.” Its discussion of the tactical dimension did not vary appreciably from the 1962 definition quoted above.  

By 1939, however, the strategic and tactical principles had begun to diverge. Although still side by side in the manual, the strategic principle of *The Objective* was discussed under “conduct of war,” defined as “the art of employing the armed forces of a nation in combination with measures of economic and political constraint for the purpose of effecting a satisfactory peace.” The tactical principle was discussed in the next paragraph as “the ultimate objective. . . . the destruction of the enemy’s armed forces in battle.”  

World War II the strategic definition dropped out completely, only to be reintroduced in 1954 as a result of our Korean war experiences. “Since war is a political act,” the introductory chapter to the manual stated, “Its broad and final objectives are political; therefore, its conduct must conform to policy and its outcome realize the objectives of policy.”  

It is revealing that during the course of the Vietnam war there were changes in both the strategic and tactical definitions of *The Objective*. What had been a clear relationship between military strategy and political objectives was lost in an abstruse discussion of national objectives, rejection of aggression, deterrence and the whole concept of a spectrum of war. The new definition obscured the Clausewitzian dictum that “the political object—the original motive for the war—will determine both the military objective to be reached and the amount of effort it requires.” In tactics, there was an even more startling change. While the 1962 edition still discussed *The Objective* as requiring “the destruction of the enemy’s armed forces and his will to fight,” the 1968 edition reduced this to “defeat of the enemy’s armed forces.” We had eliminated the very factor that was to cause us the greatest difficulty—the psychological objective of destruction of the enemy’s will to fight. This was especially paradoxical, since this was ostensibly what we were trying to do in Vietnam, having been denied the objective of destruction of the enemy’s armed forces.  

Our loss of focus on *The Objective* was particularly damaging, since this is the driving principle of war. Clausewitz’s clarification of the importance of the objec-
tive was one of his main contributions to understanding the nature of war. He emphasized that war was not waged for its own sake but was waged to obtain a particular aim—what Clausewitz called the political object of war. As he said, "the political object is a goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose." This loss of focus also exacerbated a common American failing—the tendency to see war as something separate and apart from the political process. World Wars I and II had been not so much wars as crusades to punish evil. Even so astute a military professional as General of the Army Douglas MacArthur saw war in this light. As he told the Senate, "the general definition which for many decades has been acceptable was that war was an ultimate process of politics; that when all of the political means failed, we then go to force." This statement reflected the rejection of the Clausewitzian belief that "it is clear that war should never be thought of as something autonomous but always as an instrument of policy." The truth of this dictum was brought home with a vengeance during the Vietnam war and its aftermath.

With this framework for analysis we can now turn to an examination of how the principle of *The Objective* was applied during the Vietnam war. We will begin with an analysis of North Vietnamese actions using our own frame of reference. Not only are their doctrinal manuals not available, the material that is available primarily reflects North Vietnamese declaratory strategy which was designed to continue the smoke screen of revolutionary war to mask their own aggression. It was not until after their conquest of South Vietnam that they revealed (e.g., General Dung's "Great Spring Victory") the true nature of the war. Their smoke screen was so effective that we were blinded throughout the course of the war to the point that the majority of our analyses focused on revolutionary war and the Viet Cong. Volumes have been written on their organization, structure, doctrine and tactics. According to former CIA analyst, George Allen, one of the country's foremost experts on Vietnam, such analysis distorted the true nature of the war:

The National Liberation Front was not . . . a viable, autonomous organization with a life of its own; it was a facade, a "front," by means of which the DLD (the Vietnamese Communist Party) sought to mobilize the people in the south to accomplish its ends, and to garner international sympathy and support.

The guerrilla himself may well have believed in the revolutionary cause and have believed that he was fighting for a revolutionary government in Saigon under southern leadership. Such beliefs were essential if his morale and fighting spirit were to be sustained. But the Viet Cong were only a means to an end. As General Weyand said in his analysis of Tet-68:

Applying the test of *cui bono* (for whose benefit) it can be seen that the real losers of Tet-68 were the South Vietnamese Communists (the Viet Cong or PRG) who surfaced, led the attacks, and were destroyed in the process. . . . Just as the Russians eliminated their
Polish competitors [with] the Warsaw Uprising, the North Vietnamese eliminated their southern competitors with Tet-68. They thereby insured that the eventual outcome of the war would be a South Vietnam dominated and controlled, not by South Vietnamese Communists, but by the North Vietnamese.\textsuperscript{13}

As we saw earlier, after Tet-68 the majority of the day-to-day combat in Vietnam was carried out by North Vietnamese troops, and the Viet Cong had been reduced to no more than 20 percent of the Communist fighting force.

Although most of the literature on North Vietnam and the Viet Cong is misleading, that is not to say that there were no analysts who were aware of the true nature of the war. The problem was that counterinsurgency dogma had so distorted our own frame of reference that such analyses did not fit the fashion of the time. For example, in 1963, a year before the Gulf of Tonkin incident, P. J. Honey, a lecturer in Vietnamese at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London, wrote:

\begin{quote}
The clearest statement of the long-term objectives of the Lao Dong Party which has yet come to light is to be found in a secret party document captured by the French Expeditionary Corps in North Vietnam during the spring of 1952. . . . The ultimate aim of the Vietnamese Communist leadership is to install Communist regimes in the whole of Vietnam, in Laos, and in Cambodia . . . \textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

The proof of Honey's analysis is in what Clausewitz called “judgments by results.” A Vietnam under the domination of the North was achieved on 2 July 1976 when the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) with headquarters in Hanoi was proclaimed. Hegemony over Laos was achieved when the Pathet Lao seized control of Vientiane in August 1975. In Cambodia the attainment of the objective was delayed by the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot, who seized control of Phnom Penh in April 1975. On Christmas Day 1978, Vietnam launched a multidivisional cross-border attack on Cambodia to overthrow the Pol Pot government. On 7 January 1979, they announced the foundation of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea. Although sporadic fighting still continues, Indo-China is effectively under Vietnamese control.

In his 1973 analysis of North Vietnamese strategy John Collins, former director of Military Strategy Studies at the National War College and now a member of the Congressional Research Service, stated that “enemy strategy can be outlined quickly, since it was simple, concise, and consistent . . . the opposition knew what they wanted to do, they had the initiative, and they had the winning combination . . . Controlling and communizing all of Indochina have always been the foe’s overriding objectives.”\textsuperscript{15}

In contrast with North Vietnam who could focus all of their attention on the conquest of South Vietnam, the formulation of U.S. objectives was much more complex. It is difficult to recall now that at the beginning Vietnam did not occupy center stage and was only subsidiary to a number of other issues facing the American President. Domestic issues, for example, were a major preoccupation. Even in the area of national security the primary concern was not Vietnam per se but the larger issue of the containment of Soviet and Chinese com-
munism. The result was that American political objectives were never clear during the entire course of the war. University of Nebraska Professor Hugh M. Arnold examined the official justifications most often cited for America's involvement in Indochina from 1949 through 1967. Compared to the one North Vietnamese objective, he found some twenty-two separate American rationales. They can be grouped into three major categories: from 1949 until about 1962, emphasis was on resisting communist aggression; from 1962 until about 1968, the emphasis was on counterinsurgency; after 1968, preserving the integrity of American commitments was the main emphasis.

Only once during the early period from 1949 until 1962 did the United States seriously consider commitment of U.S. ground combat forces. This was in the spring of 1954 when the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu was under siege. Then Army Chief of Staff General Matthew B. Ridgway commented on his analysis of the situation, beginning with his view on the relationship between the Army leadership and its civilian decision-makers:

The statesman, the senior civilian authority, says to the soldier (and by “soldier” I mean the professional military man—the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force as represented in the persons of the Chiefs of Staff): “This is our national policy. This is what we wish to accomplish, or would like to do. What military means are required to support it?”

The soldier studies this problem in detail. “Very well,” he says to the statesman. “Here is what your policy will require in men and guns, in ships and planes.”

If civilian authority finds the cost to be greater than the country can bear, then either the objectives themselves should be modified, or the responsibility for the risks involved should be forthrightly accepted. Under no circumstances, regardless of pressures from whatever source or motive, should the professional military man yield, or compromise his judgment for other than convincing military reasons. To do otherwise would be to destroy his usefulness.

He then went on to analyze the situation in Indochina. Some of the factors in this analysis were revealed by his Chief of Plans and Operations, Lieutenant General James M. Gavin. As we saw in an earlier chapter, fear of China was a major consideration. General Gavin wrote that “the more we studied the situation the more we realized that we were, in fact, considering going to war with China... If we would be, in fact, fighting China, then we were fighting her in the wrong place on terms entirely to her advantage... It seemed to us military planners that if an effort were made by the United States to secure Vietnam from Chinese military exploitation, and that if force on the scale that we were talking about were to be employed, then the Chinese would very likely reopen the fighting in Korea.”

As a result of his analysis General Ridgway concluded that “we could have fought in Indo-China. We could have won, if we had been willing to pay the tremendous cost in men and money that such intervention would have required—a cost that in my opinion would have eventually been as great as, or greater than, that we paid in Korea.” General Ridgway went on to say that:
As soon as the full report was in, I lost no time in having it passed on up the chain of command. It reached President Eisenhower. To a man of his military experience its implications were immediately clear. The idea of intervening was abandoned, and it is my belief that the analysis which the Army made and presented to higher authority played a considerable, perhaps a decisive part in persuading our government not to embark on that tragic adventure.¹⁹

President Eisenhower and General Ridgway were looking at the situation in Vietnam in the traditional military frame of reference. Their concern was U.S. ability to “destroy the enemy’s armed forces and his will to fight.” This frame of reference was obvious in a later conversation between President Johnson and former President Eisenhower in February 1965. In his biography, President Johnson relates that:

I asked him about the possibility of Chinese Communist or Soviet intervention in Vietnam, the two fears expressed to me so often by members of Congress. Eisenhower said that if they threatened to intervene we should pass the word to them, quietly but firmly, that they should take care “lest dire results occur.” He recalled how the armistice had been achieved finally in Korea. Talks had been going on inconclusively for a long time. When he became President, he passed three messages through secret channels to the Koreans and the Chinese. The gist of the messages was that if a satisfactory armistice was not signed promptly, he was going to remove the “limits we were observing as to the area of combat and the weapons employed.” He thought we should do the same if there were a threat of Chinese Communist intervention in Vietnam.

Eisenhower saw merit . . . putting an American division into Vietnam just south of the demilitarized zone to help protect the South, but he did not favor any large deployment at that time. Later in our talk he said that we could not let the Indochina peninsula fall. He hoped that it would not be necessary to use the six or eight divisions mentioned in some speculation. But if it should prove necessary, he said, “so be it.”²⁰

This traditional frame of reference was also reflected by Lieutenant General James M. Gavin in a February 1966 article in Harper’s. Best remembered as advocating an “enclave strategy,” General Gavin also said that “if our objective is to secure all of South Vietnam [a strategy which General Gavin did not advocate] then forces should be deployed on the 17th parallel and along the Cambodian border adequate to do this. In view of the nature of the terrain, it might be necessary to extend our defenses on the 17th parallel to the Mekong River, and across part of Thailand. Such a course would take many times as much force as we now have in Vietnam.”²¹

But in the early 1960s, the traditional military frame of reference appeared to have no relevance. In 1962, we had adopted a whole new frame of reference—counterinsurgency. In his discussion of the Vietnam war, British researcher Gregory Palmer points out that:

The official view supported by the advice of Diem’s British advisor, Sir Robert Thompson, was that the appropriate strategy was counterinsurgency with emphasis on depriving the enemy of the support of the population by resettlement, pacification, good administration, and propaganda. This had two awkward consequences
for American policy: it contradicted the reason given for breaking the Geneva declaration, that the war was really aggression from the North, and, by closely associating the American government with the policies of the government of South Vietnam, it made Diem’s actions directly answerable to the American electorate.22

This contradiction is reflected in the mission statement for the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). According to General Westmoreland, MACV’s objective was:

To assist the Government of Vietnam and its armed forces to defeat externally directed and supported communist subversion and aggression and attain an independent South Vietnam functioning in a secure environment.23

Even a cursory mission analysis reveals two divergent specified tasks. The first specified task—“To assist the Government of Vietnam and its armed forces to defeat externally directed and supported communist subversion and aggression”—is clearly a legitimate military objective, albeit one difficult to accomplish. The second specified task—to “attain an independent South Vietnam functioning in a secure environment”—is more a political than a military objective. The confusion over objectives inherent in the MACV mission statement was to plague our conduct of the war.

Even without this confusion the task was demanding enough. To veterans of the Korean war, the first objective—defeating externally directed and supported communist subversion and aggression—must have provoked a sense of déjà vu. Given the political restrictions against carrying the war to North Vietnam, the words of General MacArthur in 1951 seemed to apply:

It seems to me the worst possible concept, militarily, that we would simply stay there, resisting aggression, so-called . . . it seems to me that [the way to “resist aggression” is to] destroy the potentialities of the aggressor to continually hit you . . . When you say, merely, “we are going to continue to fight aggression,” that is not what the enemy is fighting for. The enemy is fighting for a very definite purpose—to destroy our forces . . . 24

But in Vietnam the situation was even worse. In the Korean war we had come to grips with General MacArthur’s complaint and reconciled our political and military objectives, while keeping our focus and attention on the external aggressor—North Korea and the Chinese Communist forces. Such an adjustment of objectives was not unusual in war. As Clausewitz said, “The original political objects can greatly alter during the course of the war and may finally change entirely since they are influenced by events and their probable consequences.”25

In Vietnam such an adjustment was never made. Instead of focusing our attention on the external enemy, North Vietnam—the source of the war—we turned our attention to the symptom—the guerrilla war in the south—and limited our attacks on the North to air and sea actions only. In other words, we took the political task (nation building/counterinsurgency) as our primary mission and relegated the military task (defeating external aggression) to a secondary consideration. As we will
see in the next chapter, the effect was a failure to isolate the battlefield, but because of the confusion over objectives this fact was not readily apparent. Not only was it not apparent to the American field commander in Saigon, it was also not apparent to the decision-makers in Washington, whose decision-making process was dominated by a management approach heavily dependent on quantification—the so-called Planning Programming and Budget System (PPBS)—designed for “preparation for war” rather than for the conduct of war proper.

It is instructive to note that the 1921 definition of strategy quoted earlier in this chapter listed “preparation for war” and “direction of war” as distinct elements of strategy. They are distinct elements because “preparation for war” is primarily concerned with military economics, while “direction of war” (or “war proper”) is concerned with military strategy. Failure to understand this distinction led to the attempt to conduct “war proper” with decision-making apparatus designed for “preparation for war.” According to Gregory Palmer, this led to the concept of “progressive escalating pressure which would at some point cause Hanoi to cease to support the Viet Cong.” As he goes on to say:

Such a limited and specific aim, instead of the traditional military objectives such as victory or unconditional surrender, constituted a measurable and clear programmed output satisfying the requirements of PPBS. The principle of selection [of options] was to provide “maximum pressure” with minimum risk,” a military translation of the economists’ ratio of benefits and cost.26

But, as events were to prove, “measurable and clear programmed outputs” were no substitute for a well-thought-out comprehensive plan of war. As Clausewitz said:

War plans cover every aspect of a war, and weave them all into a single operation that must have a single, ultimate objective in which all particular aims are reconciled. No one starts a war—or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so—without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it. The former is its political purpose; the latter is its operational objective. This is the governing principle which will set its course, prescribe the scale of means and effort which is required, and make its influence felt throughout down to the smallest operational detail.27

One thing we did not “intend to achieve” was victory. As we have seen, our doctrine specifically excluded it as an aim in war. Testifying before the Senate in 1966, General Maxwell Taylor said that we were not trying to “defeat” North Vietnam, only “to cause them to mend their ways.” General Taylor likened the concept of defeating the enemy to “Appomattox or something of that sort.”28 Such a war aim lacked polarity with that of our enemy, who was fighting by the old rules and who kept victory as their ultimate objective throughout the war.

There was also another critical area where we lacked polarity. Concentrating our attention on South Vietnam’s internal problems rather than on the external enemy led to defining the ground war in terms of South Vietnam alone, a geographic definition that lacked symmetry with that of our enemy, who made no secret of the
fact that he was fighting the Indochina war and who used Laos and Cambodia with impunity. Unlike the China sanctuary, which at least made some strategic sense in avoiding a wider war against a major adversary, the sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia were a self-inflicted wound. The myth of their neutrality gave North Vietnam an immense tactical and strategic advantage that plagued us throughout the war.29

When the Nixon administration came into office in January 1969, they were aware of the inadequacy of our objectives in Vietnam. Kissinger reports that Vietnam was discussed at the new administration’s first meetings of the National Security Council. The military’s lack of strategic thought is revealed in Kissinger’s comment that their briefings “did not offer imaginative ideas to a new President eager for them.” Kissinger goes on to say, “For years, the military had been complaining about being held on a leash by the civilian leadership. But when Nixon pressed them for new strategies, all they could think of was resuming the bombing of the North.”30 In June 1969, a new mission was given to MACV. As Kissinger reports:

The new mission statement [which went into effect on August 15] focused on providing “maximum assistance” to the South Vietnamese to strengthen their forces, supporting pacification efforts, and reducing the flow of supplies to the enemy.31

This new mission statement formally announced our movement into the third category of political objectives—preserving the integrity of American commitments—which had been under way since Tet-68. Through Vietnamization, resisting aggression and nation building were to become a responsibility of the South Vietnamese government. Our military objective was now withdrawal, an objective accomplished in January 1973.

The confusion over objectives detailed above had a devastating effect on our ability to conduct the war. As Brigadier General Douglas Kinnard found in a 1974 survey of Army generals who had commanded in Vietnam, “almost 70 percent of the Army generals who managed the war were uncertain of its objectives.” Kinnard goes on to say that this “mirrors a deep-seated strategic failure: the inability of policy-makers to frame tangible, obtainable goals.”32

NOTES

1. FM 100–5, 19 February 1962, p. 46.
2. Partly as a result of this book, the principles of war have been revised to include both the strategic and战术 dimension and area contained in the 1961 editions of both Field Manual 100–1, The Field Manual, and Field Manual 100–5 Operations. An extract of these new principles is contained in Appendix A.
4. FM 100–5, 1 October 1939, p. 27.
6. FM 100–5, 19 February 1962, p. 4, and FM 100–5, 6 September 1968, pp. 1–2.
8. FM 100–5, 6 September 1968, p. 5–1.
10. 82nd Congress, 1st Session, Military Situation in the Far East, Vol. 1, p. 45.
CHAPTER 10

THE OFFENSIVE

Offensive action is necessary to achieve decisive results and maintain freedom of action. It permits the commander to exercise initiative and impose his will upon the enemy; to set the pace and determine the course of battle; to exploit enemy weakness and rapidly changing situations, and to meet unexpected developments. The defensive may be forced on the commander, but it should be deliberately adopted only as a temporary expedient while awaiting an opportunity for offensive action or for the purpose of economizing forces on a front where a decision is not sought. Even on the defensive the commander seeks every opportunity to seize the initiative and achieve decisive results by offensive action.

FM 100-5, 19 February 1962

The key to understanding the principle of *The Offensive* is contained in the first sentence of the definition: "Offensive action is necessary to achieve *decisive results* and to maintain *freedom of action.*" The task of achieving "decisive results" requires an appreciation of the difference between the *strategic* offensive and the *tactical* offensive. As Clausewitz explained:

The original means of strategy is victory—that is, tacti-