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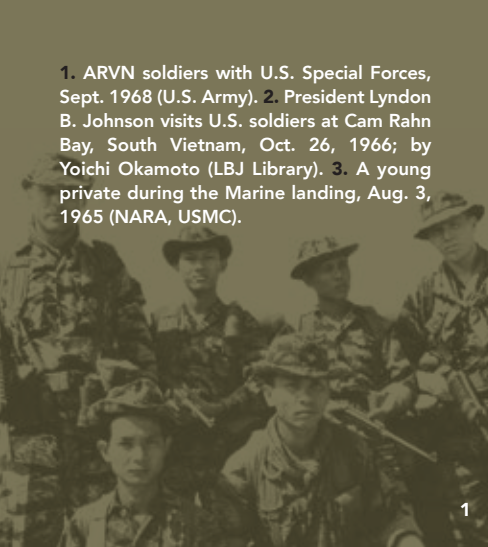
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A DISCONNECTED DIALOGUE

AMERICAN MILITARY STRATEGY, 1964-1968

GREGORY DADDIS

9. PFC Michael J. Mendoza fires M-16 into suspected Viet Cong occupied area during Operation Cook, Sept. 8, 1967, by Robert C. Lafoon (U.S. Army). **10.** U.S. Navy Catapult Officer signals launch to a Douglas A-4C *Skyhawk* aboard USS *Coral Sea*, South China Sea, March 24, 1965, by James F. Falk (USN).

IN 1995, Robert S. McNamara's *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (Times Books) hit bookstores. A mea culpa of sorts—hardly enough, his critics charged—the former U.S. Secretary of Defense detailed the many blunders and miscalculations leading to America's fateful loss in the Vietnam War. McNamara notably conceded he had "erred by not forcing . . . a knock-down, drag-out debate over the loose assumptions, unasked questions, and thin analyses underlying our military strategy in Vietnam."

The admission, supported by a careful reading of the historical record, begs larger questions: How do we remember American strategy in Vietnam? What language do we use to describe a war that proved so tragic, not only for the United States but, perhaps more importantly, for the millions of Vietnamese who lost their lives in a decades-long civil war? In coming to grips with a complex war, Americans, then and now, have relied on a series of tropes to streamline their conversations about a distasteful war. Terms like "attrition," "search-and-destroy," and "body count" have become convenient shorthand, replacing deeper explorations of a multifaceted conflict.

In fact, this bankruptcy in language proved momentous. As McNamara intimated, the failure of civilian policymakers and senior military leaders to force an honest dialogue over deeper strategic questions ensured that policy objectives for the war in Vietnam far outmatched the capabilities of the U.S. mission there. The disconnects between policy crafted in Washington and military strategy designed in Saigon go far in explaining the American outcome.

During the crucial years between 1964 and 1968, U.S. leaders failed to achieve any real consensus over what was possible in Vietnam, who was winning, and whether or not the war's political objectives were worth the sacrifices necessary to achieve them.

On Virtue and Victory

American political objectives in Southeast Asia had deep roots. By mid-1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson had assumed a strategic legacy from earlier administrations that seemingly left little room for maneuver. Fears of communism's global reach remained strong, as did assumptions underwriting the "domino theory" which presumed that if a U.S. ally fell to communism, other regional powers would follow suit. To many Americans, it seemed far less important that the Vietnamese were grappling with issues related to national identity in the post-colonial era than the possibility the whole of Vietnam might fall under the evil influence of communism.

Without question, LBJ chose to commit the United States to backing an independent, stable, non-communist South Vietnam; in mid-1964, the Saigon government (GVN) seemed edging toward outright collapse. Reports from the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) and the American embassy relayed growing concerns of GVN instability, infiltration into South Vietnam by the communist North Vietnamese Army, and militarization of the insurgent National Liberation Front. If LBJ did not act, he feared, South Vietnam surely would fall.

Such a decision partially rested on contemporary notions about the utility of U.S. military force abroad.

11. Young men from South Vietnam's 44 provinces train for 13 weeks at the National Training Center, 1970. Their job: Help villagers help themselves (NARA). 12. Flame thrower during Operation New Castle, March 26, 1967 (DOD, NARA). 13. Soldiers carry a wounded comrade through a swampy area, 1969 (DOD, NARA). 14. General William Westmoreland and President Lyndon B. Johnson at the White House, April 6, 1968, by Yoichi Okamoto (LBJ Library, NARA). 15. Vietnamese Army troops in combat operations against Viet Cong guerrillas in marshy delta country, 1961 (DOD).

EXCEPTIONALISM

Policymakers simply assumed American power would prevail.

16. Second Lieutenant Kathleen M. Sullivan treats a Vietnamese child during Operation MED CAP. Teams of U.S. Air Force doctors, nurses, and aides travel to villages to treat the sick, 1967 (DOD, NARA). 17. Marine Company 1 soldier on patrol south of Da Nang, Oct. 30, 1969 (DOD, NARA). 18. Marines blow up bunkers and tunnels used by the Viet Cong during Operation Georgia, May 5, 1966 (DOD, NARA). 19. John Kerry, spokesman for Vietnam Veterans Against the War, April 21, 1971, by Warren K. Leffler, *U.S. News & World Report Magazine* (LOC).

Most Americans, still viewing victory in World War II as proof of their nation's power and virtue, saw few, if any, limits to what they could accomplish. In short, almost any foreign policy problem could be solved with the right mix of military power, economic support, and developmental aid.

When Operation Rolling Thunder, an extended bombing campaign against North Vietnam in early 1965, failed to deliver any appreciable gains, consensus grew inside the White House for further escalation. Johnson inched closer and closer to deploying U.S. ground combat troops in Vietnam. There was little discussion, however, about how best to use these troops and how likely their deployment would achieve U.S. political objectives in Southeast Asia. As McNamara admitted, senior policymakers simply assumed American power would prevail and thus maintain a noncommunist nation in South Vietnam.

Power, Purpose, and Pacification

The conception and implementation of U.S. military strategy in Vietnam fell to MACV's commander, General William C. Westmoreland. A veteran of World War II and the Korean War, and a former West Point superintendent, Westmoreland was widely respected. His presence in crafting strategy loomed large. Throughout that crucial first year of American combat troop deployment to Vietnam, few policymakers sought to link the president's larger political objectives to the military strategy being developed in Westmoreland's headquarters. Both the White House and MACV realized difficulties were ahead, yet only a handful of senior leaders questioned the feasibility of attaining lofty political aims with a strategy ultimately resting on a weak

Saigon government. Critical strategic discussions—those matching military means to political ends—were missing in the year of American escalation.

Standard critiques of Westmoreland's strategy contend the U.S. Army concentrated solely on "attrition," the wearing down of enemy combat units. In actuality, MACV undertook a comprehensive approach. Still, strategic planning rested upon universally-held assumptions about U.S. military power and what it could deliver. Even with presidential restrictions limiting the war's geographical boundaries and prohibiting the call-up of U.S. strategic reserve forces, uniformed leaders remained optimistic that, over time, they could fulfill Johnson's political aims.

Westmoreland consequently developed a wide-ranging concept of operations in mid-1965. He not only had to keep North Vietnamese army units, or "bully boys" as he termed them, away from the population, but also defeat the local insurgency, the "termites," operating throughout South Vietnam's hamlets and villages. This dual-threat meant Westmoreland could not ignore the military aspects of a political conflict. After first "halting the losing trend" by defending South Vietnam's population centers, the U.S. and South Vietnamese allies would resume the offensive by attacking both enemy main force units and the insurgency's infrastructure.

During this critical phase, Westmoreland intended security increases to facilitate pacification, a process MACV defined as "establishing or re-establishing local government responsive to and involving participation of the people," thus linking the rural population to the GVN. Battle, in short,

had political purpose. In the final phase, MACV sought the insurgency's complete destruction while assisting Saigon in maintaining internal order and protecting the nation's borders. Throughout all phases, Westmoreland anticipated improvements within the South Vietnamese army (ARVN), so, ultimately, the Americans could hand over the war.

Casualties of War and Words

Many of those Americans, however, found their mission in Vietnam as frustrating as it was deadly. Long, grueling patrols across difficult terrain—through dark jungles and muddy rice paddies—frequently came up emptyhanded against an elusive enemy. Insurgent attacks, in the form of deadly ambushes, sapped U.S. manpower in combat units, while young American soldiers and marines contended with mines, booby traps, and the seemingly ever-present jungle boot rot. For combat soldiers, it proved an exhausting war. Worse (it seemed to them), Americans were doing all the hard fighting while their South Vietnamese allies took a safer back seat. Such attitudes were hardly fair (or accurate), as demonstrated by the losses ARVN troops and local territorial militia suffered through years of continual conflict. Still, the necessity to defeat the enemy in the field while simultaneously protecting the population from attack presented U.S. troops with challenges as taxing as they were complicated.

But such fighting held stark consequences for the South Vietnamese population as well. Military operations forced families from their ancestral homes, leaving a refugee population uprooted and adrift for months at a time. The use of herbicides, intended to deprive the enemy of natural cover, destroyed

COMPLICATED MISSION

Many troops could not make sense of a war requiring them to simultaneously create (nation-build) and destroy (defeat the enemy).

19. General William Westmoreland, flanked by Secretary of State Dean Rusk, left, and President Lyndon Johnson, right, at a press conference outside the White House, April 7, 1968, by Frank Wolfe (LBJ Library, NARA).
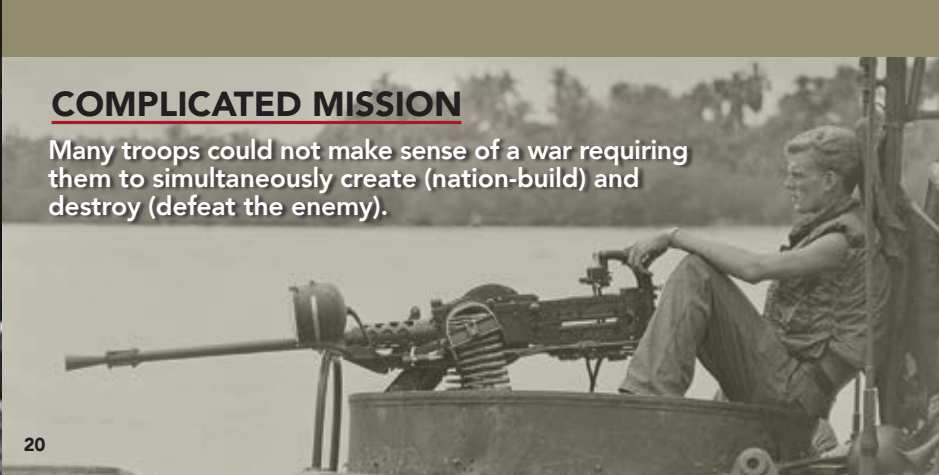
20. A U.S. Navy river patrol boat crewman during a day-long patrol on the Go Cong River, Jan. 1967 (DOD, NARA).

crops and exposed rural farmers and their families to dangerous chemicals. And young American soldiers, unable to tell friend from foe in a war without front lines, often took a heavy-handed approach when dealing with the population. While atrocities like My Lai were far from common, the South Vietnamese lived on a landscape permeated by death, destruction, and fear.

Battle also became a main component of the war's popular narrative. Terms like "body counts," "attrition," and "search-and-destroy" quickly evolved into mainstays of public discussions on the war, overshadowing the allies' more nuanced strategic approach. To critics, Westmoreland ignored the war's political components in a misguided search for heroic battlefield victories.

Yet, a deeper examination finds a far more holistic strategy. Westmoreland's command focused on a wide array of tasks—expanding the population living in "secure" areas, ensuring the defense of food-producing regions, and increasing the usage of critical roads and railroads. The 1966 Honolulu Conference decree charged Westmoreland to "attrite" Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) "forces at a rate at least as high as their capacity to put men in the field." But aiming for such a "crossover point" did not preclude MACV from accomplishing other important nonmilitary objectives.

Certainly, a multidimensional strategy risked uncertainty at the soldier level. In the field, many troops could not make sense of a war requiring them to simultaneously create (nation-build) and destroy (defeat the enemy). Here, Westmoreland struggled to articulate his strategy to numerous audiences—the White House, the Saigon leadership, the press, his own troops, and the American public back home. By the end of 1966, while the enemy tide had been stemmed, forward momentum seemed lacking. Some observers began to wonder if the war had sunk into an uneasy stalemate.

Limits of Military Force

The increasing focus on pacification—what LBJ called "the other war"—illustrated the ways in which the White House aimed to export the Great Society domestic agenda abroad. While the president made clear his desire to accentuate the war's non-military aspects, little debate accompanied decisions on how (or even if) U.S. military forces could spur "revolutionary development" inside South Vietnam, balancing security with economic, political, and social development. American-centric definitions of terms like "revolutionary development," "civic action," and "pacification" habitually seemed out-of-step with rural realities in Vietnam.

MACV's definition of civic action, for example, intended to employ "indigenous military forces on projects useful to the local population at all levels." But such initiatives failed to inspire nationwide loyalty to the Saigon government, a necessity in a political civil war. In truth, the allies frequently talked past each other when relating military strategy to concepts of social revolution among South Vietnam's population.

Still, MACV put its shoulder into pacification and, in 1967, created the Office of Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS), centralizing U.S. efforts within military headquarters. As in so many aspects of strategy, though, too few of the war's managers asked whether the American definition of pacification was even feasible. How, for instance, could foreigners establish lasting bonds between local peoples and their own government?

The pacification effort proved more than just rhetoric. In the field, units like the 4th Infantry Division instituted a "Good Neighbor" program as groundwork for social and economic development. Others, like the 25th Infantry Division in Hau Nghia province, undertook civic action projects: constructing schools, hospitals, and churches; assisting in agricultural planting, harvesting, and processing; and furnishing food, clothing, and medical supplies to the local population.

Once again, however, a broken dialogue between U.S. forces and the South Vietnamese seemed to undermine any sense of lasting progress. Local communities too often blamed Americans, rather than insurgents, for the devastation brought upon their hamlets and villages. ARVN officers and soldiers chafed under the tutelage of overbearing U.S. advisors who too often demeaned them. And, across South Vietnam, local province and district chiefs too often felt helpless inside a deadly war being waged across their landscapes.

Pacification surely gave testament to a comprehensive allied strategy, but that same strategy foundered, in part, because of largely unexamined assumptions about military force achieving social and political aims in a civil war over national identity.

The War for Public Opinion

By early 1967, many Americans found it difficult to be optimistic about Vietnam. Westmoreland's headquarters and the CIA engaged in a bitter battle over assessing progress. Military operations made only temporary gains in the countryside and Westmoreland struggled to articulate his strategy in an understandable way. All the while, the lack of demonstrable progress led to increasing dissent at home.

Worse, the war seemed to be unraveling the very fabric of South Vietnamese society. The social dislocation caused by large-scale combat operations—families being forced from devastated villages caught in the crossfire of war—undermined pacification plans and larger U.S. policy objectives. The rural population increasingly saw the ARVN as an occupying force, while the army itself was racked by low pay, morale problems, and a lack of political training. Nor did the Saigon government appear to be making inroads into improving its legitimacy with the people.

On the American home front, a growing antiwar movement voiced concerns over the devastation being wrought by U.S. policies abroad. More and more Americans began questioning whether so much destruction was justified to achieve only a military stalemate. White House officials believed they were now fighting two wars—one in Vietnam, the other at home.

Such domestic tensions led President Johnson to initiate a wide-ranging "salesmanship" campaign in 1967 to demonstrate progress in Vietnam. Three times that year, Westmoreland came home to report on the war. But the stalemate seemed only to harden. Consequently, an increasing number of politically-conscious draftees began entering the army's ranks, willing to question their government's official narrative of the war. So contentious had the war become, that by the late 1960s and early 1970s, the U.S. Army in Vietnam appeared to be at war with itself.

Strategists despised the word "stalemate." This was as true in Hanoi as it was in Washington. By late 1967, North Vietnamese leaders formulated a grand offensive into South Vietnam aimed at achieving a "decisive" military victory. Westmoreland's command sensed something was afoot, but doubted the enemy's capacity to launch a major operation across the breadth of South Vietnam. It would soon become clear MACV had greatly underestimated their adversaries.

During the 1968 Tet holiday, communist forces launched a countrywide offensive throughout South Vietnam in late January and into February. For months, senior U.S. officials had publicly declared the war was being won. The Tet offensive now undermined all their claims. Few areas in South Vietnam seemed safe. And while the allies successfully fought back enemy forces, the damage had been done. A disconnected dialogue had turned into a yawning credibility gap. To many Americans at home, only two prospects seemed likely—either U.S. military leaders had been inept in managing the war or, perhaps worse, their government had been lying to them. Either way, the war in Vietnam no longer seemed worth supporting.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, with its separate yet increasingly integrated elements, now seems less to ignite or intensify these speculations than to subsume them—at least for the time of one's contemplation of the Memorial itself—into more fundamental questions confronted on a personal level: Is war worth the human costs? Can wars be classified as just or unjust? Why did my friends die and not me? Does seeing my reflection affect my relation to those named, or to the war itself?

It was probably inevitable, even necessary, that any memorial expression of a controversial war would itself be controversial. In the words of Maya Lin, "To fly we have to have resistance." Thirty-five years on, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial seems to have reached a state of unifying equilibrium: between the statuary figures of soldiers and nurses and the names of their brothers and sisters carved in granite; between what the Wall seeks to say to us and what we are able to read for ourselves in its black stone pages.

Michael Herr, in *Dispatches,* speaks of hearing this story from a soldier in Vietnam:

> Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened.

In the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a text of that story. Though viewing the names cannot tell us what happened, visualizing the thousands of promising lives lost, the sea of names that reflect our own faces as we stand at that Wall, can urge us toward a more peaceful future.

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EXTRA! READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- "Making the Memorial," Maya Lin, *The New York Review of Books*, Nov. 2, 2000. Lin's personal essay on her aesthetics and inspiration for design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. nybooks.com
- "About the Vietnam Veterans Memorial," Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. History of the memorial and its design, construction controversy, and names of the fallen. vvmf.org/memorial

Embracing War's Complexities

In their postwar memoirs, many senior U.S. military officers would argue they had won the war militarily but that Washington politicians had lost it politically. After Tet, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had requested troop reinforcements, only to be denied by a president who would decide in March not to run for reelection. After 1969, they claimed, Congress and the Nixon White House had succumbed to domestic pressures, walking away from South Vietnamese allies in their time of greatest need. In this narrative, the military had done their duty only to be forsaken by feckless politicians.

Yet another storyline arose in the postwar years: that Westmoreland had mismanaged the war by committing to a senseless strategy of "attrition." In this tale, narrow-minded officers sought glory through killing the enemy, dismissing the far more important aspects of population security and the political conflict so central to determining which side ultimately would prevail. No wonder, the narrative went, that massacres like My Lai had occurred. In the process, any nuances of American strategy were conveniently brushed aside.

Such competing narratives—neither one an accurate account of American experiences in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968—offer valuable perspective on how we talk about war. Our dialogue matters. The American war in Vietnam proved far more complex than reductive narratives would have us believe. And if we are to avoid similar fates, of simply assuming that American military power is a panacea for any overseas social or political problem, then we must embrace those complexities. Wars are complicated affairs—and so should be our discussions of them.

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EXTRA! READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- "U.S. Military Strategy in Vietnam," Gregory Daddis, lecture at New York Military Affairs Symposium, Sept. 5, 2014. The definition of military strategy and its implementation in the Vietnam War. c-span.org
- *Vietnam War*, Digital History website, University of Houston. Textbook history of the war includes discussion of guerrilla warfare, military operations, major battles, and more. Links to primary documents, biographies, and audio. digitalhistory.uh.edu (Era tab: Vietnam War)
- "The Military and Diplomatic Course of the Vietnam War," David L. Anderson, *The Oxford Companion to American Military History* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1999). A readable, general-audience description of the many "sides" of the Vietnam conflict and how the U.S. escalated its involvement. english.illinois.edu/maps/vietnam/anderson.htm