



Footnotes

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What Students Need to Know About the Vietnam War

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The Vietnam War—or as the Vietnamese call it, the American War—is the longest war in American history (so far) and the first one the U.S. clearly lost. More significant for our purposes, its history is also the most contested. How contested it is can be readily illustrated by the titles of two influential books published during the last three years. The most recent, by John Prados, is called *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War* (University Press of Kansas, April 2009). The other, by Mark Moyar, is called *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-65* (Cambridge University Press, 2006). Whether the American war in Vietnam was an intractable mess or a near triumph tragically missed, in other words whether the war was “winnable” or not, is at the heart of most historical discussions about the U.S. in Vietnam. (Both sides in the debate usually cheerfully disregard the question of how “winning” is to be understood.)

Of course there is an important subtext to this debate. The Vietnam War called into question many of the most widespread assumptions that Americans had held about their country: that the U.S. was a special nation, that it adhered to a unique set of values, that its foreign policy was designed to promote freedom and safeguard democracy, that American soldiers were always good-hearted and patriotic, that American leaders could be trusted to carry out the complex and often secret tasks of national security with competence and integrity. Some writers and politicians would like to partially restore some of this faith and confidence by showing that the U.S. loss in Vietnam could have been avoided and that it was not, in any case, due to systemic faults in American government and society. It is therefore rather difficult to identify with precision what “students ought to know about the Vietnam War” because much of what they probably ought to know about is subject to dispute.

As a start we need to remember that, in a sense there were several separate, though related, Vietnam Wars going on at the same time between 1965 and 1973. There was the air war against North Vietnam and against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. There was the ground war in South Vietnam waged by the North Vietnamese Army, the Americans, the South Vietnamese and the Viet Cong (who called their army the People's Liberation Armed Forces—PLAF). There was the “Other War” to establish the South Vietnamese government's control over the rural areas and destroy the Viet Cong presence there, often referred to as the pacification campaign. In the U.S. there was the “war at home”—the growth of both organized and unorganized opposition to the war, the movement of public opinion, and the impact of those developments on domestic politics. And there was what might be called the diplomacy of the war involving negotiations, at first through intermediaries, between the United States and North Vietnam as well as relations with U.S. allies, the Soviet Union, and eventually China. Of these, the two that have been subject to most argument are the air war and the Pacification campaign.

Air War

The sustained bombing of North Vietnam began in the Spring of 1965. By the end of that year American aircraft had flown over 55,000 sorties and dropped 33,000 tons of bombs on the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. By the end of 1967 the U.S. had dropped 860,000 tons of bombs on North Vietnam. That was more than the 630,000 tons of bombs dropped during the Korean War and far more than the 500,000 tons dropped in the War against Japan. About 35,000 North Vietnamese are estimated to have died in the bombing, which the communists reported to have destroyed virtually all industrial and communications facilities built since 1954.

There was heated disagreement about what all this bombing had accomplished. When the initial air attacks against North Vietnam were launched, strategists in the White House had expected that the pain and shock inflicted by the bombing would soon compel the North Vietnamese to stop, or at least slow down, their support of the war in South Vietnam. They also believed that the bombing would boost the morale of the Republic of South Vietnam, sorely beset by increasingly destructive attacks by the Viet Cong.

The bombing did boost the morale of South Vietnamese leaders—or at least they told the Americans it did. Unfortunately, this display of will and determination had little apparent effect on the North Vietnamese, whose commitment to the war in the south showed no sign of abating. Washington leaders were acutely aware that unleashing dozens of aircraft and thousands of pounds of bombs against a country on the border of the People's Republic of China and closely allied to the Soviet Union carried considerable risks. Many of them held vivid memories of the Chinese intervention in Korea fifteen years before. For those reasons the bombings were carefully regulated and modulated from Washington. Each list of targets to be bombed was submitted one (later two) weeks at a time through a long chain stretching from the military commands to the Department of Defense, the State Department, the White House, and often the President himself. Washington officials even determined the strength, altitude, and direction of each strike.

The President and his top civilian advisers also saw the bombing as a slow and deliberate means of compelling the North Vietnamese to ease their pressure on the south. The carrot of stopping the bombing was deemed as important as the stick of continuing it, and bombing pauses were provided for. But the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Army, Navy, and Air commanders in Vietnam had no use for carrots and sticks. Their preference was for sledgehammers. They wanted to attack North Vietnam rapidly, unrelentingly, with overwhelming force. Instead they had to settle for a finely adjusted mix of restraints, of fits and starts emanating from Washington. Aviators saw this approach as absurd and dangerous, and the generals saw it as militarily unsound and futile.

With the commitment of American combat troops to Vietnam in the summer of 1965, Washington's emphasis shifted from bombing as a way of breaking North Vietnamese will to bombing as a way of depriving Hanoi of the means to wage war in the south. The list of targets was steadily increased, along with the rate and scale of attacks. Yet the increase was gradual, and entire areas of North Vietnam, including the cities of Hanoi and Haiphong, which contained important industrial and port facilities, were spared. Also off limits were areas within 25 miles of the Chinese border.

As the bombing continued, North Vietnam greatly strengthened its air defenses. China and Russia supplied it with sophisticated anti-aircraft guns, radars, and missiles, as well as jet fighter aircraft, until by 1967 it had one of the most modern air defense systems in the world. The limited bombing campaign in the north, while increasing numbers of American troops were being committed to combat in the south, seemed ineffective and illogical to the Joint Chiefs and to most military commanders in the field. The Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, expressed a view that would be repeated by military leaders many times throughout the war when he declared at the end of 1965, "The Armed Forces of the United States should not be required to fight this war with one arm tied behind their backs"

On the other hand, the Central Intelligence Agency emphasized that North Vietnam was an agricultural nation with a primitive transportation system and few industries. Almost all of the communists' military equipment came from China and the Soviet Union.

As for the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces in the South, they were dependent on the North for only a very small amount of supplies and equipment, estimated at about 100 tons a day. To the intelligence analysts, then, North Vietnam looked like a very unrewarding object of air attack; there simply weren't enough high-value targets. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's analysts calculated that the United States was spending almost ten dollars in direct operational costs for every one dollar of damage inflicted on North Vietnam. Those operational costs also included almost five hundred planes lost and hundreds of aviators killed or captured by the end of 1966.

“To bomb the North sufficiently to make a radical impact upon Hanoi’s political, economic, and social structure,” McNamara told the President in October 1966, “would require an effort which we could make but which would not be stomached either by our own people or by world opinion, and it would involve a serious risk of drawing us into war with China.”

The debate over the strategy and operational approach to the air war is far from settled. However, with the availability of documents from the “other side” due to the end of the Cold War, it is now possible to evaluate the criticism of Johnson’s direction of the war in a new light. On the one hand, there were factions in North Vietnam who had doubts about the policy of waging all-out war in South at any cost. To these doubters, the bombing provided further evidence that the attempt to win the south was not worth the costs to the progress of building socialism in the North. So the bombing did have an impact on some communist leaders. On the other hand, the doubtful faction was quite powerless to do anything against the much stronger “liberate-the-south-now” faction, headed by Le Duan, that completely dominated decision making in Hanoi through early 1968.

Similarly, we can now see that Johnson and his advisors were probably right in being super-cautious about the danger of intervention by China. Thousands of Chinese military engineers and antiaircraft units were heavily involved in the defense of North Vietnam. China had explicitly promised Hanoi that it would intervene should the U.S. invade North Vietnam. And, unlike in the case of Korea, the Chinese government had given the United States clear and firm, albeit secret, warnings about Beijing’s reaction should the U.S. go too far in Vietnam.

Pacification

Another subject of lively debate is pacification and the question of whether the U.S. actually won the war in South Vietnam between 1968 and 1972 by shifting its emphasis to a greatly enhanced counterinsurgency effort to win the “hearts and minds” of the rural population. This effort was made more feasible by the heavy losses that the National Liberation Front (NLF) had suffered during Tet and follow-up offensives in 1968. A new intelligence and surveillance program called “Phoenix” was launched, intended to specifically identify and neutralize the remaining Viet Cong cadre.

By early 1969 it was apparent that the security situation in the countryside was improving. Communist defections reached an all-time high, and thousands of Viet Cong agents and functionaries were reported killed or captured. By the end of 1969 over 70 percent of the population were rated by American pacification analysts as living in areas under government control, as opposed to 42 percent at the beginning of 1968.

Even those who had come to regard all Saigon reports and statistics with deep skepticism could not deny the physical evidence of improved security. Roads and rivers that had been closed for years were reopened to civilian traffic. Bridges were repaired, and even the railroad began regular service again. By 1970 the dangerous “Street Without Joy” area of coastal Quang Tri province had been cleared of major enemy units for the first time since 1963.

William Colby, the CIA official who headed CORDS, the American umbrella organization for direction and support of pacification, not surprisingly sees that effort as a great success, a “lost victory” as Colby termed it in his memoirs (*Lost Victory*, 1989). General Creighton Abrams’ biographer, Lewis Sorley, expressed a similar view in one of the more memorable passages in Vietnam War literature. “There came a day,” Sorley wrote, “when the war was won. The fighting wasn’t over but the war was won. This achievement can probably best be dated in late 1970... By then the South Vietnamese countryside had been widely pacified...”

Despite the confidence of Colby and Sorley, it remains impossible to know a lot about the counterinsurgency situation between 1969 and 1972 without more detailed studies for many of South Vietnam’s widely varying provinces. None of the few that have been published so far provided much support for the idea that the pacification struggle was “won” by 1970.

My own view is that during 1969-71 the South Vietnamese and Americans came as close as they ever would to winning the war for the countryside, but not close enough. The Viet Cong, beset by losses and shortages of supplies, hounded by South Vietnamese government security forces, still hung on and did not disintegrate. They retained a number of their base areas in the more inaccessible parts of the Mekong Delta, along the Cambodian and Laotian

borders, and in southern I Corps, the military region bordering North Vietnam. Even in the provinces that appeared to be most firmly under Saigon's control, communists were far from extinct. "We rid the country of larger enemy forces and armed every South Vietnamese who could stand still," Colonel Jack Weissinger, a senior adviser with extensive experience in Vietnam, stated. "Yet the government forces were still fearful. They were more afraid of the dedication, persistence, and uncompromising attitude of [the Viet Cong] than they were in their numbers. In some villages we got the Front cadres down to two or three but that was just enough to hang in there."

Colby's reports themselves revealed that in 1971 nearly 45 percent of rural villagers in I Corps lived within 1,000 meters of a recent terrorist incident. In Hau Ngia Province in III Corps near Saigon during the same period, an official or a Hoi Chanh was killed or wounded every few days throughout the year. More important, the top leadership of the Saigon government and army remained as dependent as ever upon the United States, not only for military support but for ideas, strategy, doctrine, and tactics. The same problems of sloth, incompetence, corruption, and nepotism that had always plagued the military and administrative organs of the South Vietnamese government remained generally unchanged. A province or district chief might be removed here, a more competent and honest commander or administrator might be promoted there, usually as a result of relentless prodding, but the general picture remained unchanged.

American GI Experience

Compelling as the Pacification debate may be to counterinsurgency experts (who have begun to crawl out of the woodwork again), they are unlikely to be of great interest to students. Instead, what most fascinates young men and women about the war are the individual experiences of American GIs in Vietnam. Teachers are unlikely ever to have a class that is not well-supplied with students who have stories from their parents, uncles, aunts, grandparents, neighbors, et al. about what it was really like "in the Nam." Perhaps the best way to regard these stories is to recall the observation of one of my Quantico instructors many years ago. "No Vietnam story is ever completely true or completely false."

It could hardly be otherwise. Well over two million men served in Vietnam between 1963 and 1974. The great majority served there only about one year during the eight-year period the U.S. was directly involved in combat. The conditions and intensity of operations in Vietnam varied enormously; from the World War I-style warfare of Khe Sanh to the "amphibious" riverine warfare of the Mekong Delta, from fierce clashes in the mountains and jungles to endless patrols in the agricultural lowlands, where the main menaces were often mines and booby traps. Even in a single province, the pattern of battle and death could vary enormously. A study prepared for the Pentagon of operation by a single Marine division in one province during 1968 and 1969 showed wide variations in the tactics employed by the U.S. and communist forces, the terrain, and the cost in U.S. casualties. The causes of the casualties also varied. In one operation, almost 30 percent of the casualties were due to mines and booby traps. In another, there were virtually no losses to those devices.

Despite the attention paid in the media to such large engagements as Khe Sanh, An Loc, and the struggles around Hue and Saigon during Tet, most of the "battles" of the Vietnam War were short, sharp clashes between company-, platoon-, or squad-size units. The majority lasted only a few hours, often only a few minutes. There were hundreds of such small engagements during 1968 in Vietnam, and, although clashes between large units continued to capture the attention of the Pentagon and the press, these small engagements remain the characteristic "battle" for most GIs.

Short as they usually were, these small battles could be costly indeed. Most U.S. casualties occurred during the first few minutes of a fight, before the U.S. unit could bring supporting artillery aircraft to bear on the enemy. The head of the MACV operations center, Brigadier General J.R. Chaisson, estimated that in engagements in the rugged, jungle-covered mountains of the central highlands, it was not unusual for a U.S. company to sustain twenty to fifty casualties in the first few minutes of contact.

In popular culture the Vietnam veteran is almost always portrayed as a man (never a woman) who spent most of his time in the jungle confronting the elusive Viet Cong; a man who had experienced many terrifying and tragic events in the course of frequent combat and now suffers from some sort of post-traumatic stress disorder. Given this widely accepted image, it may come as a surprise to your students that the majority of GIs who served in Vietnam were seldom, if ever, in direct contact with the enemy. What proportion of men actually experienced combat in the television sense is hard to measure exactly. One method is to count the percentage serving in maneuver battalions. A maneuver battalion is a combat unit of battalion size, usually infantry, armored cavalry tanks, or mechanized infantry, that is able

to move under its own resources and engage the enemy with its organic weapons. In 1968, the U.S. had 112 maneuver battalions, and Department of Defense figures showed 29 percent of total Army personnel in Vietnam and 34 percent of the Marines as serving in maneuver battalions.

The large majority of GIs who did not operate in the field served as supply, service, or administrative troops stationed in or near one of the dozen-odd American base complexes such as Quang Tri and Dong Ha in the north near the DMZ, Phu Bai near Hue, Da Nang, Qui Nhon, Nha Trang, and Cam Ranh Bay along the central coast, and the Saigon-Bien Hoa complex, the largest of all. All were located near large airfield or port facilities and housed upwards of 10,000 U.S. troops.

In general, the larger the base or headquarters, the greater were the amenities. Troops at the major installations often enjoyed hot food, electricity, hot showers, a club, athletic facilities, movies, and plenty of beer. Many clubs were air-conditioned, and the larger ones featured dining rooms where hamburgers, French fries, fried chicken, or steak were always available.

This is not to imply that GIs “in the rear” had a wonderful time—despite the derisive and contemptuous comments to that effect by troops in the field. Most men in service units worked hard at mind-numbing jobs 10 to 12 hours a day, seven days a week. The heat, insects, blowing dust, flooding and seas of mud during the rainy season were experienced by soldiers in all types of jobs. There was also the disquieting understanding that no place and no job was completely safe.

“You could be in the most protected space in Vietnam and still know that your safety was provisional; that early death, blindness, loss of legs, arms, or balls, major and lasting disfigurement—the whole rotten deal—could come in on the freaky fluky as easily in the so-called expected ways,” the reporter Michael Herr wrote, “the roads were mined, the trails booby-trapped, satchel charges and grenades blew up jeeps and movie theaters, the VC got work inside all the camps as shoe-shine boys and laundresses and honey-dippers; they’d starch your fatigues and burn your s— and then go home and mortar your area. Saigon and Cholon and Da Nang held such hostile vibes that you felt you were dry-sniped every time someone looked at you.”^[1]

For the minority of GIs serving in combat units in the field, life was not safe at all. Although officials in Washington were fond of pointing out that the casualty rate of American forces in Vietnam was considerably lower than in World War II and Korea, this had far more to do with the larger percentage of personnel in support units and the availability of improved medical care than with any differences in the intensity of combat. Men in maneuver battalions, the units that actually did the fighting, continued to run about the same chance of death or injury as their older relatives who had fought in Korea or in the Pacific. Indeed, during the first half of 1968 the overall Vietnam casualty rate exceeded the overall rate of all theaters in World War II, while the casualty rates for Army and marine maneuver battalions was more than four times as high.

So if we are going to make any sweeping generalizations about a war that defies generalization, we might say that the great majority of Vietnam GIs did not spend their time patrolling or fighting in the mountains, jungles or rice paddies, but for those who did, the dangers and the costs were comparable to other twentieth-century American wars.

Like other disasters in American history—the Civil War, the Great Depression, Pearl Harbor—the Vietnam War inspires denial, rationalization, and finger-pointing. Americans don’t like stories without happy endings or problems without solutions. But so as not to end on a completely negative note, I would like to read a short portion of one of Jan Herman’s dozens of interviews in his *Navy Medicine in Vietnam* (McFarland, Oct. 2008):

“I went back to Vietnam in 1997 with a few of the Marines I knew from that era. . . . We remembered a village called Nhi Ha. If you went to Nhi Ha in 1968 you were going to die. That was guaranteed. [In 1997] the village was still small but it had an elementary school. Some kids came out of the school onto a grassy little slope where we were eating our box lunches. One of the guys in our group had a bottle of bubble soap. He stood upwind from the kids. They stood on the grassy slope while Greg blew bubbles across their faces. As they reached up and tried to grab the bubbles they screamed with delight. Watching this, I realized the war was over.”

Notes

1. [^](#) Michael Herr, *Dispatches*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1977.

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