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Robert A. Mountel

Army War College
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania

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BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL ROBERT A. MOUNTEL
FIELD ARTILLERY



US ARMY WAR COLLEGE, CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA

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## ABSTRACT


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This paper is a review of the US involvement in Indo-China since 1954. It is primarily focussed on the US misunderstanding of the Communist insurgency, illustrating how, because of this misunderstanding, our efforts failed to produce more meaningful results. Through an analysis of this experience which continued for more than two decades, four major problem areas are discussed: the US failure to perceive the full dimensions of the threat in timely fashion; its failure to accept the importance of considering the whole of Indo-China, not only South Vietnam, as the operational area to be addressed, or more specifically, the overall importance of Laos to the Communist plan; the failure to immediately orient our efforts on the dominant source of the insurgency, the Communist infrastructure; and, our misplaced emphasis on tactical rather than political objectives of counter insurgency operations. Additionally, several major considerations concerning the US involvement in limited warfare, such as we have seen in Indo-China, are discussed. While not intended to be an all inclusive analysis, this paper is an effort to illustrate several important factors of the US Indo-China experience, thereby affording at least some of the lessons to be considered in future involvements with revolutionary warfare.

## PREFACE

The United States has never before been faced with such an agonizing, long lasting, or costly array of problems as those which it faced concerning Indo-China. Possibly, it will be through these problems . . . those of international as well as domestic significance, and the subsequent lessons still to be learned, that we will realize our only positive gains from the entire experience. By this is meant, that in the final analysis, we may find that our efforts, the lives expended, and the frustrations, will have gained very little against the enemy we faced, while the only tangible "plus" to be found, is the lessons which we will hopefully learn. This article is an effort to find a few of those lessons, and possibly illustrate why, with all of our resources, we were unable to arrest the Communist aggression in a region where we had pledged our assistance.

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# PART I

## INTRODUCTION

In considering our Indo-China experience, one must be cautious not to draw the wrong lessons in the process. In its normal context, "lessons" imply experience gained which can be related to future situations. But, Indo-China has, I'm afraid, been too unique. The method of the US involvement, especially from the standpoint of its evolution, has indeed been very different from anything we have experienced in the past. Because of this uniqueness, we are not likely to see such an experience quite like it again. This is not to say however, that the US will not find it necessary to once again take military action before the end of the twentieth century, or even by the end of the 70's, in an effort to stop an insurgency. On the contrary, this is certainly unlikely.

In looking for general lessons, one must also be cautious to avoid generalizations, such as, specifying that the war was either a revolutionary conflict or an invasion. Indeed, it has been both an externally directed and supported revolutionary war, as well as an internally supported invasion. Additionally, one must be careful in comparing other counter-insurgencies, such as those conducted against the HUKS in the Philippines and the Communist Terrorists in Malaya, with that which we have experienced in Indo-China, for these were simple affairs in comparison.[1]

The "Monday Morning Quarterback" always finds it easy to criticize, but the objective analyst examines the total situation

before forming his opinion. What I have attempted in this article, is a critical examination of what I consider to be the most significant events that occurred during our Indo-China experience which have led to the present.

My analysis primarily relates to the post 1954 period, but will also mention a previous period due to its relative importance. Because of the vastness of the subject, I have concentrated only on those decisions, strategies, and events which I consider to be most significant to the overall effort and ultimate conclusion of the conflict. Hopefully, this analysis will shed some light on an unanswered question which troubles us all . . . can the US or any open society fight a limited war such as we have experienced in Indo-China?

We have heard phrases such as "No More Vietnams" and "Don't Support Losers." Advice such as this is somewhat lacking in substance, to say the least. Some have said that we should have given it "A Good Go" and gotten out before we became overly committed. But then, when should the line have been drawn? We rejected helping the French in 1954, at a time when the enemy was no more than a guerrilla; we wouldn't allow president Ngo Dinh Diem, whom we had praised for several years, to run an efficient, or at least effective dictatorship like the one in Hanoi; and, when the forces of South Vietnam were first faced with what could be termed an invasion as the world entered the turbulent 1960's, we failed to take substantive action.

If the lessons of Indo-China indicate that a nation such as ours cannot effectively fight a limited war, then what other strategic options are open to us? Before anyone becomes emotional about the lessons to be learned, may I suggest that they first recommend to us, how American power is to be employed in the interest of world security.

In discussing the more signifcant areas of this, the most frustrating of our national experiences, I hope to illustrate what I consider to be the more important lessons available to us, lessons which may in the years to come assist us in our future international involvements with revolutionary warfare.

Let us move on now and discuss our involvement, and in doing so, illustrate some of those areas where we could possibly have done better. In the course of my review of this very complex period, I will also reassess the question of insurgency and how it relates to the subject.

PART I

FOOTNOTES

1. Franklin Mark Osanka, "Modern Guerrilla Warfare," Free Press of Glencoe New York, pp. 177-203 and pp. 293-309.

## PART II

## THE WAY WAR CAME

Practically forgotten now, lost in the problems of the 1960's, is the most significant period of the Indo-China story, a period where the players in today's action moved into their positions. The time was the initial days following World War II. During this time, French colonialism returned to power, and, at the same time, the Free Indo-China Movement, the Viet Minh, reoriented its efforts from anti-Japanese, to anti-colonialism. Responsibility for the demobilization and control of the Japanese forces, following their surrender, was assigned to the Chinese and British in the Potsdam Agreement. At the time of the Japanese surrender, Ho Chi Minh announced to the world, the independence of Vietnam. But the British, who had control of the country below the sixteenth parallel, saw things differently, and rearmed the Free French garrison, which had been interned in the Saigon area, returning the southern half of the country to its pre-war status, that of French colonialism. During this period the US maintained a policy of aloofness.[1]

By the late 1940's, the containment of Communist China, following their victory over the Nationalist forces of Chiang Kai-shek, became a major issue in US Pacific policy. Because of Ho Chi Minh's Communist alignment, the US switched from its policy of aloofness toward activities in Indo-China, to one of support for the French, in order to contain further Asian Communist expansion.

Based on this new pro-French policy, America initiated an assistance program which, by 1955, totaled $2.5 billion.[2]

In March of 1954, France, with its military position crumbling throughout Indo-China, highlighted by the impending defeat at Dien Bien Phu, requested US intervention, stating that if it was not given, a negotiated settlement with the Communists would have to be effected, which would necessitate turning over Indo-China to Communist control.[3]

Positive consideration was given to the French request, and plans were prepared for US air and ground operations, but in the final decision, such action was rejected by President Eisenhower.[4]

## PART II

## FOOTNOTES

1. Republican "White Paper," 1947, p. 12.

2. Wesley R. Fishel, "Background on the US Role in Vietnam," A Report on a Wingspread Briefing, Racine: The Johnson Foundation, 1964 p. 5.

3. Republican "White Paper," 1947, p. 16.

4. Bernard B. Fall, "Hell in a Very Small Place," Lippincott Co., 1967, p. 293.

## PART III

## THE HOW AND WHY

Following the French defeat, which was more political than military, the Geneva Conference was convened to settle the questions relating to the partitioning of Vietnam and the withdrawal of French forces. Although both countries were present at the Conference, neither the US or South Vietnam were signators to the agreements. While not a signator,the US issued a declaration concerning its position. That declaration stated:

> . . . that the US would refrain from a threat or the use of force to disrupt the Geneva Agreements, it would view any renewal of aggression in violation of the aforesaid agreements with grave concern, and as seriously threatening international peace and security, and would continue to seek to achieve unity through free elections, supervised by the UN, to insure that they are conducted fairly.

With Vietnam partitioned by the Geneva Agreements, the US agreed to respond to a request for assistance made by the South Vietnamese government of Ngo Dinh Diem,initiating a "long term" assistance agreement. This agreement was justified as follows:

> The purpose of US assistance to South Vietnam is to assist that government in developing and maintaining a strong, viable state, capable of resisting attempted subversion or aggression through military means. The government of the US expects that this aid will be met by performance on the part of the government of South Vietnam in undertaking needed reforms. It hopes that such aid, combined with your continuing efforts, will contribute effectively toward an independent Vietnam, endowed with a strong government. Such

> a government will, I hope, be so responsive to the nationalist aspirations of its people . . . and discourage any who might wish to impose a foreign ideology on your free people.[1]

Of significance to our involvement, beginning with the assistance program, and leading up to US intervention, is the US government's interpretation of letters and pronouncements which offered the rationale for the fulfillment of obligations to the South Vietnamese government, and the interpretation of the memorandum of understanding to the SEATO agreement.[2]

Let us now look at what commitments and goals the US had in Indo-China. We were committed to the defense of South Vietnam by specific articles of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, in the general articles of the United Nation's charter, as well as by unilateral agreement between South Vietnam and the US.[3]

Our objectives had certainly been defined on many occasions, but probably the most precise summary of these objectives was made at the Manila Conference of 1966. President Johnson, with the leaders of six other allied nations, announced the ultimate goals relating to Indo-China and the Asian countries of the western Pacific. These goals were:[4]

1. To be free of aggression.
2. To conquer hunger, illiteracy and disease.
3. To build a region of security, order, and progress.
4. To seek reconciliation and peace throughout Asia and the Pacific.

For Laos, the 1962 Geneva Agreement was not greatly different from the 1954 Agreement, although participation on the part of the signators was more specific, and for this reason, there was greater hope for its success. But in actuality, things did not work out for the best. While a neutral coalition government resulted, the experiment met its demise by March of 1963. The fighting which resulted continues today. Following the breakdown of the coalition government, the fighting was between the neutralists and the Pathet Lao, who had only a short time before, been close allies. Actually a split occurred within the neutralist faction itself.

One of the specifics of the Protocol to the 1962 Agreement put the US in a most difficult position. According to its terms, all foreign troops including American and North Vietnamese, were to be removed from the country. In retrospect, the situation was obvious. Looking back it becomes quite easy to criticize the US position for being most naive as to believe the North Vietnamese would actually uphold their part of the withdrawal bargain. More will be discussed concerning this, later in the article.

## PART III

## FOOTNOTES

1. Eisenhower, Dwight D. "Mandate For Change," Garden City: Doubleday, 1963, pp. 89-90.

2. US Congress. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations, "Background Information Relating to Southeast Asia and Vietnam." Washington: US GPO, July 1967, pp. 171-172.

3. Rostow, Eugene V. "Another Round in the Great Debate," "American Security in an Unstable World," Vital Speeches of the Day, November 15, 1967, pp. 67-68.

4. US DOD, Armed Forces Information and Education, "The Promise of a New Asia," US GPO, November 25, 1967, p. 28.

## PART IV

## AN INSURGENCY REASSESSED

Although the spectrum of insurgency has remained the same, there are various ways of categorizing the various stages or phases through which the Indo-China insurgency has evolved. US Army doctrine states three phases:[1]

1. Latent Incipient Subversion.
2. Organized Guerrilla Warfare.
3. War of Movement (term borrowed from Mao Tse Tung).

While official doctrine accepts these three phases to illustrate the growth of any insurgency, I prefer, as others have,[2] to use five such phases, as shown below:

I. Incipient Subversion/Clandestine Organization.

II. Psychological Offensive.

III. Guerrilla Warfare.

IV. War of Movement.

V. External Aggression.

As seen by 1960, the Indo-China insurgency had reached Phase III, and was entering into Phase IV. The fateful year of 1965, witnessed Phase V vividly in evidence. South Vietnamese forces were falling back in defense of their cities and larger towns, thereby allowing the insurgent, freedom of the countryside.

The cause of insurgency is basically discontent. The various causes for discontent may be real or contrived,[3] but regardless, the discontent itself must be real before it is sufficient to arouse people to even a low inclination toward insurgency.

In "Yu Chi Chan" (Guerrilla Warfare), Mao Tse Tung wrote that "without a political goal, guerrilla warfare must fail, as it must if its political objectives do not coincide with the aspirations of the people, and their sympathy, cooperation, and assistance cannot be gained."[4] The political nature of insurgency is also reflected in the doctrine of the US Army (FM 31-15, "Operations Against Irregular Forces") which states that political, social, or economic conditions, are ideological causes for resistance. And, going on to state that dissatisfaction is usually centered around a desire for the following:

1. National Independence.
2. Relief from Actual or Alleged Oppression.
3. Elimination of Foreign Occupation or Exploitation.
4. Economic or Social Improvement.
5. Elimination of Corruption.
6. Religious Expression.

Following 1954, Hanoi considered itself as the rightful successor to the French, not only in Vietnam but throughout the whole of Indo-China. This basic fact is in essence what this war has been all about. From the beginning the Communists have used as a tool, the dissatisfaction or frustration of the people of South Vietnam. In doing so, they found in the Saigon government, and in the numerous

contradictions within the South Vietnamese society, ready excuses for insurgency to take the place of their previous cause--that of evicting France. But the mere existence of such reasons was not sufficient to bring into being an active insurgent movement.

A Marxist philosopher may say that historical movements resulted from economic pressures. Others might find different abstract goals for the historical examples of insurgency, but in the long run, an insurgency or rebellion comes into existence because a man becomes a rebel. The cause for this comes from outside the man, while his courage, will, and determination comes from within. Any man can have these internal qualities, but the rebel will cultivate them, perhaps for years, before he finds himself ready to rebel.[5] But a rebel by himself is hardly an effective threat to a government; the insurgency must have an organization, and with it, the rebellion moves from passive dissatisfaction to the first phase of insurgency.

The key to an insurgency's success, as has been illustrated in Vietnam, has been the success of the political underground organization, which was formulated over several years, and which was deeply rooted throughout the country during the French Indo-China war. This organization has come to be known as "infrastructure." In all insurgencies, the primary weapon is this underground organization; the armed insurgent is the second, and is dependent on the underground for its existence.

We have seen the insurgency in Indo-China grow into what is in fact a war, from psychological activities and minor military actions performed by local, sometimes part-time guerrillas, to conventional operations performed by regular North Vietnamese units. We have witnessed a full spectrum of insurgency, throughout its growth from its conception. The basic concepts on which the insurgency in Indo-China have relied, and which have given substance to its strategy, have been time and space and cost. Hanoi's strategy has never been one which was directed toward the defeat of US forces in battle, because they were well aware that this was beyond their capability. Rather, their strategy has been directed toward their attainment of certain conditions which they would levy upon the US and South Vietnamese governments, costs which would be unacceptable. Hanoi's success has been hinged on four possible alternatives: (a) a failure of American resolution; (b) a failure of South Vietnamese resolution; (c) a failure on the part of both America and South Vietnam to adopt the correct strategy; and, (d) a failure of the Saigon government to establish a stable and viable nation. From the beginning, they knew that if one or more of these alternatives remained open, they would ultimately win. These so-called alternatives, basic to Hanoi's strategy, were not understood by the US, or for that matter, apparently not by the South Vietnamese government. An analysis of the present situation, even after the signing of the peace agreements, shows that all of these alternatives still remain open.

## PART IV

## FOOTNOTES

1. US Department of the Army, Field Manual 31-22, p. 6.

2. Howard, J. Guerre Revolutionaire et Pacification, Revue Militaire D' Information, No. 280 (June 1957) p. 16. Rice, Edward E. Counter Guerrilla Operations, US Army Special Warfare School, pp. 3-4.

3. Guevara, Eresto (Che), "Guerrilla Warfare," New York, Monthly Review Press, 1961, p. 15.

4. Griffeth (trans), Mao Tse Tung, "Guerrilla Warfare," New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1961, p. 43.

5. Crozier, Brian, "The Rebels," Boston: Beacon Press, 1960, p. 9.

## PART V

## THE TIME TO ACT PASSES

The period from 1956 to 1959, is a difficult time to characterize in a few words. Despite earlier political, as well as economic gains, the South Vietnamese government became increasingly more repressive in its efforts to maintain its authority. The dissatisfaction of the population grew, primarily fostered by excessive governmental measures to ferret out Communist cadres mainly in the countryside, and its efforts to discredit and neutralize any opposition in the urban areas. This dissatisfaction was exploited by the Communist underground apparatus, using more overt measures than before, in areas where their strength was relatively unchallenged by government forces, resorting to selective terrorism, evident by the sharp increase in this tactic as early as 1957.

By 1958 the South Vietnamese government was losing about forty civilian officials and the same number of military personnel per month. It is conceded that an organized uprising against the Diem regime began between this time and 1960.[1] In 1958, there was evidence that Hanoi took the first steps to organize the movement of men and supplies both through Laos and across the DMZ. Then in May of 1959, the Politburo of the Lao Dong Party announced the decision for war against the government of the south. Communist documents of this period stated "that the time had come to push the armed struggle against the enemy."[2] These documents went on to state that the action immediately took the form of long-range revolutionary warfare.

By 1960, the Republic of South Vietnam had made considerable progress when compared to its status in 1954, as well as when compared to its northern Communist neighbor. But the country was not to be allowed the additional time necessary to continue this progress. The army, with its advice and assistance from the United States, had built-up its strength to 150,000 men, and was a comparatively formidable force when considered from a regional standpoint. But its capability was totally along conventional lines, being oriented to ward off an invasion from the north. Not only was the army not organized to combat the growing insurgency, but since 1956, did not have the mission to do so. The counter insurgency mission had been assigned to the Civil Guard and the Self Defense Corps, which were ill-equipped and ill-trained, therefore, totally incapable of responding to the task at hand. It was not until 1960, when in the face of deteriorating national security, that the counter-insurgency mission was reassigned to the army. The almost fatal decision of 1956, to take the army out of the counter-insurgency business, made with the full concurrence of the US MAAG, gave the Communist organization in the south, time to strengthen its network, while stepping-up a campaign of terror, extortion, assassination, and guerrilla activities. This approval on the part of the US MAAG, to place the full burden for counter insurgency throughout the country on para-military organizations, while totally orienting the army along conventional lines, vividly illustrated gross misunderstanding of the insurgency threat

From the end of 1959, to the end of 1963, the Viet Cong engaged in what they referred to, as mentioned above, long range revolutionary warfare. During these four years, the strength of the Viet Cong increased susbtantially with a revolutionary apparatus emerging that was obstensibly independent of the north. Infiltration on a substantial scale began in 1959. By the final days of 1960 the main force strength was estimated at the battalions, or 5,000 men, plus regional and local guerrilla units probably numbering 30,000 men. In 1961, in the face of this very apparent increase in the threat, the government of South Vietnam presented to the ICC, well-documented evidence of Hanoi's responsibility in the direction and support of the insurgency.[3] Although supported if not demanded by the Geneva Accords of 1954, no action was taken to deter the aggression. In December of 1961, President Diem dispatched a letter to President Kennedy stating that "we must have further assistance from the United States if we are to win the war now being waged against us."[4] In his reply President Kennedy stated that the authorities in Hanoi "have thus violated the provisions of the Geneva Accords" and that the US still maintained the view that "any renewal of aggression is a violation of the agreements." He concluded his reply with the words "In response to your request we are prepared to help the Republic of South Vietnam . . . we shall promptly increase our assistance to your defense efforts."[5] The US response was in the form of an increase in the number of advisory personnel from 700 to 11,000. This

was indeed a significant increase, but not one which was capable of stopping the threat as it existed at that time. Two study groups were dispatched to Vietnam from Washington, to assess the situation and to make recommendations. The first group made only minor recommendations upon its return, mainly concerning military reorganization, and proposing an eighteen month counter-insurgency plan. This plan was considered, but was in fact, overtaken by events by the time it was in final form. The second group, headed by the then chairman of the Joint Chief's of Staff, General Maxwell D. Taylor, made recommendations which were more substantive, and concerned not only the military, but also political and economic matters. Although a more realistic approach to the problems facing South Vietnam, the recommendations made by this second group met with little interest, only few being actually considered.

Because of the serious lack of intelligence, as well as what appears to be a lack of US understanding of the full magnitude of the National Liberation Front (NLF), whose lines of communication and command spread throughout the south, the real extent of the threat was not seen at this most critical time. It was then that the NLF established its headquarters in southern Laos, in the vicinity of the juncture of the Cambodian and South Vietnamese borders. This headquarters, COSVN (Central Office for South Vietnam), received its direction through the Central Committee of the Lao Dong Party in Hanoi, and continued unopposed, in the control of all Communist activities throughout the southern regions

of Indo-China. In essence, it constituted a "shadow" government throughout South Vietnam. It was at this very critical time that action was needed, not planning, additional advice or training--but military action in the true sense of the word.

Between November 1964 and December 1965, the number of NVA battalions in the south reached a total of thirty-three, approximately ten regiments. By this time the NVA constituted about thirty percent of the total insurgent main force strength. In 1965, the US intervention began in the face of a threat, which had been present for several years, and which had been allowed to reach a point beyond that where an easy or comparatively low cost solution had any relevance. The enemy's intentions were quite evident, even to the most short-sighted by this time. Through increasing insurgency, his efforts continued to erode away at the government of South Vietnam and its society, with a goal of their complete and total collapse. Tactically, it was apparent that the enemy was redeploying his main strength to the central part of the country, specifically to the central highlands, with the intentions of cutting the country in half at a point between Da Nang and Nha Trang. By early 1966, the NVA units in the south were described by Hanoi as "the organic mobile forces of South Vietnam.[6]

By the final days of 1967, NVA strength in South Vietnam had risen to the point where they constituted at least forty-five percent of the total enemy.

Because of what the enemy's situation was in 1961, and what it became by the eventful days of 1965, it is apparent that we were much too slow in perceiving the realities of the threat, as well as of the full dimensions of the Communist revolutionary warfare, and even slower in reacting to it.

## PART V

## FOOTNOTES

1. Soiglianno, Robert, "South Vietnam, Nation Under Stress," Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964, p. 138. Fall, Bernard B., "Vietnam Witness," New York: Praeger, 1966, pp. 185-188. Warner, Dennis, "The Last Confussian," New York: Macmillan, 1963, p. 154.

2. Documents captured on Operation "Crimp" by the 173d Abn. Bde. (Sep), January 1966 (A 23,000 word review of the "Experiences of the South Vietnamese Revolutionary Movement During the Past Several Years").

3. US Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, "A Threat to Peace," Pub. 7308 Washington: US Government Printing 1961, pp. 14-49.

4. US Congress. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations, "Background Information Relating to Southeast Asia and Vietnam." Washington: US GPO. July 1967, pp. 100-101.

5. Ibid.

6. "Letter of Division Party Committee to Youth Members," captured by US forces in Quang Tri Province, South Vietnam, in July 1966.

## PART VI

## THE AMERICAN RESPONSE; RIGHT OR WRONG

After remaining comparatively secret during the formative years, the revolutionary war was brought into the open in the autumn of 1960, during the Third Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in Hanoi. During this significant event, two tasks were given to the Vietnamese Communists by Ho Chi Minh. First, to carry on the socialist revolution in North Vietnam, and second, to liberate South Vietnam from the "atrocious rule of the US and their henchmen." Having consolidated their position, they were now able to conduct their activities in earnest. By 1961, with a minimum of one hundred guerrillas infiltrating into the south each week; ambushers against government columns and attacks on outposts becoming a daily occurrence, and the insurgency clearly became a serious threat to the security of South Vietnam. While events vividly illustrated the Communist intent, it was not until the visit of General Maxwell D. Taylor in October of 1961, that the seriousness of the situation was reluctantly accepted as fact by the US.[1]

The US responded with an increase in its advisory effort and more equipment for the Vietnamese military. But this was clearly not the time for training and refitting. By 1963, the Communist had become an open military challenge to government control, and in fact, had taken control of a great deal of the

rural areas. It was said that by the close of 1962 approximately eighty percent of the countryside was under the influence of the insurgent in varying degrees.[2]

## PRINCIPLES

Most authorities in the field of counter-insurgency have agreed that there are certain basic principles which must be followed in order to defeat a revolutionary war. These principles are as follows:

1. Governmental aims must be clearly directed toward the establishment of a free, independent and united country, which promotes political and economical stability.

2. All activities of the government must be within the stated laws of the country.

3. There must be an overall plan to defeat the total insurgency.

4. Priority must be given to defeating the political subversion, and not to defeating the guerrilla.

5. Base areas and centers of population must be secured.

While we professed these principles to be sound as early as 1961, it appears we found them difficult to put into practice. Keeping these principles in mind, let us analyze some of the facets of the US response.

From 1961, until 1967, there was no combined plan relating to all aspects of the war outlining the general strategy. If a

plan such as this had existed, defining the various roles and responsibilities as well as establishing priorities, there would have been unity of effort throughout, and undoubtedly greater success. As we have seen, without a plan, few if any lasting results were realized. This was true because those civil and political activities, so important to counter insurgency operations, were not given the necessary consideration and in many cases totally ignored. During the period 1960 to 1967, both South Vietnamese and US efforts were mainly reactions to the enemies' initiative.

## INTERVENTION

In the spring of 1965, following the Gulf of Tonkin incident, with the South Vietnamese collapse imminent, US intervention became a reality. Our first objective was to get forces into the country and to supply them. This task was accomplished in an exceptional manner. Following this, our forces, by June of that year, as the build-up continued, initiated operations. Initially US operations were in support of South Vietnamese units, but after these so-called shakedown operations, they began operations on their own. By late spring, approximately a quarter of a million US troops were deployed and the main enemy offensive, which was directed against the central highlands, had been thwarted, at least temporarily.

## TACTICS

It was frequently said during the initial days of the US intervention, that we should "out guerrilla" the Communist guerrilla. This advice might have been excellent up until 1961, but it came much too late to be appropriate in 1965. When the US forces entered the action, the tactics employed were, generally speaking, appropriate and suited to our characteristics and assets. Formidable in size and weaponry, our forces from the beginning, directed their efforts against the enemy's tactical situation. Strategically, their major objective was the destruction of the enemy on the battlefield.

Through 1966, the war progressed with what could be considered as excellent results, that is, if those results are based on enemy casualty figures. In essence however, the war was not being dictated, as one would imagine, by the US commanders in the field. Rather, it was the Communist forces that maintained most of the initiative, while we believed that it was our forces that held the upper hand. "Search and Destroy" operations became the primary tactic of the US military strategy. Enemy casualty figures were impressive, but the truth of the matter was, there were few permanent results being achieved. Our units fought a separate war from that which was being waged around them by the enemy. US operations, while targeted on killing the enemy, were in fact, largely irrelevant to meaningful victory--achieving no political results, which are the prime goal of counter-insurgency

operations. At best, these operations assisted in maintaining the security of the country to a degree, but this was not enough. When facing revolutionary warfare, unless your strategy achieves victory, it is a losing strategy.

Our strategy also dictated extensive use of air power against the north, as well as throughout Indo-China. This achieved several objectives. It served to show the South Vietnamese that we were willing to strike at the source of the enemy's military capability; it hindered the flow of enemy troops and equipment coming south; it illustrated to Hanoi that the price for aggression would be felt on the domestic front as well as by its troops on the battlefield; and, it served to keep enemy forces off balance.

## SLOWDOWN

The massive logistical effort required to support the daily ground and air operations, required the establishment of enormous logistical bases and air field complexes throughout the south, which was in fact, the combat area. By 1968, significant numbers of US ground combat units became engaged in defense of these installations, leading to what can be considered, a shift to positional combat.

## INTELLIGENCE AND COUNTER-ESPIONAGE

In an insurgency such as we have seen in Indo-China, and particularly in South Vietnam, where well defined fronts are non-existent, and enemy main force unit locations, as well as their

intentions, cannot be easily perceived, intelligence becomes even more important than in conventional warfare. Most important to fully understanding revolutionary warfare, unless the political underground or infrastructure is penetrated and its operations greatly curtailed, guerrilla and main force units cannot be defeated.[3] This then must be the primary task of the intelligence community. Tactical intelligence, such as that relating to enemy troop locations, order of battle information, etc., must be undertaken by combat unit intelligence assets. As we have stated, our tactics were focused on the destruction of the enemy units in the field. With this being the case, the priority of our intelligence effort was directed toward that goal.

Before US intervention, as well as after it, there was a failure to establish competent internal security intelligence organizations, having as their mission, the collecting and collating of information required to disrupt and eventually defeat the basic mechanism of the insurgency, the Communist infrastructure. An organization to fulfill this task takes, comparatively speaking, a long time to build. Understandably, there should be one central organization tasked with this mission. In South Vietnam, as in many other countries, logically this organization would be the National Police. While the South Vietnamese National Police had US advisory personnel assigned, their misunderstanding of their task appears to have been equal to that of other US and Vietnamese activities.

The national police are considered best suited for the all important mission, because its success requires territorial roots which go throughout the country. Therefore, it must their task, working within the population, to break the contact between the infrastructure and the guerrilla. Once this contact is broken, or at least hampered, the guerrilla is without support, and in many cases without direction. The miltiary cannot adequately perform this mission for several reasons. Primarily, because of its requirement to move, it lacks the necessary territorial roots previously mentioned. Secondly, its basic mission must continue to be tactical in nature, and therefore must, from an intelligence standpoint, remain oriented on the enemy's military activities.

## TET 1968 AND AFTER

In 1968, the Tet offensive illustrated several points concerning the overall situation. It proved that we as well as the South Vietnamese, had failed to secure adequately, the important centers of population. It also illustrated, that because of the large numbers of US troops committed to the task of securing our logistical complexes, and manning formidable "blocking positions" on so-called main routes of infiltration, we were unable to control the countryside, which had the side effect of not having the ability of having the necessary tactical intelligence. What had taken place, was the enemy had out-manuevered us. The Tet operation was a failure for the Communist, however, because they were unable

to hold the major areas which they had attacked, and lost thousands of casualties attempting to do so. This failure is based on the military consideration of the action. But from a political standpoint they won a victory of sizable dimensions. That victory involved the US public opinion, which, combined with the growing concern over climbing casualty figures, and for US POW's, assurred the US withdrawal from extensive participation in ground combat.

From this point in 1968, to the present total withdrawal of US forces, our involvement in ground combat, with the exception of the Cambodian incursion, has seen little change. Positional combat became more the rule.

## 1972 SPRING OFFENSIVE

The North Vietnamese offensive of 1972, which saw a total of fourteen NVA divisions in the south, proved in the long run, to be a political mistake on the part of Hanoi. While achieving initial tactical success, securing additional areas which could be to their advantage, it brought about an unexpected US response. The mining of Haiphong harbor, which greatly limited their receipt of equipment from Russia, China, and elsewhere, and the heavy bombing of the north, had a significant effect on their approach to ending the war. But if this effect was significant enough to change the ultimate results, is another question.

## PART VI

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## PART VII

## LAOS, NEUTRAL BATTLEGROUND

The most defined facet of US relations concerning Laos has been, at least up until 1962, one of inconsistency of position. This was exemplified by the drastic changes in policy between the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations. Since 1962, however, our approach has improved, but is still not totally realistic.

Several very serious mistakes have highlighted our Laos experience. It is apparent that, as in the case of South Vietnam, these mistakes have been largely due to the lack of understanding of the situation. This lack of understanding was magnified by insufficient and incorrect information provided by US representation in-country. For an example, the surprise which accompanied the Kong Le coup in 1960.[1] This situation has also improved somewhat since the early 1960's, but still remains lacking.

With the importance of the trail complexes linking North and South Vietnam, which traverse the central and southern portions of Laos, the US has been faced with a serious dilemma, whether to maintain Laos as a truly neutral country, or to take positive action against the use of the country by North Vietnam as a sanctuary and infiltration route. In the clearest terms possible, what the US approach to this difficult problem has been, is that our support of a neutral Laos did not preclude a degree of military involvement.

The North Vietnamese have as their immediate goal, to continue to maintain the trail complex open for their use. A more long range goal is the use of the country as a spring board into north-eastern Thailand. What this means, is the continued domination of the Plain Des Jars and the areas north and west of Luang Prabang, as well as the areas throughout central and southern Laos, to include the Plateau Des Bolovens.

At the end of hostilities in 1954, North Vietnam was deeply fixed in Laos, particularly in the northeastern portion of the country where the border provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Nua had been solidly held by their forces since early 1953. These provinces were administered by the Pathet Lao. According to the provisions of the Geneva agreements, there provinces were eventually to be transferred to Royal government administration. This never took place.

It is quite clear that the North Vietnamese Communists have played a decisive role in the creation of the Communist revolutionary movement in Laos. Between 1946 and 1949, a period which can be termed the formative years of the Lao Communist movement, several Lao resistance groups survived in the eastern region of the country because of the leadership and aid provided by North Vietnam.

From its conception, the Lao Communist movement was composed of individuals closely associated with the North Vietnamese. The political system of the Communist controlled areas of Laos have had

a dual structure in which the front organization, the Neo Lao Hak Sat political party, has been controlled by a small, semi-secret, Communist party called the Phak Pasason Lao or The People's Party of Laos. North Vietnamese advisors are distributed throughout both of these organizations.

The Lao revolutionary movement has, from the beginning, owed its very existence to the direct initiative, guidance, and support of the North Vietnamese. Their military contribution to the movement has been of three types. First, North Vietnamese military units assigned to protect the infiltration routes into South Vietnam, at the same time serving as a deterrent against any inroads by non-communist forces into areas adjacent to the borders of both North and South Vietnam. Second, certain North Vietnamese units, especially selected for the task, supplement Pathet Lao forces, and when required, provide the thrust for operations against the Lao government. Finally, a network of North Vietnamese advisors permeates the military apparatus of the Lao Communist organization. These advisors plan military operations, stiffen Pathet Lao combat units, and continuously work at improving their effectiveness.

The Lao People's Liberation Army, has improved in size and quality over the years as a result of continuous battle experience, North Vietnamese assistance and instruction, as well as the allocation of substantial resources. It is estimated that the Lao Communist

forces approximate 30,000 personnel. North Vietnamese forces in Laos are estimated to average 45,000 combat personnel, while on occasion, this figure has risen to 75,000.[2]

At the Third Party Congress of the Lao Dong Party in 1959, the [illegible]th Vietnamese intentions concerning Laos were vividly illustrated. At that time Hanoi had decided to step up its contribution to the insurgency in South Vietnam. It therefore became particularly important for the North Vietnamese to secure and control the territory in the south and central regions of Laos, through which their personnel and material would pass enroute to the south. Continual infiltration over these routes began in that year. During the five years between 1964 and 1969, 500,000 North Vietnamese troops passed through Laos, demonstrating the importance of Laos to the overall Communist effort.

The North Vietnamese military presence in Laos supports their expansionist designs on that country. In 1953 and 1954, the Viet Minh launched its first major offensive in Laos, an offensive which was to culminate in the disaster at Dien Bien Phu.[3] This successful military operation would later add weight to their claim to the northeastern portion of Laos. Approximately this same area which the Viet Minh secured in the so-called "independence campaign" of 1953, the Pathet Lao and NVA overran again in their offensive of 1961-62. Since that time the North Vietnamese have contrived to maintain a significant military presence in the country.

Still another indication of Hanoi's ambitions in Laos is the outgrowth of the Communist Party, who's very name suggests the intention to establish a single Communist regime, under North Vietnamese control, throughout Indo-China. As evidence of this, a secret directive issued by the Lao Dong Party, dated 1 November 1951, captured by the French during operations in North Vietnam in 1952, stated that the three revolutionary parties of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, were to be united to form a single party "when conditions permitted." This document further stated that the Vietnamese Workers Party would still retain the right of supervision over the Lao and Cambodian parties at that time.[4]

Through its close relationship with the Laotian Communists, North Vietnam has been able to play an active role in dictating developments in Laos to suit its own needs and desires, while maintaining a superficial policy on non-interference.

North Vietnam has made significant investments in Laos and has developed assets that keep open a wide range of alternatives. The situation in South Vietnam will certainly dictate how these alternatives will be used. Whatever the outcome in South Vietnam, Hanoi will continue to regard the Lao territory adjacent to North Vietnam, particularly those provinces of Phong Saly, Xiang Khoung and Sam Nua, as essential to its security. Additionally, interest in access to the south, through Laos, will certainly persist.

With the no less than nine major trail routes, fanning down from the Mu Gia Pass and two other mountain defiles leading from North Vietnam, Laos continued to be a keystone to Communist military operations in South Vietnam as well as Cambodia. To further illustrate the importance of Laos to North Vietnam, there are known to be forty-two major storage centers along the one hundred and fifty mile stretch between the Mu Gia Pass in the north and the Plateau Des Bolovens region in the south.

Since 1963, military activity in Laos has followed a seesaw pattern. During the dry December to May period, the Communists push westward into non-communist areas. When the Monsoon rains begin, usually in May, government forces, mainly irregular units, go on the offensive against light resistance, to regain lost terrain. This pattern has not changed since 1963, although the tempo of Communist offensives increased considerably in 1969.

Heavy US tactical air support has been greatly responsible for the success of the government holding its own during this period. This US air support of Lao government forces, primarily in support of irregular units in the Plain Des Jars and Bolovens areas, deserves comment here. As early as 1965, the use of US air in Laos was publicly exposed. The Neutralist government originally maintained that US aircraft flew only reconnaissance missions over the country, but had been authorized to be armed and to return fire if fired upon. In 1969, the Neutralist government acknowledged that US aircraft were regularly flying combat missions in support of government operations.[5]

Currently, there are 74,000 men in the regular Lao army and 36,000 in irregular and paramilitary units. Approximately one third of these irregular forces consist of "third country" and tribal troops. While a small percentage of the overall manpower, it is this force that comprises, what can be considered, the most effective fighting units available. It has been with these troops that the primary combat effort has been placed.

On February 22, 1973, the official cease fire in Laos went into effect. But, with this questionable peace in being, there is no indication, or reason for that matter, for the Communist hold on the country to lessen. It is logical to assume that they will maintain control of those areas critical to their goals, fighting if necessary. The recent accords bear a strong resemblance to those accords concerning South Vietnam, signed in January. The 1973 Lao accords see the Communists controlling the vast majority of the country, and what is equally as important, making significant successes in the administration of the government. With the continual disunity between the neutral and rightist factions of the government, the disciplined and totally united Communist faction, now by virtue of the recent accords composing fifty percent of the total representation in government, have a distinct advantage. The 1973 agreements, even more than in 1954 and 1962, are a true victory for the Communists.

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## PART VIII

## CONCLUSIONS

In this critique of our Indo-China performance, we must insure that we remain realistic, not forgetting that throughout, we have been faced with a here-to-fore, unprecedented type of conflict, as well as a series of unpredictable events.

With this premise in mind, let us analyze our role with regard to those areas previously discussed, and comment on those in which we could have fared better.

. . . First, the US was slow in perceiving the full dimensions of Communist revolutionary warfare, and even slower in reacting to them. By 1965, when we finally took notice of what was taking place in South Vietnam, the events there had passed beyond a point where a simple solution had any relevance. The Communists, having consolidated their position in 1960, were able to freely move into the "guerrilla warfare" phase of the insurgency. In 1961, with a minimum of one hundred guerrillas infiltrating into the south through Laos each week, with ambushes and attacks on government columns and installations occurring each day, we continued to discount a real threat to the security of the country. It was not until the inspection mission made by General Maxwell D. Taylor in October of 1961, that the rapidly spreading Communist insurgency was accepted as fact. By that time, it was said that approximately eighty percent of the country was under the influence of the insurgents in varying degrees.[1]

. . . Second, while North Vietnam considered the entire area of Indo-China as one area of operations, unrestricted by national boundaries, the US did not. As we have seen, Laos from 1959 was an important facet of the Indo-China conflict, but the US considered Laos and South Vietnam as two separate and distinct situations, causing the problem of sanctuaries and the positive interdiction of supply lines to go unsolved.

. . . Third, a major, if not the primary problem, was that our intelligence and counter-espionage efforts did not establish early in the action as their primary target, the Communist infrastructure, which was the heart of the insurgency. Efforts continued to be directed toward the guerrilla main force units and its order of battle until very late in the operation.

. . . Fourth, the main thrust of our operations following our intervention in 1965, was directed toward the killing of the enemy, and therefore was largely irrelevant to meaningful success. We achieved no political results, which are a requisite to successful counter insurgency operations. Our operations which were conducted on a daily basis during the period 1965-1968, at best, assisted in maintaining the security of the country. This is not enough when combating a People's Revolutionary War, when unless a strategy achieves positive victory, it is a losing strategy. A reliance on "search and destroy" operations, plus an increasing shift to positional combat following the Tet offensive of 1968, served to limit the military value of our presence.

War is the worst of man's ills. But, it has shaped the world as we know it. History has proven that war is both an instrument for good and bad--Indo-China is no exception. The North Vietnamese have prepared to sacrifice a generation or more in the achievement of their goals. The South Vietnamese, and to a lesser degree, the Laotians as well as the Cambodians, have showed determination in their struggle to achieve their goals of national security and independence.

The political nature of revolutionary warfare must demand, that the doctrines and strategy used to combat it must possess political objectives in order for success. In dealing with this type of warfare, commanders at all levels, must understand its theory and philosophy. This understanding must persist throughout the campaign. The basic nature of insurgency, as has been made evident in Indo-China, and most particularly in South Vietnam, must be analyzed and approached through its goals, and not through its tactics. The guerrilla himself is only the tactical manifestation of the insurgency.

While a complete answer to the question concerning the ability of the US to fight a limited war, such as we have experienced in Indo-China, cannot be conclusively formulated from the limited points considered here, I believe that we have illustrated several areas which will assist in doing so.

Based on our recent and frustrating experience, it is quite clear that such a conflict must have the support of the American population. This can only be achieved if they are fully cognizant of the reasons and justification for such an action.

From the outset, decisions concerning what can and what cannot be "limited," must be made. For these decisions to be made, positive goals, objectives and policies relative to those actions which are contemplated, must be fixed. These goals, objectives and policies, may be of a limited nature, but not at the price of a clearly defined victory. For in limited war, such a victory must be considered essential.

The combat area or operational confines of the conflict may also be limited, but in establishing such limitations, the total area of the threat to which we are preparing to respond, must be kept foremost in mind. As seen in Indo-China, our limitations fixed to ground combat, restricting it to South Vietnam without accepting the dynamic importance of Laos, seriously limited our chance of success.

Limitations imposed on resources to be used in such a conflict, while necessary, must not hinder the achievement of our goals and objectives. Limitations concerning manpower are considered, not only appropriate, but absolutely necessary. The overall operation must be planned with the maximum allowable manpower in mind. This maximum manpower, must be established in light of the stakes involved. Relative to this, limitations on the use

of weaponry, must also be applied. For example, nuclear weapons would, at no time, be considered against an enemy which does not possess a nuclear capability. Limitations concerning the use of certain conventional weapons must also be considered in the light of their overall effect and influence on the total situation. In other words, their positive effect on the tactical situation must be equated against their negative effect on the strategic and political situation.

In the total consideration of the question, if our response is that America can no longer fight a limited war, then I contend that we have seriously restrained our strategic flexibility. It follows then, that this restraint would limit our military response to only that of nuclear systems. An acceptance of such a limitation would thereby disallow this nation to maintain its international stature as a world power.

Now in 1973, as in 1954 and 1962, those involved in Indo-China, enter into military and political agreements directed toward peace. But the likelihood of a resumption of the fighting remains strong. Having fought so long, with unequaled determination, Hanoi will not desist in its struggle to reunify what they regard as one entity, the whole of Indo-China. For communism to defer from this goal is impossible to accept.

President Nixon, upon his return from China in 1972, pointed out that the absence of war is not enough. If the primary objective

of a nation or group of nations is peace--defined as the absence of war--then our international system will always be at the mercy of its most ruthless members.

What the US does or fails to do to meet the future threat in Indo-China, will determine the future international situation throughout Southeast Asia. A Communist dominated Southeast Asia, due to a US failure to stand behind its responsibilities, would have worldwide repercussions concerning its credibility relative to its other commitments. In the future, two things must be weighed when accepting a commitment such as that which we have experienced in Indo-China: First, the cost of fulfilling the commitment; and second, the cost, possibly a higher cost, of failing to fulfill that commitment. Whatever happens in Indo-China, whatever policies we establish in the future, it remains axiomatic that the US will have to face situations such as Indo-China again. If we have learned anything from this experience of the past two decades, it must be the significance of time and of timing when dealing with insurgency, and that political victory is paramount, not military success.

Could we have done better in Indo-China? The obvious answer to such a question is yes. If not, then it would be time to close our eyes and stop seeking improvement. Given the US governmental system where changes in policy are possible every four years, and the many complexities which accompany revolutionary warfare, our performance hasn't been that bad.

ROBERT A. MOUNTEL
LTC FA

## PART VIII

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