

Diminishing Returns: Creighton Abrams Use of Operational Art to Plan the US Transition Out of Vietnam, 1968-1973

A Monograph

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Abstract

Diminishing Returns: Creighton Abrams use of Operational Art to plan the US transition out of Vietnam, 1968-1973, by MAJ Andrew T. Shattuck, 52 pages.

Commanders and staffs use operational art to accomplish strategic/ political objectives by arranging and sequencing tactical actions in time, space, and purpose. This case study examines GEN Creighton Abrams cognitive processes and actions to evaluate the extent that he employed operational art to accomplish his mission as Commander, Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) from 1968-1973 using a structured focused comparison case study methodology. The proposed hypotheses and research questions establish a framework for studying operational art across a broad spectrum of military campaigns and provide insights for Theater and Field Army commanders developing war plans.

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Abbreviations

ADP	Army Doctrine Publication
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
COG	Center of Gravity
COSVN	Central Office for South Vietnam
GVN	Government of Vietnam
JP	Joint Publication
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam
NSSM	National Security Study Memorandum
NDSM	National Security Decision Memorandum
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
OODA	Observe, Orient, Decide, Act
PROVN	Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
RVNAF	Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces
SVN	South Vietnam
VC	Viet Cong
VCI	Viet Cong Infrastructure
WIEU	Weekly Intelligence Estimate Update

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Introduction

Why are we here? What are we up against? Where do we want to go? What is holding up real progress? How do we get the rest of the way?

GEN Creighton Abrams, MACV Objectives Plan, 1969

Practicing operational art during military operations is the greatest test of an Army commander's abilities. Before General Creighton Abrams even arrived in Vietnam, he knew he had his work cut out for him. "The best Soldier in the Army" would need every tool acquired in his thirty-one years of experience to win a war which, up to that point, resisted winning.¹ General William Westmoreland, despite graduating West Point in 1936 alongside Abrams, was unable to translate his decades of military service into a meaningful campaign plan that aligned ends, ways, and means to achieve the US goals of an independent South Vietnam and containing Soviet communism.² Given both generals extensive military and combat experience, what accounts for Abram's ability to see clearly what Westmoreland failed to? What are the characteristics, concepts, attributes, and elements of operational art that allow Field and Theater Army Commanders to develop campaign plans that achieve political objectives?

Operational art is the yoke that harnesses the raw power of military tactics to drag along the "plow" of strategy. Soviet military thinkers Aleksander Svechin and Mikhail Tukhachevskiy developed the concept in the 1920s to account for revolutions in military affairs including distributed maneuver, durable formations, and sustained logistics which dated back to the Napoleonic wars.³ Victory by decisive battle became illusory, so commanders and staffs needed

¹ Lewis Sorley, *Thunderbolt: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Times* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992) 193.

² Sorley, *Thunderbolt*, 193.

³ Robert M. Epstein, *Napoleon's Last Victory and the Emergence of Modern War* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1994) 6; Michael D. Krause and R. Cody Phillips, *Historical Perspectives of the Operational Art* (Washington DC: Center of Military History, 2005) 8-9.

to envision ways to aggregate the results of multiple engagements extended across space and time to defeat the adversary's strategy and achieve their political objectives. Commanders use operational art to arrange and sequence tactical activities to defeat their adversary's strategy by creating and maintaining a relative advantage that causes the disintegration, culmination, or defeat of the adversary's strategy.

Since the US Army adopted the concept of operational art in the 1980s as a complement to AirLand Battle, theorists have argued over its meaning, purpose, and application.⁴ US Army doctrine focuses on the cognitive requirements for visualizing the arrangement and sequencing of operations.⁵ Shimon Naveh explains the concept through General Systems Theory, where commanders increase dynamism in the adversary system to induce disintegration.⁶ Operational art requires commanders to significantly expand problem frames beyond the battlefield to extrapolate the effects of operations on the system. This case study specifically examines Abrams ability to perceive the nature of the system which North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, China, the Soviet Union, and the United States operated within from 1978-1973, and how he identified and exploited vulnerabilities in that system to achieve US political objectives.

Abrams' needed a strategy that maximized the time available to train and equip the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) into a credible deterrent against the North Vietnamese Army (NVA).⁷ By creatively employing the elements of operational art, Abrams developed a strategy that succeeded where his predecessor failed. This study exams Abrams use of the **indirect approach** to target NVA **operational reach**, by employing **lines of operations** extending out

⁴ Wilson C. Blythe, "A History of Operational Art," *Military Review* Vol 98, No 6 (November-December 2018): 44, Accessed August 02, 2020. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/ND-18/ND18-Book-2.pdf>.

⁵ US Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2019), 2-1.

⁶ Shimon Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* (Portland: Taylor and Francis Group, 1997), 3.

⁷ Sorley, *Thunderbolt*, 237.

from strategic security zones sustained by **lines of effort**. Abrams' efforts to unify Military Advisory Command Vietnam (MACV) and ARVN efforts and align them against campaign **objectives** allowed him to work towards the **military endstate** of transitioning full operational control to the ARVN.

Per Joint Publication 5-0, Joint Planning, the **indirect approach** "attacks the enemy's COG by applying combat power against critical vulnerabilities that lead to the defeat of the COG while avoiding enemy strength".⁸ **Operational reach** is the maximum distance a military force can effectively conduct missions from its base of operations.⁹ For armies on the march, this is predominantly a function of logistics. To target an enemy's base of operations and system of logistics, an indirect approach employs **lines of operations and effort**, that provide the logical arrangement of operations and **objectives** in time, space, and purpose to achieve the **military endstate**.¹⁰ **Objectives** align military actions and capabilities against clearly defined, decisive, and attainable goals that provide the basis for tasks to be performed.¹¹ The **military endstate** represents the point in time when the use of additional military force is no longer beneficial to attaining or preserving US national interests and when other elements of national power become the primary tools of US policy.¹²

This study examines evidence of Abrams' use of operational art to support the following hypotheses. First, if Abrams understood the US, South Vietnamese, and North Vietnamese political objectives, then he could arrange military operations to achieve positions of relative advantage. Second, if Abrams tried to arrange and sequence operations across multiple domains,

⁸ US Department of Defense, Joint Staff, Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, *Joint Planning* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2020), IV-33.

⁹ US Joint Staff, JP 5-0 (2020), IV-34.

¹⁰ US Joint Staff, JP 5-0 (2020), IV-29.

¹¹ US Joint Staff, JP 5-0 (2020), IV-19.

¹² US Joint Staff, JP 5-0 (2020), IV-21.

then he could create dilemmas and opportunities to penetrate, dis-integrate, and exploit adversary operations. Third, if Abrams understood the logic underpinning the disposition, planning priorities, and commitment criteria of enemy reserves, then he can dislocate those forces in depth by interdicting and pre-empting enemy decisions.

This case study primarily examines sources available at the Ike Skelton Combined Arms Research Library due to travel restrictions imposed by a global pandemic. Within the available material, this study focuses on Abrams' thoughts, words, actions, and written correspondence to evaluate the Theater Army commander's use of operational art to achieve political objectives. This study considers evidence from Abrams tenure as Deputy MACV commander due to his extensive efforts to understand the operational environment during this period.

The next section is a literature review of previous books, monographs, and essays on General Abrams use of operational art and their relevant conclusions to identify any common themes. The subsequent section explains the research methodology of a structured, focused comparison case-study and how this method assists readers in confirming or denying patterns of thought and behavior across a range of dissimilar military campaigns.

Literature review

The previous section introduced the problem identifying characteristics, concepts, and elements of operational art that Theater and Field Army commanders employ to successfully link strategic objectives with tactical actions, proposed the thesis statement, and outlined the hypotheses that frame the organization of this case study. This section explores key theories of operational art, expands the definitions of key terms in the hypotheses, and reviews the current literature on GEN Abrams use of operational art in Vietnam.

Military operations do not happen in a vacuum. They forcibly interject themselves into the already dynamic, complex, and interactive system of systems existing everywhere in the world today. Commanders must appreciate the characteristics of these systems to develop plans with any chance of success. Ludwig von Bertalanffy's General Systems Theory defines a system as a "complex of interacting elements."¹³ There are three parameters for evaluating and understanding systems; the quantitative parameter, which describes how many elements operate in the system, the matter parameter, which describes the unique properties of each element, and the qualitative parameter, which describes the relationships between the elements.¹⁴ The primary driver of all activity in a system is its aim, which provides meaning for internal interactions and direction for external interactions.¹⁵ These concrete actions outside the system interact with elements of other systems to create disequilibrium, forcing both systems to take corrective actions either within themselves or externally.¹⁶ As the number of interactions multiply in simultaneity and succession, they generate momentum toward the aim, progress, or away from it, friction.

¹³ Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, *General Systems Theory: Foundations, Development, Applications* (New York: George Braziller, 1968) 33.

¹⁴ Bertalanffy, *General Systems Theory*, 51.

¹⁵ Bertalanffy, *General Systems Theory*, 76.

¹⁶ Bertalanffy, *General Systems Theory*, 209.

Commanders develop plans to exert influence in this environment through the process of systemic design.

Dr. Alex Ryan describes a theory of systemic design that combines aspects of systems thinking and design thinking, allowing leaders to intentionally interact with complex, interdependent systems in ways that increase shared understanding, translate to substantive action, and maximize creative space.¹⁷ Systemic design itself operates within an interdependent system of mindset, methodology, and methods, which provide clues to the answering the primary research question. The table below lists the characteristics of a systemic design mindset:

Table 1. Five Characteristics of Systemic Design Mindset

Characteristic	Value	Habits
Inquiring	Learning	Curious; observant; asks rather than assumes
Open	Growth	Defers judgement; seeks different experiences and perspectives; willing to change one's mind
Integrative	Accommodation	Avoids binary trade-offs; seeks win-win games; utilizes tension between worldviews creatively
Collaborative	Teamwork	Listens actively; builds on others' ideas; grows social cohesion; builds shared ownership and accountability
Centered	Mindedness	Reflective self-awareness; views challenges in a larger context; mediates tensions between extremes

Source: Dr. Alex Ryan, "A Framework for Systemic Design," *FormAkademisk* Vol.7, Nr.4 (2014): 4, Accessed August 02, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.7577/formakademisk.787>

As leaders adopt a systemic design mindset, they attempt to gather a broad range of diverse opinions to continuously expand and challenge their assumptions. This creates a series of cognitive tensions, as the leader and stakeholders struggle to balance the needs to act and inquire,

¹⁷ Dr. Alex Ryan, "A Framework for Systemic Design," *FormAkademisk* Vol.7, Nr.4 (2014): 4, Accessed August 02, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.7577/formakademisk.787>.

look inward and outward, be and become, direct and receive.¹⁸ Cognitive tension features prominently in James Schneider and Simon Naveh's theories of operational art.¹⁹

Systemic design methodology is "a logic for selecting and combining methods in a coherent sequence to move between deepening understanding of the challenge and generating actions to improve the situation."²⁰ Ryan adopts a six part methodology based on Naveh's theory of systemic operational design that includes a cyclical process of inquiring, framing, formulating, and generating, managed by facilitation and critically examined through reflecting.²¹ This nests closely with the logic of the Army Operations process described in ADP 3-0, but places much more emphasis on maximizing creativity, experimenting at all scales, and deliberately misapplying methods to achieve unexpected and emergent outcomes.²² Systemic design provides a cognitive framework for examining James Schneider's and Simon Naveh's theories of operational art.

The need for operational art developed as both the size of armies and battlefields grew, reaching a critical mass during the US Civil War.²³ Lincoln's armies operated throughout the breadth and depth of the entire country, each pursuing separate lines of operations to achieve specific results against tactically independent adversaries. Yet each of these operations shared the same ultimate political objective of re-uniting the states. On April 4, 1864, General Ulysses S. Grant developed a strategic vision that translated the political aim of the President into a series of discrete tactical actions that would "work all the parts of the Army together toward a common

¹⁸ Ryan, "A Framework for Systemic Design," 7.

¹⁹ Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence*, 13; James J. Schneider, "The Loose Marble – And the Origins of Operational Art," *Parameters* 19, 1 (1989): 97, Accessed August 15, 2020. <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a517707.pdf>.

²⁰ Ryan, "A Framework for Systemic Design," 4.

²¹ Ryan, "A Framework for Systemic Design," 9-10.

²² Ryan, "A Framework for Systemic Design," 11-12.

²³ Schneider, "The Loose Marble," 92

center.”²⁴ Operational artists arrange and sequence tactical actions using time, space, and purpose to achieve strategic objectives. The result is a campaign plan consisting of simultaneous and successive operations.²⁵ Simon Naveh’s theory of operational art explores the inherent tension between maintaining a holistic vision of the desired political state, the aim of the entire system, and dividing it into a series of concrete tactical actions.²⁶ The following key concepts from Naveh’s theory describe characteristics of operational art.

Like a painter, the operational artist uses a variety of common tools to create something unique. Corps and divisions are the paints, the map of the theater of war a canvas, lines of operation and effort are the brush techniques, and doctrine provides stylistic guidelines. This study proposes that the following key concepts are characteristic of the use of operational art to design campaign plans.

ADP 3-0 defines a position of relative advantage as “a location or the establishment of a favorable condition within the area of operations that provides the commander with temporary freedom of action to enhance combat power over an enemy or influence the enemy to accept risk and move to a position of disadvantage.”²⁷ In Naveh’s theory, commanders achieve this by “striking” and “slashing” at the enemy operational system along its breadth and depth.²⁸ These actions seek to disrupt the enemy system by creating disequilibrium and increasing dynamism, causing the system to figuratively rip itself apart.

Dilemma in ancient Greek means an exclusive choice between two premises, and modern language adds that both are unfavorable to the decision-maker.²⁹ Army doctrine emphasizes the

²⁴ Schneider, “The Loose Marble,” 92.

²⁵ Schneider, “The Loose Marble,” 90-93.

²⁶ Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence*, 7.

²⁷ US Army, ADP 3-0, 4-5.

²⁸ Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence*, 17.

²⁹ Bryan Garner, *Garner's Modern American Usage*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 257.

cumulative effect of imposing dilemmas on the enemy commander, which can lead to “inaction, delay, misallocation of forces, and surprise.”³⁰ Presenting the enemy with multiple, cascading dilemmas weaponizes John Boyd’s “OODA Loop,” keeping the enemy in a reactive and disoriented state while friendly forces build momentum towards achieving their political objective.³¹

“The operational sensitivity of a given space increases in direct relation to the progress one makes towards the rival’s depth or rear.”³² In a generally contiguous theater of operations, the enemy expects and prepares for military operations all along its front and to a certain depth based on their assessment of relative friendly strength in specific areas. The ever-expanding battlefield makes keeping forces in combat-ready dispositions impractical and hinders operations in support areas to regenerate and distribute combat power. This leads to the pseudo-mathematical conclusion that the effect of friendly combat power is inversely proportional to the distance from the enemy rear and accounts for the outsized impact of strategic airstrikes and special operations forces.

Commanders arrange operations according to time, space, and purpose to apply force efficiently and effectively within the operational system. Simultaneous operations present the enemy with more threats than they can respond to, unraveling his moral cohesion, and sequential operations maintain and exacerbate this state until the adversary loses the will to resist.³³ Planners may scale-down early operations in theater to secure key terrain and discourage major enemy offensives while they build combat power, or, in GEN Abrams case, transition US forces combat

³⁰ US Army, ADP 3-0, 3-11.

³¹ John R. Boyd, *Discourse on Winning and Losing*, (Maxwell AFB: Air University Press, 2018) 383, Accessed August 15, 2020. <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AUPress/Display/Article/1528758/a-discourse-on-winning-and-losing>.

³² Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence*, 18.

³³ US Joint Staff, JP 5-0, IV-36.

responsibilities to host-nation security forces to develop their proficiency, allowing US units to withdraw.

These concepts describe what a campaign plan developed using operational art should aim to achieve. The next section reviews the existing body of literature of GEN Creighton Abrams and any findings related to his use of operational art.

Previous studies on GEN Abrams' use of operational art reached varying conclusions about his relative success. MAJ William Turner's 2019 monograph compares GEN Westmoreland's and GEN Abrams' respective use of operational art to arrange and sequence tactical actions to achieve strategic objectives. Turner concludes that Westmoreland's campaign plan ultimately failed to achieve strategic objectives because it relied on maintaining a false narrative of "progress" to retain the support of the American people.³⁴ The 1968 Tet offensive shattered this narrative, American public support for the war, and Westmoreland's credibility as a competent general in one fell swoop.³⁵ Abrams, learning from his predecessor, developed a plan that confronted the brutal facts of the situation, reflected both US and Vietnamese strategic aims, and elevated the independent combat capability of Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) to the highest priority.³⁶ Nixon's decision to authorize Abrams' request for the clandestine bombing of NVA staging bases in Cambodia and the subsequent ground invasion, despite fierce domestic opposition, indicate a high level of trust between the President and his MACV Commander, and the realignment of national policy with tactical actions.³⁷

In his glowing biography of Abrams, Lewis Sorley depicts a thoughtful, skeptical, and humble commander, a soldier's soldier just as comfortable sitting next to the president in the

³⁴ MAJ William Turner, "Westmoreland and Abrams in Vietnam: A Study of the Military Operational Artist in Limited War" (monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies, 2019), 19.

³⁵ Turner, "Westmoreland and Abrams," 20.

³⁶ Turner, "Westmoreland and Abrams," 32.

³⁷ Turner, "Westmoreland and Abrams," 3

Situation Room as he was sitting on the edge of a foxhole chatting up an ARVN private. He identifies deliberate actions by Abrams, beginning in 1968 during his year as deputy MACV commander, to develop a clear understanding of US national policy for the war, a comprehensive knowledge of the operational environment, the dynamics of friendly and enemy systems, and an inclusive military strategy to link it all with US and ARVN tactical actions.³⁸ Abrams developed a campaign plan that continually disrupted NVA preparations for large conventional operations while incrementally transferring responsibility for combat operations to the ARVN and withdrawing US forces in accordance with the president's wishes.³⁹ While Sorley's voluminous writing on Abrams provides a gold mine of primary source material, some military historians, including COL (ret) Gregory Daddis, believe his assessments were, at best, too optimistic.⁴⁰

Is it possible to align national policy objectives with tactical actions when the principal and the agent have a fractious, distrustful relationship? Daddis makes the case that it is not. Nixon and Abrams ascended to their respective offices within six months of each other and their trust and confidence in one another traces a steady decline from beginning to end.⁴¹ While Abrams wrestled with a corrupt Republic of Vietnam (RVN) government, an incipient ARVN, and the NVA's inevitable regeneration following the catastrophic losses of the Tet offensive, "he remained wedded to his predecessor's goal" of "crushing" the enemy in "decisive battle."⁴² Meanwhile, an extremely hostile and paranoid president continued to lose trust and confidence in his theater commander who clearly did not understand that "peace with honor" meant getting the US out of its commitments to Vietnam for the absolute minimum political costs so he could

³⁸ Sorley, *Thunderbolt*, 200, 233-234, 237

³⁹ Sorley, *Thunderbolt*, 236, 239, 265, 287

⁴⁰ Gregory A. Daddis, "'A Better War?' – The View from the Nixon White House," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, 3 (2013): 361. Accessed August 15, 2020. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01402390.2012.688173>

⁴¹ Daddis, "A Better War?" 15, 22, 24.

⁴² Daddis, "A Better War?" 5.

pursue grand strategy with China and the Soviet Union.⁴³ If Abrams' operational plans, however brilliant, failed to achieve the policy objectives of the president and the nation, then they must violate the hallowed dictums of *Herr Clausewitz*, and constitute a misapplication of operational art.

While the jury may remain forever out on the US relative successes and failures in the Vietnam War, today's commanders will continue seeking answers for the present from the past. The previous scholarship's ambivalence on Abrams' use of operational art implies there is more to learn from this relevant period in military history. Examining "how" Abrams translated national policy into tactical action, both positively and negatively, can provide those recognizable moments for future leaders to make their best attempt to do better. The next chapter outlines how this monograph uses structured focused comparison case study methodology to examine evidence to support or refute the proposed hypotheses by answering secondary research questions.

43 Daddis, "A Better War?" 3, 11, 15.

Methodology

The previous chapter reviewed the theory of operational art, key concepts, and literature base that establish the “line of departure” for the subsequent research. This chapter explains the structured, focused comparison method of theory development and the research framework and questions for analyzing findings and drawing conclusions.

“Admittedly, it is not easy to learn from history, though almost every general and statesmen has professed to have done so.”⁴⁴ The structured focused comparison method of case study research combines the historical method of intensive, context dependent, case study analysis with the political science “building block approach” to theory development.⁴⁵ This method is “focused” because it narrowly examines selected variables across a small number of cases that all belong to a particular “class” of events, i.e. theater campaign planning, military decision-making process, commander’s visualization.⁴⁶ It is “structured” because each case study provides findings and recommendations for a common set of generalized research questions, allowing the reader to discern causal patterns between dependent and independent variables across the studies.⁴⁷ These patterns “cumulate” across the range of case studies, and aim to identify new characteristics, concepts, and elements for the theory of operational art.⁴⁸ The following case study belongs to the larger “class” of theater army commanders using operational art to develop a campaign plan.

⁴⁴ Alexander George, “Case Studies and Theory Development: The Method of Structured, Focused Comparison,” in *Diplomacy: New Approaches in History, Theory, and Policy*, ed. Paul G. Lauren (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1979), 43.

⁴⁵ George, “Case Studies and Theory Development,” 44

⁴⁶ George, “Case Studies and Theory Development,” 62

⁴⁷ George, “Case Studies and Theory Development,” 62

⁴⁸ George, “Case Studies and Theory Development,” 50

GEN Creighton Abrams tour as MACV commander provides unique independent variables to examine the characteristics, concepts, attributes, and elements of operational art that allow Theater Army Commanders to develop campaigns that achieve political objectives. First, the Vietnam War was “the only show in town” and Abrams maintained regular, direct contact with the White House, National Security Council representatives, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the President of the Republic of Vietnam, and the Commanding General of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. This created a situation where one man, Abrams, participated in many of the military, strategic, and policy discussions relating to his theater of operations, giving him the maximum opportunity to understand the positions of key stakeholders and develop plans to achieve those objectives. Second, Abrams saw his plan through to conclusion, for good or ill. While General Frederick Weyand ultimately supervised the final withdrawal of US Forces from Vietnam in 1972, he was following the plan developed by Abrams and not executing a unique campaign plan. Conclusions provide a finality to the case study that allow the reader to examine the events holistically and track the interaction of variables from start to end. The following hypotheses identify the independent variables examined in this case study.

To evaluate “how” theater commanders employ operational art, this case study examines the interactions between the dependent variable, a theater army commander developing a campaign plan to link national policy with tactical action, and a series of common independent variables. The proposed hypotheses aim to build on the current theory of operational art by describing causal patterns in historical context to allow the reader to infer theoretical relationships. The hypotheses are if-then logical statements, so the research will seek to establish the initial premises THEN examine any causal relationship between the premise and conclusion.

Hypothesis #1: If the Commander understands the political objectives of friendly AND enemy forces, then he or she can better arrange operations to achieve positions of relative advantage. As mentioned in Chapter 2, position of relative advantage here concerns the

relationships between friendly and enemy strategies. Did the commander identify the enemy strategy and develop an operational plan to disrupt or negate that strategy while achieving friendly objectives? As the enemy reacted to these disruptions, is there evidence the theater commander revised her plans to further destabilize the enemy and promote her strategic goals?

Hypothesis #2: If the Commander arranges and sequences operations across multiple domains, then he or she can create dilemmas and opportunities to penetrate, dis-integrate, and exploit adversary operations. Evidence that supports this hypothesis will show the theater commander considering the enemies ability to respond to simultaneous and sequential military operations, then arranging and layering operations to the extent that the adversary should be unable to adequately respond. Having destabilized the enemy, the plan should provide flexibility to exploit windows of opportunity and increased freedom of action to advance friendly strategic objectives.

Hypothesis #3: If the Commander understands the logic underpinning the disposition, planning priorities, and commitment criteria of enemy reserves, then he or she can dislocate those forces in depth by interdicting and pre-empting enemy decisions. This hypothesis examines the commander's efforts to understand the enemy operational system, its patterns, and its objectives. If the commander used elements of systems thinking to identify critical vulnerabilities in the enemy's operational pattern, then plans would explain how targeting those links and nodes could disrupt the enemy's system while advancing friendly goals.

If validated, these hypotheses would contribute to the theory of operational art, allowing commanders to examine their own efforts to develop campaign plans, and provide insight for examining additional case studies on the historic use of operational art. The following research questions provide common answers across the case studies, allowing for "focused comparison." Collectively, their answers aim to confirm or deny the validity of the hypotheses.

This case study will examine mostly primary sources to identify when, where, and how GEN Abrams used operational art to develop campaign plans. The case study follows GEN Abrams tour in Vietnam, beginning with his arrival as deputy MACV commander and ending upon his return to the US. Deliberate information-gathering, sense-making, planning, and reflection events receive in-depth scrutiny to expose the most relevant thoughts, words, and actions of the Theater Army Commander relating to his attempts to employ operational art. Following the case study, the findings and conclusions chapter answers each of the research questions, then tests the validity of the hypotheses. This chart provides the research questions, the logic behind their selection, and the hypotheses they should validate.

Table 2. Case Study Research Questions

Question	Logic for selection	Supported Hypothesis
1. What was the Commander's understanding of the political objective (and strategy) of all belligerents and how did the military objectives support?	Understanding the aim of a system is a necessary precondition to planning any meaningful actions to influence that system	H1
2. How did the commander understand the operational environment?	The commander's understanding of the relationships and dynamics of systems both internal and external to the operational environment will influence his or her ability to plan operations that produce constitutive, rather than summative, effects	H1, H2, H3
3. How did the commander understand logic of how the enemy would fight?	The commander's understanding of how the adversary perceives his interaction with the operational environment influences how he or she plans operations in sequence based on anticipated enemy reactions and decisions.	H2, H3
4. How did the commander arrange and sequence operations to create multiple dilemmas and gain positions of relative advantage?	The commander exploits the constitutive effects of successful operations to increase dynamism in the operational environment, propelling his or her system towards its desired aim as the enemy system disintegrates and collapses.	H1, H2, H3

Source: Created by Author

The answers to these research questions will describe how the commander used operational art, the dependent variable, and provide insight about the causal patterns linking it to the independent variables; understanding the political objectives and operational environment, the adversary's logic, and methods for arranging and sequencing operations. Descriptive answers are not binary and will not help in constructing a checklist of operational art. The purpose of this historical examination is not to provide prescriptive techniques for winning the war in Vietnam in the 1970s, nor any future conflict, but to create the opportunity for the modern commander to recognize patterns in their operational environment and aid their imagination in devising methods of exploiting them. The findings and conclusions chapter examines these links and patterns to identify any new ideas that may contribute to the theory of operational art.

Case study

Historical examples are, however, seldom used to such good effect. On the contrary, the use made of them by theorists normally not only leaves the reader dissatisfied but even irritates his intelligence.

Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*

The copious bodies of work evaluating and analyzing GEN Abrams thinking and actions as MACV Commander from 1968-1972 are possible due to his seemingly innocuous decision to run a tape recorder during his Weekly Intelligence Estimate Update. The 455 tapes consisting of more than 2,000 hours of briefings and discussion provide a remarkable amount of primary source information annotated with dates.⁴⁹ Combined with de-classified copies of White House correspondence, Department of Defense memorandum and reports, government sponsored studies, and Abrams personal files, it is relatively easy to outline Abram's thinking and decision-making process during this period. This case study examines these sources to identify specific examples of Abrams use of operational art to develop a campaign plan that translated his interpretation of US national strategy into tactical actions.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the case study attempts to answer four secondary research questions, each examining a different facet of the campaign planning process. Collectively, the questions review GEN Abrams cognitive process for understanding the system he was operating within, his ultimate aimpoint, and the process for influencing the system towards that aim. Each question examines Abrams thinking throughout the campaign and accounts for any planning adjustments he made based on new assumptions and revelations. Following the case study, the next chapter will determine if the findings provide support for the hypotheses.

⁴⁹ Lewis Sorley, *Vietnam Chronicles: The Abrams Tapes 1968-1972* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2004), XX.

Abrams use of operational art in Vietnam officially began when he assumed command of MACV in June 1968, marking both an operational and strategic inflection point for the war. North Vietnam had lost their “big bet” on the 1968 Tet Offensive triggering a general Communist uprising across South Vietnam, sacrificing an irreplaceable number of Vietcong cadres in the process.⁵⁰ US and ARVN forces consolidated in and around major population centers to clear and secure the areas, creating a power vacuum in rural villages now stripped of both insurgents and counter-insurgents. The attacks shocked the American people and the Johnson administration, collapsing the will to continue fighting in both.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999), 15.

⁵¹James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 5-6.



Figure 1 Tet Offensive. Graham A. Cosmas, *The United States Army in Vietnam: MACV The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, (Washington DC: Center for Military History, 2006), 60.

Abrams took advantage of Hanoi’s weakened position to flood the countryside with security forces. With many NVA main force units withdrawing north to reconstitute, Abrams did not have an enemy to conduct major combat operations against, so he shifted US operations to counter-insurgency, attempting to uproot the remaining Vietcong infrastructure (VCI) and disrupt NVA preparations for another offensive.⁵² As these operations successively expanded security and “pacification” areas across the country, Abrams used the breathing room to grow and

⁵²Phil Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History: 1946-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 571.

modernize the RVNAF to eventually assume full responsibility for internal security. As operations within South Vietnam (SVN) began to achieve efficiency, Abrams continued to press the White House for authorization to destroy enemy cross-border sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia, receiving it begrudgingly only after the NVA threatened to depose the newly installed, pro-Western government of President Lo Nol.⁵³

Abrams again took advantage of the opportunity, launching a reasonably successful combined offensive into Cambodia, destroying the enemy support area and closing Sihanoukville port, severing the main supply artery for NVA operations in SVN.⁵⁴ The RVNAF gained valuable experience in major combat operations and MACV delayed the next NVA offensive by at least 18 months.⁵⁵ Nixon told Abrams to keep up the pressure even as the US Congress imposed additional constraints on operations, limiting US ground force operations to the extent of SVN international borders.⁵⁶ The RVNAF-led invasion of Laos, against a now concentrated and fully-prepared NVA, failed to achieve its strategic objectives and highlighted significant shortcomings in senior military and political leadership which would rear their heads again during 1972 Easter Offensive.⁵⁷

As the lead elements of a 14 Division NVA operation crossed the de-militarized zone, Abrams was down to his last combat brigade. The RVNAF achieved both spectacular victories and horrendous defeats, ceding some territory to the NVA while avoiding the decisive blow. A chastened Hanoi returned to Paris and agreed to peace terms and US forces returned home in accordance with the will of the American people.

⁵³John M. Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign: The 1970 Offensive and America's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 31-40.

⁵⁴ Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign*, 153

⁵⁵ Sorley, *Thunderbolt*, 288.

⁵⁶Robert D. Sander, *Invasion of Laos 1971: Lam Son 719* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014), 75.

⁵⁷ Sander, *Invasion of Laos*, 192-193.

Secondary Research Question One: What was the Commander's understanding of the political objective (and strategy) of all belligerents and how did the military objectives support?

The political objective sets the aim for all systemic activity, providing purpose to a series of otherwise discreet actions. Operational art hypothesis #1 states: If the Commander understands the political objectives of friendly AND enemy forces, then he or she can better arrange operations to achieve positions of relative advantage. Failure to link tactical actions to the strategic, or political, aim of the system creates conditions for the ignominious "tactical victory but strategic defeat" scenario. Abrams understood the US political objective to achieve "peace with honor" while extricating the US from a seemingly endless commitment, but he remained cognitively anchored by the Korean ceasefire model, planning for the US to maintain a substantial presence in Vietnam following peace talks.⁵⁸

To understand the political objectives and strategy for the U.S., Abrams got his information directly from the chief executive. On 26 March 1968, while serving as MACV deputy commander, Abrams met directly with President Lyndon Johnson, Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford, and the President's "Wise Men" advisors to discuss alterations to the US strategy in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive.⁵⁹ Over the course of a series of meetings with the president, the National Security Council, and the Secretary of Defense, Abrams understood that the US strategy in Vietnam would not change dramatically, no additional troop requests would be granted outside those already approved, and that he, and GEN Westmoreland, would continue the mission of repelling the NVA while building a combat-credible ARVN.⁶⁰ When President Nixon

⁵⁸ Jeffrey J Clarke, *Advise and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973* (Washington, DC: Center For Military History, 1988), 296; Sorley, *Thunderbolt*, 202; Sorley, *Abrams Tapes*, 339, 658.

⁵⁹ Edward J. Drea, "McNamara, Clifford, and the Burdens of Vietnam," in *Secretary of Defense Historical Series Vol VI*, ed. Erin R. Mahan and Stuart I. Rochester (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2011), 189, Accessed September 20, 2020. https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/secretaryofdefense/OSDSeries_Vol6.pdf?ver=2014-05-28-134006-577.

⁶⁰ Sorley, *Thunderbolt*, 225-227.

took office in January of 1969, he immediately issued National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM) number 1, directing all elements of the US government involved in Vietnam to complete a thorough review of their current understanding and assessment of the situation.⁶¹ After reviewing the studies feedback with the National Security Council, President Nixon issued National Security Decision Memorandum (NDSM) number 9, directing Abrams not to “de-escalate the war except as an outgrowth of mutual withdrawal” and outlining the conditions for a mutual withdrawal of all US forces from South Vietnam in conjunction with a verifiable withdrawal of all NVA from South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.⁶² NDSM 9 also initiated NSSM 36, “Vietnamizing the War,” which tasked Abrams to develop plans to transfer all “US military, para-military, and civilian involvement in Vietnam” to the RVNAF beginning on 1 July 1969, and with potential completion dates of 31 December 1970, 30 June 1971, 31 December 1971, and 31 December 1972.⁶³ While Nixon’s initial policies towards Vietnamizing the war left much to Abrams discretion, the MACV Commander understood that waning US domestic and political support for the war were gathering momentum that could only favor the North Vietnamese position as it grew, making ARVN self-sufficiency imperative.

Abrams understanding of the North Vietnamese political objective and strategy began with his approval of the Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam (PROVN) report in December 1966. Immediately dismissed by GEN Westmoreland at the time, the report repudiated the current “search and destroy” multi-Division maneuver warfare operations directed against elusive NVA main force units, instead recommending that US Forces

⁶¹ Richard Nixon, “Situation in Vietnam,” *National Security Study Memorandum* 1, (January 21, 1969): Accessed October 05, 2020. https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/virtuallibrary/documents/nssm/nssm_001.pdf

⁶² Richard Nixon, “Vietnam,” *National Security Decision Memorandum* 9, (April 1, 1969): Accessed October 05, 2020. https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/virtuallibrary/documents/nsdm/nsdm_009.pdf

⁶³ Richard Nixon, *National Security Decision Memorandum* 9.

partner more closely with the ARVN, Regional and Provincial area security forces, and the National Police to secure population centers across South Vietnam and suffocate the Viet Cong insurgency.⁶⁴ The report provided a detailed outline of Hanoi's command and control structure, NVA and VC standard operating procedures, and relative strengths and weaknesses of the three types of enemy forces; main force units, guerillas, and VC infrastructure and cadres.⁶⁵ Abrams refined his understanding of the North Vietnamese objectives during his year as Deputy MACV Commander, devoting considerable time to meeting with US experts like LTC Don Marshall, an author of the PROVN report, and Douglas Pike, a Foreign Service Officer in Saigon and expert on the subject with access to captured documents, propaganda, prisoner interrogations, and defector reports.⁶⁶ Ultimately, Abrams determined that while Hanoi would alter the character of the war to suit their needs, leveraging peace talks and psychological operations to buy time between main force offensives, they would discard any negotiated peace as soon as they saw an opportunity for unification.⁶⁷ With the NVA "returning to their corner" to recover their losses from Tet and a slow pressure leak on the massive US military support to South Vietnam, Abrams developed a strategy to fill the anticipated void.

Abrams' "One War" strategy and Combined Objectives Campaign Plan aimed to increase cohesion between US and ARVN operations, blending the forces, and more importantly, their battlefield effects, so that the ARVN seamlessly acquired greater levels of responsibility for all military operations as the US military presence gradually diminished. While the campaign plans two objectives seem overly broad; to defeat VC/NVA forces, and extend RVN control in the

⁶⁴ US Department of the Army, *Report of the Office of The Deputy Chief of Staff for Military Operations, PROVN: A Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam* (Washington, DC, 1966), 1-3.

⁶⁵ US Army, *PROVN*, 51-54.

⁶⁶ Sorley, *Thunderbolt*, 265-266.

⁶⁷ Sorley, *Abrams Tapes*, 26.

Republic of Vietnam, they highlight the comprehensive nature of the war effort, which the PROVN study specified “must be won at the village level.”⁶⁸ Abrams implemented increasingly restrictive rules of engagement (ROE) on the use of artillery and close air support in populated areas, encouraged subordinate commands to de-centralize operations, sometimes down to the squad level, embed forces in the villages, operate at night when the VC were more active, and focus operations on destroying the enemies caches and battlefield preparations, understanding that collectively these actions exploited enemy weaknesses while reducing friendly ones.⁶⁹ Abrams maintained and improved his position of relative advantage over the NVA from 1968-1972 even as he transitioned the majority of his combat power back to the United States, accomplishing his nation’s political objective while rebuffing Hanoi’s attempts to achieve theirs.

Secondary Research Question Two: How did the Commander understand the operational environment?

While some dispute whether Abrams notably changed Westmoreland’s operational approach, as evidenced by his continued use of US combat troops to engage and destroy NVA main force units on the borders and in the hinterlands of South Vietnam, it is more difficult to argue that Abrams didn’t “see the war” in a fundamentally different way, specifically regarding the ultimate role of the ARVN.⁷⁰ The two men displayed markedly different learning styles, with Westmoreland preferring to receive detailed briefings of statistics-laden charts in his lushly furnished headquarters while Abrams traveled up and down the entirety of South Vietnam visiting with the garrisons of every US and ARVN combat outpost he could reach.⁷¹ The process

⁶⁸ GEN Creighton Abrams, *MACV Combined Campaign Plan 1969* (Saigon: RVN MACV Headquarters, 1968) 2-3; US Army, *PROVN*, 1.

⁶⁹ Sorley, *Thunderbolt*, 231; Sorley, *Abrams Tapes*, 62.

⁷⁰ MAJ Ian M. Ginty, “False Assumptions: Military Assistance Command Vietnam’s (MACV) Use of the Combined Strategic Objectives Plan, 1970 and its Operationalization at the Field Force Level,” (monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies, 2014), 49.

⁷¹ Sorley, *Thunderbolt*, 207.

of “going to the *gemba*,” or factory floor, is now widely accepted in business and manufacturing as the preferred method of developing a comprehensive understanding of complex processes.⁷²

Abrams extensive travel to meet with lowest-echelon forces throughout Vietnam, his intellectual humility in personal engagements with subordinates, and his devotion to daily reflection allowed him to better understand his operational environment and innovate a new operational approach.

Abrams began a deliberate period of discovery upon arriving in South Vietnam and assuming the role of Deputy MACV Commander in May 1967. He immediately set his sights on ways to improve the RVNAF, communicating with the leaders responsible for experimental ARVN training programs that he was “prepared to spend any amount of time, either in training visits, interviews, or seminars, which you consider necessary for me to get to the heart of the problem.”⁷³ He spent the next several months visiting ARVN garrisons up and down the country, talking with everyone from privates to Division commanders, ARVN regulars to Regular and Provincial Forces, and their attached US advisory teams. He noted unit training readiness levels, recent contacts with VC and their outcomes, the leadership capabilities of local officers, and challenges with equipment and logistics.⁷⁴ These visits provided Abrams a level detail not readily apparent in the Senior Advisor Monthly Evaluation, or SAME reports, which MACV used to develop a dubious picture of ARVN readiness.⁷⁵ They gave him insights about the nature of ARVN forces, like the historic impact of 67 years of French colonization on their military traditions, the corruption stemming from the traditionally feudal/political role of provincial and district military commanders, and the atrophy of units operating behind a protective screen of US

⁷²Danielle McGuinness, “No Really, Go to the Gemba,” *The Lean Post* (blog). *Lean Enterprise Institute*, September 6, 2013. Accessed October 15, 2020. <https://www.lean.org/leanpost/Posting.cfm?LeanPostId=65>

⁷³ Sorley, *Thunderbolt*, 200.

⁷⁴ Sorley, *Thunderbolt*, 206.

⁷⁵ Clark, *Advise and Support*, 241.

forces.⁷⁶ As Abrams transitioned into the role of MACV Commander in May 1968, he combined this on the ground knowledge with more detailed, analytical reporting in the country-wide Weekly Intelligence Estimate Update (WIEU).

The WIEU, conducted every Saturday at MACV headquarters, always included Abrams, his deputy, and the MACV staff for a 3-4 hour briefing covering weather, intelligence, politics, recent news, program and logistics updates, and military operations throughout South Vietnam. Once per month, Abrams invited all his US Corps Commanders to sit in for an expanded Commanders Conference, creating and maintaining a culture of shared understanding and unified purpose.⁷⁷ The briefings were rarely “one-way conversations” as Abrams continually probed both briefers and attendees to unearth the deeper meaning behind data-laden graphs and charts noting enemy infiltration figures, the average quantity of ammunition expended during ambushes, results of B-52 “Arc Light” strikes, and the percentage of secure vs. VC-controlled civilian districts. The MACV Commander challenged everyone to see enemy operations as a unified *system* working tirelessly towards the single goal of a unified, communist Vietnam. He believed that the National Liberation Front and RVN negotiators in Paris manipulated perceptions of both VC guerilla and NVA regular operations in South Vietnam to sway international and US opinion about the war, and those same forces used the negotiation concessions to achieve operational and tactical objectives in Vietnam and the United States!⁷⁸ Understanding prophetically that you “need a network to fight a network,” Abrams tried to get his arms around as much of the enemy system he could, unifying large portions of US and RVN military, para-military, and local governance operations in a format that would become familiar to US generals managing similar portfolios during the reconstruction of Afghanistan and Iraq. Receiving both detailed analysis and

⁷⁶ Sorley, *Thunderbolt*, 206; Clark, *Advise and Support*, 21-22, 184.

⁷⁷ Sorley, *A Better War*, 32.

⁷⁸ Sorley, *A Better War*, 91.

subordinate commander feedback from WIEU and Commanders conferences gave Abrams plenty to think about during the last step in his systemic design process, personal reflection enabled by classical music and hard liquor.

Whether back in his command bungalow in Saigon or forward at a tactical command post with his subordinates, Abrams liked to spend his evenings reflecting on the day's events, emerging trends in operational environment, and the latest news coming out of Washington and Paris, trying to make sense of it all over a cocktail while listening to his favorite music at ear-splitting, "I didn't wear earplugs for all of World War II," volume. Abrams remarked that "Music relaxes me...I can sit there and listen while all the fractious things of the moment subside, and I can think without all the pressures of all these things...try to look ahead, try to look back, and try to interpret what's happening...I seem to find the patterns and solutions of this war in music."⁷⁹ Echoing Field Marshal Viscount Slim's comments on General Officers setting aside adequate time for leisure and sleep, Abrams devoted his personal time to reflect on the system he was living within, and reduce the signal to noise ratio generated by the conflicting and occasionally illegal guidance coming to him from Washington.⁸⁰ At the theater level, commanders who display a bias for thinking over a bias for action can avoid responding to the operational environment in an "ad hoc" manner.⁸¹

Abrams' employed tried and true methods for understanding his operational environment familiar to most Army officers trying to make sense of complex situations. He continued educating each incoming cohort of commanders and staffs embarking on their one-year tour, particularly when the "old ways" of doing things periodically resurfaced as "new ideas." Even his

⁷⁹ Sorley, *Thunderbolt*, 248

⁸⁰ Bruce Palmer, *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 107.

⁸¹ Dietrich Dörner. *The Logic of Failure: Why Things Go Wrong and What We Can Do to Make Them Right* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996)

legendary J-2, General William E. Potts, who appeared to possess a photographic memory of the entire body of intelligence at MACV Headquarters, just barely kept pace with his commander, who was the only man able to accurately correct him during updates.⁸² Abrams' comprehensive knowledge of both the current and historic operational environment allowed him to see the systemic complexity and internal dynamics of the war, and develop an operational approach to manipulate them to achieve a position of relative advantage.

Secondary Research Question Three: How did the commander understand logic of how the enemy would fight?

Upon taking command of MACV, Abrams implemented substantial changes to the operational approach for fighting the NVA and VC in SVN. His "one war" concept and increased focus on securing the civilian population both reflect a deeper understanding of how Hanoi was pursuing its objectives in SVN. Ultimately, Abrams identified a rigid enemy system that could only "produce" large conventional force offensives after substantial logistics preparations of the battlefield and methodical infiltration of main force units through the Ho Chi Minh trail.⁸³ By devoting his energies to disrupting logistics preparations and interdicting the infiltration pipeline, Abrams maintained a position of relative advantage, preventing the NVA from launching a major, Tet 68-level, offensive in SVN throughout the majority of the RVNAF modernization effort and US troop withdrawal.

Abrams saw the enemy operational logic as a function of its freedoms and constraints. Giap enjoyed the freedom to move personnel, supplies, and equipment through Laos and Cambodia, a supportive NVN population that could continually regenerate NVA main force units given time, generous equipment, munitions, and training support from Communist allies, and a large network of VC infrastructure and cadre in SVN. His logistics, while prodigious, lacked

⁸² Sorley, *A Better War*, 134.

⁸³ Sorley, *Abrams Tapes*, 15.

speed and flexibility, requiring VC cadre and NVA troops to establish a series of caches, fighting positions, and support facilities weeks or months in advance of arriving main force units. Lastly, troops entering the Ho Chi Minh trail, a marvel of ingenuity, still took an average of six months to arrive in SVN, requiring Giap to anticipate operational conditions at least that far in advance, making bold operational adjustments out of the question.⁸⁴ The internal dynamics of this system generated predictable offensive operations that Abrams was increasingly able to deny, degrade, disrupt, and defeat on his own terms.

While modern commanders are all too familiar with insurgencies enjoying freedom of movement and reconstitution in border sanctuaries, their use by major conventional force units is perhaps unique to veterans of Vietnam and Korea. On 19 May 1959, the Communist Party Central Committee of Vietnam approved the creation of Military Transportation Group 559 and tasked it with establishing a logistical trail network through Laos and Cambodia to move NVA soldiers, equipment, and supplies into SVN.⁸⁵ Over the next 13 years, the “Ho Chi Minh” trail would grow to over 12,400 miles of trails, roads, and footpaths connecting the NVA’s strategic support area to multiple close areas along the SVN border, including an 800-mile communications network and a petroleum pipeline extending from China to near Saigon.⁸⁶ Cambodian Prince Sihanouk began accommodating NVA freighters at the port of his namesake in 1966 after US and RVNAF maritime operations disrupted their logistics over the shore network along the SVN southern coast, eventually providing “tonnages...sufficient to meet 100 percent of the requirements of enemy units in the...III and IV Corps areas, and perhaps two-thirds of the II Corps area.”⁸⁷ Arriving all along the SVN border, these large quantities of troops, supplies, and

⁸⁴ Sorley, *Abrams Tapes*, 27.

⁸⁵ Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign*, 5.

⁸⁶ Sander, *Invasion of Laos*, 10.

⁸⁷ Tran Dinh Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1979), 21.

equipment transferred to the control and guidance of the elaborate and robust VCI network for disposition and distribution.

Abrams saw the VCI as THE critical requirement for NVA operations in SVN. During the 21 October 68 WIEU, Abrams mentioned reading a monograph written by an NVA lieutenant stating “the NVA can’t do a thing down here without the cadre and guerillas.”⁸⁸ Blending with the population, collecting taxes, spreading propaganda, and carrying out terrorist attacks, the estimated 74,000 subversives also prepared battle zones across SVN in accordance with COSVN and NVA operational plans.⁸⁹ Abrams rarely missed an opportunity to explain to visiting superiors, subordinate commanders, and greenhorn staff briefers how the NVA “pushed its logistics with its nose” and the role of VCI in “carrying the ammunition up, putting in caches, and getting communications and dispensaries set up, in the forward areas...then at the *last minute*, he moves the troops in.”⁹⁰ Giap’s combat logistics made up for in resilience what it lacked in flexibility and modernization, aggregating combat power iteratively while maximizing the freedoms afforded by MACV’s strategic constraints. Equipped with a remarkably accurate assessment of the enemy’s operational approach, Abrams directed planning efforts and resources to significantly increase friction within Giap’s system.

Secondary Research Question Four: How did the Commander arrange and sequence operations to create multiple dilemmas, gain a position of relative advantage, and disrupt the enemy’s decision-making?

Abrams exploited weaknesses in the North’s operational posture after the 1968 Tet Offensive to present a series of compounding dilemmas that kept enemy units and resources dispersed, preventing Giap from striking a decisive blow in the South. He used this time to further

⁸⁸ Sorley, *Abrams Tapes*, 68.

⁸⁹ William E. Colby, *Phung Hoang (Phoenix) End of Year Report 1969* (Saigon: DEPCORDS MACV, 1969), 9.

⁹⁰ Sorley, *A Better War*, 53.

RVNAF modernization efforts, expand and stabilize the Pacification program, and complete the withdrawal of US combat forces. If history ended in 1973, with US forces returned to the US and the Communists suing for peace in Paris, we would be hard-pressed to explain how he failed.

Recognizing the complete tactical failure of Tet 68 and the precarious state of VC and NVA forces in SVN following the subsequent offensives in May, Abrams presented the North with their first dilemma: expend their remaining combat power in attempts to seize terrain at the cost of more casualties, or withdraw to highland sanctuaries to reconstitute, evading US forces in the wilderness, while ceding the initiative to the enemy.⁹¹ Following a string of tactical successes in pushing the enemy away from major population centers, Abrams checked his urge to return to major, multi-division “search and destroy” missions in the jungle, instead seeing an opportunity to seize key terrain along historic avenues of approach and let the enemy come to him.⁹² For example, after detecting signs of a major enemy offensive aimed at Saigon in October 68, Abrams relocated the entire 1st Cavalry Division from the I Corps Region to the III Corps region practically overnight, tasking them to conduct a retrograde defense from near the border to the outskirts of Saigon and “harass them, cover, delay, and force them to change their time schedule and chew them up as they were coming down.”⁹³ Following a larger but much less successful Tet offensive in 1969, the NVA withdrew to sanctuaries and began evaluating their future prospects, culminating in the strategic decision to revert to predominantly guerilla warfare using NVA regulars to supplant their irreplaceable losses in the VC.⁹⁴ Abrams wasted no time exploiting the vacuum left behind.

⁹¹ Graham A. Cosmas, *The United States Army in Vietnam: MACV The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, 2006), 111-113; Sorley, *Abrams Tapes*, 18.

⁹² Sorley, *Abrams Tapes*, 23.

⁹³ Sorley, *Thunderbolt*, 242.

⁹⁴ Trung Ưng Cục Miền Nam, *Resolution issued by the 9th Conference of COSVN July 1969* (Saigon: United States Embassy, 1970), Accessed November 02, 2020. <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001870189>; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 595. COSVN Directive 55

As “clear and hold” tactics and the Accelerated Pacification program continued to separate the NVA & VC from the population of SVN, Abrams presented the enemy with a second dilemma: conserve reconstituting NVA forces in sanctuaries to set conditions for another major offensive allowing the US and RVN to gain legitimacy with the population and weaken the VCI network, or commit NVA forces piecemeal to maintain the operational tempo of the insurgency through “sapper/ high-point” attacks risking an increase in defections and delaying offensive preparations. Hanoi chose the latter, encapsulated in Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) Resolution number 9, issued in July 1969, directing a strategic return to protracted guerrilla warfare targeting rural areas.⁹⁵ The NVA targeted US and ARVN firebases and military facilities, using ambushes and limited indirect attacks by fire with the “long range objective of eliminating the puppet army (ARVN) and other forces of opposition which are being nurtured by the Americans to replace them as they withdraw.”⁹⁶ Abrams was inside the enemy OODA loop, forcing the NVA to react to *his* operations and try to slow *his* momentum in the pacification and modernization programs, expending their combat power as fast as it could be generated while their replacement and logistics systems were continually under attack.⁹⁷ Subsequent raids into Cambodia and Laos drove the NVA both literally and figuratively away from their strategic objectives even as the US withdrew the majority of its ground combat forces.

“Never again and under no circumstances are we going to risk our entire military force for just an offensive. On the contrary, we should endeavour to preserve our military potential for further campaigns.”

⁹⁵ Trung Ưng Cục Miền Nam, *Resolution issued by the 9th Conference of COSVN July 1969*, July 1969; Sorley, *Abrams Tapes*, 278

⁹⁶ Sorley, *Abrams Tapes*, 200. Quote from a COSVN Agent regarding 1969 Summer Campaign guidance.

⁹⁷ Sorley, *Abrams Tapes* 392. Abrams discouraging commanders from hunting reports of NVA battalions out in the jungle; “what is important is to work against his *system* out there in the jungle...his trails, his base areas, his caches...not necessarily big operations. It’s operations that are tailored to reduce the *effectiveness* of that system.”



Figure 2 Cambodian Incursion. Graham A. Cosmas, *The United States Army in Vietnam: MACV The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal 1968-1973*, (Washington DC: Center for Military History, 2006), 299.

President Nixon directed Abrams to “Vietnamize” the conflict between North and South Vietnam by transferring all responsibility for combat operations to the RVN, withdraw the majority of US forces, and achieve “just and lasting peace.”⁹⁸ Abrams implemented a campaign plan in 1968 that prevented his adversary from achieving its strategic objectives while continuously making progress towards his own. On 30 March 1972, the NVA launched a 14-Division, “all-in” general offensive with the explicit goals of inflicting a strategic defeat on both

⁹⁸ Richard Nixon, “President Nixon's Speech on "Vietnamization," November 3, 1969,” *Richard Nixon: 1969 : containing the public messages, speeches, and statements of the president* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Library, 2005), 901-909, Accessed November 15, 2020. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/ppotpus/4731731.1969.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>.

the US and RVN.⁹⁹ They accomplished neither, achieving some limited territorial gains at the cost of at least 100,000 dead and the ARVN retaining control of major population centers.¹⁰⁰ Hanoi returned to the negotiating table and eventually agreed to peace terms that allowed the US to withdraw its few remaining forces, completing Abrams' mission.

⁹⁹ Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 674. While some in the Politburo argued that the next General Offensive should be delayed until after the complete US withdrawal in 1973, others successfully argued that a victory in 1972 would be viewed internationally as a US military defeat.

¹⁰⁰ Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 705-706.

Findings and Analysis

The previous chapter provided a detailed examination of how GEN Abrams used operational art to shape the Vietnam theater from its current state into a more desirable future state in line with US national policy. This chapter considers how the findings in the case study either support or contradict the broader assertions of the hypotheses and ultimately the validity of the thesis statement.

The first research question asked about the commander's understanding of the political objective (and strategy) of all belligerents and how they assigned military objectives in support. The case study shows that Abrams had detailed and frequent access to major US policy debates through conversations and visits with the President, Secretary of Defense, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the US Ambassador to Vietnam, and all their counterparts within Vietnam, as well as captured documents, prisoner interrogations, highly-placed spies, and official communications coming out of North Vietnam. Abrams routinely discussed and considered information from these sources with his subordinates and advisors, issuing changes to his operational approach as political leadership in Washington refined their vision of the desired future state. Most importantly, Abrams perceived the interplay between political and military actions on both sides and deftly managed systemic dynamics to continue accomplishing his mission. Abrams "One War" strategy did more than align US and ARVN operations, it incorporated the impacts of the peace negotiations, US domestic politics, strategic bombing campaigns, and US support to local governance operations.

The second research question explained the various "lenses" Abrams employed to understand his operational environment and the information he gathered through them. By mixing qualitative and quantitative data about the environment, gathered through direct sensory perception, detailed briefings, dialogue with seniors, peers, and subordinates, and iterative self-reflection, Abrams continuously tested his understanding of the situation and the effectiveness of

his operational approach. His comprehensive understanding of the environment allowed him to perceive aspects of the enemy system more clearly than many leaders in either Washington or Hanoi, allowing him to achieve operational efficiencies.

The third and fourth research questions focused on how Abrams understood the logic of how the enemy would fight and how he exploited that logic to achieve and maintain a position of relative advantage throughout the US troop withdrawal. Identifying systemic constraints in the NVA's ability to move personnel, supplies, and equipment from the support area to the close area, Abrams exploited critical vulnerabilities throughout the depth of the enemy system, capturing and destroying caches and cadre at the front while disrupting and interdicting staging areas and infiltration routes as far back as his political leash would allow. Despite this, the NVA did little to alter their system aside from scaling back unit size and operational tempo, allowing Abrams to pursue the same successful operational approach for five consecutive years.

The first hypothesis states that if the Commander understands the political objectives of friendly AND enemy forces, then he or she can better arrange operations to achieve positions of relative advantage. The evidence supports this hypothesis. War is an extension of politics for both sides in a conflict and any discussion of war aims is meaningless without considering both sides vision of the desired future state. This includes evaluating the level of popular support for the war, how the people on both sides receive information about the war, and the stability of the government and leaders pursuing the war. Too often, military commanders focus on obtaining positions of advantage to further the military end state without consideration of the ultimate political objective, leading to the dreaded "mission creep." Commanders and staffs must continually assess their understanding of the current political objective and how their lines of operations and effort lead to achieving it.

The second hypothesis states that if the Commander arranges and sequences operations across multiple domains, then he or she can create dilemmas and opportunities to penetrate, dis-

integrate, and exploit adversary operations. The evidence in the case study supports this hypothesis. While Abrams' ability to dominate the air domain provided clear tactical advantages when disrupting enemy logistics and operations in depth, his greatest success in SVN came when he acknowledged and prioritized operations to win the human domain. Hanoi was unable to trigger a general uprising in the south and Abrams was able to recruit thousands of volunteers into regional and provincial security force programs, freeing RVNAF units for modernization and combat operations. Abrams arranged and sequenced operations in the land and air domains to create psychological effects in the human domain that neutralized NVA attempts to garner local support and crippled the VCI.

The third hypothesis states that if the Commander understands the logic underpinning the disposition, planning priorities, and commitment criteria of enemy reserves, then he or she can dislocate those forces in depth by interdicting and pre-empting enemy decisions. The evidence in the case study overwhelmingly supports this hypothesis. Once Abrams determined the pattern and logic behind NVA operations, he successfully dismantled, disrupted, and defeated every enemy offensive from 1968-1972, even as his own ratio of US combat forces steadily declined. Commanders who understand the enemy's logic can design operations that spend American blood and treasure efficiently while preventing the enemy from accomplishing her objectives, a potentially decisive advantage when conflicts span multiple decades without political resolution.

This case study examined evidence to support or refute the thesis that commanders use operational art to arrange and sequence tactical activities to defeat their adversary's strategy by creating and maintaining a relative advantage that causes the disintegration, culmination, or defeat of the adversary's strategy. The research findings support this thesis and the case study presents a clear example of a theater army commander using operational art to arrange operations and tactical actions to achieve his assigned political objectives. The burden of hindsight reveals that the political objective of bringing troops home and ending military support for South

Vietnam was contradictory to the objective of building and sustaining an independent, non-Communist South Vietnamese state, an opinion shared by nearly every person ever involved in the conflict except Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. The final chapter provides a summary of the case study, final assessment of the thesis, implications for current practitioners, and recommendations for future research.

Conclusion

This case study examined the characteristics, concepts, attributes, and elements of operational art that allow Field and Theater Army Commanders to develop campaign plans that achieve political objectives. It examined how General Creighton Abrams successfully identified the internal and external dynamics of a complex adaptive system and designed an operational approach to achieve US political aims within it. It proposed and supported hypotheses that further specify methods for employing operational art and provided specific examples of their application. Lastly, it highlighted the ultimate subordination of military objectives to political ones, even when the latter are fatally flawed.

This case study used the Structured Focused Comparison methodology and combines with several other case studies that examined the same thesis, research questions, and hypotheses using different cases to draw broad conclusions and control for contextual anomalies. The study pursued an intentionally narrow scope, limiting evidence to specific thoughts, words, and actions of GEN Abrams to the extent possible, acknowledging that other individuals present for the same events arrived at different conclusions and questioned his methods. This narrow scope allows the reader to immerse themselves in Abrams thinking and illuminate cognitive behaviors associated with operational art.

This study found substantial evidence to support the thesis that Theater commanders use operational art to arrange and sequence tactical activities to defeat their adversary's strategy by creating and maintaining a relative advantage that causes the disintegration, culmination, or defeat of the adversary's strategy. Abrams manipulation of friendly freedoms and enemy constraints generated momentum in the Vietnam system that favored US and RVNAF aims and denied NVA ones. Abrams' consistency in the MACV Commander position for 5 years reduced mission creep and allowed US forces and RVNAF to capitalize on emerging opportunities that a rotational commander could easily have missed using a narrower cognitive frame.

Vietnam provides an ideal case study for readers seeking examples of hybrid, multi-domain future battlefields. The blend of counter-insurgency, stability operations, helicopter enabled offensive maneuver, and the daily grind of attrition warfare intermingled throughout the theater. Just as Abrams struggled to convince subordinates that everything was part of just “One War,” today’s commanders struggle to integrate joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational efforts across the range of military operations. Abrams’ rush to both secure rural villages and establish a conventional screen line following the Tet Offensive provide an example of the how consolidating gains can increase flexibility for future operations.

This case study did not explore the public and private disagreements between Abrams, MACV, the US Embassies in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, USARPAC, the Joint Chiefs, Henry Kissinger, and President Nixon over proposed and implementing policies. Given the current debates between US military leaders and policy-makers surrounding the prolonged conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, this topic is worth further research. What roles and responsibilities do military leaders have in promoting and opposing US government policy decisions in war, particularly when political vicissitudes pursue contradictory efforts or attempt to re-energize failed operational approaches?

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