Vietnam and the American Theory of Limited War

Stephen Peter Rosen

The idea of limited conventional war fought by American troops outside Europe is no longer unthinkable, but there has been no recent analysis of the whole idea of limited war. As a result, the concepts that we use when we think about this problem are, by and large, the concepts we inherited from a small group of scholars and policy analysts who did their most important writing in the middle 1950s. There is, of course, no automatic need for new strategic concepts every decade. Still, in the generation that has gone by since Robert Osgood and Thomas Schelling analyzed this subject, much has been learned while the American strategy of limited war has remained the same. As Osgood wrote in 1979, "the strategy transcended the Vietnam War and not only survived it but continued to expand in application and acceptance."[1] Much of what their strategy stated was and is true, but much is not, and much about the nature of war was simply ignored. A reconsideration of limited war strategy in light of what we can learn from historical experience leads to a new strategy to supplement the old. Limited wars are not only political wars, as the original theorists wrote, but *strange* wars. The general problem of limited war is not only the *diplomatic* one of how to signal our resolve to our enemy, but the *military* one of how to adapt, quickly and successfully, to the peculiar and unfamiliar *battlefield* conditions in which our armed forces are fighting. Diplomatic success will depend on military success since resolve cannot survive repeated failure on the battlefield. Finally, the factors that determine whether this adaptation is successful or not are largely *moral* factors: the presence or absence of political courage at the central levels of command that enables men to make clear decisions about the missions and resources allocated to the theater commander, and to delegate responsibility to the local commanders. Military courage is required of the officers, to earn and keep the confidence of their men as soldiers die without winning in the early stages of the war, and to adopt operational changes that necessarily stake the lives of the soldiers on untried and possibly incorrect tactics.

Stephen Peter Rosen currently works at the Office for the Secretary of Defense. The opinions expressed herein are entirely his own.

---

1. Robert Osgood, *Limited War Revisited* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1979), p. 10.

International Security, Fall 1982 (Vol. 7, No. 2) 0162-2889/82/010083-31 $02.50/0

Intellectual ability is obviously necessary but in some ways secondary; solutions to military problems have often been recognized but not implemented because men, with very good reason, are afraid of what would happen if they are wrong. In war the easiest thing is difficult, not because soldiers are stupid, but because they are human and do not regard human life as a resource to be expended as needed.

Early Theorists of Limited War

Between 1957 and 1960, two books were published by professors that set the terms of discussion about limited war. Robert Osgood's book *Limited War* argued that politics is primary. What is special about limited war is that resources and goals are constrained by policy, not capabilities. The object of the war is political, to be obtained by negotiation and compromise, and not military, involving the physical destruction of the enemy. Therefore, the special problem of limited war is "more broadly, the problem of combining military power with diplomacy and with the economic and psychological instruments of power. . . ."[2] While it is true that limited wars deal with smaller problems than those found in total wars, in both kinds of wars the objects have been *political*. Both world wars had explicitly political objectives and were the extension of politics just as much as in any smaller war. Nor was resource allocation determined by the physical capacity of the nation. The Allied commanders in Italy and Burma were painfully aware that they were fighting "limited wars" in order to permit the operations in other more important theaters. Those disputes over "limited" resources were analogous to the disputes over how to limit the Korean War so as to allow the simultaneous building of the U.S. position in Europe,[3] and to those within the American Joint Chiefs of Staff as the Vietnam War drained their military power in the United States and Europe.[4]

Osgood focused on the primacy of politics and ignored the other elements of limited war. In particular, he slighted the peculiar political problems inherent in limited war. The second theme of his book was that military problems had no proper place in a theory of limited war. This was because

2. Robert Osgood, *Limited War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 7.
3. Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation* (New York: Norton, 1969), p. 514; Samuel Huntington, *The Common Defense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), p. 55.
4. Herbert Y. Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson & Vietnam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 94–101.

limited war was, essentially, a diplomatic instrument, a tool for bargaining with the enemy. Earlier students of limited war, whom we will consider later, assumed that limited war was a form of war, a variety of combat. But for Osgood, war was "an upper extremity of a whole scale of international conflict of ascending conflict and scope. . . . [*N*]*o definition can determine precisely at what point on the scale conflict becomes 'war'*. . . ."[5] War, as such, did not deserve study, Osgood thought, because war was like peace, only more so. This is contrary to the traditional and common sense view that war is governed by a set of special rules. Even if it does not set its own goals, as Clausewitz wrote, "it has its own grammar."[6] This attitude led Osgood to an important policy conclusion. If limited war is to be a diplomatic tool, it must be centrally directed by the political leadership. The special needs of the military should not affect the conduct of the war. The military should be "the controllable and predictable instruments of national policy. . . . [I]t would be a dangerous error to apply to the whole complex problem of harmonizing military policy with national policy . . . the far simpler imperatives of the battlefield."[7] If war is just another form of coercive diplomacy, then it should be run by the political leadership in Washington, not by the generals in the field. Indeed, in 1979 Osgood wrote that the president of the United States "must be provided with a reliable communications, command, and control system that would enable him to tailor force to serve political purposes under varied conditions of combat."[8] The insistence on centralized control of a limited war derives from his definition of limited war. An appreciation of the problems of the battlefield might have modified this insistence on centralization.

The third theme in Osgood's work was the unimportance of domestic politics. When Osgood says that politics is primary, he meant international politics, *Realpolitik*. After much discussion, Osgood concluded that even though the American people will be hostile, because of their national traditions and ideology, to the kind of strategy he proposes, that strategy must still be adopted. This attitude resulted in some very odd conclusions. For example, he wrote that, "if we anticipate a 'war of attrition,' that would be precisely the kind of war in which our superior production and economic

5. Osgood, *Limited War*, p. 20, emphasis added.
6. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans., Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 605.
7. Osgood, *Limited War*, p. 14.
8. Osgood, *Limited War Revisited*, p. 11.

base would give us the greatest advantage." He quotes with approval Henry Kissinger's 1955 assertion that "a war of attrition is the one war China could not win."[9] After a war of attrition in Vietnam produced a wave of popular revulsion we can easily see the error of this statement. This mistake was apparent even in the 1950s to the Eisenhower administration, which was determined to end the war in Korea quickly and to avoid an involvement in Indochina. In both cases, protracted war promised political suicide.

Thomas Schelling began from a point of view much less historical and political than Osgood's, but he arrived at much the same conclusions. He too argued that the study of limited war in no way depended on any actual knowledge of war. In his book *The Strategy of Conflict*, Schelling explained that "the theory is not concerned with the efficient *application* of violence or anything of the sort; it is not essentially a theory of aggression or of resistence of war. *Threats* of war, yes, or threats of anything else. . . ."[10] The strategy of conflict is about bargaining, about conditioning someone else's behavior to one's own. It is, therefore, about communication of a certain kind. From these simple assumptions proceed all of Schelling's concepts of deterrence, the communication of resolve, war-limitation by tacit communication, the rationality of looking irrational, and so forth, that are by now so familiar to us. But in the end, it does not look that much different from Osgood's strategy. Neither "limited war" nor "the strategy of conflict" are about war, but about diplomacy and bargaining. The conference table and not the battlefield is the center of the action. Looking back, Osgood summed up the theoretical consensus by saying, "The theory of limited war came to be seen as part of a general 'strategy of conflict' in which adversaries would bargain with each other through the mechanism of graduated military responses . . . in order to achieve a negotiated settlement. . . ."[11]

Political scientists have kept this consensus alive and well for a generation. When Kenneth Waltz recently discussed a strategy for limited war in the Persian Gulf area, the same focus on communications, the same rejection of military considerations, was obvious. Though the United States does face the threat of war with the Soviet Union for Iran, "the problem is not to develop a strategy that will help enable us to fight such a war. Instead, the problem

9. Osgood, *Limited War*, pp. 271–272, citing Kissinger's article, "Military Policy and Defense of the 'Grey Areas,'" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (April 1955), pp. 416–428.
10. Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 15.
11. Osgood, *Limited War Revisited*, p. 11.

is to develop a strategy that will help us to avoid having to do so."[12] Military forces are not for fighting, but for signalling. "If, in a crisis, we were to put our troops in the oil fields, it would make the depth of our interest, the extent of our determination, and the strength of our will manifest."[13] Minor military problems, such as the fact that the Rapid Deployment Force could not presently keep itself supplied with water in the desert, are apparently irrelevant.[14] Robert Jervis, in an article about limited *nuclear* war, pauses to make the familiar point about the real purpose of *conventional* forces fighting in Africa or Asia: ". . . using large armies . . . [is] less important for influencing the course of the battle than for showing the other side that . . . things will get out of hand."[15]

Other political scientists have begun to notice that all is not well with the theory of limited war. Samuel Huntington suggests that one lesson of the Vietnam War is that limited wars must be acceptable to domestic opinion, and this means they must be short. He is supported by Stanley Hoffmann, who asks, naturally enough, what should policymakers do if strategic communication fails?[16] How can they proceed beyond the old strategy?

Vietnam as a Test Case

Wars are complex, and the Vietnam War was no exception. Still, it is useful to ask whether the central tenets of the old theory of limited war tended to be confirmed or falsified by the information supplied by that war. In the conduct of the war, was there an emphasis on strategic communication, a consequent focus on tight central control, and a relative disregard for the military and domestic political problems of waging war? If there was, what consequences can legitimately be attributed to that emphasis? It is also necessary to look at the causes of U.S. military successes and failures that had nothing to do with the decisions made in Washington. To sum up the answers to these two sets of questions it is fair to say that, first, the greater

---

12. Kenneth Waltz, "A Strategy for the Rapid Deployment Force," *International Security*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Spring 1981), p. 57.
13. Ibid., pp. 64, 67.
14. General Edward Meyer, *The Posture of the Army and the Department of the Army Budget Estimates FY 1982* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1981), p. 17.
15. Robert Jervis, "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 94, No. 4 (Winter 1979–80), pp. 618, 619.
16. Stanley Hoffmann, et al., "Vietnam Reappraised," *International Security*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Summer 1981), pp. 8, 10.

the costs and risks of a military measure, actual or contemplated, the greater the tendency for the men at the higher levels of government to talk and act as if they were guided by the academic theory of limited war. This approach to the problem seemed to minimize risk and offer victory without combat. This is true for civilians but, to a surprising extent, also true of military men, particularly General Maxwell Taylor. This tendency was reinforced by mutual distrust between civilians and the military. Together, these factors produced inattention and irresolute behavior that hampered the formation and implementation of an effective military strategy. Second, there were local military mistakes committed by the American forces in South Vietnam that were partially the result of the lack of a clear national strategy but which were also the result of the desire of General William Westmoreland, commander of American ground forces in South Vietnam, to avoid dramatic failure.

Examination of the *Pentagon Papers* can leave no doubt that in 1961 and 1962 American leaders, from the president on down, did *not* think in terms of limited war theory. They focused instead on the military problem of how to beat a guerilla enemy in a counter-insurgency war. They realized that such a war could only be won by a combination of military action and political and administrative reform, but they nonetheless thought in terms of a war-winning strategy, not in terms of deterrence, signalling, limitations, or bargaining. In August 1962, McGeorge Bundy, special assistant to the president for national security affairs, circulated a National Security Action Memorandum that instructed the relevant departments to draw up plans of action consistent with the doctrine of counter-insurgency.[17] A bit later that year Michael V. Forrestal, the White House aide for Far Eastern affairs, in a memo to the president dwelled at some length on the specific problems of the battlefield. In light of the subsequent tendency of the army to emphasize "search and destroy" missions and of the government tendency to rely on military signals and diplomacy, this memo is startling both for its attention to military detail and for the quality of the military analysis provided by the soldiers advising the Vietnamese. The advisers said that in the operations by the South Vietnamese army "the proportion of 'clear and hold' operations . . . is too low in proportion to the 'hit and withdraw' operations designed to destroy regular Viet Cong units." Both kinds of action were necessary, but there was too much emphasis on the latter. This is exactly the same

17. *The Pentagon Papers*, Volume 2, (Boston: Gravel edition, n.d.), p. 689.

criticism that was to be leveled at the United States army five or six years later. The American advisers said the South Vietnamese went in too much for large unit, "elaborate, set piece operations" that chewed up the countryside, but which the communists could easily evade. The Vietnamese tended not to patrol at night, and spent too little time on extended patrols. Air power was being misused and was possibly causing unnecessary civilian damage.[18] Many of the mistakes that the American army would later make were visible on a small scale to Forrestal and to the president.

Nor was this memo an aberration. Roger Hilsman, director of the State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research, had intensively studied the phenomenon of counter-guerrilla warfare by the United States in the Philippines at the turn of the century, and by the French and British,[19] and his memo to Secretary of State Dean Rusk in December 1962 evaluating the performance of the South Vietnamese showed the same attention to military problems, as well as to those of political and administrative reform, and none to signalling the North. Specifically, he warned that the South Vietnamese army would not have much success unless it "appreciably modifies military tactics (particularly those relating to large unit actions and tactical use of airpower and artillery),"[20] and concentrated more on "clear and hold" operations followed by civil and political reforms.[21]

But when an increase in the stakes was considered, the question the leaders in Washington asked themselves was not "how will this affect the resolution of combat" but "what signal are we sending the enemy?" This concern with the question of signalling applied, at least in part, to the American military. In May 1961, Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatrick asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff if they would recommend a plan to send two 1,600-man American combat units to South Vietnam. The Chiefs said yes, they would, because it would deter the North Vietnamese and the Chinese, but also because it would release ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) troops for patrolling.[22]

When America had 685 soldiers in South Vietnam, 3,200 more men represented a small increase in the stakes. The Chiefs wanted to communicate

---

18. Ibid., pp. 719–723.
19. Douglas Blaufarb, *The Counter-insurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance 1950 to Present* (New York: Free Press, 1977), p. 60.
20. *Pentagon Papers*, Volume 2, p. 691.
21. Ibid., pp. 701–702.
22. Ibid., p. 49.

resolve and commitment to their enemies, neutrals, and allies, but also considered the plain military advantages.

As the stakes grew larger, so did the perceived importance of an action as a signal. In October of that year, General Maxwell Taylor recommended to the president that 6,000–8,000 combat troops be sent to South Vietnam. The purpose was to show America's commitment. "[T]here can be no action so convincing of U.S. seriousness of purpose and hence so reassuring to the people and Government of SVN and to our other friends and allies in SEA. . . ." The fact that an increment of force this small would have little practical military effect was unimportant since a lot of troops were not "necessary to produce the desired effect on national morale in SVN and on international opinion."[23] Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, moreover, rejected the proposal, largely because it was likely to be an inadequate signal and unlikely to "tip the scales decisively. . . . [I]t will not convince the other side (whether the shots are called from Moscow, Peiping, or Hanoi) that we mean business." This could be done "only if we accompany the initial force introduction by a clear commitment to the full objective accompanied by a warning through some channel to Hanoi that continued support of the Viet Cong will lead to punitive retaliation against North Vietnam."[24]

Here was the idea of a mix of military action and diplomacy in order to communicate with the enemy that was favored by the theorists. There is no doubt that others watch American actions and draw conclusions from them, but this was one of the first suggestions that leaders should decide what military actions should be taken on the basis of their value as a signal.

This tendency became unmistakable early in 1964. The proximate cause was the disastrous military conditions within South Vietnam. Following the decline and fall of the Diem regime, almost all counter-insurgency efforts, including the strategic hamlet program, came to a halt or went into reverse. Simultaneously, the Viet Cong stepped up their side of the war and by November regiment-size Viet Cong units were conducting conventional attacks.[25] Nothing the United States could do in the short term, other than the immediate dispatch of large numbers of ground troops, could help the actual military situation in the South. McNamara had estimated that it would take 208,000 American troops to make a difference and to deal with the inevitable

23. Ibid., pp. 90–91.
24. Ibid., p. 108.
25. W. C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Dell, 1980), p. 126.

overt introduction of North Vietnamese troops that would follow in response. Any more than 208,000 would interfere with U.S. plans for the defense of Europe.[26] In 1965, Lyndon Johnson was not prepared to lose South Vietnam but neither was he prepared to send 208,000 men. But he could send signals and avoid making a decision. It was a cheap, low-risk approach.

This is harsh judgment, but is justified by the record in the *Pentagon Papers*. Various measures to coerce North Vietnam were considered. Covert actions against the North were continued despite the judgment of the review committee chaired by General Krulak, former Pentagon counter-insurgency expert and then commanding general, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, that the communist leaders were tough and would not respond to this "coercive diplomacy" unless "the *damage* visited upon them is of great magnitude."[27] Walt Rostow, chairman of the State Department Policy Planning Council, disagreed. By November of 1964, Rostow was complaining to McNamara that "too much thought is being given to the actual damage we do in the North, not enough to the signal we wish to send." He recommended that any use of force against the North "should be as limited and insanguinary as possible."[28] The State Department had recommended to the president in February that twelve F-100 fighters be sent to Thailand, not for their military utility, (they would have no significant effect on infiltration through Laos, said the U.S. local embassy in Laos) but "with a view toward . . . potential deterrence and signalling impacts on communist activities in Laos."[29] It was generally acknowledged that the kinds of attacks against the North that were being contemplated would be militarily ineffective. The National Intelligence Estimate explicitly stated, in May 1964, that the combination of bombing and negotiation under consideration "would not seriously affect communist *capabilities* to continue that insurrection," but it would affect Hanoi's *will* to some extent, and it would also signal America's intention to limit the extent of the war.[30] The Joint Chiefs of Staff were aware of and unhappy with the coercive diplomacy. "We should not waste critical time and more resources in another protracted series of messages, but rather we should take positive, prompt, and meaningful military action. . . ."[31]

---

26. *Pentagon Papers*, Volume 2, p. 108.
27. Ibid., Volume 3, pp. 152–153, emphasis in the original.
28. Ibid., pp. 632–633.
29. Ibid., pp. 157, 515.
30. Ibid., p. 169.
31. Ibid., p. 173.

If the civilians were wrong, the military was not necessarily right. The full-scale bombing effort recommended by the military would *not* have ended the war on terms favorable to the United States, and McNamara was justified when he asked the Joint Chiefs if their recommended 94 target plan would end North Vietnamese support to the Viet Cong. If not, what would?[32] It is, however, legitimate to attribute to this limited war attitude three practical consequences. Concentrating on the dispatch of signals diverted attention from a search for military measures that could have been successful. It led decisionmakers into actions they knew the American people would not like and might reject. And it was consciously used as a way of avoiding or deferring risky decisions. These conclusions are best supported by one of the most important decisions of this period, the decision to begin the ROLLING THUNDER bombing campaign against North Vietnam. A working group chaired by William P. Bundy, assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, convened in November 1964 to review future American policy for Southeast Asia. It came up with three options. Option A was more of the same: United States aid and advisers plus tit-for-tat strikes against the North if American soldiers were attacked in the South. Option B quickly acquired the nickname "the full squeeze": enemy bridges, lines of communication, and industry were to be bombed and enemy harbors mined. It was to be "a systematic program of progressively heavy pressures against the North Vietnamese, to be continued until current objectives were met. Negotiations were to be resisted" in order to prevent communist peace offensives from halting American action. Option C was the "progressive squeeze and talk", which was a program to increase U.S. pressure against the North gradually, coupled with a stated willingness to stop the pressure and negotiate.[33] This was the policy which Lyndon Johnson's conduct of the war—the slow expansion of the target list plus the 1967 San Antonio formula for unconditional negotiations[34] plus the repeated bombing pauses—most closely resembled. It was a limited war strategy of signalling by military means U.S. commitment and then proceeding diplomatically. Assistant Secretary of Defense for In-

32. Ibid., p. 555.
33. Ibid., pp. 221–224.
34. On September 29, 1967, Johnson made a speech in San Antonio, Texas, in which he stated that the United States would cease all bombing of North Vietnam when it was convinced that doing so would lead promptly to "productive discussions." Johnson also said he expected North Vietnam not to take advantage of the bombing halt. See Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1971), p. 267.

ternational Security Affairs John McNaughton, the drafter of the options, unconsciously highlighted this resemblance, "To change DRV [North Vietnam] behavior [change can be tacit] U.S. should 'negotiate' by an optimum combination of words and deeds." At the same time, "It is important that USSR and China understand the limited nature of our deeds—i.e., not for a colony or base and not to destroy NVN. . . ."[35]

What were the consequences of this attitude? First, it caused the military problem of how to win the war on the ground in the South to be neglected. The anonymous author of the section of the *Pentagon Papers* that discusses the beginning of the American combat troop commitment comments on the absence of any documents discussing the proper role or rationale for American *ground* forces in South Vietnam until they were actually sent in March. "In other words, it appears that the key decisionmakers in Washington are not focussing on the importance of deployment. The attention getter as the [2/7/65] Bundy memo [to LBJ] indicates was the impending air war against North Vietnam."[36] The author is not quite correct. There was some discussion of the role of ground troops during this period. They were considered as part of a limited war bargaining strategy. Within Bundy's working group, the *Pentagon Papers* notes, "It was the recognized lack of strong bargaining points that led the working group to consider the introduction of ground forces into the northern provinces of South Vietnam." Troop deployment signalled commitment, and, as the representative from the State Department Policy Planning Staff pointed out, Hanoi's price for negotiations was likely to be an end to the bombing. In that event, troops on the ground would be "a valuable bargaining piece."[37] William Bundy wrote in January 1965 that he liked the idea of sending troops to the northern provinces of South Vietnam. "It would have a real stiffening effect in Saigon, and a strong signal effect to Hanoi."[38]

Because troops were there primarily to signal, it did not matter so much what their combat qualities were. The first troops not to be sent as advisers were the Marines who guarded the air base at Da Nang. They were chosen because, as Marines, they had the ability to keep themselves supplied "over the beach" in an area in which the logistics network was not yet developed. They also had some heavy equipment to help defend themselves and the

35. *Pentagon Papers*, Volume 3, pp. 580–582.
36. Ibid., p. 431.
37. Ibid., p. 226.
38. Ibid., p. 606.

base. At the last moment, John McNaughton tried to halt their dispatch. The *Pentagon Papers* infer that he thought they were *too* heavy. They would signal the North that Americans were coming with heavy offensive units that were there to stay. Instead the 173rd Airborne Brigade should be sent. It was light, and would signal the willingness to move them out if necessary.[39] McNaughton ultimately was unsuccessful in this instance but his way of thinking did prevail, Westmoreland claims, in another case. In 1965, the United States observed the construction of the first surface-to-air missile sites in North Vietnam, and the military sought permission to attack them before they were completed, to save American casualties. "McNaughton ridiculed the idea. 'You don't think the North Vietnamese are going to use them!' he scoffed to General Moore. 'Putting them in is just a political ploy by the Russians to appease Hanoi.'

"It was all a matter of signals said the clever civilian theorists in Washington. We won't bomb the SAM sites, which signals the North Vietnamese not to use them."[40]

There is a good deal of bitterness in the story, and Westmoreland seems to be reporting it secondhand. McNaughton's earlier action is, however, well established though his motives are not. There is also the matter of the one effort made to figure out what military role the American troops would be *able* to perform, *before* large numbers of them were sent to fight. Late in March 1965 Maxwell Taylor, then ambassador to South Vietnam, cabled Washington with a natural request. What was to be the strategy for the use of troops that were coming? They could be used either offensively or defensively to establish enclaves, they could conduct "clear and hold" operations, or they could be used as a general reserve to backstop the South Vietnamese. Taylor preferred a combination of the first and the last, but more than anything he wanted some kind of decision. He proposed that the first Marine units be used for 60 days in an experiment to see whether conventional American ground troops could successfully adapt to the requirements of a counter-insurgency war, *before* more troops were sent to try and fight that war.[41] His questions were not answered, and at the urging of Lyndon Johnson the United States, less than a month after Taylor sent his cable,[42] authorized the deployment of 82,000 troops with more to follow.

---

39. Westmoreland, *Soldier Reports*, p. 158; *Pentagon Papers*, Volume 3, pp. 421–424.
40. Westmoreland, *Soldier Reports*, p. 154.
41. *Pentagon Papers*, Volume 3, pp. 453, 455.
42. Ibid., p. 457.

It is not correct to say that the Washington leadership was insensitive to public opinion. There is the famous example of Johnson explicitly approving a change in mission for the Marines sent to Vietnam "to permit their more active use" and, in the same document, calling on officials to avoid any publicity and to "minimize any appearance of sudden changes in policy. . . ."[43] The men who formulated the three bombing options, however, were aware that what they were suggesting was not going to receive the blessing of the American people. William Bundy wrote a report, based on drafts by McNaughton, summing up the problems with Option C. "This course of action is inherently likely to stretch out and to be subject to major pressures both within the United States and internationally. As we saw in Korea, an 'in-between' course of action will always arouse a school of thought that believes things should be tackled quickly and conclusively. On the other side, the continuation of military action and a reasonably firm posture will arouse sharp criticism in other political quarters."[44] Looking back on this aspect of the war, Dean Rusk said ". . . we never made any effort to create a war psychology in the United States during the Vietnam affair. We didn't have military parades through cities. . . . We tried to do in cold blood perhaps what can only be done in hot blood, when sacrifices of this order are involved. At least that's a problem that people have to think of if any such thing, God forbid, should happen again."[45]

The national leaders wanted to keep public opinion quiet in order to keep control over the war and to avoid escalation that might lead to a large conventional or nuclear war. The need to avoid nuclear war was and is unquestionable. It quickly produced, however, a tendency to choose plans that were controllable over plans that would be militarily successful. Option C was preferred because, as McNaughton put it, it was "designed to give the U.S. the option at any time to proceed or not, to escalate or not, and to quicken the pace or not."[46] The desire to keep the limited war limited also increased the pressure to centralize control of the war in the hands of the president. Johnson proudly told Doris Kearns that, "by keeping a lid on all the designated targets, *I* knew *I* could keep control of the war in my own hands. If China reacted to our slow escalation by threatening to retaliate,

43. Ibid., p. 703, citing NSAM–328, 4/6/65.
44. Ibid., p. 617.
45. Michael Charlton and Anthony Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why: The American Involvement in Vietnam* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), p. 115.
46. *Pentagon Papers*, Volume 3, p. 224.

we'd have plenty of time to ease off the bombing."[47] The ultimate result was that, by 1968, General Westmoreland needed special authorization to use anti-personnel rounds in the artillery pieces defending Khe Sanh. Johnson and his senior advisers would insistently interrogate Westmoreland about the details of his defense plans. What would he do if there was bad weather around Khe Sanh? Is his long-range artillery effective?[48] The desire for central control became excessive as the war dragged on.

At the same time, the Washington leadership failed to do the one thing that the central leadership must do. It did not define a clear military mission for the military and it did not establish a clear limit to the resources to be allocated for that mission. Because the Johnson administration could not bring itself to make two big decisions, it intruded itself into the making of innumerable little decisions. This hindered the military from carrying out the mission that it had, of necessity, defined for itself. The limited war attitude, with its emphasis on signals, central direction, and war limitation by means of flexible policies, contributed to, if it did not cause, this situation.

This combination of high level indecision and micromanagement first arose when combat troops were sent to Westmoreland. Taylor had tried unsuccessfully to get a strategy defined, but now the practical question was—how many troops to Vietnam? In the case of the Korean War, the decision was made in a clear-cut military manner. MacArthur was initially given all the troops in the Pacific Command plus just about all the reserves in the continental United States, Puerto Rico, and the Canal Zone. The troops in Europe were not touched, and, in December 1950, as mobilization made more troops available, the Joint Chiefs of Staff made a difficult decision: no more reinforcements for Korea. The United States had the responsibility to defend Europe in a general war. If Korea became part of a bigger war, the defense of Europe would have to come first. Korea would be defended with the existing commitment or it would be evacuated.[49]

No such decision as to where the Vietnam War lay on the U.S. list of national security priorities was ever made. McNamara tried in 1961, when he said 208,000 was the maximum that could be spared, as we have seen. But that level was passed by 1967. Instead of making that decision, the buck was passed downward. Johnson did not want a big war, but neither did he

47. Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 264.
48. Schandler, *Unmaking of a President*, pp. 90, 88.
49. Matthew B. Ridgway, *The Korean War* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), p. 91.

wish to be accused of losing the war by denying his field commander what he needed. So Westmoreland was to be given whatever he asked for, short of force levels that would require mobilizing the reserves. In July 1965, McNaughton instructed the staff of the Joint Chiefs that the president was willing to keep adding ground troops "as required and as our capabilities permit."[50] Over 400,000 men were authorized in the spring of 1966, but one can search the *Pentagon Papers* in vain for a rationale justifying that level. The author of that section himself notes, "The question of where the numbers . . . came from provokes much speculation."[51] The figure came from nowhere because the administration abdicated its responsibility to set priorities. Johnson never formulated a clear policy, either global or regional, so he could never say what was or was not needed in Vietnam. All he could do was send a memo to McNamara in June 1966 stating "As you know, we have been moving our men to Vietnam on a scheduled determined by General Westmoreland's requirements."[52] How Westmoreland's requirements should fit in with the leaders' other requirements was never resolved. Because McNamara had no policy line, all *he* could do was send a memo to the generals in August and demand detailed accounting of what they were up to. He would send everything Westmoreland required. "Nevertheless I desire and expect a detailed, line-by-line analysis of these requirements to determine that each is truly essential to the carrying out of our war plan."

This was nonsense. The administration could either send everything Westmoreland asked for, or better, it could send what was required by the war plan consistent with its other objectives; but this was just harassment. The best McNamara could do to set guidelines for the generals was to warn them that sending too many troops to Vietnam would "weaken our ability to win by . . . raising doubts concerning the soundness of our planning."[53] This was a far cry from the detailed military discussions of counter-insurgency of 1961, which set concrete goals and courses of actions against which the military could be measured but within which the military would be left alone to deal with local conditions as they saw fit. This failure of strategic thinking grew worse until the Tet crisis brought matters to a head, and Clark Clifford to the Pentagon, where he exclaimed in despair, "I couldn't get hold of a

50. *Pentagon Papers*, Volume 4, p. 291.
51. Ibid., p. 320.
52. Ibid., p. 323.
53. Ibid., p. 326.

plan to win the war. . . . [W]hen I attempted to find out how long it would take to achieve our goal, there was no answer. When I asked how many more men it would take . . . no one could be certain."[54]

The Absence of Strategy

What had happened to American military strategy? Its absence became painfully obvious in 1968, but actually it was missing from 1964 on. The answer, in part, is that America had adopted a limited war signalling strategy. The military measures adequate for that strategy were not adequate for successfully prosecuting the war in South Vietnam. As the Bundy working group admitted, the measures it proposed "would almost certainly not destroy DRV capability to continue supporting the insurrection . . . should Hanoi so wish."[55] Hanoi *did* so wish, the signalling strategy collapsed, and the leaders were left without a policy. The importance of a clear policy and a clear allocation of resources is made apparent by looking at what happened when, pressed to the wall, the Johnson administration did set a troop ceiling. By late 1967, 525,000 men had gradually come to be authorized for Vietnam. Many had been taken away from units defending Europe. No more would be available without calling up the reserves and this Johnson would not do. Westmoreland did not like this situation, but finally he knew where he stood. He could no longer hope to get the number of troops he wanted to wage his kind of war, but he could and did formulate a strategy to make the best use of the resources he had. He began a serious program of Vietnamization. "It was the only strategy that I could come up with that was viable if there was no change in policy. . . . It was my strategy, and I portrayed it as such. The administration was totally non-commital on it. They kind of nodded their heads and did not disagree."[56] But this was better than nothing, and it began the program that, by 1972, would allow the South Vietnamese to defeat an armored invasion with the help of American logistics and air power, but without American combat troops.

Why was the warfighting, counter-insurgency attitude of 1961 replaced by the bargaining, limited war attitude by 1964? While it was natural for Washington leaders to try and increase their political control over the military as

54. Schandler, *Unmaking of a President*, p. 162.
55. *Pentagon Papers*, Volume 3, p. 653.
56. Schandler, *Unmaking of a President*, p. 62.

American commitment grew, it would have been equally natural for them also to increase their concern with problems of military strategy, as opposed to signalling, once U.S. forces were actually involved in combat. This did not happen. Why?

The nature of the people handling the war in Washington changed. As the war grew bigger, it drew in more senior people, as more high level officials became involved in the direction of the war. These men simply had had little experience in the direction of a war, and had not studied military problems. What *did* they know? Walt Rostow described himself and his colleagues who came to work in Washington for John Kennedy: "Some had been trained in modern economic theory. . . . In the 1950's they had focussed their minds sharply on problems of nuclear deterrence and arms control; on the need for highly mobile conventional forces in a nuclear world; on how to organize the Pentagon and military budget to produce a rational force structure. And when they took posts of responsibility, they felt comfortable with this array of problems, even in such acute forms as the Berlin and Cuba missile crisis of 1961–1962.

"But they found themselves caught up in a problem for which they were ill-prepared—guerrilla warfare. . . ."[57] In short, these men knew limited war theory and defense economics, but not military strategy. Rostow argues that, "instead of constructing an alternative, systematic analysis of the cause of the battle, they tended to do something more limited but wholly legitimate; that is, to debate critically the views (or believed views) of the military."[58] Men found limited war theory a quick and easy way to become fluent participants in a crucial debate. Other officials had had direct experience with the skillful *non-use* of force in the Missile Crisis. From the documents, it seems that some of them carried this way of thinking into an area where it was less helpful, into the realm of the actual conduct of war.

If the civilian leadership did not have such knowledge, where could they get it? They could go to school, and at the instigation of President Kennedy, the Foreign Service Institute set up a course for senior and middle level officials to teach them about counter-insurgency warfare. Henry Cabot Lodge delayed his departure to South Vietnam as ambassador so that he could take the course. Hundreds of other officials eventually joined him. Lectures were given by Walt Rostow, Edward Lansdale, and MIT professor Lucian Pye. It

57. Walt Whitman Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 494.
58. Ibid., p. 495.

was a failure. The course lasted six weeks and dealt with the whole range of counter-insurgency problems in underdeveloped countries all over the world. This simply could not be done, or done well. Douglas Blaufarb, a CIA official who attended the first six-week session, described the character of the course: "It was highly generalized and often left the officers at a loss as to how to translate the generalities into policies, and, even more difficult, into practical actions."[59] It could not have been otherwise.

If the civilian leadership could not acquire the necessary expertise in a hurry, to whom could they turn for help? The obvious answer is "to the military." This was not done because the military was not trusted. Civil-military relations in the United States were, and are, on the surface, satisfactory. Civilian control is a universally accepted principle. Below the surface, relations were bad. In the back of everyone's mind in the 1960s was the memory of General Douglas MacArthur's insubordination in Korea. Lyndon Johnson, never a man to leave something in the back of his mind, told Westmoreland flat out in February 1966: "General, I have a lot riding on you. . . . I hope you don't pull a MacArthur on me."[60] Johnson and Westmoreland got along reasonably well, but the suspicion was there. In private, Johnson was vivid: "And the generals. Oh, they'd love the war, too. It's hard to be a military hero without a war. . . . That's why I am so suspicious of the military. They're always so narrow in their appraisal of everything."[61]

This general suspicion had been increased for the men who worked for John Kennedy by the experience of the Cuban Missile Crisis. According to his brother Robert, John Kennedy was "distressed" with his military advisers. "They seemed always to assume that if the Russians and Cubans would not respond, or [even] if they did, that a war was in our national interest." This remark was probably prompted by the recommendation that Air Force General Curtis Lemay had made to bomb the missiles in Cuba *after* the Soviets had begun to withdraw them. "[T]his experience pointed out for all of us the importance of civilian direction and control. . . ."[62] A somewhat less tactful remark by John Kennedy has been recorded: "The first advice I'm going to give my successor is to watch the generals and to avoid the feeling that just because they are military men their opinion on military matters is

59. Blaufarb, *Counter-Insurgency*, pp. 72–73.
60. Westmoreland, *Soldier Reports*, p. 208.
61. Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson*, p. 262.
62. Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days* (New York: New American Library, 1969), p. 119.

worth a damn."[63] There was the famous encounter between McNamara and the Chief of Naval Operations during the blockade of Cuba that ended with McNamara shouting that the object of the operation was not to shoot Russians but to communicate a political message: "I don't give a damn what John Paul Jones would have done."[64]

Relations had not improved with time. McNamara's obsession with getting control of the defense budget made things worse. In Lyndon Johnson's words, "Why, no military men could spend a dime without McNamara's approval. He fought and bled for the principle that the Joint Chiefs of Staff could not get a mandate without a specific request. Otherwise, we would be giving them money based on pie-in-the-sky figures. . . ."[65] All in all, the civilians were not men who would turn easily to the generals and say, "Teach us about strategy."

It must be said that generals were and are often wrong. Their advice in the Vietnam War was often bad. The military, however, was fighting the war and had the data and personal experience that was crucial to the formulation of good strategy. Bad relations meant that the civilians and the soldiers were less likely to work together to develop good strategy. Instead the civilians were inclined to turn to limited war theory. It enabled them to make strategy of a sort without help from the generals. It gave them power over the generals, which is what they wanted.

This state of affairs came to a head with the 1968 Tet offensive. To sum up the state of affairs before the communists launched their attack we can say that: 1) there was no generally agreed upon comprehensible military strategy for winning the war, and no clear definition of the amount of resources to be devoted to the war; 2) there was a limited war theory of signalling, but it had been a complete failure; and 3) as a result of the limited war attitude and other causes, decisionmaking had become centralized in Washington. This combination of factors had brought the civilian leadership in Washington close to collapse and the Tet offensive pushed them over the edge. The kind of "war" they understood had not produced results. They had no theory to help them understand the macro-course of the war. They had mass of a detailed data, but no way to understand the micro-course of the war. They

---

63. John Keegan, "The Human Face of Deterrence," *International Security*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Summer 1981), p. 147.
64. Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), p. 131.
65. Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson*, p. 298.

were in Washington and not in the field so they had no way to see through the statistics to the reality the numbers were supposed to represent. And they did not trust the judgment of their military men in the field. An enemy "spectacular," no matter how catastrophic for the enemy, was likely to be seen in the worst possible light. Henry McPherson, a speechwriter for Johnson, was disturbed by Tet and talked to Rostow:

> Well, I must say that I mistrusted what [Rostow] said, although I don't say with any confidence that I was right to mistrust him, because . . . I had the feeling that the country had just about had it, that they would simply not take any more. . . . I suppose, from a social scientist point of view, it is particularly interesting that people like me . . . could be so affected by the media as everyone else was, while downstairs, within fifty yards of my desk, was that enormous panoply of intelligence-gathering devices—tickers, radios, messages coming in from the field. I assume the reason this is so . . . [was] I was fed up with the optimism that seemed to flow without stopping from Saigon.[66]

William Bundy remembers a memo about the effect of Tet on pacification: "It was a poignant memo which said in effect, 'They've had it.' That memo reflected my view for a period."[67] Daniel Ellsberg, then on loan to the Defense Department from the Rand Corporation, was more precise.

In a February 28, 1968 memo, he wrote, "I think that the war is over; [our] aims are lost. . . . The Tet offensive and what is shortly to come do not mark a 'setback' to pacification, it is the death of pacification. . . . I am forced to predict not only that the 'blue' areas will contract in the next few months and the 'red' zone expand, but that the new red on the maps will *never go back.*"[68]

This was proven to be wrong. The optimism flowing from Saigon was, for once, justified. The data on pacification that was available to the men at the center looked bad. There was a seven-point drop in the number of secure or relatively secure hamlets in South Vietnam after Tet. The men in the field were frantically reporting that this was true, but that they were also rapidly wiping out the Viet Cong forces that had made the countryside insecure. The VC had come into the open to attack the cities, and they were being killed. Pacification figures temporarily looked bad because Allied forces were being drawn away from the countryside to kill the communists in the cities. Paci-

66. Schandler, *Unmaking of a President*, pp. 81–82.
67. Ibid., p. 83.
68. Quoted in Rostow, *Diffusion of Power*, pp. 519–520.

fication would be in great shape in a while. They were absolutely correct—by 1970 over 90% of the hamlets were at least relatively secure. These figures were verified by students of the peasantry hostile to U.S. policy such as Samuel Popkin.[69] But in Washington, men were neither ready to believe their men in the field, nor able to understand the war themselves.

Redefining the Theory

There is another way to think about limited war. It emphasizes the construction of clear military objectives and military limits by the government, as well as the political objectives and limits that were the concern of the old theory. It emphasizes the need for decentralized, rather than centralized, control of the war, to the extent possible, once fighting actually begins.

War is uncertain, and so there is no certain road to success. There are, however, better and worse ways to begin. Stanley Hoffmann has noted an important fact: "When one is talking about limited war, . . . each one is *sui generis*. Forces designed to fight a major technological war against the main opponent are fairly fungible; forces supposed to fight low intensity wars are not. A force that would have been perfectly equipped to fight in Vietnam is not usable as such in the Persian Gulf. . . . Those who talk about the primary role of military force have never really faced that problem."[70]

Small wars are *sui generis*, but so are big wars. The difference is we generally have only one or two big enemies. A nation usually has ample time to study its big enemy, and to review its past wars with it. Countries are familiar with the terrain because they have fought there before, and indeed, often live on it. They will usually design and build their armed forces to beat this one, specific enemy. And even then, there can be surprises, as the French found out in 1940. If big wars are hard to understand in advance, how much more difficult is the task of fighting little wars for those countries who must do so? Little enemies are legion. They are located all around the world, and have different climates, terrains, and armies. The special military problems of small wars, Hoffmann to the contrary notwithstanding, have long been studied by military thinkers. G.F.R. Henderson, the foremost British military historian of the nineteenth century, listed the maxims that guided military

69. Blaufarb, *Counter-Insurgency*, pp. 270–271.
70. Hoffmann et al., "Vietnam Reappraised," p. 10.

strategy for wars in Europe, but then acknowledged their irrelevance to wars in India.[71]

Another British officer, Charles Callwell, wrote a book at the beginning of the century entitled *Small Wars*, in which he addresses exactly our problem. "In great campaigns, the opponent's system is understood; . . . it is only when some great reformer of the art of war springs up that it is otherwise. But each small war presents new features. . . . Small wars break out unexpectedly and in unexpected places. . . . The nature of the enemy . . . can be only very imperfectly gauged."[72] Closer to our own time, the commander of U.S. Marine Corps forces in South Vietnam captured the essence of the problem in the title of his book *Strange War, Strange Strategy*.[73]

There are two conceivable ways of dealing with the problem of small, strange wars. The first is to foresee all possible contingencies and tailor separate forces for each of these wars. This is near to impossible. The United States army is currently tying itself into knots over the problem of how to structure itself for two different kinds of war, one against the Warsaw Pact and one in the Persian Gulf area. Everything policymakers know about war, everything they know about large organizations, argues against having, in effect, two separate forces within one organization. Now multiply this problem by the number of different conceivable little wars. To start, there are at least three distinct types of terrain merely in the Persian Gulf region: dry desert in the interior of Saudi Arabia and Iran, heavily forested mountains in Oman and along the Caspian Sea, and humid, malarial swamp along the Iran–Iraq border. Three different kinds of enemy could be encountered: Soviet armor and forces, local armored forces, and light infantry. War in each terrain and against each enemy has its own set of requirements. If you have only one enemy, you can afford to tailor your forces. To the extent that strategists can prethink operations in Southwest Asia, they should do so, but they cannot create little armies for every little war.

The other conceivable approach to the problem is to increase the speed with which America's one army can adapt to local circumstances. Specialized advance planning can backfire. The British army in India was trained for desert warfare in the 1930s as a result of its experience in World War I, but

---

71. G.F.R. Henderson, *The Science of War*, ed., Neill Malcom, (London, 1930), p. 102.
72. C.E. Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, 3rd ed., 1906; rpt. (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1976), pp. 33, 43.
73. Lewis Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1970).

was then suddenly called upon to fight in the jungle to defend Burma against the Japanese.

What do armies need to deal with this problem of unfamiliar combat? The first and most basic necessity is confidence in themselves and confidence in their leaders. This is because, in these difficult circumstances, there will be some, perhaps many, initial defeats. This will crack some units. Some men will not obey officers, and some officers will fear to undertake offensive operations or to run risks. If this goes too far, it will be fatal. A professional army with long-service men is more likely to have this confidence simply because everyone will know and trust everybody else. The bad ones can be weeded out, and trust and cohesion established. The British army in Burma was such an army. It was repeatedly mauled by the Japanese because it had not learned to conduct operations in the jungle. It was roadbound, and so was outmaneuvered. It had to retreat from Burma into India through hundreds of miles of jungle and mountain. When they emerged, they passed in review before their commander, General William Slim. "All of them, British, Indian, Gurkha, were gaunt and as ragged as scarecrows. Yet, as they trudged behind their surviving officers in groups pitifully small, they still carried their arms and kept their ranks, they were still recognizable as fighting units. They might look like scarecrows, but they looked like soldiers, too."[74] They gave a cheer for Slim. They were, in short, ready to learn from their experiences and to follow their commanders.

Courage is necessary to keep the army going, but it is necessary for another reason. This point requires explanation. By 1964, the war in Vietnam was not a guerrilla and anti-guerrilla war only. The communists could and did assemble from time to time large units up to the size of a division. William Westmoreland was perfectly correct when he said that you could practice counter-insurgency with all the success in the world, but unless you also dealt with the big enemy units, they could bust up the pacification program at will. At the end of 1964 a Viet Cong division, in what, as Westmoreland put it, was "probably the most portentous ARVN defeat of 1964,"[75] overran a hamlet and destroyed two elite South Vietnamese battalions. For this reason, Westmoreland consistently rejected the advice of many (and the actual example of the U.S. Marine Corps) to use a large portion of the army in small unit patrols, though this was the most effective means of locating

74. William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory* (London: Cassell, 1956), pp. 109–110.
75. Westmoreland, *Soldier Reports*, p. 132.

and killing enemy forces.[76] Instead he conducted large-unit (i.e., battalion-sized and up) patrols to locate and fight the enemy. Large units could better defend themselves against large enemy units. They could not, however, bring the communists to battle against their will because the large units could be detected and evaded. A good strategist in Washington would have given Westmoreland the mission: "Deny the enemy the ability to operate large units in the South. Then we can get on with the anti-guerrilla war." Large-unit actions, the infamous "search and destroy" missions, could not and did not do this. In 1965 and 1966, the communists would often stand and fight against U.S. units when their base areas were invaded. After some very costly defeats, the communists gave up this strategy, and evaded large U.S. units. By late 1966, the *Pentagon Papers* reports, "the VC/NVA avoided initiating actions which might result in large and unacceptable casualties from the firepower of Allied forces. During the year, the enemy became increasingly cautious in the face of increased Allied strength. . . . VC tactics were designed to conserve main strength for the most opportune targets."[77]

The U.S. army, in its *Vietnam Studies* series, has written that the enemy "normally defended by evading. . . . The enemy's combat forces were lightly equipped so that they could move more freely and quickly."[78] Big enemy units successfully evaded American forces by breaking up into small units out in the wilderness.[79] But even when the enemy came out of hiding and attacked en masse as they did in February, May, and August 1968, their casualty rate did not exceed their ability to replace their men—291,000 were lost, 298,000 were brought in or locally recruited.[80] High casualties, even when replaced, meant the loss of experienced cadres and battle-tested soldiers. But they could protract the war indefinitely.

This was not an unsoluble problem for us. The key was intelligence. Police work and the usual tools of counter-insurgency warfare worked against guerrillas, but the big enemy units often operated away from the population. The traditional tools of conventional military intelligence—interrogation of prisoners, use of captured documents, aerial reconnaissance, communica-

---

76. Ibid., pp. 214–215.
77. *Pentagon Papers*, Volume 4, p. 321.
78. Lt. General John H. Hay, Jr., *Vietnam Studies: Tactical and Material Innovations* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1974), p. 5.
79. Francis J. West, *Small Unit Action in Vietnam Summer 1966* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1967), p. 15.
80. "National Security Study Memorandum 1," February 21, 1969, inserted in the May 12, 1972 *Congressional Record* by Representative Ronald Dellum, p. 16751.

tions intercepts—worked, but were also deficient. The enemy could move fast. Both police work and conventional military intelligence did yield results, but they were *slow*. A villager might learn of the presence of an enemy unit, but by the time he went to town and reported it, and this information had trickled up and down the chain of command, three days, on average, had gone by.[81] The enemy unit had long gone. The same was true for other techniques. American large unit operations aggravated this problem. Large units moved more slowly on the ground. If they moved by helicopter, they required a long period of advance planning to assemble the necessary aircraft, plan the resupplies, coordinate the artillery fire, and so forth.[82] If the South Vietnamese units were involved, it was almost certain that warning would be given to the enemy long in advance. Planning took weeks. General Julian Ewell, who commanded an American division in the Mekong Delta, found that he could stop the enemy from escaping when his reaction time was reduced from 60 to 10 *minutes*.[83] The big American units could only cover a certain amount of ground. They would kill the enemy soldiers they found, but, as Westmoreland admits, the "enemy often escaped."[84] The worst problem with big unit operations was that military leaders could not have many of them. They could not check out all intelligence leads or pursue every contact. There were only about 100 American maneuver battalions in Vietnam at the peak of U.S. involvement. Base defense, rest, and replenishment cut down on the number available for patrol. As a result, American troops were concentrating on fighting the enemy's big units, which was all right, but they were losing, which was not. Even so, large unit sweeps were the rule through 1968.[85]

The answer is obvious in retrospect, but it was apparent to some at the time as well. If the enemy escaped by breaking into small units, American troops would break down into small units to keep after him. If he assembled a superior force, they would use their superior firepower and mobility to reinforce their patrol, and do it quickly, before the enemy had time to disperse and escape one more time. It was not always the right tactic, but it kept the pressure on the enemy. General Julian Ewell applied this tactic with

---

81. Lt. General Julian Ewell, *Vietnam Studies: Sharpening the Combat Edge: The Use of Analysis to Reinforce Military Judgment* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1974), pp. 96–97, 103.
82. Hay, *Innovations*, pp. 29–30.
83. Ewell, *Analysis*, p. 94.
84. Westmoreland, *Soldier Reports*, p. 197.
85. Ewell, *Analysis*, p. 78; NSSM 1, p. 16754.

an air mobile force against enemy guerrilla forces in the Mekong Delta in 1969.[86] Marines applied it against North Vietnamese units in the northern provinces of South Vietnam until 1967.[87]

Why was this method not employed more extensively? Why did Westmoreland not change his tactics when they did not produce results? If the small unit was not rapidly and adequately assisted after it made contact, it would be wiped out. Let us backtrack to the beginning of Westmoreland's tour of duty.

When Westmoreland first arrived in South Vietnam, he *did* advocate these tactics. Then something happened. Late in 1964, "the ARVN incurred a serious defeat *for which I bear a measure of responsibility. At my urging*, ARVN leaders broke down their forces into small units, parcelling them out to district chiefs to provide protection throughout the province and to patrol extensively in hope of inhibiting VC movement. The tactics worked fine for awhile, but in November 1964 two mainforce VC regiments came out of the hills and opened a general offensive.

"One by one the big VC units defeated the small ARVN and militia units. Lacking an adequate reserve, ARVN leaders were powerless to strike back."[88] Westmoreland never again advocated small unit operations on a large scale. It did not matter that by 1967 America *did* have the ability to reinforce patrols. Westmoreland himself gives examples of how air power or air reinforcement saved ARVN and American forces in the same places and circumstances where French units, without air support, had been wiped out.[89] *A strategy of small unit patrols ran too many risks.* American generals, Westmoreland included, are aggressive and proud of it. "Nobody ever won a war sitting on his ass" is the remark that sums up the attitude of the American army. But Westmoreland was interested in avoiding disaster. He is proud of this too. In Vietnam, he writes, no sizeable American unit "ever incurred what could fairly be called a setback. That is a remarkable record. . . ." He later repeats himself. "I could take comfort in the fact that in the Highlands [scene of the search and destroy missions] . . . the American fighting men and his commander had performed without the setbacks that have sometimes marked first performances in other wars." He repeats himself again—Americans had

86. Ewell, *Analysis*, pp. 76–78.
87. West, *Small Unit Action*, p. 15; Walt, *Strange War*, p. 48.
88. Westmoreland, *Soldier Reports*, p. 126, emphasis added.
89. Ibid., pp. 141, 175.

none of the catastrophes experienced by the French in Vietnam.[90] We cannot help but remember the old saying "one cannot learn unless he makes mistakes" and one cannot win wars by avoiding risks.

Westmoreland's predicament was a painful one, and it points out why learning in war is different from other kinds of organizational learning. Mistakes in war mean the wasteful death of men who trusted one to make the right decision. No one would want U.S. officers ever to forget that. Small units *were* occasionally badly hurt in the Delta.[91] This does make operational military innovation difficult. Westmoreland was not the first officer to hesitate before trying a new tactic that would be disastrous if incorrect. One of the longest lived failures of military adaptation occurred in the battle of the Atlantic in World War I. The German submarine force had interfered with British shipping, but had not created an intolerable situation until the start of the unrestricted U-boat campaign in February 1917. Merchant ship losses quickly mounted to the point where shipping capacity was predicted to be only 60–70% of what would be needed in the period April to August 1917.[92] The problem was in one way analogous to that facing Westmoreland. Enemy submarines could see destroyers before the destroyers could see them. If one area was patrolled, the U-boats would operate elsewhere. There were not nearly enough destroyers to blanket the zones in which the U-boats could operate. The answer was the convoy. If you put the destroyers with the merchant ships, they would be able to respond to the appearance of a submarine in good time. Many people at the time, up to and including Prime Minister David Lloyd-George, saw the merits of the convoy, and still it was resisted by the Royal Navy. The reason is no secret. *The risk was too great until all else had failed, and national defeat was the only visible alternative.* Admiral John Jellicoe was quite frank after the war: "Until unrestricted submarine warfare was instituted, the losses in the Mercantile Marine from submarine attack were not sufficiently heavy to cause the Admiralty *to take upon themselves the very grave responsibility of attempting to introduce the Convoy System,* because of its many disadvantages combined with *the fear* that an insufficiently protected convoy, if seriously attacked by submarines, might involve *such heavy losses as to be a real calamity.*[93] The Admiralty finally did adopt the

90. Ibid., pp. 202, 204, 205.
91. Ewell, *Analysis,* p. 92.
92. Arthur Jacob Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904–1919,* Volume 4, *1917: Year of Crisis* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 105.
93. Ibid., p. 147, emphasis added. Also, p. 162.

convoy system before there was an actual confrontation with Lloyd-George, but they waited until they calculated they could lose three ships out of every convoy to submarines and still be no worse off than they already were.[94] They waited, in other words, until the *relative cost of making a mistake* by adopting the new tactic was low. These men were anything but cowards, but the unique demands of this kind of innovation required a kind of courage they did not have.

The need for this courage is the reason why learning in war is so difficult. When the need for this courage is removed, the task is easier. An outstanding success story in the history of military learning and adaptation was in the "war of the beams," the war between the Germans, who built the radio navigation aids that guided German night bombers, and the Britons who tried to thwart them. R.V. Jones gives a splendid account of his personal victories in this battle. What his account makes clear is that his countermeasures were rapidly invented *and implemented,* because *nobody would be worse off if he were wrong.* His work did not require the diversion of large amounts of resources. If his interference with the German system failed, the bombers were coming anyway, and it did no harm to try. In the one case where matters would have been worse if he were wrong, things were quite different. He was an advocate of the use of chaff to help British bombers penetrate German radar. He saw no reason to "be squeamish" as he put it, that the Germans might learn about chaff from the British and turn around and use it to increase their bombing of England. If Jones were wrong, hundreds *more* people would die. The final decision was made by Churchill in consultation with Leigh-Mallory, head of Fighter Command who, in Churchill's words, "would have to 'carry the can'" if British defenses broke down because of German chaff. In the decisive meeting, Churchill turned to Leigh-Mallory, who "very decently gave the opinion that even though his defenses might be neutralized he was now convinced that the advantage lay with saving the casualties in Bomber Command, and *that he would take the responsibility.*"[95] Leigh-Mallory, not the scientists, should get the credit for having the courage to take risks.

Technical innovation is easier than *tactical* innovation because new equip-

94. Ibid., p. 163.
95. R.V. Jones, *The Wizard War* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1978), p. 297, emphasis added.

ment can be tried out before it gets to the battlefield. The German tank commander Heinz Guderian put his finger on the problem. He was discussing the merits of tanks with another German commander who finally cast some doubt on this technical marvel. "All technicians are liars," he warned. Guderian replied, "I admit they do tell lies, but their lies are generally found out after a year or two when their technical ideas can't be put into concrete shape. Tacticians tell lies, too, but in their case the lies only become evident after the next war has been lost. . . ."[96]

The process of military adaptation and innovation requires courage in one other way. In a strange war, the new data is first encountered by the men in the field, but the process of adaptation can proceed from the top down or the bottom up. Information can be transferred up the line to the central command where it is evaluated, and where new solutions are formulated. Then the new orders are sent back down the line, where they are finally implemented. This process is sometimes necessary. It may be necessary to put together pieces of the puzzle coming from widely separated men in the field before it is clear what to do. If the men in the field have neither the competence nor a self-interest in making the necessary changes, central direction is in order. But it is slow.

If we are brave enough to trust our local commanders and if we have given them a well-defined mission, we can delegate responsibility to them. This speeds up enormously the process of innovation. In both the Philippines in 1901 and in the Mekong Delta in 1968, the decisive tactical innovations were developed by low-level commanders, by captains, and were only then picked up by the higher ranking officers.[97] For the last 100 years, the German army has been good at fighting precisely because it selects officers who can make decisions under pressure, and then trains them to take the initiative within the framework of their missions. This principle and the success it brings has long been apparent to observers.[98] But before this can be done political

---

96. Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader* (New York: Dutton, 1952), p. 32.
97. For the Philippine campaign, see John M. Gates, *Schoolbooks and Krags: The United States Army in the Philippines, 1898–1902* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973), pp. 199–200. In the South Vietnam Mekong Delta area, see Ewell, *Analysis*, p. 78.
98. See Henderson, *Science of War*, "Military Criticism and Modern Tactics" and "The Training of Infantry for the Attack"; BDM Corporation, *Generals Balck and von Mellenthin on Tactics* (McLean, Va.: BDM Corporation, 1980), W–81–077–TR for OSD/Net Assessment; Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power* (Bethesda, Md.: C & L Associates, 1980); W. von Lossow, "Mission Type Tactics Versus Order Type Tactics," *Military Review*, Vol. 57, No. 6 (June 1977), pp. 87–91.

leaders must trust them, and not have to worry about whether they will "pull a Douglas MacArthur on you."

Conclusions

The implications for policy are simple. Limited war is strange war, and policymakers will have to adapt to new circumstances. They will be better able to do so if the civilian leadership has the courage to make clear decisions as to resources and missions. The military should *not* be given a free hand, but they must be allowed the freedom to solve the military problem within the limits set for them. The military will be able to begin solving the problem only after it receives meaningful instructions and parameters. The military itself should be staffed at the highest levels with men who have demonstrated the ability to command and adapt to difficult circumstances in combat and who are respected for that ability within the army. These measures cannot be taken until the civilian leadership learns enough about military problems to set meaningful missions for the military. It is not enough to say America's goal is "a free South Vietnam" or "the free flow of oil from the Persian Gulf." Plans must be sufficiently precise that a military commander knows what to do and sufficiently well defined for him to go back to the president and say "I can't do it with these forces." The president can then make an informed decision. Neither he nor his generals can make useful choices if the mission is to "deter the Russians" or "defend the oil fields."

Civil-military relations must be improved. The civilian leadership in the Pentagon for the most part does not trust the military to wage war properly and the military has vivid and painful memories of the Vietnam War. It hates the sound of the term "limited war." It will tend to recommend *against* any war in which it is not given a free hand. The education of the civilians and the cultivation of mutual trust will be helped by intensive peacetime exercises that involve both civilians and soldiers, by war games involving civilians, and by the revision of the theory of limited war. The military must respond by placing men in command who have demonstrated the ability to command and innovate under fire.

In domestic politics, no one today would dare to expect the bureaucracy to be the neutral executor of, for example, a guaranteed annual income. Americans have had too much experience, and they have paid attention to that experience. They know better. They ought to know better than to expect

their military to be the neutral executor of diplomatic policy. The military, particularly when engaged in combat, has its own special needs and ideals. Leaders must know what these are if they wish to make effective military policy. Trust and courage are what is needed to win strange wars. The old theory of limited war rejected the traditional wisdom about war, one maxim of which held that, in war, the moral virtues are at least as important, and probably more important, than the intellectual virtues. It is past time that we recalled this obvious truth.