

The Vietnam War was Winnable

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One day in the spring of 1985, fifteen years after I had left South Vietnam for the last time, I was having lunch with my faculty advisor at the Naval War College, Professor Robert Megagee, when another faculty member joined us and asked what we were talking about. Professor Megagee, who had taught me diplomatic history at the U.S. Naval Academy as an undergraduate, told this distinguished academic that we were discussing the Vietnam War. Professor Megagee's colleague immediately blurted out, "There is no practical use in such a discussion because there was nothing we could have done to win that war." This comment caused me to challenge our table mate. I told him that wars are not deterministic or ordained by some immutable truth—they are won or lost based on many factors that can be modified and adjusted to affect an outcome. The historian, who was on leave from Harvard University to the Naval War College, looked me straight in the eye and said, "I challenge you to prove that. Tell me how the U.S. could have won the Vietnam War, given the constraints imposed on it and the superior will and strategy of the North Vietnamese."

This challenge led me to begin a life-long study of the war and why the U.S. lost it. An intermediate analysis three years later resulted in the publication of an article for the Marine Corps Gazette in which I laid out the basic reason for our failure to win the war.¹ Additional study and the publication of new materials, especially those from North Vietnamese sources, have served to reinforce my original conclusion.

For any person who has participated in a war, the experience is unique and they see the war through the eyes of their own experience. This often makes it exceedingly difficult to be objective about the general conduct and outcome of any war. Each veteran of a war tends to analyze the overall reasons for success or failure in that war through a very narrow range of vision, one that is often clouded by emotion and trauma. I realize I am not immune to this constraint on objectivity and any analysis I might offer should be viewed with skepticism since there can be little doubt that the Vietnam War had a deep and lasting effect on me. Because I was so affected by the war, I spent many years studying it, primarily with the hope that I might find a cogent answer to the central question that plagued me: "Why did the U.S. lose the war?" I have examined every reason put forth by a host of writers, carefully examining their arguments, discussing them with other military analysts and veterans, and revising my findings in the light of my own experience in South Vietnam. From North Vietnamese generals, former VC politicians, and international journalists to military historians and U. S. and ARVN veterans of the war, I have attempted to find the root cause for the defeat of my country.

One may question the utility of even attempting to ascertain why the U.S. lost the Vietnam War; after all, it is over and done with and the strategic balance of power in the world has been little affected by its outcome. Although historians continue to this day to argue about why the U.S. lost this war, few other people give it any thought. I would count myself among the latter, if the war had not had such a profound effect on me and I thought the U.S. would never again make the same mistakes it made in South Vietnam. However, after over four decades of study, I am concerned about the "lessons learned" that many historians and other analysts have drawn from the Vietnam War. I see many of

these “lessons learned” as false and dangerous, especially when applied to many of the challenges facing my country today. I have seen some of these “lessons learned” applied with disastrous results by well-meaning and intelligent men and women serving my country today. For this reason, I offer my personal assessment of the primary reason why we lost the war in South Vietnam in the hope that future political and military leaders will not pursue a path that leads to defeat.

To be as succinct as possible, the U.S. lost the war because its national leadership pursued a fatally flawed strategy based upon wishful thinking, hubris, and incorrect assumptions. They did so not because they were fools or lacked the necessary information needed to formulate a winning strategy. No, the requisite information for the proper strategic analysis was available as early as the end of the First Indo-China War in 1954, but a combination of factors caused our strategic planners to overlook or dismiss the analysis. Unfortunately, the North Vietnamese had a far greater appreciation for these factors than our own leaders, which resulted in the communists forging a far more effective strategy for the achievement of their goals—and to do so despite some extremely burdensome and potentially lethal constraints.

I will not address the reasons for our intervention in South Vietnam or why we continued to remain there long after it became apparent we would be unable to successfully affect its outcome. I think the historians have drawn the correct conclusions for the rationale our leaders used in both cases. Whether those reasons were correct or necessary, I leave to the historians to settle. What I will do is identify the objectives of the major protagonists, their respective strategies, and the root cause for failure of the

American strategy, a strategy that was, in my opinion, doomed from the beginning without a major change in policy.

For the North Vietnamese, or more accurately for the Lao Dong Party, the goal they set for themselves and one they never abandoned or modified was the complete unification of Vietnam and the domination of the Indo-China peninsula, to include Laos and Cambodia. This goal, which was clearly and openly pronounced by the Lao Dong Party during the First Indo-China War, became feasible when the Chinese Nationalists were defeated by the Chinese Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA) in 1949 giving the Lao Dong Party's Viet Minh a secure border with China, bases and sanctuaries on that border, and massive amounts of captured Kuomintang weapons and ammunition, to include the artillery used with such effectiveness at the decisive Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Using doctrine developed by the Chinese communists, secure bases in southern China, and fire power that could match the French, the Lao Dong Party led the Viet Minh forces to victory, expelling the French from the Red River Delta and all of the northern part of Vietnam.

However, their goal of unifying all of Vietnam under their control was thwarted by the 1954 Geneva Accords which the Soviet Union and the PRC imposed upon them. These accords, which the U.S. was not a signatory to, called for elections in 1956 to determine the political future of a united Vietnam. The Lao Dong Party was confident that it could win a nationwide election in 1956 and most observers agree with that assumption. However, the U.S. decided that any election held in 1956 would result in a unified country dominated by the communists, a situation that threatened to destabilize their allies in Southeast Asia and lead to communist regimes in most, if not all, of the

countries in the region. Given that there were active communist insurgencies in several Southeast Asian countries in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it was correct to assume many of these countries might succumb to these insurgencies if the U.S. allowed South Vietnam to fall to the communists.

At this time, the U.S. grand strategy was one articulated by George Kennan in his famous “long telegram” which called for the containment of the Soviet Union and later the PRC. This grand strategy called for the U.S. to resist any further expansion of communism, a strategy that led to the Marshall Plan for Europe, the Korean War, numerous other conflicts on the periphery of the Eurasian land mass, and the Vietnam War. While Mr. Kennan would later dispute that his grand strategy for the containment of the Soviet Union should have been applied to the U.S. decision to intervene in South Vietnam, U.S. policy makers in the early 1960s were definitely thinking in terms of containment when the policy discussions concerning South Vietnam were being conducted. Therefore, the U.S. objective was to prevent South Vietnam from falling under the control of a communist government allied with the Soviet Union and the PRC. For domestic and international political reasons the U.S. articulated several other goals, most of which were irrelevant or impractical, such as fostering liberal democracy and protecting religious freedom in South Vietnam.

For the South Vietnamese Government, their goal was to avoid defeat by both the internal and external threat posed by the Lao Dong Party and to remain in power. From time to time, the GVN would also echo the goals of the U.S., but the GVN endorsement of these goals was always tepid at best and done more to mollify the Americans than to be taken seriously. For the GVN their paramount interest was survival in the face of

aggression from North Vietnam. Unlike the Americans, the GVN had a more realistic appreciation of the threat and often rejected the advice given by the Americans which they knew was either irrelevant or infeasible given the cultural, political and strategic realities in their country. While the GVN had many weaknesses, their military leadership understood the strategic dynamics better than their American allies who clung to the mistaken belief that tactical brilliance and technological superiority could compensate for strategic incompetence.²

The strategy employed by the North Vietnamese to achieve their goal of unification of all of Vietnam and control of Laos and Cambodia was no mystery to the U.S. Lao Dong Party documents obtained by the French in the early 1950s laid out the communist strategy clearly. The North Vietnamese knew by 1956 that any hope of achieving their goal through elections in South Vietnam and subversion in Laos and Cambodia was impossible given the decision of President Diem and the Americans not to hold elections in South Vietnam. They recognized they must resort to violent means to achieve their goal and they, quite logically, adopted a strategy that was based upon their successful experience in the First Indo-China War. Initially, this strategy called for the Lao Dong Party to build a modern military force capable of defending North Vietnam using equipment and munitions provided by the Soviet Union and the PRC while at the same time using southern Lao Dong cadres to organize the rural population of South Vietnam and lay the groundwork for future military actions.³ The Lao Dong Party understood that they could not rely alone on a southern insurgency to achieve their goal, although they hoped the insurgency would so weaken the GVN that a coalition Government that included the communist front organization, the National Liberation

Front, would come to power and set the stage for eventual control of the entire south. The Lao Dong Party did not strictly adhere to the Chinese communist model of revolutionary war that placed complete reliance on a guerrilla army but, instead, they party planned to use a guerrilla army in South Vietnam to weaken and distract the GVN while it built up a modern, mobile army in North Vietnam that could intervene at the decisive moment when the situation in South Vietnam made it possible to use this modern army to achieve a decisive result. While the North Vietnamese model included the three types of military forces —local, regional, and main force units—that the Chinese communists used in their successful campaigns against the Japanese and the Kuomintang in China, they placed a greater emphasis on conventional forces for striking a decisive blow. This model was not endorsed by the PRC and often led to theoretical conflicts with the Chinese during the Second Indo-China War.

The North Vietnamese were always concerned about military intervention by the U.S. and so they developed a strategy that would take into account that intervention. They realized that the U.S. possessed a huge material advantage over their forces, especially in terms of naval and air power, but they had fought a modern army during the First Indo-China War and they knew that they could defeat such an army if they employed a strategy similar to the one they used against the French. Although there were some variations to their strategy to take into account changing events in South Vietnam, the North Vietnamese strategy was remarkably similar to the one they used to drive the French out of North Vietnam during their campaigns from 1950 to 1954. Fortunately for the North Vietnamese, few Americans understood how the Viet Minh strategy worked or why it was successful; and those who did were either ignored or dismissed as pessimists.

During the First Indo-China War, the Viet Minh had few successes until the Chinese communists came to power in late 1949 giving them the sanctuaries and the equipment they needed to achieve success. The Viet Minh had been using the Chinese communist model of revolutionary war with its three stages as their theoretical model ever since Ho Chi Minh returned from China to lead the communist revolution in Vietnam. These three stages of revolutionary war are: Stage One, which entails “organization, consolidation and preservation”; Stage Two, which calls for “progressive expansion”; and Stage Three, the “decisive engagement and destruction of the enemy.”⁴ Since this three stage model for revolutionary warfare had worked so well for the Chinese communists, it was logical that it be adopted by the Viet Minh.

From 1945 to 1950, the Viet Minh were unable to progress from Stage One to Stage Two, and, in fact, had suffered several severe losses when they attempted to expand their military operations in the Red River Delta of North Vietnam. This all changed when southern China fell to the communist forces of Mao Tse-tung in late 1949. This development spelled disaster for the French because it created all of southern China as a sanctuary and base for training and logistical support for the Viet Minh. It also meant that the French now had a hostile border with China that was 1,306 kilometers long. It was now physically impossible for the French forces to defend such a long border, forcing them to give up much of the territory north and west of the Red River Delta. The French knew they could not attack the PRC, so the Viet Minh bases in southern China were beyond their reach. The Viet Minh were quick to take advantage of this strategic windfall and began developing a system of supply routes that led from southern China into North Vietnam. The strategic initiative passed from the French to

the Viet Minh once the PRC provided the Viet Minh with a safe haven for their forces to attack the French and the military equipment and supplies the Viet Minh forces needed to conduct sustained operations inside North Vietnam. Compounding the French dilemma, the Korean War reached a negotiated stalemate in 1953 freeing up vast quantities of military weapons and equipment from the PRC which the Viet Minh put to good use immediately.

Some prescient American strategists, like Generals Eisenhower and Marshall, understood the situation clearly and cautioned against involving U.S. forces in the war between the French and the Viet Minh. They understood that the French were doomed in Indo-China as long as the Viet Minh had sanctuaries in China and an unlimited supply of weapons and ammunition from their Chinese comrades to carry on their war against the French. Despite local victories by the French, it was inevitable that the balance of forces would always favor the Viet Minh as long as they had access to secure bases in China and the material support of the PRC. It is for this reason President Eisenhower rejected the French request for U.S. air support at Dien Bien Phu, the decisive battle in the First Indo-China War. He knew that even if U.S. air power saved the French at Dien Bien Phu, the French would never overcome the problem of the Viet Minh sanctuaries in China and the almost inexhaustible supply of manpower the Viet Minh could devote to the war. As a result, the U.S. attempted to limit the Viet Minh gains to North Vietnam by using diplomacy while it built up an anti-communist regime in the southern part of Vietnam.

With the defeat of the French at Dien Dien Phu, the diplomats took over from the generals. A conference was convened in Geneva, Switzerland to end the hostilities and

the Vietnamese communists expected they would achieve their goals of removing all foreign troops from Indo-China and establishing themselves as the masters of a united Vietnam. Unfortunately for them, the diplomats did not give them the victory they thought they had won on the battlefield. Instead, the Chinese and the Soviet delegates forced them to accept an agreement that left the southern half of Vietnam outside of their political control with the understanding that free elections would be held in 1956 throughout Vietnam to determine what kind of Government a united Vietnam would have. The U.S. and the South Vietnamese did not sign the Geneva accords and, therefore, they did not feel obligated to hold elections in 1956. The U.S. realized that any election held in 1956 would most likely result in a unified and communist-dominated government in Vietnam and would eventually lead to communist dominated governments in Laos and Cambodia. This expansion of communism ran counter to the U. S. national strategy of containment and threatened several other countries in the region who were dealing with communist insurgencies, such as Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia. The U.S. had just finished fighting a costly war on the Korean peninsula against the communist regimes of China and North Korea, so it was not about to let three more countries fall under communist domination and possibly fuel a series of additional “wars of national liberation” in other countries in the region, some of which were strong allies of the U.S.

So the stage was set for a confrontation between North Vietnam and the U.S. which could only be resolved by force. The North Vietnamese communists wanted to expand their control over South Vietnam and their influence, if not outright control, over Laos and Cambodia; while the U.S. was committed to a policy that called for resisting

any further communist expansion anywhere in the world. Neither side was willing to compromise. These two conflicting goals would collide with catastrophic results for both countries.

When elections were not held in 1956, the North Vietnamese under the leadership of the Lao Dong Party, decided to use military force to achieve their goal of unification of the country. Like most strategies their plan was simple, but difficult and based upon many assumptions, some of which proved to be false. It called for the organization of a mass-based party infrastructure in South Vietnam whose purpose was to provide three things: intelligence, manpower, and logistical support for mobile military forces. In effect, it called for the Lao Dong Party to establish itself in every village and hamlet of South Vietnam so the rural peasantry could be mobilized and controlled in support of the revolutionary military forces. The Lao Dong Party knew from its experience during the First Indo-China War that guerrilla forces alone were incapable of achieving a decisive result against a well-armed and technologically advanced military force like the one the Americans had. To achieve victory over a foe as strong as the U.S., they knew they would have to avoid decisive engagement while at the same time inflict heavy casualties on the Americans and their GVN allies in order to erode the national will of both governments and their respective populations. In essence, they embarked on a protracted war of attrition, but one that allowed them to modulate the level of violence so as not to risk defeat. To achieve this, they first needed to make sure they maintained the support of the three elements identified by Carl von Clausewitz in his classic of military strategy, On War, which are essential if a country decides to wage war. Those three essential elements of support are: the people, the government, and the military. The North

Vietnamese clearly understood this dictum for the foundation of a successful strategy, but unfortunately the Americans did not or they chose to ignore it.

Since the Lao Dong Party ruled unopposed in North Vietnam, had complete control over the sources of information their population received, had a system of government that made internal security tight and comprehensive, had a military that was under the complete control of the party, and had a recent tradition of victory over a superior foreign military force, this first and most important requirement for a successful strategy was achieved. Their next step in the formulation of their strategy was to take into account every possible action their opposition might take and to develop a strategy that could successfully counter these actions. During the initial stages of the development of their strategy, they hoped that the U.S. would not intervene militarily in South Vietnam, but they planned for that eventuality from the beginning. As early as 1959 they decided that it was highly likely the U.S. would use military force to thwart their plans; so they developed a strategy that was highly flexible and could be changed rapidly to adjust to any level of U.S. military intervention.

This Lao Dong strategy was based on their experience in their war against the French, but adapted to the reality that the Americans possessed far more economic and military power than the French had. The specifics of their strategy of attrition involved a combination of political and military actions that would erode the will of their adversaries and cause their opponents' governments, militaries, and populations to accede to the goals of the Lao Dong Party. It was a strategy that was not dependent upon time tables or assumptions about the motivations of their opponents; instead, it was a carefully crafted

strategy that capitalized upon their opponents' weaknesses and minimized their own vulnerabilities with an open ended commitment to persevere no matter how long it took.

What then was the strategy the Lao Dong Party employed against the GVN and the Americans? In its broadest terms, their strategy consisted of several actions that had the aggregated effect of neutralizing their adversaries' advantages and preventing them from taking the steps needed to defeat them. These were:

First, the primary concern of the Lao Dong Party was to secure North Vietnam from invasion. This was done by aligning themselves with the Soviet Union and the PRC, making any attack on the territory of North Vietnam by GVN or American ground forces a potential cause for war between the U.S. and these two countries. It also ensured that these two communist allies would provide the military equipment and economic aid needed to withstand any attack on its soil and to sustain its attack against South Vietnam. In addition, the Lao Dong Party embarked on a sustained program to build a modern military defense force capable of withstanding a conventional attack on their homeland. This effort included the acquisition of modern aircraft, sophisticated armored vehicles, mobile artillery, and technologically advanced air defense and communications systems, almost all provided at no cost by their communist allies.

Second, they appealed through the extensive worldwide propaganda system of communist, socialist, and other leftist organizations to influence public opinion against the GVN and the U.S. The formation of the National Liberation Front (NLF) and other front groups to hide the actual identity of the leadership of the insurgency in South Vietnam and provide a patina of non-communist participation in the leadership of the

insurgency was an example of how the Lao Dong Party attempted to influence external observers. This was part of their “dau tranh” campaign on a worldwide scale to promote the Lao Dong Party’s position and gain support for their cause outside of Vietnam. They found a ready audience for their propaganda among leftist groups throughout Western Europe and the U.S. As with most of their strategy this implementing action was based upon the success of the Viet Minh to influence French public opinion during the First Indo-China War and erode support for the war leading to the election of the a Socialist Government in France that ran on a platform calling for an end of that war.

Third, they built a modern military capable of regional power projection, using extensive support from the Soviet Union and the PRC. Certain units were designated for special training in mobile warfare and supplied with equipment that would enable these units to operate far from North Vietnam in Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam. This military buildup was begun shortly after the end of the First Indo-China War and was largely completed by 1964.

Fourth, the Lao Dong Party began to build an extensive political infrastructure in South Vietnam with its primary focus on organizing the rural areas of that country. Using cadres from the First Indo-China War, the Lao Dong Party created the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI) in these rural areas using the same organizational techniques they had employed against the French. This model had a long history beginning with the system perfected by Chinese communist cadres who spent several decades building their powerful rural political base in their war with the Kuomintang. The Lao Dong Party adapted the Chinese communist model of political organization to Vietnam but strengthened this system by integrating the lessons they had learned from their experience

during the First Indo-China War. The purpose of the VCI was to mobilize the peasants of South Vietnam to create a mass-based political organization that paralleled the Government of the GVN but extended down into the village and hamlet level. The primary objective for this mass-based political organization was the provision of three basic requirements for mobile military warfare: intelligence, recruits, and logistical support. The strategy of the Lao Dong Party was highly dependent on the VCI in South Vietnam for these three requirements, especially the logistical support needed by North Vietnamese military units. The Lao Dong Party realized that without the logistical support of the VCI in South Vietnam, their ability to conduct large-scale, sustained, mobile military operations was severely curtailed, if not eliminated. While not the only reason for their concern about any successful GVN pacification program, it was the Lao Dong Party's primary reason for concern since any degradation of the VCI threatened the ability of the North Vietnamese military to operate in South Vietnam.

Fifth, the Lao Dong Party needed a secure logistical system to support mobile warfare in South Vietnam. Phase III of their doctrine of revolutionary war called for the defeat of the conventional forces of their enemy using modern, conventionally armed, mobile main force units. To do this, they needed a means of supplying such units. This entailed maintaining the VCI in every strategically important part of South Vietnam and establishing a system of resupply and reinforcement external to South Vietnam. This logistical system was managed by Unit 559, which received its designation from the date of its inception, May 1959. Unit 559 was given the mission of establishing an extensive and sophisticated system of transportation routes, supply depots, training areas, and medical facilities running for over 3,500 miles in length from North Vietnam through

Laos and Cambodia to Saigon. This system was known to the Americans as the Ho Chi Minh Trail and to the North Vietnamese as the Truong Son Strategic Supply Route. The system was truly massive; in Laos alone it covered 1,700 square miles. All along the Ho Chi Minh Trail system were multiple roads and trails, some of them all weather and hard surfaced, and along these trails and roads were numerous staging areas, truck parks, petroleum pipelines, bivouac sites, hospitals, farms, supply depots and command and control hubs, all carefully camouflaged to prevent detection by U.S. aircraft and CIA and U.S. Special Forces reconnaissance teams. Providing maintenance and protection for this huge and long logistical system were over 100,000 North Vietnamese troops in Laos and Cambodia and an additional 15,000 Chinese in Laos.

This supply system was in complete violation of the 1962 Geneva Accords which called for the neutrality of Laos and Cambodia, but the North Vietnamese were left with no viable choice for an alternative means of supplying their military forces fighting in South Vietnam. Their early attempts to infiltrate men and supplies through the DMZ were unsuccessful and costly. Besides, the North Vietnamese military strategy called for cutting South Vietnam in two in the Central Highlands of Military Region II and this plan necessitated a secure infiltration route to base areas in eastern Cambodia. They also realized that any final push against the capital of South Vietnam, Saigon, necessitated secure supply bases in eastern Cambodia. Given their military strategy, it was only logical for the North Vietnamese to use the eastern regions of both Laos and Cambodia to build the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Since the trail was essential to their strategy, they viewed any attempt to successfully cut it as an existential threat to their overall strategy for the conquest of South Vietnam. Many Western historians have tended to ignore or play

down the vital importance of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but the North Vietnamese communists do not share these views. In fact, some among the victors of the war have openly admitted that the failure of the Americans to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos was the biggest mistake the Americans made during the war and had the Americans cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail the outcome of the war would have been far different.⁵ For the North Vietnamese, the Ho Chi Minh Trail was both their biggest advantage and their most significant vulnerability—and they knew it.

Finally, once the Lao Dong Party had accomplished the steps mentioned above, they were ready to embark on the final phase of their strategy to defeat the Americans and overthrow the GVN. I will not go into the specifics of their strategy inside South Vietnam but only broadly explain that it entailed the conduct of an attrition intensive campaign designed to protect their bases inside South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia and to conduct military and terrorist campaigns designed to erode the will of both the American and South Vietnamese governments to continue the war. As long as the North Vietnamese had secure sanctuaries, a secure supply route from North Vietnam to South Vietnam, and a secure rural political infrastructure capable of providing intelligence, recruits, and logistical support, their success was assured. Even with over 500,000 American troops, it was impossible for the U.S. to secure the 1400 mile border that ran from East China Sea west along the DMZ and then south through Laos and Cambodia. The Americans surrendered the initiative to the North Vietnamese when they steadfastly refused to invade Laos to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail. All the North Vietnamese had to do was maintain pressure on the Americans and the GVN by waging a war of attrition and avoiding a decisive engagement. They knew they could bleed the Americans indefinitely

and simply withdrawal to their sanctuaries to avoid decisive engagement or intolerable casualties. They felt confident that the U.S. would weary of the endless list of casualties and withdrawal, allowing the regular NVA main force units to quickly attack a weakened and demoralized South Vietnam. With their carefully crafted strategy, they were assured of eventual victory; but only as long as they protected their supporting political infrastructure inside South Vietnam, their bases and supply depots in Laos and Cambodia, and their means of moving men and supplies south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

If the above was the North Vietnamese strategy, what was the American strategy? Sadly, it was a fatally flawed one, doomed from the very beginning once the U.S. rejected the idea of invading the panhandle of Laos and cutting the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Despite warnings from the South Vietnamese military and the American Joint Chiefs of Staff as early as 1956 and a very direct and prescient warning from Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara to President Kennedy in 1961, this key strategic decision not to deal with the North Vietnamese use of the trail and road system in eastern Laos did not appear to deter President Kennedy from confronting the North Vietnamese militarily or President Johnson from escalating the war after he took office. The Rusk-McNamara memorandum, in particular, should have given pause to the framers of the U.S. strategy for engaging the North Vietnamese. One can only assume that President Kennedy's advisors, many of whom also served President Johnson, thought the danger of not dealing with the road system developed by the French in Laos was minimal or the North Vietnamese would abide by the 1962 Geneva Accords on Laos and not use Laotian territory to move troops and supplies to South Vietnam. In the joint

memorandum to President Kennedy, Rusk and McNamara wrote, “It will probably not be possible for the Government of (South) Vietnam to win the war as long as the flow of men and supplies from North Vietnam remains unchecked and the guerrillas enjoy a safe sanctuary in neighboring territory.”⁶ At the time, there were advisors in the Kennedy Administration who recognized the strategic importance of the road and trail system in eastern Laos, but their advice was largely dismissed. Advocates for adhering to the 1962 Geneva Accords on Laos, primarily Averill Harriman and Roger Hilsman in the State Department, convinced President Kennedy that it was imperative for the U.S. to keep U.S. ground troops out of Laos. Their advice was based upon the importance of the U.S. to keep its international agreements and the fear that any U.S. military presence in Laos would have an adverse effect on U.S.-Soviet relations and might even result in China taking military action against the U.S. in Laos and, possibly, Korea. While there was no firm intelligence that military action by the U.S. in southern Laos or Cambodia would trigger a military reaction from either the Soviet Union or China, President Kennedy’s advisors assumed the worse and decided to attempt to solve the problem of South Vietnam by treating it as a problem solely restricted to that country and North Vietnam. Many of the President’s advisors were rightly worried about the nuclear threat posed by both the Soviet Union and the PRC and they did not want to precipitate armed conflict with either of these countries, fearing such an escalation could necessitate the use of strategic nuclear weapons. Because of this well-founded fear, they had developed the concept of the “graduated response” to any aggression launched by either of these adversaries. Ironically, one of the principle architects of gradually escalating military action against North Vietnam, primarily through the use of bombing, was Walt Rostow

who recognized the importance of eastern Laos to the North Vietnamese strategy. This strategic concept, often referred to as the “Rostow Thesis,” called for a gradual escalation of violence against North Vietnam until the leadership of the Lao Dong Party in Hanoi decided their continued aggression in South Vietnam was not worth the punishment inflicted upon them. It assumed a “rational player” would desist once they saw the continued escalation of the violence was not worth the price. While not abandoning the U.S. strategy of containment of communism, the U.S. adopted a strategy of “graduated response” to any communist expansion on the periphery of the Eurasian landmass in order to reduce the likelihood of either the Soviet Union or the PRC using nuclear weapons. Despite some very sound advice from Walt Rostow that warned of the problem of North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Laos, President Johnson continued to adhere to the flawed strategy of “graduated response” developed by President Kennedy’s national security staff.

Unfortunately for South Vietnam, the idea of “graduated response” caused the U.S. to employ a strategy in Southeast Asia that was not based upon any hard intelligence that it would have the desired effect on the leadership of the Lao Dong Party in North Vietnam. The U.S. national security advisors simply assumed that the North Vietnamese were “rational players” and they would abandon their goal of unifying Vietnam once they saw that U.S. will was firm and that the U.S. could ratchet up the level of violence to a degree that would break their will to resist. It all made very good sense to the President’s advisors who assumed the North Vietnamese thought as “rational players.” If the U.S. showed resolve and escalated the violence in a gradual and sustained manner, the North Vietnamese would come to their senses and reach a settlement that allowed the pro-

Western GVN to remain in power in South Vietnam. By telling the world that the U.S. had no interest in overthrowing the regime in North Vietnam, had no interest in territorial acquisition in Southeast Asia, and had no intention of “expanding” the war into Laos and Cambodia, the U.S. national security advisors thought this benign and reasonable approach would be accepted by America’s allies and the American people. As for the North Vietnamese and their allies, such a statement of U.S. goals only served to convince them that U.S. interests were limited to South Vietnam alone and; therefore, there would be no tangible threat to their strategy of using the Ho Chi Minh Trail and their bases in Laos and Cambodia.

Many commentators have offered a wide variety of reasons for our failure to win the Vietnam War. There are those who say we should have mined the harbor of Haiphong, we should have unleashed the full might of our air power against North Vietnam, we should have pursued a more enlightened or more aggressive pacification program inside South Vietnam, or we should have tried to turn South Vietnam into a Jeffersonian democracy by a combination of political, social, and economic reforms. While we will never know if any of these proposals would have brought victory, none of them address the central reason for our failure to win the war—our inability to prevent North Vietnam from moving troops and equipment to South Vietnam using the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Our political and military leaders failed to ask the most critical question effecting their strategy—What if the enemy’s will is stronger than ours and, if so, what can we do that will thwart their ability to carry on the war in South Vietnam regardless of their will to do so?

The only plausible answer to the question above is the one that General Westmoreland and his staff came to in 1967 when they began to plan for the occupation of the Panhandle of Laos. Instead of relying on air power and indigenous special operations teams, which failed to stem the flow of troops and equipment to South Vietnam through Laos, General Westmoreland finally saw the necessity to use U.S. ground troops to block and hold the terrain between Dong Ha in South Vietnam and Savannakhet on the Mekong River in Laos. This obvious plan, which was studied as early as 1964, was delayed initially by the U.S. State Department who did not want to threaten the neutrality of Laos or give up their primary role for management of American affairs in that country. Later the implementation of the plan was thwarted by the CIA who did not want to give up their mission of conducting the “Secret War” in Laos, or to diminish the importance of their responsibility for pacification programs in South Vietnam. Even the U.S. military tried to kill the plan by asserting that it was logistically infeasible or the North Vietnamese would simply go farther west to get around it. A leading opponent of the plan was the U.S. Marine Corps which did not like the idea of any barrier defense inside South Vietnam, let alone stretching to the Mekong River. In fact, the U.S. Marine Corps did everything possible to prevent their forces in I Corps from being used for any form of static defense, a position that often put them at odds with General Westmoreland and the MACV headquarters. The Marine Corps insistence on the primacy of mobile defense and their attachment to an “ink spot” counter-insurgency strategy, along with their dislike for any form of warfare that involved occupying static positions, delayed the implementation of the attack into Laos until the TET offensive of 1968 made such an attack by U.S. ground forces politically impossible.⁷

Of all the possible strategies proposed for an American victory in Vietnam, the strategy of cutting the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos offered the best chance for success, for the following reasons:

First, the use of U.S. ground troops along the Dong Ha-Savannakhet axis would cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail, making it impossible for North Vietnamese troops and equipment to move into South Vietnam. U.S. and ARVN forces would no longer need to protect a border with North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia that stretched for nearly 1400 miles, but could concentrate their forces along a frontage of only 225 miles, the distance from the East China Sea to Savannakhet. In order for North Vietnamese supply columns to move south, the North Vietnamese would need to breach this barrier using large numbers of conventional forces fighting in terrain that heavily favors the defense. Even if they broke free, they would have to maintain the breach continuously or face isolation of their forces moving south through mountainous terrain. If, as some unsophisticated commentators have asserted, the North Vietnamese chose to attempt to go around the barrier, they would be forced to cross the Mekong River, a significant physical obstacle easily covered by U.S. air and riverine forces and screened by a force like the US First Air Cavalry Division using bases on the Thai side of the river. Since the bulk of supplies sent south by Unit 559 came by truck, the Mekong River posed an almost impossible logistical obstacle for them since they would have to bridge that river to move their trucks south and in doing so, enter the sovereign country of Thailand, a SEATO ally of the United States. What's more, if the the North Vietnamese were able to move their troops and supplies across the Mekong River into Thailand, they would be confronted with a hostile population and without the political infrastructure needed to create a

system of bases and sanctuaries, not to mention adding nearly 500 more miles to any trip south. Also, unlike the terrain in eastern Laos, which is mountainous and jungle clad, the terrain the North Vietnamese would have to transit in Thailand is flat and open, making it relatively easy to find and attack them. Furthermore, any North Vietnamese units that were able to get to the Mekong River would have to abandon their vehicles on the Laos side, and they would not be able to maintain any petroleum pipelines once they were in Thailand. It is hard to imagine that the North Vietnamese would be able to maintain their infiltration figure of 8,000 men and 100 tons of equipment and ammunition per month if U.S. forces were occupying defensive positions from Dong Ha to Savannakhet.

Second, the force levels needed to defend the Dong Ha-Savannakhet axis would have been less than those that were employed by the U.S. pursuing their attrition based strategy in South Vietnam. By 1969 the U.S. employed eleven divisions in South Vietnam with over 500,000 troops. The plan to establish the Dong Ha-Savannakhet defensive barrier would require only two U.S. Marine divisions in Quang Tri Province, South Vietnam, and four U.S. Army divisions in southern Laos, with an additional U.S. Army division positioned in the vicinity of Paksane, Laos where it could screen the Mekong River north of Savannakhet and threaten the right flank of any North Vietnamese force moving against the barrier to the south. As a SEATO ally, Thailand could be called upon to employ their military and border police units along the Mekong River and in depth along any potential infiltration routes the North Vietnamese might try to establish in Thailand. South Vietnamese units such as the Rangers and the elite 1st ARVN Division could serve as a second line of defense for the barrier and used to hunt down any NVA units that penetrated the barrier. Such an alignment of forces would

require the North Vietnamese to fight a conventional battle against an American, South Vietnamese, and Thai force that enjoyed a considerable advantage in terms of fire power, mobility, logistics, and terrain.

Third, by concentrating the U.S. military in only one province of South Vietnam - Quang Tri - and southern Laos, the bulk of the South Vietnamese forces could be devoted to dealing with the VC military units and the VCI in the remaining 43 provinces of South Vietnam, thus allowing them to concentrate on pacification and nation building, two tasks better suited to indigenous forces. In addition to using both the U.S. and ARVN forces in a more appropriate manner, it would effectively remove the presence of American forces from the South Vietnamese countryside where their presence often took on the appearance of an occupying army. It would also end the sometimes profligate use of excessive American supporting arms in the populated areas of South Vietnam and concentrate that immense destructive power against the North Vietnamese inside North Vietnam and Laos. By reducing South Vietnamese civilian casualties from American supporting arms and employing American military forces in the largely uninhabited regions of southern Laos and the DMZ of South Vietnam, a far more humane and moral military strategy would be employed.

Fourth, while logistically challenging, the Dong Ha-Savannakhet defensive barrier was far easier to establish and maintain than its detractors claimed at the time, and still claim today. The port of Danang in northern I Corps could easily support two U.S. Marine Divisions while the ports of Thailand and the road system running from those ports to Savannakhet and along the Thai side of the Mekong River are adequate to support five U.S. divisions, with only modest improvements. U.S. Air Force bases

already existed in eastern Thailand and would only need some expansion to support the U.S. forces in Laos. An argument made by military planners on the Joint Chiefs of Staff for the need to activate the reserves to support the engineering requirements for the barrier does not stand up to scrutiny. Private U.S. and other Western engineering contractors, already active in both Thailand and South Vietnam using local labor, could have handled this requirement easily without the political cost in the U.S. incurred by calling up Reserve military engineer units. If the North Vietnamese could build and maintain roads under the pressure of constant bombing by U.S. aircraft using coolie labor, it is safe to assume that South Vietnamese and Lao laborers could do it under the threat of North Vietnamese attack. Using local labor to build roads and defensive positions would be cheaper than using U.S. military engineers and would help the local rural economies by providing a large number of peasants with better wages than they would have received tilling the land. Such road building jobs would also reduce the demand for farmland redistribution, a key communist propaganda theme.

Finally, with the U.S. strategy of fighting the North Vietnamese in along the DMZ in South Vietnam and in the Panhandle of southern Laos, U.S. aircraft and U.S. airfields would no longer be spread out all over South Vietnam and vulnerable to attack. Instead, U.S. air power could be concentrated at just a few airfields in South Vietnam, such as the one at Danang, with the bulk of our aircraft stationed in eastern Thailand or at sea on U.S. Navy aircraft carriers, thus obviating the need for tying down so many US infantry units protecting airfields in South Vietnam.

Many Western critics of the “barrier defense” explained above, point to the failure of the electronic system in southern Laos that was employed as part of the McNamara

Line as proof that a barrier would prove ineffective in stemming the flow of men and supplies from North Vietnam. These critics point out, quite correctly, that the North Vietnamese were able to adapt to the system of intrusion devices used to monitor foot and vehicle traffic along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and still move sufficient men and tonnage to support the insurgency in South Vietnam. While the electronic intrusion devices made the North Vietnamese pay a high price for their continued use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, they did not pose a significant enough obstacle to them, and they overcame this technological system through ingenuity and perseverance. The barrier system explained above is entirely different from the electronic one devised by the Whiz Kids in the Pentagon that relied on technology to stem the flow of North Vietnamese troops and equipment moving down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This barrier would be one permanently manned by U.S. troops occupying strong defensive positions similar to those found along the DMZ in Korea and defended in depth. It would not rely on technology and air power to attack traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but instead would use a system of strong points manned by infantry backed up by artillery fire in hardened fire support bases and mobile reaction forces in addition to concentrated air power. It would also entail ground and aerial reconnaissance units prowling the terrain north of the barrier to give advance warning of any enemy movement towards it. The efficacy of such an arrangement could be found in the defensive system that was used along the DMZ in South Vietnam from Dong Ha to Khe Sanh near the Lao border. This barrier system effectively stopped the North Vietnamese from moving men and supplies into South Vietnam through the DMZ after 1965 and forced them to use the Ho Chi Minh Trail system in eastern Laos to infiltrate into South Vietnam.

Some critics accept the fact that a barrier from Dong Ha to Savannakhet would have prevented North Vietnamese infiltration into South Vietnam using a land route, but argue the North Vietnamese would only increase seaborne infiltration using the East China Sea and the port of Sihanoukville in Cambodia. The U.S. and South Vietnamese navies were able to prevent the use of the South Vietnamese coast for infiltration after 1965 and the North Vietnamese never considered this avenue a serious means of moving the quantities of men and supplies needed to sustain their military operations in South Vietnam. Most of their seaborne attempts at infiltration were quite small and met with disaster since the movement of their infiltration vessels could be easily observed using U.S. surveillance means. Even if they reached the coast of South Vietnam they had very few places where they could safely land and unload before they were observed. They would constantly have to change their offload sites, storage sites, and transport units using a seaborne system of resupply and reinforcement, thus complicating their logistics to the point of absurdity. As for the use of Sihanoukville, they did use third country shipping and their Hak Lee Transportation Company in Cambodia to supply their divisions in eastern Cambodia but this route was only viable as long as Prince Sihanouk agreed to its use and it would never be capable of bringing the 8,000 or more North Vietnamese troops needed each month to maintain their force levels inside South Vietnam. It was out of the question to bring over 90,000 NVA troops each year through Sihanoukville since Prince Sihanouk had an agreement with the North Vietnamese not to use his ports for this purpose. He was sensitive to the issue of sovereignty and he had to maintain the fiction of neutrality for both international and internal political reasons. He knew the use of Sihanoukville for the infiltration of North Vietnamese troops would be

an open and easily verifiable violation of his country's neutrality and would give the U.S. an excuse to invade his country. In any event, his regime was overthrown in 1970 putting paid to any idea of using a seaborne infiltration route in Cambodia.

Perhaps the best response to the critics of the Dong Ha—Savannakhet defensive barrier can be found in the statement of Colonel Bui Bin, the North Vietnamese officer who accepted the surrender of the South Vietnamese Government in 1975 with the fall of Saigon and went on to fill several high level positions in the new communist Government. He was interviewed by Stephen Young, an American attorney and peace activist, in 1995 who asked him several questions about how the North Vietnamese viewed the conduct of the Vietnam War. The following should lay to rest any lingering doubts as to the efficacy of the Dong Ha—Savannakhet barrier plan:

Question: "How could the Americans have won the war?"

Bui Tin's answer: "Cut the Ho Chi Minh trail inside Laos. If Johnson had granted Westmoreland's requests to enter Laos and block the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Hanoi could not win the war."

When I read Bui Tin's answer to the question posed by his American interviewer, I began to think back on my own experiences during the Vietnam War and how they tended to reinforce his assertion. I thought about how, as a reconnaissance platoon commander and infantry company commander in Quang Nam Province, I saw the North Vietnamese continuing to use the same infiltration routes and the same base areas in 1969 that they were using in 1967, undeterred by the efforts of covert operations and air power in Laos to restrict their movement down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. I thought of the

comments of the former VC, Tran Van Qua, when he spoke of the greatest vulnerability of the VC—their supply system, which he contended was almost entirely dependent upon supplies of weapons and ammunition from North Vietnam. I thought about the comments made by numerous captured VC political cadres and North Vietnamese soldiers I spoke with that clearly identified the Ho Chi Minh Trail as the most critical and vulnerable aspect of the Lao Dong Party's strategy and how reliant they were on the troop replacement drafts and the arms and ammunition stocks sent down the trail. And finally, I thought about the analysis the COSVN staff had done after the TET offensive of 1968 that "The Tay Ninh Source" had provided to our CIA which identified the fear of an invasion of southern Laos as the main cause for their decision to attack the U.S. Marine base at Khe Sanh and launch the TET offensive.

From the very beginning of the U.S. involvement in South Vietnam, the evidence was readily available to justify an invasion and occupation of the panhandle of Laos. The U.S. had the experience, engineering expertise, construction assets, and military forces needed to conduct such an invasion, but the U.S. Government decided against it until it was too late. Because the Americans failed to deal with this essential and vulnerable aspect of the North Vietnamese strategy, they allowed the North Vietnamese to continue to send men and supplies south and to maintain sanctuaries inside Laos and Cambodia which in turn allowed them to modulate the level of violence inside South Vietnam while minimizing their own losses. Without the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the North Vietnamese would never have been able to execute the third phase of their revolutionary war strategy, that of mobile warfare using conventional units and tactics. In sum, the American failure to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail on the ground was the key to our failure to win the war.

ENDNOTES

¹ Andrew R. Finlayson, “Vietnam Strategies”, *Marine Corps Gazette* (August 1988), pp. 90-94.

² For a two excellent works that describe the strategic failure of the U.S. the author suggests two books: Summers. Larry *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982); and Hannah, Norman. *The Key to Failure: Laos and the Vietnam War* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1987).

³ Pribbenow, Merle. *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People’s Army of Vietnam 195-1975* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), pp. 3-20. This translation of the official history of the PAVN by the People’s Army Publishing House provides an excellent perspective on how the Lao Dong Party planned and executed its strategy for the conquest of South Vietnam.

⁴ For a concise explanation of how the Chinese Communist three-stage model for revolutionary warfare was used in China, see Griffin, Samuel. *Mao Tse-tung on Guerrilla Warfare* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1961), pp. 20-34.

⁵ “How North Vietnam Won the War,” [The Wall Street Journal](#), (August 3, 1995), A8.; also see Pribbenow (trans.), *Victory In Vietnam: The Official History of the People’s Army of Vietnam 1954-1975* (Lawrence 2002), pp. 3-90 which provides the North Vietnamese details on their overall strategy and the importance of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

⁶ Memorandum for the President, dated November 11, 1961. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. II, 110.

⁷ Nguyen, Lien-Hang T. *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), pp. 200-203. Nguyen confirms Hanoi’s conviction that the Ho Chi Minh Trail was the “linchpin of Hanoi’s ability to wage war in the south.” She also explains the American plan for the 1971 invasion of southern Laos, Lam Son 719, using South Vietnamese ground forces, and the reasons for its failure.